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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 10 June 2021

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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.]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Trade Agreements: SMEs

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that trade agreements provide a level playing field for SMEs. [900730]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands) [V]: Employing 17 million people and generating £2.3 trillion in turnover, small and medium-sized enterprises are vital to increasing UK trade. That is why we are continuing to seek SME chapters and SME-friendly provisions throughout all our free trade agreements. Outside the SME chapter, the wider benefits of the agreements—for example, reducing customs costs, supporting intellectual property rights, facilitating mutual recognition of professional qualifications and increasing regulatory transparency—will help to level the field between SMEs and large businesses.

Mr Speaker: Mr Hollinrake is not here, so we will go instead to the shadow Secretary of State.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Small and medium-sized farms across the country are rightly worried that this weekend's agreement with Australia and the precedent it will set for future trade deals will not just undermine their business but destroy them. Last November, the Minister of State promised these farmers that the new Trade and Agriculture Commission would mean that

“all the National Farmers Unions...will play an active role in assessing trade agreements going forward”—[*Official Report*, 17 November 2020; Vol. 684, c. 190.]—

and that as a consequence the farming industry's interests would be “advanced and protected” by the TAC. Does he stand by those statements today?

Greg Hands [V]: I thank the right hon. Lady for those questions and I absolutely stand by that. We are involving NFUs from all four nations; I have met NFU Scotland's Martin Kennedy twice in recent weeks. We are confident that the new Trade and Agriculture Commission will be up and running in good time for it to conduct its statutory review of the Australia free trade agreement.

Emily Thornberry: I thank the Minister for that answer but the British farming industry knows the truth: the Trade and Agriculture Commission it was promised to defend the interests of British farmers is not the one advertised by the Government this week, and my question to the Minister of State is simply this: why? What are the Government so scared of? If they are confident that their deal with Australia will benefit British farmers, not undermine them, why do they not have the courage of their convictions and establish the Trade and Agriculture Commission on the basis that farmers were promised last November and let the voice of British farming deliver its verdict on the deal?

Greg Hands: We—I, the Secretary of State and the whole of the Department for International Trade—listen very carefully, of course, to the voices of British farmers. The Secretary of State opened expressions of interest to become members of the Trade and Agriculture Commission just this week. It is very important to understand that the role of the commission never has been to advise on negotiations; its role will be as debated and approved during the passage of the Trade Act 2021 and the Agriculture Act 2020, and we are looking forward to seeing its scrutiny later this year.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Many happy returns to you today, Mr Speaker.

SMEs make up the backbone of the Scotch whisky industry and the Minister likes to talk about whisky, so let us talk about the reality for the industry resulting from the Government's trade policy. Speyside Distillery, winner of best whisky at the world whisky awards, tells me that sales are dramatically down since Brexit and that this Government's awful Brexit deal has led to the cost of its goods going up by a fifth—up 12% on glass and up 7% on cardboard—and increased shipping costs and delays. Extra paperwork alone is costing it 33p per case. It tells me that a deal with Australia will not even scratch the sides of its substantial losses from Brexit, so what additional support and compensation will the Government pay to distilleries such as Speyside for these losses?

Greg Hands: I am delighted to hear the Scottish National party raise the subject of whisky, because it did not do so in the urgent question two weeks ago on the Australia trade deal. I remind SNP Members that Scotch whisky currently faces tariffs going into Australia; it is one of Scotch whisky's most important markets and is a growing market even during the pandemic. In terms of trade volumes with the European Union, we are continuing to see a recovery in the data. This is of course volatile data, but none the less there was a 46% increase in exports to the EU in February and a further 9% increase in March. Further data will be coming out in due course.

Drew Hendry: As ever, when presented with the realities the Minister just spins into Brexit fantasy. They just do not care about Scottish businesses. There is a good reason why the SNP has never supported Westminster's trade policy, and that is because Scotland's needs are always ignored. The UK Government said fishing was expendable during the EU negotiations in the '70s, their Brexit obsession dragged us out of the world's largest

single market, and now they are betraying our farmers and crofters all while capitulating on standards in animal welfare. They do not listen to Scotland and they do not care about Scotland, but is the Minister aware that they are being found out in Scotland?

Greg Hands: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman has been listening carefully enough to what I have been saying to him about the SNP and trade deals. It is not just Westminster trade deals that he and his colleagues have rejected; they have even rejected the trade deals negotiated previously by the European Union. He has pledged to rejoin the EU, in which case Scotland would become immediately subject to those trade deals. He also wishes to rejoin the common fisheries policy, which would be completely against the interest of fishers right across Scotland.

The SNP has never supported any trade deal. It has been against the Canada and South Africa deals, and it has not supported the Japan or Singapore deals. It is simply anti-business, anti-trade and against the interests of the Scotch whisky industry and of Scottish fishers.

Trade Agreements: US, Canada and New Zealand

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What progress she has made on negotiating free trade agreements with (a) the US, (b) Canada and (c) New Zealand. [900732]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): We are making significant progress with our free trade agreement negotiations. We have just launched a consultation on the new, improved trade agreement with Canada, we are in the final stages of our FTA with New Zealand, and we are in the midst of resolving the Airbus-Boeing dispute with the US.

Mr Hollobone: Does my right hon. Friend think it is right that the EU should have greater access to the UK market than our friends in New Zealand?

Elizabeth Truss: Next week we have the New Zealand Trade Minister, Damien O'Connor, coming to the UK, and we are working on a gold-standard agreement that will give us more access to Pacific markets at the same time as further deepening our economic relationship with a long-standing and trusted partner.

Mr Speaker: Let us go to the Chair of the International Development Committee.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) [V]: Happy birthday from Na h-Eileanan an Iar, Mr Speaker.

The point of trade deals is economic growth, but as the Secretary of State well knows, the trade deals with the US, Canada and New Zealand will make up only about 4% of the Brexit damage. However, signing a Swiss-style sanitary and phytosanitary agreement could achieve greater economic growth, would not threaten farming as the Australian trade deal does, would sort out the Northern Ireland protocol sausage situation and would prevent the Prime Minister from getting spoken to like a naughty schoolboy by the President of the United States. Given those four advantages, has she

considered lifting her pen and signing a Swiss-style SPS agreement to make things a whole lot better on a number of fronts?

Elizabeth Truss: My colleague Lord Frost is clear that we need to see pragmatism from the EU to resolve this issue. The hon. Gentleman does not seem to acknowledge that the parts of the world where we are striking deals, whether Asia-Pacific with the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership or countries such as India and those in the Gulf, are the fast-growing parts of the world. He is living in a static past; we are living in a dynamic future.

English Language Teaching

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on supporting the recovery of the UK's English language teaching sector. [900733]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

Recognising the challenges that the sector faces, both I and my co-chair of the education sector advisory group, the Minister for Universities, continue to engage with colleagues across Government to explore options for further support.

Caroline Ansell [V]: The English language is arguably this country's most successful export. Covid has of course devastated the sector, and with the international scene still challenging, the impact goes on and is deep and wide even as other sectors recover. Will my hon. Friend meet me, a delegation of MPs and officials from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to work together to overcome the challenges that the sector faces and safeguard the future of this vital export, which is so important to Eastbourne and to the UK?

Graham Stuart: I would of course be delighted to meet my hon. Friend, and I congratulate her on her continued leadership in Parliament on behalf of her constituents and the country as a whole.

Free Trade Agreements

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): What recent progress she has made on negotiating new free trade agreements. [900734]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): We have signed trade deals covering 67 countries and the European Union, we are making good progress with like-minded friends and allies such as New Zealand and Australia, and we will shortly launch negotiations to join the trans-Pacific partnership, worth £9 trillion of GDP.

Tonia Antoniazzi [V]: Penblwydd hapus, Mr Speaker. On 6 November, the Secretary of State told the National Farmers Union of Wales:

“We have no intention of ever striking a deal that doesn’t benefit farmers, but we have provided checks and balances in the form of the Trade and Agriculture Commission”.

May I ask her if the commission will have the power to tell Parliament whether her Australia deal benefits Welsh farmers, or is she breaking the promise that she made only seven months ago?

Elizabeth Truss: I assure the hon. Lady that the Trade and Agriculture Commission will be up and running to fully scrutinise the Australia trade deal. As set out in the Agriculture Act 2020, the TAC will look at whether FTAs

“are consistent with the maintenance of UK levels of statutory protection”

for

“animal or plant life or health...animal welfare, and...the environment.”

That is what Parliament supported in the Agriculture Act and the Trade Act 2021.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): On 6 October, the Secretary of State said:

“A lot of farmers would consider it unfair if practices that are banned in the UK because of animal welfare reasons are allowed elsewhere and those products are allowed to come in and undercut the standards that our farmers are asked to follow. I agree with that. I think that’s an important principle.”

That is what she said, so may I simply ask the Secretary of State whether she still stands by that principle in the context of her proposed deal with Australia?

Elizabeth Truss: I have always been clear that we will not allow our farmers, with their high animal welfare standards, to be undermined by unfair competition from elsewhere. The right hon. Lady will be well aware that Australian beef and lamb is already able to come into the United Kingdom under our current import rules.

Emily Thornberry: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but if I may, I will give her a specific example. The practice of mulesing is illegal in Britain but is in common use in Australia, not just in the wool industry, but in meat. Lambs at six weeks old are held down without pain relief and have the skin from their buttocks gouged out to prevent the scar tissue that grows back bearing wool. My simple question to her is this: under her proposed trade deal with Australia, will tariffs be reduced on meat produced on sheep farms that use the practice of mulesing?

Elizabeth Truss: We are still in negotiations about the final stage of the deal, but I can assure the right hon. Lady that British farmers, with their high animal welfare standards, will not be undermined. I am sure she is aware of World Trade Organisation rules that prevent discrimination on the basis of production methods, and what she seems to be advocating is leaving the World Trade Organisation. By the way, she might be interested to know that foie gras is already banned in Australia.

Unfair Trading Practices

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle the use of (a) trade-distorting subsidies and (b) other unfair trading practices. [900736]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker. The United Kingdom now has a fully operational trade remedies system that can take action if foreign subsidies harm British businesses. In addition, last month, my right hon. Friend the International Trade Secretary chaired a meeting of G7 Trade Ministers that called for the start of negotiations to develop stronger international rules on market-distorting subsidies and trade-distorting actions by state-owned enterprises, such as the forced transfer of technology.

Dr Mullan: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker. With nine out of 10 of the largest Chinese firms being state-owned enterprises, it is clear that the international rulebook is not keeping up with the latest players’ tactics. I do not want to see—I do not think anyone here wants to see—British businesses undercut. Will the Minister elaborate on what more we can do, working with like-minded allies in the WTO and the G7, to tackle these unfair practices?

Mr Jayawardena: My hon. Friend is right that global trading rules have not adapted to take account of China’s growth or its different economic model, so Britain cannot, and will not, allow her businesses to be damaged or undercut by those who do not play by the rules, such as through the non-transparent granting of different forms of industrial subsidies. We will work with like-minded partners at the G7, the G20, the WTO and elsewhere to address the harmful impacts of these unfair practices.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab) [V]: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker. The Trade Remedies Authority has made a deeply flawed recommendation to withdraw half of all the safeguards on steel. If the recommendation is implemented, it is likely to lead to a flood of steel imports, with potentially disastrous consequences for the steel industry, communities and livelihoods. The Government’s own regulations do not allow them to retain the safeguards unless the Trade Remedies Authority advises them to do so. The Secretary of State has already said that the regulations need to be reviewed, so will Ministers accept our offer to work together to find a way to retain these vital safeguards and, in so doing, live up to the commitment made by the Trade Secretary to do whatever it takes to protect our steel industry?

Mr Jayawardena: I am delighted to hear what the shadow Minister says, but what he is asking for, which is the imposition of measures against the independent recommendation of the TRA, is not within the Secretary of State’s powers today. In fact, his party argued that the Secretary of State should have fewer powers when the legislation was going through the House under the last Government. It wanted to curtail her powers further, and it was robust on that. We will not hesitate to defend British industry; that is our policy. The world has changed since 2018, when these powers were put in place, and the Trade Secretary is exploring what else might be needed in Britain’s toolkit to defend British industry.

Australia Trade Agreement: Buckinghamshire

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential benefits of a free trade agreement with Australia for Buckinghamshire. [900738]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands) [V]: There will be opportunities for businesses across Buckinghamshire as part of the 2,600 businesses in the south-east that were already exporting goods to Australia last year. They are set to benefit from action on tariffs in areas such as cars, food and drink, and machinery, and there will be benefits in services, including digital, data and innovation provisions that will future-proof the FTA for businesses in Buckinghamshire and across the United Kingdom.

Rob Butler: Many happy returns, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for his answer. Buckinghamshire has more microbusinesses than any other county in the country, so now that we are a free sovereign trading nation once again, what help can my right hon. Friend give to those very small businesses that want to export to Australia but might not yet have the expertise and experience to do so?

Greg Hands: I am well aware of the situation in Buckinghamshire; my father set up a microbusiness in Buckinghamshire 40-odd years ago. I can tell my hon. Friend that our refreshed export strategy will raise the exporting culture of the UK, taking advantage of our new independent trade policy by providing SMEs and micro-businesses across Buckinghamshire with new opportunities to build their exporting capability in both goods and services, to enhance support, to strengthen one-to-many digital services and to improve access to finance.

Trade Deals: Human Rights

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on human rights in future trade deals. [900739]

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on human rights in future trade deals. [900742]

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on human rights in future trade deals. [900747]

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on human rights in future trade deals. [900750]

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with UK trade partners on inserting clauses on human rights in future trade deals. [900754]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): The United Kingdom has long supported the promotion of her values globally. We are clear that more trade does not need to come at the expense of rights or responsibilities, and although our approach to agreements will vary between partners, our strong economic relationships allow us to have open discussions on a range of issues.

Beth Winter: Penblwydd hapus, Mr Speaker. Given the ongoing violations of international law by the Israeli Government, the attacks on the human rights of the Palestinian people and their suffering, and Israel's recent bombardment of the Gaza strip in May, in which more than 240 Palestinians, over a quarter of them children, were killed, thousands more were injured and more than 90,000 people displaced, does the Minister agree that it is now essential that there is an investigation into whether UK-made arms or components have been used in the recent violence and destruction of homes, businesses and health facilities in Gaza? In the meantime, will the Government immediately cease the export of arms to Israel?

Mr Jayawardena: Every Israeli and Palestinian has the right to live in peace and security. We understand the deep frustration on all sides at the lack of progress in the middle east peace process. The ongoing violence just underlines that a lasting resolution that ends these problems is long overdue. In respect of our arms exports, we have a robust arms export control process in the United Kingdom that is governed by the consolidated criteria, and no exports occur where the consolidated criteria are not met.

Liz Twist: The UK's deal with Cameroon will complete its ratification process today, with no vote by MPs and no apparent concern from Ministers about the abuse that is taking place in that country. Can I ask the Minister whether he thinks the US Government were wrong to end preferential trade with Cameroon because of the Biya regime's abuses, and if not, why are we ratifying a deal to do the opposite?

Mr Jayawardena: The Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), spoke in an Adjournment debate yesterday on this topic, and the Opposition could, of course, have used an Opposition day debate on this area. We have a strong history of protecting rights around the world, promoting our values globally, and we will continue to do so. By having an economic partnership agreement in place and encouraging trade, we are continuing to support some of the most vulnerable people in Cameroon, providing valuable employment and helping to lift them out of poverty.

Ms Rimmer: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker. "Mass torture", "rape" and "forced sterilisation"—that is the testimony of dozens of survivors at the Uyghur tribunal in London, which is chaired by the former lead prosecutor at The Hague, Sir Geoffrey Nice, QC. Does the Minister really think the British Government should be turning a blind eye to the suffering of the human race for the sake of trade deals?

Mr Jayawardena: We have not. We have proven our leadership and commitment time and again. We have ramped up pressure on China in multilateral forums. We are taking targeted action on supply chains and our approach to China remains clear-eyed: we remain rooted in our values and in our interests. The truth is that we have announced a series of measures to help make sure that British businesses and the public sector are in no way complicit in the rights violations in Xinjiang, and that includes making sure there is a review of export controls as they apply to the situation there.

Geraint Davies [V]: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker. The English-speaking population in Cameroon faces mass killings, atrocities and torture. As we have heard, the US has now invoked trade sanctions, but the UK has signed a trade deal without parliamentary approval. So can I ask: has the EU's essential rights clause now been removed from all future trade deals, so that abuses, however abhorrent and widespread, will now be supported by the British economy through secret deals, thereby taking control back from Parliament and giving it to those with blood on their hands?

Mr Jayawardena: I am not entirely sure what the hon. Gentleman is referring to in respect of secret deals. This is an agreement that the EU had originally. We have continued an agreement here to provide certainty to businesses in both countries and to date the EU has not taken measures against Cameroon—I know how fond he is of the EU.

Alex Cunningham: In response to the Adjournment debate last night, the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness, told the House in relation to Cameroon that

“Violence does appear to have decreased in recent months compared with the peak of the conflict”.—[*Official Report*, 9 June 2021; Vol. 696, c. 1070.]

as if the fact that the Biya regime is killing and maiming fewer of its citizens was justification for our trade deal with them. Is it really the Government's position that it is fine to do trade deals with murderous regimes if they are now killing fewer of their own people than they were?

Mr Jayawardena: The British people will have noticed that I have now answered five questions from Labour Members on future trade agreements and, instead of seeking to secure benefits for their constituents on those deals, they are clutching at straws to stop them. The Labour party is hopelessly out of touch. This Conservative Government are focused on delivering for the British people. Unlike Labour, we have a plan for jobs and growth, and trade is central to that. We have secured trade deals with 67 countries around the world, plus the EU, covering trade worth £730 billion last year—and we are just getting started.

UK Steel Exports

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support UK steel exports. [900740]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): We are working to de-escalate trade tensions that negatively impact steel exporters, including our pursuit of a permanent resolution to the US section 232 tariffs, which so unfairly harm the UK steel industry. I am pleased to say that in terms of the EU we have agreed tariff-rate quota allocations for UK steel exports, without which the industry could have been hit by a 25% tariff and an estimated cost of £80 million in the first half of this year alone.

Jessica Morden: Another penblwydd hapus to you, Mr Speaker.

The greatest step that Ministers can take to protect our exports is to protect our steel industry as a whole. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) asked earlier, will Ministers commit to working with Labour on a cross-party basis, as was promised in the Westminster Hall debate yesterday, to fix deficiencies in our trade remedies legislation and reverse the recommendations from the Trade Remedies Investigations Directorate that UK Steel has called “a hammer blow” to our industry?

Graham Stuart: The TRA has conducted a full review of the steel safeguard measure so that it applies to the UK in a proportionate and WTO-compliant manner. It is an independent body, as the hon. Lady knows, that provides unbiased evidence-based assessments of the need for remedies. For clarity, the Secretary of State—[*Interruption.*] It would be great to get through one answer without chuntering from the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), but it seems to be impossible. The Secretary of State can only accept or reject the TRA recommendation as a whole; she cannot modify or partially accept it and she cannot extend the measure if the TRA does not recommend it. However, it is crucial that the Government have the correct tools available to allow them to tackle unfair trade, and the Secretary of State will be giving careful consideration to the trade remedies framework and the powers that it affords her.

G7 Summit: Trade Priorities

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): What her Department's trade priorities are for the upcoming G7 summit. [900743]

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What her Department's trade priorities are for the upcoming G7 summit. [900760]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker; I am sorry that I did not mention it earlier.

Mr Speaker: You've made up for it now.

Elizabeth Truss: The UK has inaugurated the first ever G7 trade track to take forward the issue of free and fair trade. We need to make sure that the WTO is reformed to stop unfair trading practices and modernise the global trading system.

Anna McMorris: Penblwydd hapus, Mr Speaker.

Ahead of the G7, the Prime Minister has said that climate is his top priority, yet the Department for International Trade is still funnelling billions—including £3.5 billion from UK Export Finance—into overseas fossil-fuel projects and dirty projects are still being considered, despite the promise to end them. The Prime Minister himself flies into Cornwall on a private jet to talk climate. How can this Government expect to be taken seriously as a climate leader on the biggest threat facing us when they clearly do not take the issue seriously themselves?

Elizabeth Truss: I refute what the hon. Lady just said. We have changed the rules that govern UK Export Finance to make sure that it is focused solely on financing clean-energy projects, and that is alongside other measures

that support our zero-carbon objectives. We are also working hard at the World Trade Organisation and through the G7 to make trade greener and to make sure that zero carbon is part of how the global trading system works.

Stephen Morgan: Labour has backed an intellectual property waiver on vaccines to help with the pandemic in the poorest countries. The US agrees, as do the majority of world leaders, but the UK remains steadfastly against the plan. With the G7 giving us the opportunity for breakthrough this weekend, will the Secretary of State tell us why she will not support this life-saving initiative?

Elizabeth Truss: I am very proud that the UK Government funded research into the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, which is now producing 98% of the 49 million covid vaccines delivered right around the world. We have played a leading role in that. I am interested in practical measures that have real effect, such as voluntary licensing agreements. If there is any evidence that intellectual property waivers could help, I am all ears and interested to hear it, but we cannot have a regime that destroys intellectual property rights and ends up stopping future innovation.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): With all due respect to the Secretary of State, boosting the overall global supply of vaccines is key to get global trade going, secure British jobs and help our allies in the Commonwealth and the developing world. In these exceptional times, why did Britain, as my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) said, refuse to support at the World Trade Organisation yesterday—presumably on the Secretary of State's instruction—allies of ours such as America, India and South Africa, and many other countries, and to back a temporary waiver of patents on covid vaccines?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, the UK is always willing to listen to pragmatic suggestions about how we make the regime work better. For example, we have supported the abolition of export restrictions—many other countries have not—so that we can see goods flow around the world. The fact is that the real changes are being made by voluntary licensing, as we have enabled at the Serum Institute in India. We are part of the third-way work to roll out practical answers. There is no IP waiver proposal on the table that would actually deliver more vaccines to the poorest people in the world, which is what we want to achieve.

Mr Speaker: Right, let us try the next challenge.

Free Trade Agreement: Australia

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What progress she has made in securing a free trade agreement with Australia. [900744]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands) [V]: Following two days of intensive discussions during the visit of Dan Tehan, the Australian Minister for Trade, Tourism and Investment, on 22 and 23 April, both sides reached consensus on most elements of a comprehensive free trade agreement. The UK and Australia are now working to agree the outstanding elements, with the aim of reaching agreement in principle this month.

Sir Edward Leigh [V]: I am speaking from Lincolnshire, the bread basket of England. It is a prosperous county, but in the area of world free trade before the second world war, we could walk on derelict farms from Lincoln to Grimsby. Can the Minister assure me that this free trade deal with Australia, which I welcome, will ensure a bright future for our farmers, and that there will be no relaxation of our high-quality standards and no imports of mass-produced wheat that could undercut our farmers?

Greg Hands: My right hon. Friend is quite right to point to the brilliance of the Lincolnshire farmers and their industry in helping both to feed this country and to export. We have been absolutely clear that, when it comes to trade deals, there will be no compromise on our standards, food safety, animal welfare and the environment. I agree that there is an opportunity here for Lincolnshire to be exporting more. We have secured more access last week in the Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein deal. We are looking forward to joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, which has big opportunities for UK agriculture and future free trade agreements going forward.

Australia Trade Agreement: Scottish Farming

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the potential economic effect of the proposed free trade agreement between the UK and Australia on farming in Scotland. [900745]

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the potential economic effect of the proposed free trade agreement between the UK and Australia on farming in Scotland. [900780]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands) [V]: This is a deal for the whole Union. Our scoping assessment found that Scotland will benefit in all modelled scenarios. Reducing tariff barriers for our world-class food and drink industry should help bolster exports of iconic Scottish goods to Australia, such as Scotch whisky, apparel and services, such as financial services. Once we accede to CPTPP, Scottish farmers will also gain access to the increasing middle class in Asia.

Richard Thomson: Australia's red meat industry has the goal of doubling its sales by 2030, which requires access to UK markets. That expansion can only come, despite what the Government say, at the expense of domestic producers and standards. What absolute minimum SPS, bio-security and welfare standards will the Government insist on in any Australian trade deal to safeguard producers and consumers, and to ensure that our farmers are not simply the next industry to be thrown beneath the wheels of the Brexit bus?

Greg Hands: I have met with NFU Scotland a few times in recent weeks. To be honest, it would be nice to hear the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues for once sticking up for agriculture in Scotland and the opportunities that come from trade, rather than being against every single trade agreement. Australia apparently exports a lot to Asia—75% of its beef exports, 70% of its lamb exports—and only 0.15% to the UK. There are strong reasons for that. The production costs, for beef in particular, are much higher in countries such as Japan

and Korea than they are in either the UK or in Australia. Staged over time, tariff reductions and making sure that safeguards are in place, we are confident that we will have the ability to protect UK farmers from any unforeseen increases in Australian imports to this country.

Amy Callaghan [V]: I wish you a very happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

Currently, the UK does not have specific legislation to ban meat from animals raised by inhumane methods such as battery cages—methods that are utterly intolerable here but permitted and used extensively in Australia. The Department for International Trade has also never set out if or how it might inspect animal welfare and food standards in countries with which we may sign new post-Brexit trade deals. Does the Minister truly believe that the people of Scotland are prepared to see food on their supermarket shelves reared in appalling conditions, all for the additional 0.1% to 0.2% of GDP over 15 years as per his Department's own assessment?

Greg Hands: I have never heard the SNP support any trade deal, ever. SNP Members even voted for a no-deal Brexit last December. The hon. Member mentioned standards. We have been absolutely clear that there will be no compromise on our standards. However, Australia, in its standards on animal welfare, is actually ranked five out of five by the World Organisation for Animal Health for its performance in veterinary services across 38 categories. The hon. Member talks about meeting our standards; our import standards remain high, and will be unchanged as a result of this or any other trade agreement. Australian produce—as, indeed, other produce—must continue to meet our high import standards.

Domestic Battery Development

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): If she will include provisions to support domestic battery development in future trade deals. [900746]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): We recognise the importance of domestic battery development and manufacturing, which is why we have engaged with business to understand its needs and ensure that our free trade agreements deliver. That includes negotiating rules of origin that consider the transition to electric vehicles and enable British manufacturers such as Jaguar Land Rover and Nissan to access global markets.

Steve McCabe [V]: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

As the Minister acknowledges, the future of our car industry in the west midlands is dependent on battery production and the Government giving the go-ahead for a gigafactory, but battery production requires ready access to materials such as cobalt, lithium and manganese. Will he tell us which countries he is talking to about trade deals that would secure these supplies?

Mr Jayawardena: We are talking to friends around the world to make sure that our supply chains are more resilient than ever before. That is a clear lesson from our coronavirus situation, where we have seen that we should not be too reliant on any one country. We have prioritised securing investment in battery cell gigafactories, to which the hon. Member refers. I am delighted that he is

supporting our agenda, which we believe is key to anchoring the mass manufacture of electric vehicles in Britain, safeguarding jobs and driving emissions to net zero by 2050.

Australia Trade Agreement: Bishop Auckland

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): What steps her Department has taken to ensure that (a) farmers and (b) food producers in Bishop Auckland can benefit from an free trade agreement with Australia. [900749]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands) [V]: The Government are clear that any deal with Australia must work for UK farmers and producers. We will use a range of tools to defend British farming. As well as improving access to the Australian market, an FTA will act as a gateway to CPTPP, creating unheralded new export opportunities for British farmers and producers.

Dehenna Davison: Last summer, the Secretary of State visited Grange Hill farm in Bishop Auckland, where leading farmers John and Jane are rightly proud of the fabulous beef that they produce. Will my right hon. Friend please tell the House how the gateway to the CPTPP—a deal with Australia—will open up new markets for British beef farmers?

Greg Hands: I know that the Secretary of State greatly enjoyed her visit last year to the farms in my hon. Friend's constituency. CPTPP is a great opportunity. I referenced in an earlier question growing Asian demand for products such as meat and other British agrifood products. We see there being tremendous opportunities in that fast-growing market—13% of global GDP across four continents. This is a real opportunity to be able to sell British farming produce to those fast-growing Asian and American markets.

UK-China Trading Relationship

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the UK's trading relationship with China. [900751]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): China is an important trading partner for the UK, with bilateral trade worth £78.8 billion in 2020. In fact, China was our third largest overall trading partner and seventh largest export market last year, with UK exports to China amounting to £22.9 billion. The UK also remains a leading destination for Chinese outbound investment in Europe.

Joanna Cherry [V]: Coda Octopus, a company based in my constituency, has been encouraged by successive Tory Governments to expand its sales to China. Its world-leading Echoscope is used in underwater port construction and in renewable energy projects, and it does not have a military use. Yet despite a 23-year track record of exports, it is now losing millions of pounds in orders due to a change in attitude on export licences, and responses from the Minister's Department are taking over 100 days. Will the Minister meet me so that I can sort this situation out for my constituents?

Graham Stuart: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her reasonable question. It is a delight to have an SNP Member in the Chamber actually championing business and looking to open up markets. We have one of the most rigorous and thorough export licensing regimes in the world, and we are proud of it. Every application is looked at on a case-by-case basis against the consolidated criteria. However, I will ensure that a meeting is set up for her with the appropriate Minister to discuss this.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

Two weeks ago, we heard that Jimmy Lai, the owner of the largest pro-democracy newspaper in Hong Kong, had not only been sentenced for a second time but has now had his assets frozen. This step makes it incredibly hard to continue to fund his journalistic enterprises, which in turn has a chilling implication for a free press in Hong Kong. Colleagues across this House have called on the Government to implement Magnitsky sanctions, but there is concern that the UK's sluggishness to implement sanctions is because the Government seek a future trade deal with China. Can the Minister clarify: is the prospect of a future deal causing this Government to treat China with leniency it does not deserve?

Graham Stuart: It is one of the abiding characteristics of the left in general that if they cannot find a scare story they invent one. This Government are clear: we are not seeking a free trade agreement with China. We have led the world in challenging China where we have found it necessary to do so. Working with international partners, we seek to maximise impact on any actions China takes that run counter to its international treaty obligations, including detentions without trial, detention of human rights defenders, and persecution of some religious and ethnic minorities. We work with allies on the most effective means to challenge it. On 30 June, at the 44th session of the UN Human Rights Council, the UK read out a formal statement on behalf of 28 countries highlighting concerns about the human rights situation in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. I hope that the hon. Lady and other Opposition Members will never again suggest that we would do anything to put trade ahead of our responsibilities on human rights.

Topical Questions

[900790] **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): Last week the UK agreed in principle a new trade deal with Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein worth £22 billion that brings opportunities for British exporters and services, from farmers to lawyers to musicians. It is the first trade deal ever to include provisions on mobile roaming, and it brings benefits to UK fish processing, supporting 18,000 jobs in Scotland, East Yorkshire and north Lincolnshire.

Layla Moran [V]: Last month, Members in all parts of the House were horrified by the appalling outbreak of violence between Israel and Gaza. Can the Secretary of State set out whether British arms exports were used in any way against innocent civilians in that conflict? If she is unable to do so, does she not agree that the

inability to know where our arms are being used, and what for, is hugely concerning given the potential breaches of international law?

Elizabeth Truss: We welcomed the announcement of a ceasefire in Israel and Gaza last month. We are committed to a durable ceasefire. As the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) mentioned, we have one of the most robust export control regimes in the world and we take these issues very seriously.

[900794] **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is currently working on a possible trade deal with the Gulf, which would be of great benefit to all concerned. For trade to be successful, we need to ensure easy mobility for business people, but currently Emiratis wanting to visit the UK on the visa waiver scheme are permitted only a single entry in a period of six months. Will the Minister work with colleagues in the Home Office to allow multiple entries so that the UK is never at a disadvantage compared with other European countries?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to recognise the importance of the Gulf given that the six countries in the Gulf Co-operation Council are our third-largest non-EU export market, at over £30 billion last year. I am very pleased that we have a strong visa offer for our partners there, including the electronic visa waiver programme, and that the introduction of Britain's new points-based immigration system creates a level playing field for the first time in many years. I will continue to work closely with fellow Ministers at the Home Office to make sure that the visa system contributes to Britain rightly being recognised as a world leader with which to trade and invest.

[900796] **Ian Levy** (Blyth Valley) (Con): Happy birthday from Blyth Valley, Mr Speaker.

I recently had the pleasure of visiting B&B Attachments, a fantastic firm in Cramlington that designs and constructs stock handling machinery for the front of forklift trucks. During my visit, it became evident that now more than ever, we need to showcase the ability of such firms on a global stage. Does the Secretary of State agree that she is doing all she can to support and promote the achievements of our homegrown manufacturing?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): I thank my hon. Friend for his continued support for businesses in his constituency, and I agree with him that B&B Attachments is an example of UK manufacturing at its best. My Department was delighted to help B&B grow its business overseas by providing specialised advice and dedicated funding. The Department is doing all it can to help other manufacturing suppliers from across the regions and nations of the UK to achieve success overseas, including with grants from our £38 million internationalisation fund.

[900793] **Taiwo Owatemi** (Coventry North West) (Lab) [V]: Given that physical trade shows are taking place in the EU as early as July and given that so far there has not been any confirmation of what support will be provided to UK exporters, can the Minister provide clarity on when his Department will publish its trade show access programme for the financial year 2021-22? I am sure that the Minister knows that continued delays will be disastrous for UK exporters, as the UK is supposed to be showing the world that it is ready to export and keen to forge new commercial relationships with the rest of the world.

Graham Stuart: I thank the hon. Lady for her excellent question, because trade show support is really important for putting British business on the front foot. We have worked across multiple industries to improve our digital and virtual offer, and I am delighted to say that in some areas that has led to higher levels of activity than we had before. I will make sure that the House is informed as soon as we have further to say about the plan, possibly following 21 June.

[900795] **Anum Qaisar-Javed** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Rouzan, a medic, and Yasin, aged nine—those are only two names of the many children and frontline medics who have been killed during systematic oppression of the Palestinian people by the Israeli Government. Export licences to sell arms to Israel worth £80 million—£80 million—have been granted by Ministers in the Department over the past three years. Lives have been lost, businesses have been attacked, homes are in rubble and families have been torn apart, yet the UK Government are still selling British-made weapons to Israel. Will the Minister please clarify whether it is UK Government policy to sell arms to those complicit in violations of international law?

Elizabeth Truss: The UK has one of the most robust arms export control regimes in the world. We rigorously examine every application on a case-by-case basis, and the criteria are clearly laid out in legislation to ensure complete compliance with international law.

[900801] **Matt Vickers** (Stockton South) (Con) [V]: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the work she is doing to secure a free trade agreement with Australia. Does she agree that an agreement with our friends in Australia will deliver for the whole of the Union, bringing huge benefits to businesses and jobs not only in my patch of Stockton South, but in every corner of our United Kingdom?

Elizabeth Truss: I welcome my hon. Friend's enthusiasm for a deal with Australia. There is also the fact that it will lead to entry to the CPTPP—a vast Pacific market of huge benefit to the manufacturing industry in the north-east of England and beyond. I thank him very much for his support.

[900797] **Paula Barker** (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State will be aware that, post Brexit, there have been substantial changes to checks being undertaken on products of animal origin. However, an abundance of red tape, including the need for certified veterinarians to sign off dairy products, rather than a dairy inspector, as required by most non-EU countries, is creating an additional burden and causing extensive

delays to the processing of crucial consumer products. Will Ministers impress on their Cabinet colleagues the need to resolve these delays and press for a speedy resolution to facilitate efficient trade across borders?

Mr Jayawardena: The Labour party is the party of red tape; we are the ones who are getting rid of it. We have called for pragmatism in this area. We are a sovereign nation—we are British, and we are proud of it—and we are going to stand by every corner of this country as we deliver trade benefits and create jobs. In respect of the issues around meat, it is wrong that anyone should be threatening the British sausage. We will stand up for the British sausage, and no one will ever be able to destroy it.

[900804] **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): A very happy birthday to you, Mr Speaker. In Burnley and Padiham, we have world-class skills and products, and when we export those, it is phenomenally successful, but we know that businesses struggle with having the confidence and knowledge to export if they have never done it before. Could my hon. Friend set out what steps the Department for International Trade is taking to give businesses the support they need when exporting for the first time, so that we can push the “made in Burnley” message even further around the world?

Graham Stuart: I am pleased to say that my Department has recently created the new Export Academy, designed precisely to equip businesses with the capabilities and confidence to export successfully. My hon. Friend is such a champion of his local exporters, and it is so refreshing to have Government Members like him championing local business. I believe that he is holding an exporters fair shortly, and I congratulate him on that. He will be pleased to hear that 259 businesses from the north-west have joined the SME pilot Export Academy since it began, including 15 from the Burnley area. We have international trade advisers for the northern powerhouse, so additional resource has gone in there, and with his help, we will continue to champion northern businesses, and businesses from Burnley in particular, over the coming months and years.

[900810] **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab) [V]: The International Trade Secretary described her new deal with Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein as a “major boost” for our trade, but the Norwegian Government were more realistic. They said that the deal is “not as comprehensive” as our previous arrangements, that trade would be

“more bureaucratic and less dynamic”

and that without a veterinary agreement, there will be “a number of trade barriers”

that we did not previously face. Does the Secretary of State recognise that more honest description of the deal, and will she take steps to reduce the barriers to trade that she has created for our exporters and importers?

Mr Jayawardena: Once again, the Labour party is obsessed by membership of the European Union. It has not moved on from the referendum, when the British people provided a clear signal to us in this place that we should get on with delivering the benefits of Brexit. This deal is a world leader in digital trade, eliminating the need for paperwork, and many countries and trade blocs could learn from that.

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I feel somewhat inadequate that I can only say this in English, but many happy returns, Mr Speaker.

Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, as and when a trade deal with the United States is agreed, the Government will not compromise on the principle that underpins the online safety Bill—that digital platforms, including American ones, must comply with the duty of care to keep their users as safe as they reasonably can—and that that will hold true whether or not the Bill has completed its legislative passage and is enforced by that point?

Elizabeth Truss: The UK is committed to making our regime the safest place in the world to be online. In trade negotiations, we will protect our online safety regime, while also promoting our thriving digital industry. I am pleased that in free trade agreements with Japan and the European economic area, we have agreed free flow of data alongside protecting Britain's high standards, and that is exactly what we would do in an agreement with the United States.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Scotch whisky is vital in North East Fife, not just because we enjoy a wee dram, particularly on birthdays—many happy returns, Mr Speaker—but because it forms a key part of the local economy. With four independent distilleries in my constituency, the success of these businesses matters both for those in directly linked jobs and for those working in tourism and hospitality. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the Prime Minister will use his bilateral meeting with President Biden this week to agree and publish a clear road map for the permanent settlement of the Boeing-Airbus dispute, which would remove the risk of tariffs being reimposed on Scotch whisky and other sectors?

Elizabeth Truss: It was very positive news when the tariffs were lifted earlier this year. We are now working very closely with Katherine Tai, the US TR, with whom I have regular conversations, on a permanent settlement to this arrangement, and we are making good progress.

Mr Speaker: As it is my birthday, I am going to give a gift to Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): You and I are of a similar vintage, Mr Speaker—

Mr Speaker: You've just lost that question—come on, Jim!

Jim Shannon: The difference is that you and I don't count the years, Mr Speaker. Instead, we make the years count, and that is important.

It is really important that we have these trade deals and I support them, but I wish to express concern about the Australian trade deal. I declare an interest as a member of the Ulster Farmers' Union. The Ulster Farmers' Union and my neighbours, who are members of it, have expressed concern about the quality of Australian beef and the fact that it might impact adversely on the Northern Ireland beef sector and industry. We export most of our beef. Can the Secretary of State assure me that the deal will not impact on the Northern Ireland beef sector?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I have met the Foyle Food Group, for example, who were the first beef exporters to export to the United States when we got the ban removed. I know that there are huge opportunities around the world for high-quality Northern Ireland beef. Part of what we are doing with the Australian trade deal is opening up wider access to the Asia-Pacific markets, which have higher prices than here in the UK and in Europe and will bring more opportunity. I am very happy to have further conversations with the hon. Gentleman.

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

10.31 am

Sitting suspended.

Napier Barracks Asylum Accommodation

10.34 am

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on the judicial review judgment on Napier barracks contingency asylum accommodation.

Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): Happy birthday from me as well, Mr Speaker. I made my maiden speech on your birthday when you were in the Chair as Deputy Speaker six years ago.

I am answering this question on behalf of the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who has sadly suffered a family bereavement and therefore cannot be here this morning.

Covid-19 has had a major and unprecedented impact on the asylum system. We make absolutely no apologies for doing everything in our power to provide shelter to those in need during these exceptional times.

Between March and October last year, nearly 12,000 extra people needed to be housed as a result of the pandemic, nearly 10,000 of whom ended up in hotels, at huge public expense. Every accommodation option had to be considered.

Those accommodated at Napier barracks are catered with three nutritious meals per day, with options for special dietary or religious requirements. There is a recreational building with a library. Prayer rooms are available and scheduled activities now include yoga, English conversation and art. There is a nurse on site and access to a GP. All asylum seekers housed at Napier have access to a 24/7 advice service, provided for the Home Office by Migrant Help.

Napier barracks has been happily used for many years by Army and police personnel. The army itself has continued to use barrack accommodation around the country during the pandemic, when needed. While we are disappointed by some of the judgment, the High Court found in the Home Office's favour in a number of areas. It rejected the claim that conditions at Napier amounted to "inhuman or degrading treatment." The judge declined to rule that dormitories or barrack accommodation could never provide "adequate accommodation" for asylum seekers, and the judge rejected the claim that the expectation that residents would be back on site by 10pm amounted to a curfew or unlawful imprisonment.

Furthermore, the judgment was based on conditions in the past, before several significant improvements. These include a stronger cleaning regime, reopening of communal areas with staggered access times, limiting the period of residency and using lateral flow tests three times a week. The overall capacity of the site has also been reduced. At all stages, the Home Office believed it was taking reasonable steps to respond to Public Health England suggestions on public health, where possible.

We have published the suitability criteria that we use for assessing who is suitable to be accommodated at Napier. If it becomes apparent that someone is resident but unsuitable, a transfer is then arranged.

Through our new plans for immigration and the upcoming sovereign borders Bill, this Government are taking action to increase the fairness and efficiency of our asylum system but also to fight illegal and unnecessary migration, such as that by small boats coming across the English Channel. I hope Members will support that Bill when it comes forward, as it is sorely needed to support reform of the system.

Yvette Cooper: In January, there was a major covid outbreak at the Home Office centre at Napier barracks. Some 200 people got covid, both residents and staff, impacting on the local community too. Last week's damning court judgment said:

"The 'bottom line' is that the arrangements at the Barracks were contrary to the advice of PHE...The precautions which were taken were completely inadequate to prevent the spread of Covid-19 infection, and...the outbreak which occurred in mid-January 2021 was inevitable."

The Home Office put people in dormitory blocks, with shared facilities for up to 28 people, at the height of a pandemic.

When the Home Affairs Committee asked the Home Secretary about this, she said that

"the use of the accommodation was all based on Public Health England advice, and...working in line with public health guidance...so we have been following guidance in every single way."

The permanent secretary told the Committee

"we were following the guidance at every stage".

But the court judgment and the evidence from PHE shows the opposite is true.

An internal Home Office email from 7 September records PHE advice as

"advice is that dormitories are not suitable".

Public Health England told the Home Affairs Committee they

"don't know how dormitories can be COVID compliant."

They told the Home Office to follow youth hostel guidance—single rooms only and dormitories to be closed, except for household groups. They and Public Health Wales advised that if the Home Office were going ahead, they should at least limit the number of beds to six, keep people in bubbles with clear isolation facilities and have strong cleaning regimes. None of those things happened at Napier.

Instead, the independent inspectorate and local health officials found poor ventilation in dormitories, inadequate shared washing facilities, a deficient cleaning regime and no proper arrangements for self-isolation, with those testing positive and negative all kept in the same large dormitories. The Home Office was clearly not following public health advice in every way or at every stage. The Minister has an obligation to correct the record, so will he now admit that the Home Office did not follow public health advice and apologise for the inaccurate information given?

Will the Minister tell us what is happening now? Leading local health professionals have warned that the site still cannot be considered safe, and the Home Office's own documents show local health professionals saying that another outbreak is inevitable. Charities have told me that there are still 12 to 14 people in a room and 28 people in shared blocks. Is that true, even after a damning inspectorate report and a damning court judgment, and even after 200 people caught covid on the site? The Home Office has a responsibility to

[Yvette Cooper]

keep people safe. Why has it been ignoring public health advice in the middle of a pandemic and putting public health at risk?

Chris Philp: First, the Select Committee Chair should take into account the context that pertained last September: 60,000 people needed to be accommodated in the middle of a pandemic—an increase of 12,000 people in just the space of a few months. With the best will in the world, it is operationally extremely difficult to accommodate 60,000 people in a pandemic—an extra 12,000 people at a matter of a few weeks or a few months' notice.

The reality is that in the middle of a pandemic outbreaks in some places occur. We have had outbreaks in the hotels that have been used. In other parts of Government—in prisons and other places—there have been covid outbreaks. We have had covid going around Parliament as well. I have caught covid myself; in fact, 5 million people have tested positive for covid. The virus knows no boundaries, and it is very difficult to manage 60,000 people in those circumstances. The measures taken to combat covid on site included rigorous cleaning built into the contract, hand sanitisers, social distancing, personal cleaning equipment provided to service users, isolating and cohorting arrangements. They have now been enhanced further, with more cleaning, staggered access to communal areas and, three times a week, lateral flow testing. We have also reduced the numbers currently on the site.

Public Health England wrote to the Select Committee Chair on 1 June. I have the letter in front of me. In the second paragraph, it says:

“PHE has been in a positive ongoing dialogue and working collaboratively with Home Office (HO) colleagues on a range of COVID-19 related issues since spring 2020.”

Moreover, public health guidance published on gov.uk on 15 December 2020, which she will be aware of, said that ideally accommodation providers would “identify single-rooms with en suite bathroom facilities”.

That is difficult to do for 60,000 people. However, it then said that

“if single occupancy accommodation is not available”—

thus acknowledging that that will not be possible in all cases—

“accommodation where cohorting is possible should be provided”.

We have maintained a close dialogue with Public Health England. Where possible we have followed its guidelines, and a number of improvements have been made in recent months.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Whatever people's view on the asylum situation in this country, people in Folkestone are united in their opposition to the use of Napier barracks in this way. It has been destructive to the community, not least because the barracks have been the focal point of protests—both people protesting about migrant crossings and people protesting about the use of the barracks. It has been a drain on other public services as well. Does the Home Office intend to renew its lease on Napier barracks, which expires in September?

Chris Philp: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for the tireless work that he has done on behalf of his constituents, liaising with the Home Office, Kent

County Council, Folkestone and Hythe District Council and others, and representing his constituents extremely effectively. Unfortunately, very often the local population is not terribly keen on accommodation centres of this kind, for the reasons that he outlined.

We are obviously working hard to mitigate those impacts. Kent police, for example, have received extra funding, and we are working closely with the local health service. The current arrangements on the site are due to run until September. No decision has been made beyond that, but I assure my hon. Friend that he will be closely engaged with at all stages as any further decision is taken.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I, too, wish you a very happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) on securing this urgent question. The recent High Court judgment was a further shameful indictment of the Government's approach to asylum accommodation. My right hon. Friend highlighted the failure of the Home Office to listen to the public health advice about Napier barracks that led to the covid outbreak affecting 197 asylum seekers and staff and posing a danger to the wider community.

On 30 November, as a result of a fire safety inspection at Napier, the Crown premises fire safety inspectorate concluded that

“identified individuals or groups of people would be at risk in case of fire.”

In January, a fire broke out in Napier. The independent chief inspector of borders and immigration noted that the CPFSI's concerns had not been addressed prior to the fire. Can the Minister tell me why the Home Office ignored the advice of Public Health England and the CPFSI? Can he give me a categorical assurance that the Home Office will now follow all future advice from PHE and CPFSI, and publish the advice it was given by PHE?

The Kent and Medway clinical commissioning group's infection prevention report outlined that the site did not facilitate effective social distancing. Quite simply, how on earth did this happen in the middle of a global pandemic?

Chris Philp: I have said already that having to accommodate 60,000 people in the middle of a pandemic, and an increase of 12,000 in a few months, poses very substantial challenges. Where we were able to, we followed suggestions that were made. The hon. Gentleman asked about publishing PHE advice. I said in my first answer that it was published on gov.uk on 15 December last year. He said that a fire broke out. A fire did not break out; there was an act of deliberate arson by the people who were accommodated there, which was disgraceful, outrageous, unjustifiable and unconscionable. It did not break out; it was arson.

In relation to the points about public health, I have already listed, in answer to the Select Committee Chairman, the measures that have recently been taken to improve conditions at the Napier site.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The residents of Blackpool South were absolutely appalled by the recent High Court judgment. Many of them have questioned why accommodation that was previously fit

for our brave troops is somehow inadequate for those who are supposedly fleeing persecution around the globe. Indeed, some have asked why so many people want to remain in the UK at all if the accommodation is so bad. Does the Minister agree that the High Court judgment only highlights the need for urgent reform of our asylum system as a whole, and does he agree that we now need to look at processing asylum seekers outside the UK as part of this plan?

Chris Philp: The judgment, as I said earlier, did not find that the conditions were inhuman or degrading, and it did not find that using dormitory or barrack accommodation was inherently unsuitable, so I agree with the spirit of my hon. Friend's question.

We certainly need to reform the system. The people who are coming across the English channel on small boats are making a journey that is not only dangerous and illegal, but unnecessary. France is a safe country, Germany is a safe country, Belgium is a safe country and Italy is a safe country. The right thing to do—the safe thing to do, and the legal thing to do—is to claim asylum in the first available place. In relation to his last question, yes, all options are being considered.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The utterly damning judgment said expressly that if the MOD had treated soldiers in this way, that, too, would have been unlawful. But let us just run with the idea that this was six soldiers instead of six asylum seekers, and they were put in conditions where a covid outbreak was inevitable, where the fire inspectorate highlighted serious or significant risk of harm, where self-harm and attempts at suicide were occurring because of the prison camp conditions, and where failed screening processes meant that that group of soldiers included those who were particularly vulnerable to covid or mental ill health. Imagine MPs were then told that use of the accommodation was all based on Public Health England advice, without us ever getting to see that advice, and then a court case established that the opposite was true. [*Interruption.*] Yes—only thanks to the court case.

Knowingly placing soldiers or anyone else into a covid trap and a fire trap would lead to outrage, resignations and sackings. Why are the consequences not exactly the same when it is six torture and trafficking survivors from Eritrea or Sudan? Will the Minister apologise for telling the House that conditions at Napier were good enough for the armed services? If he thinks that, it is insulting to the armed services. Will he accept that the conditions are not good enough for the Government to use the barracks for any cohort of people, and what does he think the Home Secretary can learn from the precedent of Amber Rudd's resignation for inadvertently misleading the Home Affairs Committee?

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman talks about the publication of the public health guidance. It was published online. He said it was only published because of the court case. It was published on 15 December—long before the court case was registered.

The hon. Member said the people there were sick. There are screening criteria to make sure that people who should not go there do not go there. If they become vulnerable during the time of occupation, they get moved out. I should also add that the people

accommodated there are all young single men, almost entirely aged between 18 and 40. On the number who got covid—along with 5 million, or more than 5 million, other people in this country—not a single person was hospitalised that I am aware of. That is why we are taking further steps to make sure the site is covid-secure. I have listed some of them already: lateral flow testing three times a week now, numbers being reduced and enhanced cleaning. Those are sensible steps in response to the pandemic and in response to the court judgment.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con) [V]: A very happy birthday to you, Mr Speaker.

The Home Office has worked incredibly hard in very difficult circumstances to improve conditions, and covid security particularly, for the men temporarily housed at Napier barracks since the evidence informing the High Court ruling was submitted. However, I represent a large Army community that will be wondering why conditions considered fine for servicemen and women are considered not good enough for asylum seekers, including those who have made the illegal and perilous journey across the channel. How am I to advise my constituents?

Chris Philp: I think my right hon. Friend is raising an extremely good question. It is precisely because of that question that we will be introducing a Bill in the near future, announced in the Queen's Speech, to reform our system to make sure that the asylum system is fair, as of course it should be, to those in genuine need, but that we deal with these claims quickly, effectively and fairly, and also prevent unnecessary illegal migration, which puts enormous pressure on the system of the kind we are discussing.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The British Red Cross, which I think we would all acknowledge as the expert in the area of provision of accommodation of this sort, made a recommendation in its recent report that the Home Office

"should introduce a formal, independent inspection regime for asylum...accommodation with publicly available reports,"

in order to better

"monitor the quality and effectiveness of support provided and improve transparency and accountability"

for decisions. Surely, in the Home Office's own interests, that would be preferable to a status quo where it is left to mark its own homework or to be called out by the courts.

Chris Philp: We do not mark our own homework; we are very widely inspected. In fact, there was an inspection by the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration just a few months ago into Napier.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): Many happy returns, Mr Speaker.

One of the most shocking aspects of Napier barracks was the detention of vulnerable people who had already survived serious human rights abuses, including torture and trafficking. Given that people's immigration cases can be resolved more humanely, efficiently and cost-effectively by supporting them in the community, why is the Home Office opening a new detention centre for vulnerable women in County Durham?

Chris Philp: I am afraid to say that the hon. Lady is getting a little muddled up there. The Napier site is not for detention; it is an accommodation centre, and people are free to come and go, as the court case found. The centre up in Hassockfield in Durham is a detention centre prior to removal for people whose appeal rights are exhausted and who have no legal right to be in the country. They are two completely different things.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Would the Minister agree with me that the problem is not Napier barracks, but people crossing the channel illegally from France? Is not the simple solution that, when these people arrive in England, we put them on a Royal Navy boat and take them back to France, because France is a safe country and that is where asylum should be claimed? If we did that, it would stop the problem.

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that these channel crossings, which are now running at extremely and unacceptably high levels, are completely unnecessary because France is a safe country and people do not need to make the crossing. It is dangerous and it is also illegal, so I completely agree with those sentiments. In relation to the decisive action needed to stop these crossings completely, I can assure my hon. Friend that every single option is under very active consideration.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): The Home Secretary told the House in January that Napier barracks was

“in line with Public Health England guidelines.”—[*Official Report*, 26 January 2021; Vol. 688, c. 177.]

She reiterated that earlier this week when she told the House that her Department worked fully with PHE, but it is not true, as the High Court ruled last week, with the honourable Justice Linden writing that

“the arrangements at the Barracks were contrary to the advice of PHE”.

The ministerial code states that Ministers must give

“accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity.”

So I ask the Minister, given this blatant discrepancy between the facts and what the Home Secretary said, why is she not here today to correct the record, or will she learn from her predecessor, who resigned as Home Secretary for inadvertently misleading MPs?

Chris Philp: I have already read the quote from the letter from Public Health England to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee dated 1 June in terms of the work we have been doing with them, and it says in the second paragraph:

“PHE has been in a positive ongoing dialogue and working collaboratively with Home Office...on a range of COVID-19 related issues since spring 2020.”

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: I wish you a long life and happiness of your birthday, Mr Speaker.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) rightly said that the problem here is the illegal crossings from France. May I take this opportunity to thank the Minister and his colleagues for doing everything they can to reform the asylum system so that it helps those who actually are vulnerable and need it most? Can he confirm that under the new proposals we

will be opening more safe routes to the UK while clamping down on the people smugglers who prey on the most vulnerable?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend, as always, puts it exactly right. We intend to stand by those in genuine need with schemes like the resettlement scheme, which has taken vulnerable people directly from places of danger and resettled them, and has done so more than any other country in Europe, but when it comes to illegal migration we intend to clamp down hard.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Happy birthday to you, Mr Speaker.

Yesterday, I was made aware of a serious matter that could revolutionise our equality laws. Professors gave evidence at the Women and Equalities Committee and said that buildings—not people—could be something akin to aggressive or threatening. So I think the illegal immigrants at Napier may perhaps have acted in self-defence when trashing and torching the barracks. We should all be aware of their vulnerabilities and sensibilities, so will the Minister agree to send a delegation from the Committee to assess this building aggression, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), whose sensibilities make him ideally suited to the job?

Chris Philp: I am not quite sure where to start. I certainly do not agree with the comments made about building aggression; they seem absurd. My hon. Friend makes a good point, and there is absolutely no excuse whatsoever for incidents such as the terrible act of arson we saw back in January.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: A very happy birthday to you today, Mr Speaker.

The Minister's description of Napier barracks sounds like a propaganda film—yoga, three meals a day, regular cleaning. However, in reality refugees and those seeking asylum are living in squalid accommodation, bitten alive by bedbugs and with inadequate health support. The Government's accommodation policies are entrenched in controversy, so can the Minister explain how the £1 billion contracts are monitored, and does he agree with the High Court ruling that the use at Napier barracks was unlawful and shameful?

Chris Philp: I have explained that many aspects of the judgment found in favour of the Home Office, and I have also explained that improvements have been made subsequently. The contracts are monitored on an ongoing basis, but I repeat again that the challenges of managing 60,000 people in asylum accommodation in the middle of a pandemic are very considerable.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I see this issue about public health in a pandemic as a little bit of a distraction technique, frankly. Pandemic or no pandemic, I am pretty sure that most Labour Members would rather have these people, who are largely illegal immigrants, in elaborate hotel accommodation for as long as possible—potentially indefinitely. Does the Minister agree that if we are going to do what the elected Government were asked to do, which is take back control of our borders, it might be necessary in time to be open to looking at human rights law, because it seems that these judges, who are so often out of step with public opinion, are a blockage to us doing what we need to do?

Chris Philp: I think the public do expect us to reform the system and to control our borders, which is why we are bringing forward a new Bill very shortly to do exactly that. On the question of human rights, which my hon. Friend rightly raises, there is a review going on currently into the operation of the Human Rights Act 1998 that will be reporting, I think, later this year.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) [V]: My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) has reminded the House that quite recently a Home Secretary resigned for inadvertently misleading the Home Affairs Committee. Other hon. Members have asked the Minister whether the current Home Secretary misled the Home Affairs Committee in oral evidence on 24 February this year. In response to those questions, the Minister keeps referring to a Public Health England letter from June this year that talks about full co-operation from the Home Office since spring of this year.

Of course, when the Home Secretary gave evidence on 24 February, she was talking about what had happened before then, not what happened this spring. Evidence presented to the High Court suggests that what she said—that the Department had previously followed public health guidance regarding Napier barracks in “every single way”—was simply not factually correct. The High Court has said that the fact that that public health evidence was ignored meant that the covid outbreak was “inevitable”, so why is the Home Secretary not tendering her resignation, as Amber Rudd had the grace and decency to do?

Chris Philp: The hon. and learned Lady refers to the letter of 1 June and says that it post-dates the Home Affairs Committee appearance on 24 February, which it does. However, the paragraph that I quoted says that the positive ongoing dialogue and collaborative working had been ongoing “since spring 2020”.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Many happy returns of the day, Mr Speaker.

The High Court judgment was absolutely damning. The judge said:

“I do not accept that the accommodation there ensured a standard of living which was adequate for the health of the Claimants.”

The Government are housing people 14 to a room. As we have heard, more than 200 people contracted covid. What is the Minister going to do to ensure that people are protected from covid? How many people have been vaccinated at the barracks, and what are the future plans for housing asylum seekers in accommodation that is fit for human habitation?

Chris Philp: Just to be clear, the court judgment found that there was no article 3 infringement. It did not find that the conditions amounted to inhuman or degrading treatment. Moreover, the judgment did not find, in relation to the requirement to be back at 10 o'clock, that a curfew had been imposed; nor did it find that the barracks or dormitory accommodation were inherently inadequate in the context of asylum accommodation. It is important that the House understands those important aspects of the judgment.

I have already outlined the measures that have been taken: an increased cleaning service, social distancing and lateral flow testing three times a week. All those

measures are designed to ensure that users are safe. The hon. Member asked about vaccinations. The Government's approach to vaccinations in general is that, outside of things like the NHS, vaccinations are done in the order that people are entitled to them based on age and clinical conditions, so the same rules that apply to the hon. Member, to me and to Mr Speaker will apply to people at Napier as well.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I wish you many happy returns, Mr Speaker.

After the second world war, my grandfather, Paul, who fought alongside British forces, was settled in the UK in a refugee camp. A few years later, my mother was born in the same refugee camp. That refugee camp was at an old Army base. Yes, conditions were not great, but they were thankful that they were born in that, because, had my grandfather returned to the Soviet Union, he would have returned to a gulag or perhaps even worse. Why were those conditions good enough for a hero who fought against the Nazis and for my own mother, but not good enough for this current wave of migrants?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is making an extremely powerful point. The experience of his mother and his family illustrates the service that this country does in providing asylum to those who genuinely need it. It puts today's debate rather in context.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

The High Court judgment showed that Napier was unsafe in terms of fire safety, covid security and mental wellbeing, whether for armed forces personnel or asylum seekers, but it is representative of a generalised callousness with regard to support for refugees which leaves many in Newcastle living in inadequate accommodation with inadequate support to keep themselves and their accommodation clean and covid secure. How is the Minister going to change that? Will he say whether Nationwide Accommodation Services, which ran Napier day to day, has other contracts with the Home Office?

Chris Philp: If the hon. Lady would like to raise that case in writing, I would be happy to look into it to find out the details and circumstances. We are accommodating 60,000 people across the country. The cost of running the asylum system now amounts to £1 billion a year, which is a staggering sum and makes the case for reform, for all the reasons that Conservative Members have been laying out.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Happy birthday from the people of Ashfield, Mr Speaker.

After five years of living in the back of a lorry fighting for King and country during the second world war, my grandad Charlie returned to these shores, to live in poor housing, with no heating and no hot water, and he made do with an outside toilet and no access to free yoga lessons. He then went on to work for 40 years down the pit and not once did he ever complain about his life. So does the Minister agree that if illegal immigrants entering this country do not like the housing, which has much better facilities than in my grandad's day, one solution would be to return to France, taking their leftie lawyers and the Opposition with them?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend, as always, makes a powerful point. There is serious question to answer about why people who are in safe countries, such as France, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Italy and all these other European countries, are attempting these dangerous, illegal and unnecessary journeys. What I say to them is that they are in countries that have a fully functioning asylum system and they should claim asylum there.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con) [V]: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

The people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke cannot figure out what is wrong with an Army barracks that has provided free accommodation, food, sanitation and yoga to people who have entered this country illegally. Leftie lawyers have stuck their oar in and ensured that hard-earned UK taxpayers' money is going to have to be splashed on expensive accommodation, such as hotels or buying properties, as seen in Stoke-on-Trent, adding further strain to local public services. Does the Minister agree that people entering illegally from safe places such as France should be returned immediately and that we should now look to Denmark and process asylum seekers outside the UK as part of our plan for immigration?

Chris Philp: I agree with the thrust of my hon. Friend's point, which he makes powerfully. We have already changed our inadmissibility rules to enable the sort of thing that he is describing, and we are in discussions to help make those operational. He rightly says that people should not be entering the UK illegally and dangerously having come from a safe place where they could reasonably have claimed asylum, and that most certainly includes France.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab) [V]: The Home Office's treatment of asylum seekers is appalling. Will the Minister address the latest scandal: the failure to provide new prepayment Aspen cards, which has left many individuals and families without any money at all for several weeks? In my constituency, many asylum seekers are reliant on a local charity, West London Welcome, for food and necessities, because the Minister's Department cannot or will not do its job.

Chris Philp: There have been some delays with the new Aspen cards, which are in the process of being rapidly resolved. However, I categorically reject the allegation that the Home Office, the Government and the UK are not doing their reasonable bit to support asylum seekers. As I have said, the cost of providing asylum support to these 60,000 people now amounts to £1 billion a year, so any suggestion that there is a lack of generosity or there is a meanness of spirit is categorically and completely untrue.

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

11.9 am

Sitting suspended.

Hillsborough: Collapse of Trials

11.11 am

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice, if he will make a statement on the collapse of trials relating to the Hillsborough disaster and subsequent developments.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): I am sure that the whole House would want to join me in paying tribute to the immense courage, determination and patience of the families of the 96 people who died in the Hillsborough disaster, and of those injured who, 32 years on, continue to grieve about the events of that truly terrible day.

The collapse of the case concerning two former police officers and a solicitor who are charged with perverting the course of justice for allegedly having altered statements to be provided to the 1990 Taylor inquiry was the final opportunity for the families seeking justice for what happened at Hillsborough. As the House will have seen, the trial judge in that case ruled that the offence of perverting the course of justice could not have been committed because the inquiry was carrying out an administrative function for the Home Secretary and was not a process of public justice. As such, the prosecution was not able to establish a key element of the offence of perverting the course of justice and the case was unable to proceed any further. Of course, as Lord Chancellor, it is my duty to respect that decision.

Since the Taylor inquiry, the Inquiries Act 2005 was introduced, which allows inquiries to take evidence on oath and to compel witnesses to give evidence and to produce documentary evidence. Section 35 of that Act also makes it an offence to commit acts that intend to have the effect of distorting, altering or preventing evidence from being given to the statutory inquiry. It is also an offence intentionally to suppress or to conceal a relevant document or to destroy such a document.

Members will be rightly concerned as to what, if any, effect this may have on current public inquiries, such as the Grenfell inquiry, the undercover policing inquiry and the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. Each of those are statutory inquiries and each has been set up under the aegis of the 2005 Act, which means that, should someone seek to distort, destroy, conceal or suppress evidence in any of those inquiries, that Act provides that those actions will constitute a specific criminal offence. Indeed, the common law offence of perverting the course of justice may also be an appropriate offence to charge if the elements of that offence are made out.

We recognise the need for those in public office to act responsibly and to discharge their duties with both honesty and integrity. As we continue to consider the judgment in the latest Hillsborough trial and its implications, we will of course always consider opportunities to review the law and how it operates. I want the families to know that there will be no exception in this case. We are carefully considering the points made by the former Bishop of Liverpool, James Jones, in his 2017 report on the experiences of the Hillsborough families, including in relation to the proposed duty of candour. Our focus now, after the trial's conclusion, will be on publishing the Government's overarching response to that report, after having further consulted all the families.

Irrespective of the outcome of this case, the Government continue to be committed to engaging with the survivors and the bereaved families. It is critical that the lessons of the Hillsborough tragedy—the Hillsborough disaster—are not only learned but consistently applied so that something similar can never be allowed to happen again. The Government are absolutely determined to do just that.

Mr Speaker: This is a very important urgent question and I wanted to make sure that it was debated, quite rightly, today. The Lord Chancellor took longer than I expected, so if Members feel they need to take longer, will they please bear in mind that I want to make sure that everybody gets a fair chance to have their say about this very important matter?

Maria Eagle: I thank Lord Chancellor for his careful and thoughtful words.

It is 32 years since the 96 people were unlawfully killed having gone to watch a football match, primarily through the gross negligence of the South Yorkshire police who should have been protecting them. Five years since the inquest verdicts, after six men were charged with 14 offences, only two charges were even put to the jury. Twelve charges were thrown out or withdrawn and just one conviction was secured, for a health and safety breach, resulting in a £6,500 fine. Yet since 2016, the families and survivors have been silenced to prevent any prejudice to the criminal proceedings, necessitating the cancellation of all public memorial services, including the 30th anniversary, and preventing them from correcting the record when the Hillsborough slurs about fans causing the disaster have been repeated—and they have been repeated in court and outside court.

Does the Lord Chancellor agree that it is a catastrophic failure of our criminal justice system that nobody has been held accountable for these killings and that it has taken 32 years for things to fail so badly? Does he think that the Crown Prosecution Service has any questions to answer about the charges laid, the vigour with which they were fought, and the CPS's failure to challenge the reintroduction of the Hillsborough slurs when the families themselves could not because they were silenced? Does he accept that the utter failure, over 32 years, of our criminal justice system to do justice for these people requires changes of the law to make sure that families who are bereaved in public disasters never again have to endure this extended ordeal, after so many years trying to get truth and justice?

The Lord Chancellor seemed to say that he wants to learn lessons, and I welcome that, so will he consider enacting measures in the Public Advocate (No. 2) Bill, which is designed to stop things going wrong in the first place—that is the key to stopping things going wrong in respect of public disasters—and in the Public Authority (Accountability) Bill? Will he work with those of us in this House who have been campaigning on this issue to get it right for the future?

Since the collapse of the trials, two defence barristers have repeated the Hillsborough slurs in public. This matters so much to the families—the cover-up has been denied—so does the Lord Chancellor agree that it now has to stop? Will he make it clear that it must stop and that the apology that the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, gave in this House matters now as much as it did then and sets the record straight? Does he agree that

the idea that it is lawful for a public authority to withhold information from an inquiry established to identify why 96 people died at a football event and to learn lessons, and for a solicitor to advise such a step, cannot be right and must be changed?

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and I pay tribute to her for the consistent work that she continues to do in this area. She has asked a number of questions, and she will perhaps forgive me if I cannot answer them with absolute specificity, but I will do my very best. I will start by reiterating the apology that David Cameron made. That is the Government's position—no ifs, no buts.

With regard to the prosecution, clearly, it was right for the case to be brought and, as I have said, as Lord Chancellor, I have to respect the process. However, that has had quite a consequence for the families.

The important work that now needs to be done by colleagues in the Home Office—I have taken the trouble to speak to Home Office officials this morning—is to focus on Bishop James Jones's 2017 report and work with the families to ensure that those recommendations are carried out. The focus has to be unrelenting, and I want this to take months, not years. Obviously, the families need to be at the heart of it—“nothing about them without them” clearly has to be the watchword—and I am confident, in the light of the work done by David Cameron, by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) and now by the Home Office, that that approach will very much be taken.

In regard to the work that the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood and others, including Lord Wills, have been doing on the independent public advocate, I want to assure the hon. Lady that we are absolutely committed to ensuring that bereaved people are supported and given a proper voice throughout the process. A Government consultation was conducted in 2018, and the responses to it were rather varied. I propose to do some more work on that process more swiftly, and to bottom-out what the options might be in ensuring that any service is independent, has the confidence of those who use it and makes a difference, particularly in major public inquiries where many lives have been lost. I know that that has been the focus. I will work with the hon. Lady to ensure that the consultation will look at what the threshold might look like and at the overall impact. I do not think we need to create some huge public body; I know that that is not the hon. Lady's intention. I now want to give this careful and close attention, and I am sure she will work with me on that.

It is good to note that a lot of work has already been done with regard to legal aid eligibility. We have, in effect, ended any means test on legal aid for legal help and, indeed, representation by the use of the exceptional cases funding category of legal aid. That was an important and welcome initiative. We must also bear in mind the work done by Mr Nick Hurd, a former Member of this House, as the Prime Minister's adviser and envoy on the Grenfell inquiry. I want to make sure that the correlation of that type of role is fully understood in the concept of a potential independent public advocate. I am sure that the hon. Lady and I will have further exchanges, and I am sure she will forgive me if I have not answered every specific question that she has asked. I am profoundly grateful to her for her urgent question today.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor has acknowledged that the collapse of this trial has been the final blow to the Hillsborough families in their desperate search for justice over so many years. He has referenced the independent public advocate. In 2017, I pledged:

“To ensure that the pain and suffering of the Hillsborough families...is not repeated, we will introduce an independent public advocate who will act for bereaved families after a public disaster and support them at public inquests.”

We are now four years on, so can I urge him to act swiftly in this matter? We have established our former colleague here in this House, Nick Hurd, as a ministerial representative working with the Grenfell families after that tragedy, but I would say to the Lord Chancellor that I see that role as quite different from the role of an independent public advocate. The independence of the public advocate is incredibly important. The Lord Chancellor wants to get it right, but please get it right quickly.

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, and I pay tribute to her for the approach that she took not only as Prime Minister but as Home Secretary throughout those years, particularly after the first report by Bishop James Jones in 2012. I well remember being a Back Benchers in this House and raising the issue of potential criminal charges, and now here we are, nearly 10 years later. I take the point about time, but I know that she will appreciate that I want to get this absolutely right. I want to make sure that anything that we do chimes with the aspirations and needs of those who might use such independent advocates. Our work will be fruitless if it does not achieve those aims.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Secretary of State, David Lammy.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), who has been at these issues in this House for 24 years on behalf of her constituents and others.

The Secretary of State will know that inquests have since found that 96 victims were unlawfully killed by the negligence of others. The authorities who were supposed to protect the 96 that day instead failed them. More than five years ago, the South Yorkshire police commander in charge on the day of the Hillsborough disaster admitted not only that he had inadequate experience to oversee the safety of the 54,000 people, not only that he accepted responsibility for the deaths, but that he lied, telling the then secretary of the Football Association that Liverpool fans should be blamed for getting entry through a large exit gate when, in fact, he ordered the gate to be opened himself. These lies—these pernicious, ugly mistruths—have caused incredible pain to the families of the 96, who were already in despair and obviously experiencing grief.

The collapse of the most recent case at the end of last month is yet another kick in the gut for the families of all those who lost loved ones at Hillsborough. It is nothing less than a national scandal that not one person responsible has been punished or held to account in the criminal justice system for these deadly failures. The lack of justice in this case is undermining the very concept of a public inquiry. After a tragedy like this, the

system only works where there is good faith. There is clearly bad faith in respect of the Hillsborough tragedy, and we must legislate so that this can never happen again.

The travesty of Hillsborough is not a one-off. We can see parallels in the experience that the Grenfell families are going through at this time. Do the Government now accept that they need to change the law? Another tragedy, another 32 years of injustice—we clearly need to do something. This does not have to be a partisan issue. The former Prime Minister, as we have heard, yesterday expressed the need for legislative change after the most recent trial collapsed because, although it was accepted that police evidence had been altered, it did not constitute perversion of the course of justice as it was evidenced to a public inquiry. Authorities must be held to account and victims must be given the support that they need. The proposals to ensure that this takes place—the Public Advocate Bill and the Public Authority (Accountability) Bill—are ready to go. We cannot have more cover-ups, more lies and more pain for bereaved families. Truth and justice matter. Will the Secretary of State today commit to working cross-party to change the law not only to secure justice for the families of the 96, but to ensure that this does not and cannot ever happen again?

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman and, of course, I reiterate the commitment that I made to the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) to work across the House. Those are not just words; that is backed up by the consistent work that this Government have done both in the incarnation of the previous Prime Minister and, indeed, when David Cameron was in office.

The right hon. Gentleman refers to changes in the law. I have already alluded to my intention with regard to the additional work to be done on how an independent public advocate service might work. I am also mindful of work that the Law Commission has done on potential changes to the offences of misconduct in public office, which are clearly tied in with these matters. On the matter of perverting the course of justice, I have made it clear that inquiries under the Inquiries Act 2005 could indeed be covered by that common law offence, which is a significant difference from the Taylor inquiry, which was, if you like, an administrative inquiry ordered by the Home Office, which formed the basis of learned trial judges' decisions. I am confident that the current inquiries under the 2005 Act—indeed the future covid inquiry—would be covered, subject to the evidential tests being met by the common law offence of perverting the course of justice as well as the section 35 offences that I referred to in my initial statement.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: Nothing can take away from the grief and heartache that the Hillsborough families have suffered. The system, for various reasons, has prolonged that suffering, and this has been rightly brought to our attention by the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle). She is a fellow member of the Justice Committee, and all Committee members would want to extend their deepest condolences to the families at what must be a very trying time.

Will the Lord Chancellor recognise that we have to be cautious in moving to legislative change in relation to the specific facts of this case? This is a case in which a

legal decision—a point of law—was argued by very experienced counsel on both sides in front of a very experienced High Court judge. Conclusions may have to be made, as he has set out, as to what should come from that, but legislative change may not be appropriate where we are dealing with a very fact-specific set of circumstances and the particular legal status of the Taylor inquiry.

Will the Lord Chancellor also recognise that he has received from the Justice Committee a report that highlights the way in which, in a number of important areas, the coronial inquest system fails, regrettably, to protect and support bereaved families both in large cases of great public attention such as this and in smaller ones too? The report makes a specific recommendation that legal representation should, as a matter of course, be available to families in cases where there has been a disaster that has significant public consequences or where state agencies such as a police authority are themselves legally represented, so that the families can get their concerns aired and their desire to challenge and scrutinise the evidence heard by their own representatives at the inquest stage earlier in the proceedings?

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to the Chair of the Justice Committee. I think I should correct the record; it was, of course, the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) who asked the urgent question. I know that the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) is similarly supportive, and I am sure that she is more than grateful to be referred to, but I am grateful to the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood, who is in the Chamber.

My hon. Friend is right to talk about the excellent report that his Committee has done. We will respond to it by the end of July, and my officials are working on that response. His question draws out some important points that we should all remember when it comes to inquests. Inquests are processes that are designed to uncover the facts. They are not trials; they cannot be trials. This brings us back to the essential point for the families. The families have put their faith in the criminal trial process as a way of responsibility—people being held to account. However comprehensive the inquest process was—and the inquest chaired by Sir John Goldring was, indeed, a very comprehensive and thorough piece of work that all of us can reflect upon and understand—it was never going to be a trial.

The point I seek to make is that we must ensure that, when we talk about equality of arms, which is a very important point that underpins the hon. Lady's campaign, we do not turn to some sort of adversarial blame game. That would be wrong. It would be a disservice, frankly, to bereaved families, and it would be a misunderstanding of the coroner's function. Article 2 widens the provisions of the inquest to allow for wider consideration to be given, but it is important that all of us focus upon the function of an inquest and the fact that any changes to be made should not detract from its essential quality.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP) [V]: The Hillsborough disaster was a fatal human tragedy at a football match at Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield on 15 April 1989. I pay tribute to those who lost their lives and the families who have spent decades in pursuit of justice.

In 2016, the inquiry findings concluded that 96 victims were unlawfully killed due to gross negligence. Police errors in planning, defects at the stadium and delays in the emergency response all contributed to the disaster. The behaviour of fans was not to blame. The 32-year battle for justice by the families shows that the English legal system is in dire need of reform. It has failed to provide any real accountability for these unlawful deaths and a cover-up that extended from the police lying and omitting crucial details to the media narrative shifting, blaming fans for their deaths, and a long, hard fight for the truth. The collapse of the latest trial means that no one will be held criminally responsible. Margaret Aspinall, who lost her 18-year-old son in the disaster and is the former chair of the Hillsborough Family Support Group, has called this outcome a

“cover-up of the cover-up of the cover-up”,

saying that families have been

“put through a 32-year legal nightmare looking for the truth and accountability.”

Given the collapse of the trial, how does the Minister plan to promote confidence in accountability for public servants and in the idea that fair justice is ensured in the English legal system? The ruling that the Government inquiries are not a course of public justice and that in effect public servants cannot be held legally to account for evidence provided to them is incorrect and risks creating a dangerous precedent for those who wish to withhold or amend evidence for future inquiries. What action will the Minister take to ensure that the system of inquiries is not compromised by this ruling?

This is the end of the legal line for the Hillsborough campaigners. The reviews, inquiries, inquests and criminal trials have allowed the record to be set straight and established that fans were not to blame for the disaster. However, no convictions have been made and many still feel that justice has not been served. What assurances can the Government give to the victims and their families that the lessons of Hillsborough have been learned and that justice and accountability remain unequivocally guaranteed in the English legal system?

No one should go to a football match and not return home afterwards. It is right that the matter is considered carefully and sensitively, but after 32 years the campaign for justice for the 96 rightly deserved justice.

Robert Buckland: In the hon. Lady's sensitive and appropriate invocation of the memories of the 96, it is right to pause to remember that 50 years ago the Ibrox disaster happened in Glasgow, a major disaster costing many, many lives.

Mr Speaker: And the one with Bolton Wanderers, too.

Robert Buckland: Indeed, Mr Speaker; you are quite right to add that to the record.

What brings those two tragedies together, although they are separated by time, is the fundamental approach that was taken to safety then. It seems that public order trumped safety, and the attitude of the then authorities was about the containment of potential unruly behaviour rather than the fundamental issues of safety. That lazy thinking, which seems astounding now in 2021, underpins many of the ways in which disasters such as this happened—or near disasters, which on many occasions were averted only by mere good luck or circumstance.

[Robert Buckland]

That is an important point to reflect on. We cannot go back to those days. The care and safety of fans at matches have to be paramount and at the centre of any considerations by police and other agencies responsible for safety on these important occasions.

I have in my previous answers dealt with many of the proper points that the hon. Lady raises. I will reflect in this way: with regard to the inquest process, I think she will appreciate the important need for me to balance the imperative of ensuring that those who have been voiceless have a voice while at the same time making sure that we do not do anything inadvertent to close down opportunities for frankness. Although the Inquiries Act has done a very important job in making clear what is covered not just by statute but by the common law offence of perverting the course of justice, just because an inquiry might not be held under its aegis does not mean that there should be some retreat from principles of honesty, openness and integrity. That should not be the case. It should not just be about the letter of the law being there; it should be about the spirit of behaviour by everybody. That is what I want to see, and I know that it is what hon. and right hon. Members want to see too.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): It is hard to disagree with the reported comments of Deanna Matthews that it is “ludicrous” for the search for justice to have ended in this way, particularly when the community in Liverpool have had to fight so hard for so long to uncover the truth. What does my right hon. and learned Friend consider is the key lesson for the Department he leads to prevent things like this from ever happening again?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend encapsulates very well the task that is before me and the Government. The task is to make sure, first, that we have finally moved away from the public order mindset that I referred to, but secondly, that in response to any tragedy or disaster that might happen, there is a spirit of openness and a willingness and an understanding that the needs of bereaved families must be at the heart of processes. In everything that we do with regard to future investigations, inquiries and criminal investigations, people must not hide behind process and use that as a shield, because that has been the impression and the perception, which is why the families feel today that deep damage has been done to the process.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Bishop James Jones set out in his report that one of the problems with the initial inquest was that there was no public funding for the families to get the representation and advice they needed. The Government have said that providing legal aid for inquests is too expensive. I listened carefully to the Secretary of State’s earlier response about that: an inquest is not like criminal proceedings or court proceedings. But clearly some legal advice is important for families in these cases. Whatever he wants to call it, will he listen to those families and prevent further injustices in future by providing legal aid for inquests?

Robert Buckland: I do not know whether the hon. Lady heard my observations about what has already been done with regard to legal aid and legal eligibility. The effective removal of the upper means test threshold

with regard to exceptional case funding for legal help and legal representation in circumstances just such as this is a very important development. I take the point that she makes. That is why I have already undertaken not just to present the response to the 2018 consultation but to develop it further so that any potential change that can be made will be done with the fullest, most careful and earliest consideration.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): With your permission, Mr Speaker, as this is the first time I am speaking on this topic, I hope you will allow me to pay tribute to the four victims from Warrington who lost their lives at Hillsborough—in particular, to David Benson from Penketh in my constituency, who was just 22 when he died. Having read some of the comments from Brian, David’s father, it is clear to me that he feels that the system has failed him at every single level. With that in mind, will the Lord Chancellor clarify what steps he is taking following the collapse of the most recent trial in relation to the offence of perverting the course of justice and common law offences that touch on those who hold public office?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend puts in very heartfelt, genuine terms the real sense of loss and frustration, to say the least, that his constituents and their families feel. I have already outlined the steps that I want to take with regard to looking at the public advocate role. In line with that, I and my officials are considering very carefully the work of Law Commission on the offences of misconduct in public office published right at the end of last year. I aim to issue a response as soon as possible with regard to any next steps. There is a joint protocol that we have agreed between my Department—the Government—and the Law Commission. I want to make sure that any potential changes are done in the round so that we are not inadvertently missing out any particular issues that clearly need to be addressed.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab) [V]: May I pay my own tribute to the families and survivors? It took 27 years to get to the truth that 96 people were unlawfully killed at Hillsborough, yet 32 years on, justice remains out of reach. The decades-long fight of the bereaved families and survivors is all the evidence we need that the legal system is broken, and the collapse of the recent trial risks setting a precedent that tips the scales of justice even further away from victims. Can I ask the Lord Chancellor to say how he will engage with the families and survivors about their experiences? Will he quickly set out a timetable for reviewing and changing the law, to learn lessons from the horrific experiences that the families and survivors have had of the British legal and judicial system?

Robert Buckland: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I can assure him that when it comes to ramifications, we must remember that this was a decision of first instance that turned on its particular facts. I have clearly set out the position with regard to the existing Inquiries Act 2005 and the section 35 offences applying to that and, indeed, the common law offence of perverting the course of justice.

In terms of the other important points the hon. Gentleman makes, colleagues at the Home Office will now be working closely with the families with regard to

the 2017 Bishop James Jones report. They can get on with that work now that the trial has come to a conclusion. As I said earlier, “nothing about them without them” has to be at the heart of the work that is done with the families, so that what emerges will be a positive set of changes informed by the excellent work of Bishop James Jones.

Secondly, I have already outlined what my intentions are with potential legislative change, and I absolutely get the hon. Gentleman’s point about the need, after all this time, for work to be done as speedily as possible.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: The Hillsborough tragedy is one of those events where anyone who was alive at the time will remember where they were when these terrible events were unfolding. All our sympathy must be with the families of the victims and those recovering. Will my right hon and learned Friend set out what plans he has to review the existing position so that legal support is provided to the families of victims not only of the Hillsborough tragedy, but of other tragedies that may sadly happen? There will need to be legal support for families undergoing this. We need to learn the lessons and ensure that the failure to provide proper legal support for these families during the entire process is not repeated.

Robert Buckland: I think it goes further than that; it starts right at the beginning of the process, and I think the families would say that they were shut out from day one. The rot sets in much earlier than the investigative, inquisitorial and adversarial process. That is something that none of us can accept or wants to see happen. What we are left with is the aftermath. The work that Government have been doing and will continue to do in the spirit of cross-party co-operation is designed to try to create a higher degree of accountability and involvement, but I emphasise something that I have not yet properly emphasised, which is that the justice system cannot do this alone. It is only as good as the product of the evidence, information and intelligence it receives, and that requires all arms of the state to act in a way that is responsible, open, accountable and honest.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab) [V]: Those of us who were at Hillsborough that April in 1989 will never forget the scenes that we witnessed that day, made all the worse by the deliberate attempt by South Yorkshire police to blame Liverpool fans. It made the trauma of the families 10 times worse. It is worth putting on the record again that what has been found is that the police lost control, the stadium was unfit for a match of that importance and that size of crowd, and other agencies such as the ambulance service failed on the day.

What is important now is that we take the lessons forward. This has been a terrible time again for the families. I hear what the Secretary of State says, but over the years as an MP on constituency cases I have had some good and bad experiences with the coronial service. I dealt with a case recently that also raises questions about whether sensitivity and openness to families is really there throughout the coronial service. I hope that we will look at that again.

Robert Buckland: I thank the hon. Gentleman who, as a Merseyside MP as well as a football fan, has lived this experience, along with all of us who have followed this tragedy over the years. I am, of course, more than

happy to look at the case that he raises. In the past I have always been happy to see him on particular issues, and this occasion will be no exception.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I am sure that the whole House has immense sympathy with the families affected by the tragic events of Hillsborough, and their tireless pursuit of justice is to be praised. Has my right hon. and learned Friend made an assessment of the adequacy of the financial package of support available to bereaved families after such a tragic event?

Robert Buckland: I thank my hon. Friend for that important point. As I outlined in previous answers, it is important, certainly from my position with regard to the justice process, that we act as swiftly as possible to make legal aid eligibility easier. We have done that, but clearly, in the light of the responses to our consultation, more work needs to be done to achieve the level of justice-related support that families deserve.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab) [V]: The recent collapse of the Hillsborough trial was a devastating development for many people living in my constituency and across Merseyside who have suffered so much in their decades’ long quest for justice. The pain that it has caused the families of the 96 Liverpool fans who lost their lives, along with the trauma still haunting so many of the survivors, needs to be urgently addressed by this House. Do the Government accept that the payment of compensation by the police to 601 people affected by the disaster is inconsistent with the court’s failure to find anybody responsible for the tragedy, and that that failure needs to be addressed by legislation to protect victims in the future?

Robert Buckland: The hon. Gentleman asks a proper question about compensation; indeed, it echoes that of my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton). I undertake to write to them both about that aspect. I do not want to say anything that would in any way be misconstrued or misunderstood. Frankly, this is a very sensitive matter that needs more careful consideration. I am alive to the fact that things are said and done purportedly on behalf of the families when in fact the families have not been involved. We have to act in a way that is consistent with our words, and that is what I am doing on this occasion.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab) [V]: I pay tribute to the families and survivors at Hillsborough. Liverpool is a proud and resilient city, and I am a proud Scouser. Contrary to the Prime Minister’s description, we are not a city that wallows in victim status; we have a long history of fighting social injustice, and Hillsborough is the worst kind of injustice. On 15 April 1989, 96 Liverpool fans left to watch a football match and died as a result of corporate failures. Can the Lord Chancellor tell the House, and the families of the 96, what he intends to do for justice to be served?

Robert Buckland: I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to the great city of Liverpool. I am a proud Welshman, but Liverpool is very close to my homeland and to my heart. It is a great city—a wonderful place, full of amazing people. I want to put that on the record. I am sure that she listened very carefully to the points

[Robert Buckland]

that I made about my intentions, and the Government's, with regard to achieving as high a degree of justice as possible. Sometimes the word "justice" is bandied about a bit too much and we are perhaps a little careless with the way we use it. Bearing in mind everything that has happened, and the huge setbacks and reversals that the families have experienced, I will try to achieve as high a degree of justice as possible in these terrible difficult and deeply sad circumstances.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab) [V]: Thirty-two years after the Hillsborough tragedy, the families of the 96 football fans unlawfully killed that day have not seen justice done. Three of my Warrington North constituents—19-year-old Ian "Ronnie" Whelan, 19-year-old Colin Ashcroft and 42-year-old Eric Hughes—were among the 96 innocent victims killed that day. May their memories forever be a blessing. Many more of my constituents have been traumatised by the events of that day.

The fact that there has been no individual responsible held to account by the justice system is a national scandal, as are the years of smears about fans that the families and survivors have endured, blaming them for the disaster. Will the Government therefore consider implementing the Public Authority (Accountability) Bill of the former Member for Leigh to set a requirement on public institutions, public servants and officials, and on those carrying out functions on their behalf, to act in the public interest and with candour and frankness, so that other families bereaved in public disasters cannot be treated as disgracefully as the Hillsborough families have been?

Robert Buckland: I think the hon. Lady is right to remind us again about the victims of the disaster from Warrington North and how in fact the diaspora—I suppose that is the best word to use—was a wide one, bearing in mind the wide fan base of Liverpool football club. That means that what happened was a national disaster, and was not confined to the great city of Liverpool, though the great city of Liverpool felt the brunt of it. This was something I think all of us felt was a national loss and a national disaster, and therefore we have a national responsibility to address it and to rectify wrongs that have been committed.

I listened very carefully to the hon. Lady's point about the Bill that fell back prior to the general election of 2017. I am of course, as I have already indicated, looking carefully at aspects relating to that Bill, and indeed at wider work to make sure that we fully reflect the wrongs that were committed and the culture change that I think is such an important part of rectifying the ills of the past.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Ninety-six people were unlawfully killed at Hillsborough. Police statements were altered, yet nobody has been held to account. What are the Government going to do about it?

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and she will forgive me if I do not go through all the important points I have made in response to other hon. Members. I will simply say this to her: she rightly raises the issue and she wants accountability—so do I, and so

do the Government. That is why the work will continue in the months ahead, particularly the important work that the Home Office has conducted with the families directly, as a result of Bishop James Jones's second report—the 2017 report.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): Can I thank the Lord Chancellor for his answers so far?

On 15 April 1989, I witnessed 96 women, men and children unlawfully killed at a football match in Hillsborough, Sheffield. On 26 May 2021 in Salford, we shamefully witnessed a trial collapse on a technicality. After 32 years, not a single person has been held accountable for the deaths, and justice has been denied to families and survivors.

"Our loved ones went to a football match and were killed, then they and the survivors were branded hooligans," said Margaret Aspinall:

"We've been put through a 32-year legal nightmare looking for the truth and accountability."

Mary Corrigan, whose 17-year-old son Keith—he was a great friend of mine—died, said she was "so angry":

"It's the lies, the lies that they've come out with,"

she said:

"It's unbelievable."

We now have families of the dead, survivors and indeed a city—broken by the events of 32 years—believing our justice system is corrupt and damaged beyond repair.

Does the Lord Chancellor accept that there need to be legislative changes to avoid families affected by future disasters facing the same mistreatment and injustice as the Hillsborough families and survivors have suffered? Will the Lord Chancellor commit to working with families, survivors and Members across this House to implement the Public Advocate (No. 2) Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), which will help to ensure this injustice is never repeated?

Robert Buckland: I am profoundly grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks and I listened very carefully to what he said. He was a witness to what happened and, no doubt, he has to live with that. All of us in this House would understand and share with him that huge sense of loss to which I referred and that sense of an ongoing injustice. I hope he appreciates that, in the answers I have given, I have set out the steps the Government wish to take on the important work that is being done on many fronts: potential legislative change; the work of Bishop James Jones's inquiry; and, importantly, the work that quietly but effectively goes on between the Home Office and families directly. I say again that we have to act in accordance with our words, and doing things for, to or about the families is meaningless unless we do it with them—it has to be with them that we will make things better.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab) [V]: In asking my question today, I am thinking of all those who lost a loved one and all those who were affected in any way by the Hillsborough disaster, and all that they have been through.

I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) for their incredible work on this, and I will support them every

step of the way as they create a legal legacy for all those affected in the most terrible way by the Hillsborough disaster. Both of them accurately captured the effective silencing in recent years of those who know the truth of Hillsborough during the recent proceedings, which is why I want to ask about the Hillsborough archive, which is crucial to making sure that history correctly records the truth of Hillsborough. Will the Lord Chancellor and appropriate Ministers meet me to discuss the future for that archive?

Robert Buckland: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, who makes an important point about the archive. There is a general point to be made here which goes back to the initial question. The ongoing criminal procedure meant that a lot of material, for example, material on existing websites, had to be taken down. Obviously, I want that to change—I want it all to go back. Indeed, more work needs to be done to ensure that documents and material are in the public domain. So my answer is: yes, I absolutely will undertake to work with her, because I think it is important that everybody has access to the truth, so that the full story is known by generations yet to come.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It represents a complete failure of the state, does it not, that 96 people were unlawfully killed and then there was a cover-up, for which no one has been held to account because of what amounts to a technicality 32 years later on? So does the Lord Chancellor agree that, to the families of the bereaved, the idea about statements submitted by the police to an inquiry headed by a Lord Justice that was not in the “course of public justice” is a cruel absurdity, on top of all the other injustices that they have suffered? Does he consider that anything could have been done to close this loophole long before we got to this point?

Robert Buckland: I listened carefully to the careful question from the hon. Gentleman. He appreciates that with regard to criminal procedure the law applicable at the time is the law that is then used with regard to the evidence and whether individuals might be guilty or not guilty of allegations. I have made it very clear that the Inquiries Act 2005, which of course was passed many years after the Taylor inquiry, covers the major public inquiries that we are all very familiar with, the ongoing ones that we have and indeed the future covid inquiry. I have also made it clear that that common law offence of perverting the course of justice would cover those types of inquiries, but clearly as part of the work we are doing, we will look carefully to make sure that there are not any inadvertent loopholes, while remembering the important point that there will be certain procedures that must be conducted in a spirit of openness and honesty which will benefit from being less adversarial and more fact-finding, and that of course includes the essence of the inquest process itself. We must be very mindful of getting that balance right when we look at these things.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab) [V]: The collapse of the trial last month was devastating for the families who lost loved ones at Hillsborough. In 2016, an inquest jury ruled that the 96 who tragically lost their lives were unlawfully killed, yet no successful criminal

charges have been brought against any individual. The whole House will be in agreement that this is a massive failing of the criminal justice system.

I have heard the Lord Chancellor’s responses today, but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) says, the Public Advocate Bill and the Public Authority (Accountability) Bill are ready to go. Will the Government now commit to introducing that legislation without delay, so that no families bereaved by public disasters have to go through what the families who lost loved ones at Hillsborough have had to endure?

Robert Buckland: Without repeating the points I made in earlier answers, I reiterate my commitment to carefully considering the 2018 consultation and the responses that have been given, which were quite varied and included varied views about the merits of the proposal. I will always look to achieve that essential element of independence and to ensure that a voice is provided to those who, prior to this, have been voiceless.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab) [V]: Ninety-six people died at Hillsborough, including 18 people from the borough of Sefton. That included Kevin Williams, one of the youngest victims, whose mum, Anne, campaigned so hard to achieve the new inquest. Despite the coroner’s verdict, no one was held accountable of unlawful killing at that new inquest. Instead, the loved ones of the bereaved families continue to be smeared to this day. The Justice Secretary said that he was committed to changing the law, so I ask him: how quickly will he introduce the Hillsborough law? Will it deliver parity of legal funding for bereaved families? Will it include a duty of candour on public officials? In short, will it ensure that no one is ever denied justice in such a cruel way ever again?

Robert Buckland: I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to all those from the borough of Sefton who lost their lives and to their families, to whom he quite rightly refers. Those campaigners, in particular in his constituency, worked so hard for the inquest. I remember the people he talks about very well, as I think do most of us who followed events closely; I remember them with gratitude and honour.

I will not reiterate the points I have made, but I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answers that I gave a moment ago. I simply say this: I want to get it right and to ensure that things are done as quickly as possible, but I do not want to rush this and get it wrong in a way that, frankly, the families would, once again, be let down by.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) for her assiduous work over many years on behalf of her constituents and many others on this important issue. It is important to remember that the families have suffered injustice at every stage, and have had to fight to overturn lies and decisions that have gone against them. They have had to relive the tragedy and listen to all the details of what their family members went through on that day.

To then come to the final stage, with a court case falling on the technicality that it is not unlawful to give false statements in an inquest—we cannot imagine the pain and anguish that that must cause. I ask the

[Clive Efford]

Lord Chancellor to expedite the changes in law that he has said he is willing to do, but will he also tell us whether he thinks the Crown Prosecution Service has anything to answer for here? Should it be looking at itself and the way it has conducted itself during this case?

Robert Buckland: The hon. Gentleman encapsulates the feelings very well indeed. I refer him to the answers I gave a moment ago.

With regard to the CPS, I have to say that I am not the accountable Minister. The Attorney General is responsible for the superintendence of the independent Crown Prosecution Service. As Lord Chancellor, my clear role is to acknowledge and respect process, and I think perhaps it would not be right for me to make comments about an individual case, not having been close to the facts. The hon. Gentleman knows that there are mechanisms by which further questions can be asked, primarily via the Attorney General's Office.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab) [V]: As other hon. Members have done today, I pay tribute to the families and survivors of Hillsborough for their dignity and tenacity in the pursuit of truth and justice, and of course I pay tribute to my wider city of Liverpool. Hillsborough and the subsequent fight for justice show the great lengths to which state actors are willing to go to avoid accountability and truth—to act in their own self-interest, not that of the public, the survivors or the families.

The fact remains that 96 innocent men, women and children were unlawfully killed, and yet nobody has been held accountable and justice still awaits. Will the Secretary of State condemn Jonathan Goldberg's recent comments about the behaviour of Liverpool fans that day? A member of the Queen's Counsel should know better and, quite frankly, his empty apology just does not cut it.

Robert Buckland: I can absolutely understand the strong feelings that the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker) has articulated. She is right to remind us that every time comments are made in public, by people who should think very carefully, real hurt can be caused. The hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) is right to mention the reliving of events. The intense

sensitivity of these matters cannot be overestimated, so my sage advice to everybody in public life, and anybody who wishes to pass comment about the dreadful events of 1989, is this. Remember that there are human people behind this, who are still living with it. Show some respect.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab) [V]: I pay tribute to the families, survivors and victims. The Lord Chancellor referred to loopholes. I understand that the expert witness Sir Robert Francis QC, who has led or been involved in inquiries into the Liverpool Alder Hey Children's Hospital scandal and others, and who is a champion of openness and transparency, told the jury—with regret, I expect—that there was no legal duty of candour for police at a public inquiry. Can I be absolutely clear? Is the Lord Chancellor absolutely satisfied that the current legal provisions, which he referred to earlier, cover all administrative inquiries in relation to breach of candour? I thank him today for his candour.

Robert Buckland: The hon. Gentleman asks a very important question. Indeed, he touches on detail that my officials and I need to consider regarding not just the ruling, but the evidence that was given in the trial. As he knows, it would not be right for me to comment on the detail of that evidence. It is clear that that work needs to be carried out as part of a wider process of making sure that well-intentioned decisions to get on with important and expeditious work to uncover the truth do not end up, further down the line, in loopholes that can cause real misery to those who seek justice. He knows that my door is always open to him, and I am sure that we will carry on having an active dialogue on these important matters.

ROYAL ASSENT

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

Finance Act 2021.

I now suspend the House for two minutes to enable the necessary arrangements to be made for the next business.

12.14 pm

Sitting suspended.

Speaker's Statement

12.16 pm

Mr Speaker: Before I call the shadow Leader of the House to ask the business question, I would like to take the opportunity to put on record the House's thanks to Tony Reay, who retired this week after 43 years of service in the House. Tony worked first in the craft and maintenance team as a carpenter. Since 2001, Tony has worked in the security team, where he was a security officer. He was a popular member of the team with colleagues, Members and visitors alike. As one of his colleagues said:

"I've seen staff and public entering with a frown only to experience the Reay way and then they would be leaving with a beaming smile or a howl of laughter. He will certainly be missed by his Security family and staff of the house."

I am sure we would all like to wish Tony a very long and happy retirement. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Business of the House

12.17 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker. I join you in your good wishes to Tony.

Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Mr Speaker, as you are just leaving the Chair, may I too wish you a happy birthday, before you depart? I do not think we will sing.

The business for the week commencing 14 June will include:

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

TUESDAY 15 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.

WEDNESDAY 16 JUNE—Second Reading of the Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Bill.

THURSDAY 17 JUNE—General debate on the Misuse of Drugs Act, followed by a general debate on the UK's preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative and the G7. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 18 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 21 June will include:

MONDAY 21 JUNE—Opposition day (3rd allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

TUESDAY 22 JUNE—Second Reading of the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 23 JUNE—Consideration in Committee of the Armed Forces Bill.

THURSDAY 24 JUNE—General debate on the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, followed by business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 25 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the business. Can he share with the House the reasons why the business for next week appears to have changed?

This is a great country, full of amazing, inspiring people, and this week is the Government's opportunity to showcase our great country and its values at the G7 in Cornwall—leading, not just hosting. Yet instead of leadership, what do we have? The UK teetering on the brink of a trade war with our nearest allies, including some G7 guests, over sausages. This is about the meaning of the Northern Ireland protocol, an international agreement that the Prime Minister literally negotiated. I wonder if he actually read it, or maybe he got a classmate to do his homework.

The UK is the only developed economy and the only G7 participant to be cutting aid for life-saving global programmes. We have a Government who do not even dare to put that to a parliamentary vote.

[Thangam Debbonaire]

There is no news of when Nazanin and others trapped in foreign jails for crimes that they did not commit will be reunited with their families.

We have a call to get the world vaccinated—but not until the end of next year. The virus is still mutating and none of us is safe until everyone is safe, so I urge the Prime Minister to put party politics aside and take Labour's plan for global vaccination to the G7.

To demonstrate the extent of his commitment to tackling the climate emergency, the Prime Minister flies to Cornwall by private jet. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) stands ready to advise the Prime Minister on train times for his return. While he is on it, perhaps the Prime Minister could sort out his failed green homes scheme. He should be leading the G7 by example and inspiration, not just putting out the place cards for dinner, so will the Leader of the House ask the Prime Minister to showcase what this country has to offer instead of his own lack of leadership?

I am disappointed that the Government have not taken responsibility for the loophole that means that a Member can be subject to a parliamentary recall petition by their constituents for an expenses charge but not for serious sexual harassment. A Member who has been sexually harassing staff will return to Parliament within weeks and shows no sign of resigning. Staff are worried and constituents have every right to be concerned, so will the Leader of the House confirm that the public can use the parliamentary petitions process to trigger a debate about the matter? Will he tell us why that Member is still, apparently, a member of the Conservative party? Will he bring forward the motions needed so that the people of Delyn can decide whether they want to ditch their MP?

On the domestic agenda, again there is failure. The Secretary of State for Education feels our children's future is worth just 50 quid per pupil, compared with £2,500 in the Netherlands. Meanwhile, Labour has an actual catch-up plan that Parliament voted in favour of yesterday. If the Government will not do the right thing and adopt Labour's plan, will the Secretary of State for Education explain to the House what it is about breakfast clubs, mental health support and small group tutoring that he objects to?

It is Carers Week, and carers and people who need care in Bristol West want me to ask the Prime Minister where his plan to fix social care is. It was announced 687 days ago; how many more years will they have to wait? The Government have repeatedly ignored crises in health and social care over the past decade, and they failed to act on the 2016 pandemic preparedness report. They continue to ignore disabled people, people with long-term illnesses and those needing mental health support during the pandemic. They have paid no attention to the exhaustion of heroic key workers who just keep on going and need hope that things will get better soon. The Government continue to use the pandemic as their personal cash machine; the least they could do is announce the public inquiry. The Leader of the House said last time that we should not have the inquiry while the virus is still raging. He cannot have it both ways: it is either raging or it is not. If it is, the Government need to learn now the lessons about what is going wrong. There is no excuse for delaying the inquiry.

Successive Tory Governments have run down public services, eroded working people's ability to pay rent and feed their families, and left productivity stagnant. That is in stark contrast to the Labour Government, who left the country with the brilliant Sure Start scheme for early years; thousands more police, nurses and doctors; the shortest waiting times on record for key treatments; and low crime rates—plus an economy that was recovering well after the global financial crisis. This Government announce a few tutors here or some more nurses there, but it is a drop in the ocean compared with the destruction of the past 11 Tory years. It is not just the pandemic: children need tutors because Tories cut education; crime rates soar because Tories cut police numbers; and rape victims wait years for justice because Tories cut the justice system. And now they expect people to be grateful for the thin gruel they are offering. No wonder the people of North East Somerset are voting Labour.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady may have fallen into the nostalgic trap—I am sometimes accused of falling into one myself—of looking back at a golden age past but forgetting the reality of the misery of the last socialist Government. That socialist Government left us with an annual deficit of £150 billion a year, the worst financial crisis that we had seen in decade after decade and a situation in which, as one of her own Members said, there was simply no money left. Much though I think we should admire, like and revel in our past history, we have to remember the failures of socialism and that every socialist Government that this country has ever had, at the end of their complete term, have left unemployment higher than when they came into office.

As regards police, we now have over 8,000 more police, meeting our promise to recruit more than 20,000. We are ensuring that the police are on the streets so that we are kept safe. We have reformed education with the advent of more academy schools, which are raising standards. The hon. Lady blamed the need for tutoring on the Conservative party, whereas, actually, the need for extra tutoring and the fact that a package of £3 billion in total has been provided to help children is because of the pandemic. That seems to have passed from her mind. It is quite right that the pandemic should have an inquiry, as the Prime Minister has promised, and that will be set up by the end of this parliamentary Session, because it is right to look at it when the decisions have all been taken and we begin to see the proper consequences of it.

The hon. Lady talks about leading in the G7. That is precisely what the Prime Minister is doing; he is showing the clearest possible leadership. The vaccine roll-out in the rest of the world will be helped enormously, and particularly, by the Oxford-AstraZeneca drug. Why? Because of the agreement made with Oxford-AstraZeneca to provide it at cost price. That is the fundamental difference that means that it can be afforded, to allow it to spread across the world, helping millions upon millions of people—leadership by the United Kingdom.

The Prime Minister will call upon the G7 leaders to make commitments to vaccinate the entire world against the coronavirus by the end of 2022. He is calling for emissions cuts and is hosting COP26 later in the year. It is an extraordinary degree of leadership that is being shown among the democratic nations that are showing the way, encouraging people to have freedom and democracy.

The hon. Lady seems to want to ban British sausages from Northern Ireland, but let us not fuss too much about sausages. Sausages are important and they may be a nice thing to have for breakfast, but the scandal is that the European Union takes it upon itself to think that life-saving cancer drugs may not go freely between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This is not the act of a friendly organisation. This is an act of an organisation playing games, playing ducks and drakes with the peace process. There is a brilliant article by David Trimble in the newspaper today setting out the risk that the European Union is taking. We should be absolutely clear that the protocol was there to respect the integrity of the United Kingdom, as well as to help the single market. It cannot have one side but not the other.

Then the hon. Lady came to things that can perfectly well be catered for by Opposition days. There are dates that have been announced over the next two weeks. If she wants to debate membership of this House for individual Members, I call upon her to put down a motion; it is up to her to do it. If she wants to have a debate on overseas aid, I call upon her to do it, but no sensible Government would be continuing with overseas aid at its previous levels in the current financial circumstances. It is extremely sensible to cut our coat according to our cloth. That is what Her Majesty's Government are doing, and that is quite right. It is the proper thing to do and it still means that, as a percentage of GDP, we are one of the most generous donors in the world, and we are giving more than was ever given by that socialist Government of happy memory that I started with. Do we not remember what the hon. Lady was saying at the end—how glorious it was by 2010? They gave away less money then, so they do not have that much to be proud of. We as Conservatives do.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Alongside the Arts Council, I had a really wonderful visit to meet On:song in Stroud. It is a fantastic music organisation that has used the culture recovery grant not only to survive through the pandemic, which caused it an awful lot of difficulties, but to use its skills and diversify to reach and help many more people across the country. That is hugely important Government support, yet other Stroud businesses in the supply chain side of events and culture are really struggling to be heard and understood for grants. I am thinking about Freemans Event Partners and CORE Lighting—fantastic organisations in my patch. The reality is that big events, sporting festivals, exhibitions and weddings cannot go ahead without them. Does my right hon. Friend agree about the importance of supply chain businesses, and will he consider granting a debate on the Floor of the House to explore how we can bring their key expertise into use?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her support of the culture recovery fund, which has so far distributed over £1.2 billion of taxpayers' money, supporting more than 5,000 individual organisations and sites. There will be a further £300 million in the culture recovery fund this year. She is right to say that the pandemic has had a severe effect on supply chain businesses, including those in my own constituency. I believe that they are eligible to apply for grants from local councils, and I suggest that businesses in her constituency do that. I cannot promise her a debate, though the Chairman of the Backbench Business

Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), might be about to raise a question, and I am sure that he would like to hear about that issue as an item for debate, because it affects many hon. and right hon. Members. I will obviously raise her concerns with the relevant Department.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I, too, send my best wishes to Mr Speaker on his birthday and to Tony Reay on his impending retirement. It is always sad to see someone moving on, but it is a great opportunity for them all the same.

In previous weeks, I have raised issues about openness and transparency, and, again, I find that it is a case of here we go again. This week, it is the Cabinet Office that has been found guilty of acting unlawfully in handing out lucrative contracts to an ex-colleague. This goes on and on. When can we have a debate in Government time to consider the Government's processes of openness and transparency so that we can shine a light on a clear way forward now that my Ministerial Interests (Emergency Powers) Bill is no more, having fallen at the end of the previous parliamentary Session?

This week, we have also had a great deal of debate around the cuts to foreign aid, so I simply ask the Leader of the House: when will this House have a chance to have a substantive vote on that subject?

We are very quickly approaching 21 June, at which point the hybrid virtual covid procedures come to an end. Obviously, we have always said that this House would look to be in step with the public, but as we are still at this stage unclear what that date will mean for the public, can the Leader of the House add anything to give a bit more clarity? Beyond that, even when things do change, what consideration can be given to the particularly unique medical circumstances in which some Members will find themselves which result in their not being able to attend Parliament? What can we do to support them to make sure that the communities they represent are not disenfranchised? It could happen to a number of Members at any time; only last week a Member of this place, who is also a Member of the Scottish Parliament, was tracked and traced and had to isolate at very short notice.

Finally, we have seen protected time for Opposition day debates in the Government's approach to scheduling statements, but over the past few weeks I have noticed that Back-Bench business time has been quite severely constrained by the number of statements made. Can we consider what can be done to make sure that the most time possible is made available for those important debates?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I join the hon. Gentleman and Mr Speaker in paying tribute to Tony Reay? More than 40 years' service in this House is truly terrific; it is a real model of public service. I know that everyone who has worked with him has found pleasure in doing so. It is always important that our security team is as friendly and welcoming as it is. We have a first-class team in the Palace, and to have one of its number retiring after such distinguished service is well worth commemorating.

Let me come to the point on Back-Bench business time. I am not unsympathetic to what the hon. Gentleman says. It is purely a balance: Members put in urgent questions, they want to hear statements, and we want to

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finish at a regular time. There are other ways of proceeding. We could, if Members wanted it, have irregular times of ending, but that has not been the mood of the House in recent years. It is about trying to get the balance right. I think it is proper to prioritise Opposition days, because that is fixed time for the Opposition, and it is a long-standing convention that we protect that; we also try to do that when the hon. Gentleman's party has an Opposition day debate.

That leads me to the hon. Gentleman's point on foreign aid. We will have four days of business over the next fortnight that is not controlled by the Government, so if there is a mood in the House to debate things, a motion may be put down either through the Backbench Business Committee or for an Opposition day. It is important to remember that although Standing Order No. 14 gives the Government control of the Order Paper, it does not stop other matters being raised in a number of ways of which right hon. and hon. Members are aware. Although 21 June—the longest day—is fast approaching, we will know more next week, so we will have to wait and see what the overall Government policy is then.

The hon. Gentleman refers to openness and transparency. Is it the infamous kimono-wearing fox killer who likes bringing all these cases? I am interested in his case with his builder which we might find out about at one time or another; we keep our eyes open and breath bated for that result to come out. The Government won in two of the three cases—there was no bias—and the courts recognised the need to act quickly. That is my fundamental point: the reason we have the vaccination success is that the Government moved swiftly. We could not wait three to six months to issue contracts in the normal way, and that was a perfectly proper and reasonable approach.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I join other Members in wishing our Speaker a very happy birthday and Mr Reay, after 43 years of service, a long, happy and healthy retirement.

Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on violent crime, including stabbings and disorderly behaviour? Embarrassingly, as we move towards city status in Southend, the formerly quiet areas of Chalkwell and Leigh-on-Sea have seen crimes involving knives and disorderly behaviour. That has been a result of gangs moving into the areas and drug dealing. Present measures are simply not working.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important and troubling issue. As constituency MPs, we all see the terrible effects of violent crime and we should never be complacent in tackling it. So far, between 2019 and 2022, the Government will have spent more than £105.5 million of taxpayers' money to develop 18 violence reduction units and over £136.5 million to support an enhanced police response. We have also spent £200 million on early intervention and prevention support initiatives through the youth endowment fund to support children and young people at risk of exploitation and involvement in serious violence, and the Government are taking urgent action to tackle knife crime and keep people safe. We have, according to the latest figures, recruited 8,771 additional police officers as part of our commitment to hiring an extra 20,000 police

officers. I understand that, when crime hits, such bald statistics do not necessarily provide immediate comfort, but I hope they give reassurance that this matter is being taken very seriously and is being tackled.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now go to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, Ian Mearns.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for announcing the Backbench business for 17 June. We have just had it confirmed this morning that the second debate on 24 June will be on UK defence spending. We also understand that there are to be two days of Estimates debates in the last week of June, and in order to facilitate that I am afraid to say that applications to the Backbench Business Committee must be made by no later than 6 pm this forthcoming Tuesday, 15 June.

Lastly, as chairman also of the all-party parliamentary group for football supporters, may I express my ongoing sympathy for and solidarity with the bereaved and traumatised families of the 96 Liverpool fans killed at Hillsborough 32 years ago? I hope that the Backbench Business Committee can facilitate a debate in this Chamber as soon as possible, having received an application from my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) just this week.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I echo what the hon. Gentleman said about the 96 deaths at Hillsborough, which were the subject of the urgent question that has just passed; it rightly continues to be remembered in this House. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for telling us that the debate on 24 June will be on defence spending, which, interestingly, was one of the subjects specifically given to the Backbench Business Committee when it was set up, and for his very clear notice on the Estimates days, which I hope the relevant parties will listen carefully to and take to heart.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con) [V]: I join the House in wishing Mr Speaker a happy birthday and passing on our thanks and best wishes to Mr Tony Reay.

Owing to a £10 million shortfall between the Government's generous financial support and the cost of maintaining its existing global network, the British Council is in danger of having to close the largest number of overseas offices in its near 90-year history. Before the Government make a bad decision—they are due to announce their decision in the coming week—that runs counter to global Britain and will damage our soft power, will my right hon. Friend make time for a debate so that the House can discuss this important matter, further to my urgent question earlier this week? We want the Government not to fall at the final fence.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The British Council is undoubtedly a crucial part of the UK's presence overseas and a key soft power asset. As the Minister for Asia said in response to the urgent question on Tuesday, the Government

“value the influence of the British Council. We agreed a 2021-22 spending review settlement totalling £189 million, which is a 26% increase in funding from 2020-21.”—[*Official Report*, 8 June 2021; Vol. 696, c. 832.]

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this matter again and will reiterate his concerns to the Minister, but in terms of a further debate, the Backbench Business Committee is undoubtedly the right place to apply for one.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab) [V]: I am sure the whole House will join me in offering condolences to Dea-John Reid's mother, Joan Morris, and the whole family, after he was tragically murdered on 31 May. My hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) and I are working with the family, the black churches and the authorities to ensure unity. Will the Leader of the House ask the Home Secretary to come to the Chamber to debate this issue and to provide funding to reduce knife crime? It is not sufficient for the Leader of the House to quote figures about measures that have not worked. I urge him to listen to the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who made the same point, and provide a real debate in the Chamber.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I join the hon. Gentleman in passing condolences to the family of Dea-John Reid. He is right: there is nothing I can say at the Dispatch Box about how policy is developing and the amount of money that has been spent that will bring great comfort to a bereaved family in these most saddening circumstances. It is always a long-term project to increase the safety of our streets and to reduce knife crime. In this context, it is important that there are more police, as the numbers going up will make our streets safer overall, but I absolutely understand from what he says that it is too late in this particular instance. We mourn with the family, and we must make every effort to ensure that fewer families are affected in future, because the loss of a child is the greatest blow a parent ever faces.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): On Oxbridge colleges, I was very pleased to see the Prime Minister intervene and object to the appalling news that Magdalen College, Oxford had taken down a portrait of the Queen, but of course, this is not an isolated incident. Today I hear that 150 academics at Oriel College, Oxford are refusing to teach because the Rhodes statue has not been taken down. This week we also heard the disturbing news that Churchill College, Cambridge is considering changing the name of the college, to make it seem more inclusive. I know that, historically, there have been lots of eccentric, left-wing academics at Oxford and Cambridge, but given the sheer frequency with which these events are cropping up, will my right hon. Friend provide time for us to discuss what we can do to prevent the woke-ification of Oxbridge colleges?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As for Magdalen College, it is not exactly 1687-88. It is a few pimply adolescents getting excited and taking down a picture of Her Majesty. It makes Magdalen look pretty wet, but it is not the end of the world. I would not get too excited about that, although it amuses me to speculate as to what would happen if one of Her Majesty's subjects suggested taking down the stars and stripes in an American university. It might not be enormously well received. As the pimply adolescent in question is, I think, an American citizen, he might like to think about that. He might think that taking down the US flag in an American university was a bridge too far even for the most patriotic Briton.

As regards the academics' refusing to teach, I am half tempted to say that you should be lucky not to be taught by such a useless bunch. If they are that feeble, what are you missing and what are they doing there? Why do they not have any pride in their country, in our marvellous history and in our success? Rhodes is not a black and white figure. Perhaps they are not learned enough to have bothered to look up the history of Rhodes, which has been written about quite extensively now, in any detail. As I say, he is a figure of importance, interest and enormous generosity to Oxford. Do they want to give the money back to the descendants of Cecil Rhodes, or are they intending to keep it to themselves? We must not allow this wokeness to happen. As for the idea of changing Churchill College, perhaps we should introduce a Bill to rename Cambridge Churchill and call it Churchill University. That would be one in the eye for the lefties.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I prefer the Fen Bog Poly—that might be a better name for it.

In fairness to the Leader of the House, he has always been very good in saying that Ministers should reply to Members' correspondence. In fact, last July he said:

"Ministers are aware that it is a basic courtesy that replies come from Ministers, not from officials".—[*Official Report*, 16 July 2020; Vol. 678, c. 1684.]

In May, my latest letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer was replied to by an M. Milgate—I do not know who that is—of the correspondence and inquiry unit at Her Majesty's Treasury. I have some sympathy, because I know that there has been a huge increase in the amount of correspondence, but when, in a parliamentary question, I asked the Treasury to tell us how many letters from Members were answered by Ministers and how many were answered by officials, the answer I got from the Exchequer Secretary was:

"It is not possible to provide the breakdown the Member has requested."

Not only are they not answering some of our letters—I do not know if they are picking on me in particular, but they are not answering mine, and I do not know if they are answering the Leader of the House's letters written in a constituency capacity—but they cannot even tell Members of this House how many of the letters from Members of Parliament are being answered by officials and how many by Ministers. Is that acceptable, and why is the Leader of the House impotent in persuading his Ministers that they have to answer our letters?

Mr Rees-Mogg: They do have to answer Members' letters; it is a basic courtesy. I have received letters from officials rather than Ministers, and I am afraid I send them back saying that is not good enough and that I expect a response from a Minister. I remind hon. Members and right hon. Members that letters ought to come from them. Some hon. Members get their members of staff to send letters and I am afraid that they then receive from my office—

Kevin Brennan *indicated dissent.*

Mr Rees-Mogg: No, I understand that the hon. Gentleman is not in this category. It is just a reminder to the House that the courtesy works both ways. Is it indiscreet of me to say that I receive the most charming hand-written letters from the Deputy Speaker asking me to follow up with individual Departments, which I have done? They seem to get responses quite quickly

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when we intervene in that way. It really should not happen like that. I make this offer to all hon. and right hon. Members: if they are having problems of this kind, they should please contact my office and I will follow it up. It is our fundamental right to receive redress of grievance for our constituents from individual named Ministers. When I was at school, if a piece of work was not good enough, it got a little tear at the top of the page and was given back to you. I suggest that that is what Members do to letters they get from officials.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Next week, we have the reporting back of the reviews into social distancing and other measures and the plans and guidance for life beyond 21 June. In answer to my question on 12 May, the Prime Minister kindly confirmed that we would get the opportunity to debate this hugely important guidance before it is implemented. Could my right hon. Friend update the House on when that might be?

Mr Rees-Mogg: No decisions have yet been made and the Government will set out the conclusions of the review ahead of step 4 shortly, at which point I am sure that the House will have the opportunity to consider the next steps. The Government have been assiduous in updating the House throughout the pandemic and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has been particularly good at coming to this Chamber in person. That will continue to be the case. Any decision on guidance following the reviews will be based on the latest data and we must allow appropriate time for them to be assessed. We have of course committed—and I reiterate this commitment—to, where possible, make time for votes on regulations of national significance which apply to England or UK-wide, if necessary, before they come into force. That commitment remains.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The UK is the leading English language teaching destination, bringing students from over 150 countries to Britain to study English, and there are several excellent schools in Bath. While the students are there, they become part of our local community and they will play an important part in the economic recovery of our city. The sector alone is worth £1.4 billion to the overall economy and plays a vital role in building our relationships with countries across the world. However, in 2020, ELT schools lost over 80% of their business, and it will be one of the last sectors to recover. May we therefore have a debate about the measures needed to support this industry before many of these valuable and viable schools close for good?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The overall support given to the economy, as the hon. Lady will know, is over £400 billion, and businesses in all areas have been able to access specific grants, or there have been discretionary grants from councils to help them. There is inevitably a limit to the support that can be provided, and it is not unending either, but the overall package has been as generous as was conceivably affordable and has therefore helped to maintain many businesses.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con) [V]: May we have a statement on the roll-out of family hubs? There are now well over 150 family hubs across England and Northern

Ireland offering a range of services such as reducing parental conflict, walk-in help for young people with mental health concerns, one-stop shops for families with children with special needs, post-separation support, and help to tackle money worries. Does the Leader of the House agree that, as we build back better after the pandemic, supporting families is vital?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I completely agree that, as we build back better, and indeed as we level up, support for families will be absolutely crucial. They are the building blocks of our society. Throughout a year of lockdowns and periodic home schooling, families have been under immense strain, and the Government are determined to champion the family hub model. The Government are establishing a national centre for family hubs that will provide expert advice, guidance and advocacy. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education recently announced that the Anna Freud Centre has been awarded the contract to run the national centre. May I join my hon. Friend in commending the work of Dr Samantha Callan, who has worked tirelessly nationwide to promote family hubs over many years?

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: It is 100 years since Glasgow's world-famous Barras market was founded by Maggie McIver. The market claimed that you could buy anything there from a needle to an anchor, and it is the home of the Barrowland Ballroom. May we have a debate on the future of our markets and the contribution that they make to our culture and society—and, given the number of second-hand goods you can buy, to our net zero ambitions?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I commend the market for its 100th anniversary and its ability to provide everything that you could possibly need to buy, either a needle or an anchor. There is probably more popular demand for needles than anchors, but it is none the less useful to be able to get an anchor. I encourage the hon. Lady to seek an Adjournment debate so that she could specifically praise this admirable market. I think that would inform the House and would be beneficial to Members more widely.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Protecting the glorious English countryside from unsuitable, unplanned and unwelcome development in the wrong places is one of the key functions of our planning system, yet it would appear that, under the Planning Inspectorate's interpretation of the Human Rights Act 1998, one group of people—Gypsies and Travellers—seem to be exempt from the rules and regulations that apply to everyone else, and they can effectively build whatever they want wherever they like. Can we have action from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to allow local planning authorities to effectively enforce against intentional, unauthorised development in the open countryside by Gypsies and Travellers without being overruled by a warped interpretation of the Human Rights Act?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. Local planning authorities already have a wide range of enforcement powers, with strong penalties for non-compliance to tackle such situations. However, as set out in our recent planning White Paper, we intend to strengthen those powers and sanctions,

including around intentional unauthorised development. Under planning law, national planning policies and local planning policies to guard against unsuitable development apply equally to all applicants who wish to develop. Planners may also take into account the specific needs of individual groups when making decisions on the development, and every case needs to be treated on its merit.

On the subject at hand, I hope that my hon. Friend is assured by the progress of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which will give the police additional powers to remove unauthorised Traveller encampments. We must be careful of spurious human rights claims; otherwise, we will have people in the City of London saying that it is their human right to build 100-storey tower blocks, and that would be ridiculous.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Polls show that a large proportion of the public believes that the Government's allocation of covid contracts is corrupt. Yesterday, the High Court found that the Minister for the Cabinet Office broke the law in the allocation of one covid contract to a firm run by his former adviser. Given all that, does the Leader of the House not agree that, to restore confidence in this House—confidence that is being undermined day after day by the allocation of covid contracts by his Government—the Minister for the Cabinet Office should be sacked, and the House should take tough action against such contracts?

Mr Rees-Mogg: No, I do not agree with that awful nonsense, as I have set out very clearly before. There was a pandemic—the hon. Gentleman seems to have forgotten this—and there was a need to crack on with things. He would have fiddled while Rome burned. It is nice to see him back, incidentally; it is good of him to come to the Chamber. He would have ignored the whole thing while some great bureaucratic process could wander through an endless discussion, and red tape would be tied into pretty little bows before things were done. We needed the vaccine. We needed Test and Trace. We needed to have a system that got messages out to people. The judgment yesterday found that there was no bias, and that it was reasonable to act swiftly. That is really important to understand, so no—I am with good sense and good government, not with the infamous fox killer.

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con) [V]: I join others in wishing many happy returns to Mr Speaker. I hope that he is right now consuming a slice of lunchtime cake.

I live in hope that the Government stick to the 21 June road map. More delay would be a disaster for businesses and livelihoods across the country, but if the Government do decide to extend phase 3, my understanding is that no additional parliamentary approval would be required until the current regulations expire on 30 June. Should there be a delay, will my right hon. Friend make time for such a decision to be fully debated in this House, as of course any such restriction of our liberties should be?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The suggestion of cake has reminded me that there is a test match on, so I hope that the “Test Match Special” team may find a spare portion of cake to send to Mr Speaker to wish him well on his birthday. To come to my hon. Friend and neighbour's very important point, the Health Secretary said on Monday:

“It is still too early to make decisions on step 4... So we will assess the data and announce the outcome a week today, on 14 June.”—[*Official Report*, 7 June 2021; Vol. 696, c. 670.]

Like my hon. Friend and, I think, all of us in this House, I hope that it will still be possible to open up on the 21st, but we have to be sensible about this.

We will of course continue to involve the House in scrutinising our decisions, with regular statements and debates, and the ability for Members to question the Government and their scientific advisers. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), we have committed that, for significant national measures with effect on the whole of England or UK-wide, we will, wherever possible, consult Parliament and hold votes before such regulations come into force. I hope that that gives my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) the comfort that he requires.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Since 2010, funding from central Government for my local force, Greater Manchester police, has been cut by £215 million, resulting in thousands fewer officers and support staff. In my constituency of Stockport, the impact of the cuts has been drastic. There has been an increase in antisocial behaviour, but we know that increased policing alone is not the answer to rising rates of crime and antisocial behaviour. In a 2016 survey by Unison, 83% of respondents reported increased crime rates and incidents of antisocial behaviour in areas where youth and other relevant services had been cut. Will the Leader of the House allocate Government time for a debate on policing, youth services and mental health provision in Greater Manchester? Does he agree with me that we need to invest in young people in all communities and not strip away vital public services?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I would say that there have been problems with Manchester policing that have absolutely nothing to do with the Government and are more local political matters, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman is fully aware of. Expenditure on policing is increasing, as I have said. Well over 8,000, and heading towards 9,000, extra police officers have already been added. This is a national effort to ensure that our streets are made safer. It is important that we continue to do that, and that we support the police in the very difficult job that they do and give them the support they need to carry out their onerous duties.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): In business questions last January, I raised the horrendous experience of my constituent Alison with her ex-partner and the Child Maintenance Service. Following that intervention, the CMS agreed that the rate of repayment was unacceptable and that they would continue recovery action against her ex-partner for significant arrears.

Earlier this year, a repayment plan was agreed without consulting Alison and recovery action will now not proceed, despite previous assurances. My office has contacted the CMS to request a conference call on the issue, but has had no response. Can the Leader of the House use his good offices to request intervention from the appropriate Department for Work and Pensions Minister?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will do that, and I will ask my office to get in touch with the CMS. The CMS ought to be responsive to Members. I have said before that I have found it one of the most difficult organisations to deal with, as a Member of Parliament for my constituents. I have great sympathy with the hon. Gentleman and I am grateful that he has raised this point. The CMS must respond to Members of Parliament; that is the duty of that type of agency.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am very much in favour of the Government's policy on reducing overseas aid this year. We will still be giving ten thousand million pounds in aid, which is a higher proportion than France, Italy or, of course, the United States of America. But the House has a right to decide on this issue. Does the Leader of the House agree with me that it is very strange that the Government have given the opportunity, via an Opposition day this week, an Opposition day on 14 June and an Opposition day on 21 June, when that vote could definitely occur?

The Backbench Business Committee has been kind enough to announce the subjects of its debates in advance. Why are the loyal Opposition not telling us today that we are going to have that debate on Monday? Is it because they are pretty sure they are going to lose the vote and the House will support the Government?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I must defend Her Majesty's Opposition, because we changed the date of their Opposition day debate, so it is reasonable for them not to have put the debate forward. My hon. Friend lays down an interesting challenge to them, because they know the policy is hugely supported in the country. Polling indicates that a majority of Labour supporters support the policy, let alone Conservative supporters, who support it overwhelmingly. So, let us see, as time's winged chariot passes along, whether or not they are brave enough to put their money where their mouth so often is.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I must now suspend the House for two minutes to make the arrangements for the next business.

1.3 pm

Sitting suspended.

Ofsted Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges

1.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Ofsted review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges.

This is a very serious matter. Abuse in any form is abhorrent, especially when it is abuse of the vulnerable or children. The Everyone's Invited testimonies have shown us the scale and nature of sexual abuse and harassment experienced by young people, often from their peers, and I would like to thank the founders and all those who have shared their experiences. Anyone who has visited their website will have been struck by the huge volume of accounts, many of which contain chilling stories of abuse and harassment.

Let me be clear: sexism and misogyny are not okay. Sexual harassment, let alone non-consensual touching, groping or sexual contact, is not okay—none of this is okay. Sending unrequested nudes is not okay, and neither is bullying your peers into sending a nude and then sharing it with your mates. Yet this has become commonplace for so many young people. We, as government, as parents, as educators and as a society, must work together to turn the cultural dial.

This Government acted quickly by asking Ofsted to carry out the review that has reported its findings today, and setting up a specific National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children helpline to support those who wanted to report sexual abuse or receive advice. More than 400 calls have been received so far, and about 70 have been referred to other agencies, including the police. The number is 0800 136 663 and it will remain open until October.

Today, I would like to thank Ofsted for working at pace to ensure we have fresh insight into the scale of the issues young people are facing. I thank all who contributed, especially victims' representatives and the schools and colleges. I thank the 900 young people who gave their views, and the reference group, with its representatives from a wide range of organisations, including social care, the police, education leaders, and the Independent Schools Council. Their input has been invaluable.

Sometimes, sexual abuse happens within school or college, but sometimes it happens outside the school gates. In both cases, it is important to support our teachers to deal with the issues quickly and sensitively so that our children and young people get the right assistance. Much of the abuse identified impacts predominantly on girls and young women. We know from the annual "Girls Attitudes" survey that, increasingly, young girls feel pressured about their appearance, but the Ofsted review is the first time we have evidence of the scale of activity in education settings that at best can be referred to as sexism, and at worst is repeated, sustained abuse. This is why we are working across government, prioritising the child sexual abuse strategy and the violence against women and girls strategy, as well as the Online Safety Bill, to make sure they can be delivered in a co-ordinated and holistic way. Everyone needs to coalesce around this issue, put aside institutional boundaries and put the needs of children and young people first.

We fully accept the findings of the review, and we believe that schools and colleges, safeguarding partners, Government and the inspectorates can collectively make the difference. On the recommendations that Ofsted has identified for the Government, we will go further. Much of this work is already under way. We are already updating the “Keeping children safe in education” statutory guidance for this September, ensuring that schools have even clearer guidance on how to deal with reports of sexual abuse, and we will also update the “Working together to safeguard children” statutory guidance in line.

We have already introduced the new compulsory relationships, sex and health education curriculum. In both primary and secondary schools, the curriculum’s focus on healthy relationships helps children to know where to seek help and report abuse and address inappropriate behaviour such as harassment, exploitation, sexism and misogyny. It is the first time that the curriculum has been updated since 2000, and from next term we expect the RSHE curriculum to be implemented in full.

There is more that we are doing. We know that our teachers do not always feel comfortable in teaching about sex and relationships, but it is vital that we get this right. We therefore want to support and work with school leaders and other agencies to help teachers and school staff to deliver the RSHE curriculum as effectively as possible, and I am asking schools to dedicate time from an inset day for that purpose.

Children have said that it is important to teach the RSHE curriculum from a young age. Young people supporting their peers is a powerful way to bring about change, and we are considering how we can get older students to support the delivery of the RSHE curriculum. While the statutory curriculum does not currently apply to further education colleges, there is good practice in many of these colleges, and we are working with the sector to address this gap.

It is important that children and young people feel confident that they will be heard and that action will be taken. We want to work with young people and hear their voices, so that they can inform the curriculum and communications. I and other Ministers will be meeting young people to help achieve that.

Every day in our schools, designated safeguarding leads undertake amazing work to keep children safe. They deserve our admiration and support. Today we are announcing that we will work with up to a further 500 schools on our project to support and supervise designated safeguarding leads in up to 10 additional local authorities, and that we are already developing an online resource hub where designated safeguarding leads can access relevant advice. The Government will undertake further work to consider how we can give greater status and support to designated safeguarding leads, looking first at the model we have for special educational needs co-ordinators. We are also discussing with Ofsted whether any additional support is needed for children and young people with special educational needs.

This is a cultural issue and not just a matter of how to investigate individual cases. We do expect all schools and colleges to have robust policies in place to create a culture that treats all young people fairly and addresses concerns immediately, but schools and colleges cannot do that alone and should not think that they have to. We expect every local safeguarding partnership to reach out to all its schools and be clear on how they are

engaged in local safeguarding arrangements. We would like to see that happen by the October half-term. We are developing a programme looking at best practice in how schools engage in local safeguarding arrangements.

It is also clear from the testimonies that our young people continue to face similar issues when they move to university. The Office for Students recently published a statement of expectations on harassment and sexual misconduct; all universities should take note of that and act on it. Today, the OfS has asked all universities to review and update their systems, policies and procedures in advance of the next academic year. The Government will continue to work with the OfS to ensure that all students feel confident to report incidents of sexual harassment and sexual violence.

There is another thing that is not okay: the ease of access to and increasing violence of online pornography. This increasingly accessible online content, which often portrays extremely violent sex, can give young people warped views of sex and deeply disturbing views on consent. The Government have already taken many actions to protect victims of sexual abuse and sexual violence, including by outlawing coercive control. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 has outlawed non-fatal strangulation and removed the rough sex defence to murder. We have criminalised upskirting and both the sending of and the threat of sending revenge pornography.

The Online Safety Bill will deliver a groundbreaking system of accountability and oversight of tech companies and make them accountable to an independent regulator. The strongest protections in the new regulatory framework will be for children, and companies will need to take steps to ensure that children cannot access services that pose the highest risk of harm, such as online pornography. In addition, the Secretary of State for Education and the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport have asked the Children’s Commissioner to start looking immediately at how we can reduce children and young people’s access to pornography and other harmful content. That work will identify whether there are actions that can be taken more quickly to protect children before the Online Safety Bill comes into effect.

Finally, there is an important role for parents. As a mum, I know of the difficulty in discussing these issues with our children, but parents need to be aware of what their children are doing and how to support them when things go wrong. Parents, please do look at the support available from the UK Safer Internet Centre, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and the Internet Watch Foundation. Each has detailed resources to help upskill us all on what can sometimes feel like a daunting world. Right now, it is estimated that 1.4 million children access pornography every month in the UK. What they are seeing is changing how they perceive sex and relationships. So please, parents, turn on your broadband filters and make sure that you understand and switch on the safety features on your children’s phones and devices. Just as you would not put your children into physical danger, do not allow your child to go into digital danger.

The rising trend in sexual abuse must be stopped. We, the Government, stand by our schools, our families and all those who care about children, and we will do whatever is right to safeguard them. For that reason, I commend this statement to the House.

1.18 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. I, too, pay tribute to the young girls and young women who came forward to share their experiences under extremely difficult circumstances. That took huge bravery, but I hope they will look at the action that is now unfolding and see that their bravery has been rewarded. I think it is safe to say that without their action, today's unfolding of policy recommendations would not have happened; for that, they should take pride in their actions.

A young person's experience at school shapes their future in so many ways. It plays a key role in their development socially and emotionally, and few experiences have such a scarring effect as sexual abuse or harassment, yet today's review shows that far too many children, especially girls, are living in a world where it is normalised and they have no alternative but to accept it. From unsolicited touching and explicit images to false rumours about sexual history, sexual harassment in schools ruins lives and must be rooted out.

This is an issue on which I am sure the entire House agrees, and I welcome Ofsted's report and the Minister's comments. I put on record Labour's gratitude to the chief inspector of schools, Amanda Spielman, not only for her thorough report, but for taking the time to brief me and colleagues across the House in advance of publication.

We all agree on the need for action, but I must ask the Minister why it has taken so long, and why it took a national scandal to force the Government to act. The Department for Education was warned about routine sexual harassment in our schools as far back as 2016. Since then, figures suggest that up to 1,000 girls may have been raped in school. In 2016, the Women and Equalities Committee found that 29% of 18-year-olds had experienced unwanted sexual touching at school. The Committee criticised the lack of central data collection on sexual harassment, and yet the Government refused to act. Routine record-keeping and analysis is one of today's recommendations—something that was asked for five years ago.

In 2019, schools' awareness of safeguarding policies was so poor that my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and for Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) were forced to write directly to head teachers to raise awareness. They met the head of Ofsted to explain their concerns. The strengthening of guidance and training for teachers features prominently in today's report—another action that the Government have known for years was needed. The Labour party has produced a Green Paper on violence against women and girls. In it, we call for a national strategy, backed up by strengthened teacher training, inspection and policies, requirements for data collection and targeted action in the Online Safety Bill.

The shadow Education Secretary, who is my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), and the shadow Minister for domestic violence and safeguarding, who is my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley, wrote to the Department for Education in March this year with an offer to work together on implementation. We have been calling for action and making constructive, implementable policy recommendations for years. We now need a clear plan

to tackle sexual abuse and harassment in school, backed up by clear dates for delivery. We need tough action in the Online Safety Bill to tackle the forced and unwanted sharing of nude photos and other online harassment.

Finally, considering how many young people are living with the consequences of past sexual abuse and harassment, I think it would be appropriate for the Minister to offer a heartfelt apology to each and every one of them for the creation of a system that fails to keep them safe from harm, but instead has normalised it.

Vicky Ford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for thanking the young women who came forward with their testimonials. We agree on that, and we also agree that keeping children and young people safe is a complete priority. I must, however, refute the suggestion that the Government have not taken action on the matter over recent years, because we absolutely have. We first introduced the statutory safeguarding guidance back in 2015, and we update it every year. It contains a section specifically addressing peer-on-peer sexual violence and harassment. Last year, through the UK Safer Internet Centre, which the Government help to fund, we provided schools with guidance on actions to take when they are aware of the sharing of nude images.

We also introduced the new compulsory relationships and sex education and health education curriculum, largely as a result of the Women and Equalities Committee's report. Of course, it took some time to make sure that the curriculum was right, because this is a highly sensitive issue. The curriculum was due to roll out compulsorily last September, but because of the pandemic it needed to be delayed until this September.¹ We have already provided schools with a huge amount of training and teaching on how to roll out the curriculum. Indeed, this time last year we ran many seminars, which schools attended, on rolling out the mental health and wellbeing aspects of that curriculum. We will now be working, as I said, very closely with schools to ensure that they have support as it becomes more compulsory next term.

There are many schools, including the excellent school in Solihull that we heard about on the radio this morning, that are already delivering this curriculum in a really constructive and excellent way. Then there is the violence against women and girls strategy, on which we have had one of the largest ever consultations. It was right of the Government to reopen that consultation after the tragic death and murder of Sarah Everard in order to enable girls and women to come forward with their own suggestions.

The Online Safety Bill will be a benchmark and a reset, putting children's safety at the very forefront of it. Incidentally, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Home Secretary is completely correct in her concerns about end-to-end encryption and its potential impact on children's safety.

Guidance has been set up. For example, we established the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. As the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) knows, we have been looking at this issue for many months now and we will be reporting back on it. There is, of course, more that we can do. While individual schools have a responsibility to keep reports of sexual harassment, Ofsted will now be questioning and quizzing schools on those reports, enabling it to look at the issue in detail. For example, if a school is not reporting any incidents and yet we know that those incidents are so prevalent,

1. [Official Report, 17 June 2021, Vol. 697, c. 5MC.]

we need to know whether there is something in the culture of that school that means that children do not feel comfortable coming forward. These are the sorts of further actions that will be taken, but they build on actions that we have been taking over many years, because we know that the online world in particular is forever evolving and brings dangers for children.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now go to the Chair of the Education Committee, Sir Robert Halfon.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: I thank the Minister for all that she is doing. The report greatly focuses on safeguarding failings within schools, but the question must be raised as to why such failings were not previously identified by Ofsted or the Independent Schools Inspectorate in the first instance. Peer-on-peer abuse is one aspect of the wider systemic safeguarding failings and cannot be seen in isolation. Why is there not a consistent approach to safeguarding through the school inspections regime, and does a lack of consistency not perpetuate the problem further? Will she consider a review into the advice provided to schools by the local authority inspectors to ensure that there is a consistent and joined-up approach in safeguarding? Finally, can the Government identify how they will raise parental awareness of safeguarding issues, such as peer-on-peer abuse? Will parental safeguarding induction and engagement programmes be provided to parents and carers?

Vicky Ford: As ever, the Chair of the Education Committee makes some very helpful suggestions. May I reassure him that all schools must comply with the statutory safeguarding guidance, and we are already updating it, as we do each year. The report under discussion makes a number of suggestions about how to strengthen the inspection regime. For example, going forward, inspectors will hold discussions with students in single-sex groups, because, through this report, they have found that that has enabled children to be more confident in coming forward with their own experiences. That has helped to provide a better understanding of the schools or colleges' approach to tackling sexual harassment and violence, including that which occurs online. Going forward, Ofsted will request that all college leaders supply those records and analyses of what is happening within their organisation, and Ofsted will work with the ISI to improve training for the inspectors, especially on this issue.

My right hon. Friend makes an important point about parental advice. Some schools are incredibly good at providing this. I met a headteacher of a school in Liverpool who works really closely with parents, informing them about the online safety risks. We should remember that it is often the parents who buy the phone and own the phone contract. I would like to see more schools working with parents to ensure that they help to make parents as well as children aware of this. I hope that schools will not only dedicate an inset day to discussing how to improve the RSHE curriculum but use part of that day to think about how they can better involve parents. As I said, there is a huge amount of advice out there for parents, much of it in organisations that the Government fund, including things such as Safer Internet

Day. That advice is widely distributed, but we need to up that game to ensure that parents know the advice is there and that they access it.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD) [V]: I welcome this statement, but it is crystal clear from student and teacher feedback that there is simply not enough being done to educate either group on the vital subject of consent, so will the Government give a cast-iron guarantee that consent will be put at the heart of relationships, sex and health education, and that every member of school staff whom students could approach for advice and help can access the training on consent, so that students can get that advice and support, irrespective of whether they raise issues with staff inside or outside the classroom?

Vicky Ford: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the issue of consent. It is important, when we look at the testimonials on Everyone's Invited, to understand that not all of them involved illegal or criminal acts, but some did, and when there is a criminal act, it should be reported and acted on. The victim should have the confidence that it will be safe to report it and that it will be acted on. On the issue of consent, it is very much part of the RSHE curriculum. The curriculum starts at primary school age, where we teach about issues such as healthy relationships and talk about what an unhealthy relationship is and how to report it. Issues such as consent are built in as the child gets older through the period, but it is built into the curriculum, as are issues to do with unacceptable behaviour, harassment, misogyny and sexism. This is all part of the curriculum. I agree with the hon. Lady that it should be taught, and it is being taught.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The figures in this Ofsted report are shocking, and behind each one is a young person—most often a young woman—whose childhood and experience of education are being blighted by the fear, misery and mental harm of sexual harassment and sexual violence. It is important that schools are supported to deliver culture change, but will the Minister accept that schools that fail to make meaningful progress to change their culture and keep young people safe from sexual harassment and sexual violence should no longer be considered to be providing an outstanding educational experience for their students? Will she act to ensure that when schools are inspected by Ofsted, the progress on delivering change in culture and practice to tackle sexual harassment is a formal part of the assessment framework and contributes materially to the Ofsted rating?

Vicky Ford: The hon. Member is absolutely right to say that where a school's safeguarding regime is inadequate, the school is inadequate. That is a core part of the Ofsted inspection, which it will look at and report to us, so where there are concerns about safeguarding, action will be taken. Action is being taken in a number of cases, but I agree that we need to strengthen the Ofsted regime with respect to this element of safeguarding. That is what the proposals suggest, and they will be actioned to ensure that where a school is not acting in a way that safeguards children appropriately, action will quite correctly be taken. This is at the forefront of a school's responsibility. They are responsible not only for education but for our children's safety.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): One of the most concerning, but unfortunately not surprising, aspects of this review is that young people are not reporting the sexual abuse and harassment they experience from their peers because of how often it happens. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is the job of everyone who works with young people, not just teachers and parents, to help them to feel supported and empowered enough to come forward with their experiences so that we can tackle them in the way that we ought to?

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; one of the chilling aspects is this lack of confidence that children and young people have to come forward and the feeling that, “If I say something, will anything happen?” We absolutely need to change the cultural dial so that young people feel that they can come forward, that they will be supported and that action will be taken. I would say to anyone listening right now who has been a victim that if they need help or support, or if they just want advice, they should call that NSPCC helpline, because we set it up specifically with experts; it is a specific helpline just with experts on this matter of sexual abuse. Also however, if they report it to a teacher, the teacher should know how to act and be able to do so swiftly and sensitively. The role of the designated safeguard lead is really important here, which is why we want to bolster and support them.

It is also about all partners, not just the schools, not just the parents, and that is why we are asking that in every local area the police, health bodies and local authorities, who are the national safeguarding partners, review deeply how they are working together with the schools in their local area. We are asking that they do this deep review and report back by October half-term.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab) [V]: Many of the issues raised in the Ofsted report are not new, and indeed there was much I recognised from my own experience in education of widespread and normalised sexual harassment and abuse in school and on campus. As a 30-year-old, smartphones and social media only became widespread towards the latter end of my school years, but their ubiquity now has turbocharged these existing problems and created new avenues for harm. Ofsted has found that the RSHE curriculum does not reflect the reality of young people’s lives, as it has not kept up with these developments nor with young people’s capacity to get around things like filters with ease, just as my generation did. So does the Minister accept that the curriculum is not fit for purpose? What steps will her Government take to ensure that all schools can deliver relevant LGBT-inclusive, high-quality RSHE, which empowers young people, challenges attitudes that become embedded around consent and makes clear the avenues young people have for redress if they have concerns?

Vicky Ford: The sex education curriculum that we have had in the past has not been fit for purpose in a digital age, and that is precisely why we have gone through this exercise over the past few years, with deep consultation and many experts working on it, to bring the new RSHE curriculum into place. This will be compulsory from September.¹ There are already many excellent examples of schools teaching it well, although we do hear, as we have through the Ofsted report, that teachers would like more support and advice on how to deliver it, and we have promised today that we will set

that out. That is also why we are asking, or encouraging, all schools to take an inset day and dedicate time to this. They have the curriculum; there is a wide range of different tools to help them deliver it and it is absolutely key for our children that they get supported by this curriculum, because it will help teach them about what is safe and what is not safe.

We are in a digital revolution and we have been for many years, and for a lot of children, especially during the pandemic, being able to be with friends online is absolutely key, but it also does bring harms and what we have seen, sadly, through the pandemic is the acceleration of some of these harms, particularly in areas such as online pornography. That is another reason why it is absolutely right that we are acting now.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I want to give credit to Stroud High School girls, who took the initiative to gather evidence of harassment of their peers and to get me in to talk about it. It makes my blood boil now even to think about what they are enduring, sometimes on a daily basis, wearing their school uniforms in the street. We know that online abuse is fuelling poor real-life behaviour. These are hidden horrors. A lot of the abuse is anonymous and parents are, frankly, terrified. Many of the questions to the Minister today have been about the online world. The Minister cares an awful lot about this issue. Can she confirm that the Government’s flagship online harms legislation that is coming through is going to help protect young people, and will she tell us a little bit more about how it will prevent the sharing of unsolicited images?

Vicky Ford: May I also thank the girls from Stroud High School? It takes great bravery and courage to do that, yet it is actions like that by young girls and women across the country that are helping to make the world a better place for future children.

As I said earlier, I can confirm that the strongest protections in the online safety Bill are for children. It is particularly important that companies will be required to protect children from illegal and harmful content, including self-generated content when it is on their platforms. There is, however, still the challenge of peer-on-peer sharing. That is one of the reasons why I believe so strongly that the Home Secretary is right in her firm statements about the risk of end-to-end encryption that we already see, for example, on WhatsApp, but which is potentially coming into other areas. That is another issue that will be need to be considered.

It is really important that we have asked the Children’s Commissioner to do this deep piece of work. She is an extraordinarily experienced former school leader who brings great passion into this world. In fact, I met her only this week to discuss the issue. We must take every step. We know that legislating in the digital world can sometimes be challenging, but we are ahead of the world on this and are absolutely committed to the end objective: ensuring that our children are, as far as possible, as safe online as they are offline. Again, this is also an issue of helping to change the cultural dial.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): When I read the report at lunchtime today, I was absolutely shocked by the scale of the problem that was described by young people themselves. We have known that this problem existed, which is why the review took place, but the evidence that has come forward is startling.

1. [Official Report, 17 June 2021, Vol. 697, c. 6MC.]

I was in local government when ChildLine was set up in response to the fact that young people could not get their voices heard when they were suffering problems in care. I note that there is the now the hotline to the NSPCC, but that is due to end in October. Will the Minister consider not only whether that should continue beyond October, but whether there should also be a programme to advertise that number and encourage young people to use it going forward, in perpetuity?

This certainly is a problem where boys specifically are the offenders. Does the Minister think that there should be a specific part of the RSHE curriculum that deals with boys' behaviour and attitudes to make them aware of the problems that their behaviour causes?

Vicky Ford: First, let me discuss the specific helpline that we have set up. We obviously fund many other helplines through the NSPCC, including the ChildLine number, at the moment. Since we set up the helpline, we have had 400 calls, so as long as it is being used, it is good. If we start to see it tailing away—I cannot comment post October.¹ But we do want to ensure that there is always a place that a child can go to for advice. At the moment, this helpline is the bespoke place for advice, but that is why we have committed to the NSPCC and ChildLine for so many years.

Let me turn to boys. Again, part of the whole new RSHE curriculum is teaching healthy relationships and healthy behaviour: what is acceptable and not acceptable; what is coercive behaviour; what is abusive behaviour; what is harassment; and respect for each other. I think it is important that while we are clear that abuse is abhorrent, we also need to recognise that not all boys and men are abusers, and no one is saying that. We need to make sure that we put in protections and that we are there to act and help a girl who has been abused, but not make the suggestion that all boys are inherently abusers. That is the level that teachers will be working to when they are teaching this, to ensure that they get the balance right.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) [V]: I commend my hon. Friend for the progress that has been made in providing effective education in schools to equip our young people with the skills and knowledge they need to deal with the risks of inappropriate sexual behaviour. Does she agree that despite the many reviews of safeguarding arrangements—the latest being the Wood review—we still lack a sufficiently robust duty on schools to co-operate with local safeguarding arrangements, which in the experience of lead members and directors of children's services leads to inconsistent practice and makes emerging issues across the school sector harder to spot?

Vicky Ford: As ever, my hon. Friend raises an important question, which is about how schools and colleges co-operate with safeguarding partners. They are under a statutory duty to co-operate with those partners once they are named as a relevant agency to that partnership. Our guidance is clear that we expect all schools to be brought into local safeguarding arrangements, and that is one reason why we have asked all our local safeguarding partnerships across the country to review now how that system is working locally.

We want to make sure that our safeguarding partners are supporting our schools. It is really important that a school feels it has a relationship with, for example, the

police so that if it has a sensitive issue it wants to discuss with them, that can be done with somebody who understands children and young people, understands the behaviour and understands the school. It is about having that sort of closeness of relationship to support each other. That is what I have been told by headteachers again and again, and that is what I would like to see—that sort of close relationship working through those partnerships to keep schools safe. I believe that schools want to do that, and we need to ensure that our safeguarding partnerships are working hand in hand with our schools.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]: Sexism and sexual harassment harm girls and boys in their experience of school and help establish a toxic sexual culture, which then infects our streets, our workplaces, our universities and our Parliament. Four years ago, more than three quarters of secondary school students were unsure or not aware of the existence of any policies or practices in their school related to preventing sexism. What difference will students in primary and secondary school in Newcastle see as a result of today's statement, and when?

Vicky Ford: The hon. Member is absolutely right that this can and does harm boys as well as girls. There are tales I have heard of boys also having suffered from having images of themselves widely shared with their peer groups. The abuse, bullying and harassment has led to devastating mental wellbeing consequences for the boys, and it is important that we recognise that as well.

There are four immediate actions that we are taking today. The first is to support designated safeguarding leads in schools, such as in Newcastle. They do excellent work, but many of them have asked for access to better advice, the sharing of best practice and continuous professional development, all of which we are working on through what I mentioned in my statement.

As I said, we will be increasing the funding for the bespoke NSPCC helpline, so that children in Newcastle and elsewhere, if they have suffered abuse, can pick up the phone and call that line. In fact, they can type in—many kids would rather send a text message to helplines than actually ring them. That advice is there.

Our teachers will get the extra support that we want to put in on how they can deliver the RSHE curriculum. As I have said, we are looking, for example, at better ways that we can help older children support younger children in this as well.

The fourth action we will be taking, which will be important in Newcastle as well as everywhere else, is making sure that our safeguarding partnerships—police, health and local authority children's social care—absolutely ensure that the safeguarding arrangements that it is vital they wrap around children are working well in every single local area.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): I thank the Minister for her statement. The review has revealed that different parts of the state are not always working together as well as they should be to ensure that cases of sexual abuse are properly dealt with. Can my hon. Friend the Minister confirm that she will be working with the Home Office, local government and other bodies to ensure that cases are dealt with swiftly and consistently?

1.[Official Report, 17 June 2021, Vol. 697, c. 6MC.]

Vicky Ford: Absolutely. It is really important that we continue to work in this cross-Government way. Indeed, just as we have local safeguarding partnerships that bring together health, police and local authority children's services, we have three Ministers who are responsible, representing each of those three areas. I am the safeguarding partner for children within children's social services—that sits with me in the Department for Education—and there is the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), as the safeguarding partner for the police, and the Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), within the Department of Health and Social Care.

The strategies we are bringing together include, for example, the strategy on violence against women and girls, which I discuss regularly with the others. There is also the strategy on women's health, on which the Department of Health and Social Care is working, and that is absolutely key. One thing we have been doing is to encourage more young women and girls to feed into that as well. We need to continue to work across Government. We bring in, or haul in sometimes, our other Ministers—no, they all come willingly—to help us on these issues, too. It is teamwork that needs to be led by Government, but also needs to be led by teachers, parents and everyone who is concerned about the safety of our children, and that is the way we will address it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for her statement.

Points of Order

1.52 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Could you clarify how we better ensure that Ministers who sit in the other place face proper scrutiny from parliamentary Select Committees of this House? The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee has had considerable difficulty securing any time with the Minister of State at the Cabinet Office. We were told on 16 February that it was his responsibility to oversee the negotiation of crucial bilateral agreements to ensure that people working in the creative and service sectors in the UK can travel to and work in countries within the EU. Following our subsequent request to see the Minister, we had two refusals point blank. It was only after the Prime Minister himself stated, under my questioning at a Liaison Committee hearing, that he expected the Minister to appear before the Committee, that finally, on 23 April, we secured a date for the Minister's appearance, that being today.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you can imagine my dismay at the said Minister's subsequent cancellation of his appearance this week. We all appreciate that there are many important issues for the Minister to address, particularly in the light of the trade dispute with the EU. However, with the Minister citing the G7 as a reason for cancellation, that can hardly be deemed an unexpected event. Could you express the House's concern over Ministers from the other place not appearing in front of parliamentary Select Committees to receive due scrutiny, and would you reflect on the democratic deficit that this brings about?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. Select Committee scrutiny is an essential aspect of our work in this place, and for Committees to be able properly to undertake scrutiny they need access to key witnesses, including Ministers. The Government must therefore make every effort to ensure that the appropriate Ministers are able to give evidence to Committees in a timely way. When the Minister concerned is in the House of Lords, it is particularly important that Committees in this House are able to hold them to account.

I am very sorry that the hon. Gentleman's Committee has been experiencing these difficulties. He has now put his concerns on the record. They will have been heard by Ministers, and I hope that every effort is now made to ensure that the Committee is able to take evidence from the Minister, without delay.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In responding to the urgent question on 27 May about the UK's proposed tariff offer to the Australian Government on agricultural experts, the Minister for Trade Policy claimed, in his opening statement, that

"Australia has some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world."—[*Official Report*, 27 May 2021; Vol. 696, c. 549.]

Later, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), he said that

"if she sat down with the RSPCA Australia, it might give her a robust view of how good Australian animal welfare standards are."—[*Official Report*, 27 May 2021; Vol. 696, c. 557.]

Since then, the Australian RSPCA has described the Minister's reply as being "misinformed", with its chief executive, Dr Richard Mussell, saying:

"Unfortunately, animal welfare standards in Australia are basic at best...Standards are rarely audited and, unless implemented into law, which few are, they are only voluntary."

I have informed the Minister of my intention to raise this point of order, and I am sure he would not wish to have inadvertently misled the House in this way. I wonder whether you can advise me as to how the Minister might be able to correct the record in the House at the earliest opportunity.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he wished to raise this matter. I have to say that the content of Ministers' answers to parliamentary questions is a matter not for me but for the Minister concerned. I am also a little concerned that points of order become a continuation of Question Time. However, the hon. Gentleman has put his views on the record, and I am sure the point has been heard by those on the Treasury Bench and will be relayed to the Minister.

I am now suspending the House for two minutes to make arrangements for the next business.

1.57 pm

Sitting suspended.

Aviation, Travel and Tourism Industries

2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the aviation, travel and tourism industries.

The aviation, travel and tourism sectors are an essential part of the UK's identity and economy. More than that, they are a driver in creating a global Britain and in levelling up our country. That is reflected in the history and the facts. Before covid-19, the UK had the largest aviation market in Europe and the third largest globally, contributing £22 billion to GDP and directly providing around 230,000 jobs.

Tourism is similarly hugely important to our economy, as people travel from home and abroad to share in our culture, our landscape, our history and traditions, and the warm welcome from all corners of our United Kingdom. In 2019, 4 million people were working in the tourism industry, with the sector directly contributing £75 billion each year to the nation's economy. The Government understand the severe impact of covid-19 and the effect that the necessary restrictions that have been introduced to control it have had on the UK's aviation, travel and tourism sectors.

The House is united in wanting to see international travel reopened as soon as it is safe to do so, enabling those living here to see the family and friends they have been separated from for so long; for business to be done; for holidays to be enjoyed; enabling far countries to be explored; and for our friends from all corners of the wide world to be welcomed once again to the United Kingdom's shining shores.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I spoke to the Minister beforehand. The holiday and travel sector, in particular, has great uncertainty. What help can be given to businesses such as Laser Travel in my constituency that offer a tailored, top-to-bottom service? Existing furlough, self-employed support for international travel businesses for a further six months, retained business rates relief and a further tailored recovery grants regime for travel agents, tour operators—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman cannot make a speech at this point. Not everyone will get to speak in this debate who wants to do so, and interventions simply cannot be that long.

Robert Courts: I would be delighted to discuss this matter further with the hon. Gentleman. Later in my speech I will come to some of the factors that have been available to some of the wonderful travel and tourism businesses that we have all over the United Kingdom. That may give him the answer that he wants. If it does not, I am happy to discuss it further with him and I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston)—the tourism Minister—would be happy to do so as well.

As I was saying, everybody can be reassured that the Government recognise the critical national importance of international travel. It connects families that have been kept apart, boosts businesses, brings in investment and underpins the UK economy. It is essential to the

[Robert Courts]

way that we see ourselves as a country: open, international and cosmopolitan. That is why it is essential that any steps that we take now lay the groundwork for a sustainable, safe and robust return to international travel.

In February 2021, the Prime Minister asked the Secretary of State for Transport to convene a successor to the Global Travel Taskforce, building on the recommendations set out in November 2020. The taskforce published that report in April 2021. I would like to offer my sincere thanks to the travel and tourism industry for its enormous contribution and close co-operation with Government in the development of the report and for its continued support in the ongoing efforts to successfully implement the report's recommendations. The report set out a framework for a safe, sustainable, robust return to international travel, seeking input from across the transport industry.

The Secretary of State confirmed on 7 May that non-essential international travel would resume on 17 May, lifting the "stay in the UK" regulation and allowing international travel to recommence under the new traffic light system. The system cautiously balances the reopening of international travel with managing the risk posed by imported variants. It categorises countries based on risk, allowing us to protect public health, and particularly the roll-out of our world-beating vaccination programme, from variants of covid-19.

The Joint Biosecurity Centre produces risk assessments of countries and territories. Decisions on which list a country is assigned to and any associated border measures are then taken by Ministers, who take into account that JBC risk assessment alongside wider public health factors. The Government have had to make difficult decisions in the early stages of the return to international travel; however, they are necessary to ensure that we do not risk throwing away our hard-won achievements, which have been possible only through the hard work of the British people, and people coming forward for their vaccinations when called. However difficult these times are, and I am under no illusion that they are challenging, we must not risk having to go backwards.

To address the immediate impact of travel restrictions we have introduced an unprecedented package of financial support across the economy, totalling approximately £350 billion. By September 2021, the air transport sector alone will have benefited from around £7 billion of Government support, including accessing more than £2 billion through the Bank of England's covid corporate financing facility and around £1 billion to £1.5 billion of support through the furlough scheme. That is the same job retention scheme that some Labour Front Benchers have criticised and called "money wasting". I could not disagree more, and I am sure that the people whose jobs it has saved would disagree as well.

The extension of the furlough scheme to the end of September this year allows us to continue supporting businesses and protecting as many jobs as possible. As part of our economy-wide support we have provided over £25 billion to the tourism, leisure and hospitality sectors in the form of grants, loans and tax breaks. We have extended business rates relief and introduced new restart grants of up to £18,000 for many in the sector. We have also extended the cut in VAT for tourism and hospitality activities to 5% until the end of September.

The levelling-up fund, the city and growth deals in Scotland and Wales, and the towns fund all show that the Government are investing in tourism infrastructure across our Union. This week, we announced town deals for a further 33 towns as part of the towns fund programme. Those places, which range from seaside towns such as Hastings and Hartlepool to the historic market towns of Bedford and Bishop Auckland, will share over £790 million to boost their local economies, create jobs and help them to build back better from the pandemic.

To date, we have announced town deals for 86 places across England worth over £2 billion in total. A new £56 million welcome back fund is helping councils to boost tourism, improve green spaces and provide more outdoor seating areas. Part of that funding will be specifically allocated to support coastal areas, with funding going to all coastal resorts across England to welcome back holidaymakers safely in the coming months.

On health certification and testing, the border requirements that international visitors will need to follow depend upon the risk rating of the locations that they have been in prior to arrival, as I referred to. As variants of concern still pose a significant risk, testing from a UK Government approved provider remains in place. We recognise that the cost of those tests is still too high. Although we have seen the price of post-arrival tests decrease from around £210 to around £170, we continue to explore options for lowering the cost of testing further, including cheaper tests being used when holidaymakers return home.

Passengers can now use the NHS app to demonstrate their covid-19 vaccination status or alternatively can request a letter that outlines proof of vaccination five days after they have received their second dose of a covid-19 vaccine. The ability to prove one's vaccination status for outbound travel using the NHS app and an inclusive letter service means that several countries now accept vaccinated visitors from the UK with reduced or removed testing and health measures.

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): My hon. Friend says that several countries accept evidence of UK vaccinations in order to facilitate travel. Why does the United Kingdom not recognise the validity of those vaccinations for international travel?

Robert Courts: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising that matter. We are considering what role vaccination may be able to play in facilitating international travel. I will refer to that again in due course.

The measures set out in the traffic-light system are not set in stone. That is also an answer to my right hon. Friend's question. We are working towards a future travel system that can coexist with an endemic covid-19, and indeed recognising, as he has pointed out, the strong strategic rationale of the success of the vaccine programme. We are working to consider the role of vaccinations in shaping a different set of health and testing measures for inbound travel into our country. We will set out our position on that in due course.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): The Minister has talked about the way the traffic-light system might work. We were promised that there would be a green watch list that would give travellers more time, but that simply was not used in the case of Portugal. Could he expand on that a little further?

Robert Courts: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising that point and appreciate that it is one on which many hon. Members will want an answer. We have always been clear that we could use the green watch list where we were able to do so. We have equally always been clear that when the evidence requires us to take swift action, we will do that, because the public would expect us to take action to protect public health, which is what we did in that instance.

As recommended in the Global Travel Taskforce report, the Government's approach will be assessed on 28 June, 31 July and 1 October. This is to ensure that the measures and the approach in place are still adequate, that they are relevant, and that they are efficient. Of course, the first of those review points comes up at the end of this month.

The GTT report included a commitment for the Government to produce a tourism recovery plan, as was reiterated in the 22 February road map. That tourism recovery plan will set out the transformation and growth of the sector over the next five years as part of our economic recovery. The plan will address both the short-term and medium-term issues affecting the sector, such as bringing back consumer demand and supporting businesses as they reopen. We also wanted to set the sector on a long-term path to support delivery of the Government's wider objectives, such as levelling up, strengthening our Union, and enhancing growth and productivity. We want to future-proof the tourism sector. We are determined to see the development of a more sustainable, innovative and data-driven tourism industry.

As we return to travelling, building consumer confidence is key. On 17 May, we published a passenger covid-19 charter that sets out consumer rights and responsibilities while restrictions are still in place, alongside the Government's expectations of the businesses in the sector. In the meantime, we will be regularly reviewing travel measures, taking into account the latest domestic and international data. The system we have designed will be adaptable to the evolving epidemiological picture, and the Government must of course be prepared to take action at any time to protect public health.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned that the Government plan two or three further checkpoints during the summer. Is he actually saying, as he talks about consumers and recovery, that if a destination is not placed on the green list or the amber list by 31 July, it cannot be reopened to travel before 31 October?

Robert Courts: If I have understood my right hon. Friend's question correctly, the position is that we continue to assess all the measures that apply in terms of policy at the checkpoint reviews. Similarly, we look approximately every three weeks at which countries fall into which list. When I talked about consumer confidence in the charter, I was referring to the rights that consumers have and the responsibilities of those in the industry. I hope that I understood his question correctly; if not, I will come back to it later.

In the last couple of minutes, I would like to say a little bit about our priorities for the future of aviation. The UK has a proud history at the forefront of global aviation. It provides hundreds of thousands of jobs and billions of pounds to the UK's GDP and tax revenues—money that is invested back into our vital national

services. We are working on a strategic framework that will focus on building back better and ensure a successful UK aviation sector for the future. That framework will set out a plan for a return to growth of the aviation sector, and it will include consideration of workforce and skills, Union connectivity, noise, innovation, regulation and consumer issues. The strategy will complement the Government's net zero aviation strategy. It will consider the critical role that aviation plays in growing the UK's global reach and we will publish it by the end of the year.

The measures I have outlined demonstrate how determined the Government are to support this vital industry as we start to rebuild the economy. I am a Minister in the Department for Transport. By definition, I want to see people travelling, and I want to see people flying. I want a thriving aviation industry. I want to welcome people back to our shores to enjoy the delights our country has to offer, and I want our people to be able to explore the wonders of the world. But we cannot and will not rush this, and we cannot and will not undermine our hard-won progress. If we move too quickly—recklessly, even—we could throw away our progress and take us all, including the travel, tourism and aviation industries, back to square one. The best way to support our aviation, travel and tourism industries is to resolutely follow the vaccine roll-out, return life to normality and allow these industries once again to soar.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It might be helpful for colleagues to know that I intend to run the debate until around 4 o'clock, because there is another debate after this, and therefore there has to be a very low time limit of three minutes, I am afraid, even at the beginning. I apologise to the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May); I normally try to give her more than three minutes, but we are really under pressure this afternoon. I should point out that Members who are further down the list simply will not have a chance to speak today. They will be able to work out by the arithmetic whether or not they will have a chance to speak, so they do not have to come and ask me. It is a pleasure to call the shadow Minister, Alex Sobel.

2.17 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I will try to be as brief as possible, to give Members the maximum time. My role as shadow tourism Minister means that I am lucky enough to visit many of the wonderful and various tourist attractions that Britain has to offer. Just a few weeks ago, I celebrated the reopening of museums and galleries by attending the launch of Grayson Perry's "Art Club" exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery. More recently, I visited the beautifully kept gardens and buildings at Chiltern Open Air Museum and enjoyed the gardens at Batsford arboretum. School holidays for my children have been made more enjoyable for the whole family thanks in no small part to Legoland Windsor, the Wave in Bristol, Whipsnade zoo, the Wild Place Project and Roger Tuby and Stewart Robinson's fairgrounds. I also visited Stratford-upon-Avon, one of our biggest tourist magnets, and was delighted to see it so busy, and I visited Scarborough to welcome back domestic coach tourism.

[Alex Sobel]

While all these attractions are still doing what they do best—educating, entertaining and enchanting their many visitors—they have one thing in common: they have all been let down in one way or another by the Government's lacklustre and patchy support over the course of the covid-19 pandemic. Last September, I stood here and impressed the need to protect the hospitality industry. We know that hospitality is one of the major forces powering the UK tourism economy. Establishments providing food, drink and accommodation rely heavily on the tourism trade and must be protected for their sake and the sake of tourism—an industry worth £155 billion and responsible for more than 3 million jobs. That is why my party—the party that supports frontline businesses—is calling for a flexible repayment scheme to tackle the £6 billion debt burden facing the hospitality industry without harming the recovery of businesses that are still unable to turn a profit. It is the fair thing to do.

We also need to consider the other huge threat to hospitality recovering: the staff crisis. Venues have been hit by the triple whammy of changes to the immigration rules post Brexit, many workers deciding to return to their country of origin in Europe, and the pandemic and previously furloughed workers retraining and moving on. I have heard this time and again from Bristol to Scarborough. The Government must address the shortage of workers.

To protect the tourism industry itself, we were promised a plan, to which the Minister referred. In April, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston)—who is present and can advise the Minister—assured me that the tourism recovery plan was on the way and would be announced by the end of spring. But the sector is starting the season late and there is still no plan. Neither our domestic nor our international travel and tourism industries know what support they can count on as the summer season starts. Instead, we wait. Will the Minister tell me whether we are having the longest spring on record? When can we expect the plan? I am sure his DCMS colleague will help him with that.

The coach industry waits for a package of support that aligns it with other areas of the leisure and hospitality sector. Tour guides, events staff and other excluded workers wait to see whether they are eligible for Government support in the plan. Fairground operators wait to see whether there will finally be a Government support package that does not exclude them because of their lack of static business or shop front. Travel agents wait for sector-specific funding, while the lack of inbound and outbound travel and the uncertainty over testing regimes and quarantine continue to hit bookings. Zoos and aquariums do not wait; they continue with the inadequate zoo animals fund—which many in the sector call the “zoo closure fund”—and ask what the tourism recovery package will do to help them, their staff and their animals.

I should mention that the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire, has chosen this period to undertake a review of destination management organisations. It is important that DCMS aligns the review of DMOs with the tourism recovery plan to best support the promotion

of local and regional tourism. Any funding must be used to encourage co-operation and streamline processes, ensuring that DMOs are best placed to be at the centre of the English tourism ecosystem, while ending the need for them to compete for limited funding. I hope the Minister will give us clarity on both the tourism recovery plan and the review of DMOs when he responds to the debate.

Nowhere is uncertainty felt so keenly as by the outbound travel industry, with so many yearning for a holiday abroad. We have been told that we absolutely should not travel to amber-list countries, but essential travel is okay. Then we were told that perhaps holidays could be essential—then that, actually, it is dangerous to travel abroad this year and we should not do it, but to just be careful if we do. “Go to Portugal.” “Come back from Portugal.” “Why did you even go to Portugal?” Why were there so many mixed messages on outbound travel? It is key to the UK economy and, right now, clarity on holidays is critical to the UK's collective psyche. The Government must step in to bring reassurance.

It is worth remembering that planes are not the only way to get abroad. The pandemic has hit Eurostar and other train operators hard, yet the Government have not supported them at all. We need a comprehensive strategy for our regional, national and international railways that goes beyond the current franchise-support programme to address the impact of covid-19 on operations such as Eurostar.

We all want to go back to normal. As a country, we have endured so much. We are tough. We do not need to be infantilised by the Government; we just want clear, truthful messaging. We know that uncertainty hurts our economy and that financial support promotes recovery and levels the playing field with the competitors in Europe—many of which have received the sort of support that we should provide to our tourism industry—that are taking advantage of the lack of support for our sector. Now is the time for the Government to step up and deliver a package that will give businesses certainty, the ability to plan for the future and a chance to rebuild.

2.22 pm

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

This is a disappointing debate, because one year and one week ago this very issue was raised in this House. A different Minister was at the Dispatch Box at the time, but she promised me that the Government were working hard across the sector to

“get internationally agreed standard health measures”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2020; Vol. 676, c. 850.]

in place. One year on, we are no further forward. Indeed, we have a devastated industry, jobs lost and global Britain shut for business.

More than not being any further forward, we have gone backwards. We now have more than 50% of the adult population vaccinated—it is a wonderful programme—yet we are more restricted on travel than we were last year. In 2020, I went to Switzerland in August and South Korea in September. There was no vaccine but travel was possible. This year, there is a vaccine but travel is not possible. I really do not understand the Government's stance.

Of course, it is permissible for a person to travel to countries on the amber list, provided that it is practicable for them to quarantine when they come back, but Government Ministers tell people that they must not travel and cannot go on holiday to places on the amber list. The messaging is mixed and the system is chaotic. Portugal was put on the green list, people went to the football, then Portugal was put on the amber list, leaving holidaymakers scrambling for flights and devastated families having to cancel their plans. That is not to mention the impact on the airlines, on travel agents here and on the travel and tourist industry in our longest-standing trading partner in Europe.

Business travel is practically impossible: global Britain has shut its doors to business and investors. In a normal pre-pandemic year, passengers travelling through Heathrow spent £16 billion throughout the country, including at places such as Legoland Windsor, which is partly in my constituency. That has been lost.

There are some facts on which the Government need to be upfront with the British people and about which Ministers need to think a bit more when they make decisions. First, we will not eradicate covid-19 from the UK. There will not be a time when we can say that there will never be another case of covid-19 in this country. Secondly, variants will keep on coming. There will be new variants every year. If the Government's position is that we cannot open up travel until there are no new variants elsewhere in the world, we will never be able to travel abroad ever again. The third fact that the Government need to state much more clearly is that sadly people will die from covid here in the UK in the future, as 10,000 to 20,000 people do every year from flu.

We are falling behind the rest of Europe in our decisions to open up, as my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady) has indicated. The Government may say all they have, as the Minister has, about the importance of the aviation industry, but they need to decide whether they want an airline industry and aviation sector in the UK or not, because at the rate they are going, they will not have one, certainly not as a key sector in the economy, as it was before the pandemic. It is incomprehensible, I think, that one of the most heavily vaccinated countries in the world is the one that is most reluctant to give its citizens the freedoms those vaccinations should support.

2.25 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I think it is clear to all of us just how important international travel is to the economy, and to the tourism and hospitality sector in particular. With European and world connectivity now more important than ever, it is the Scottish Government's ambition to see airports and airlines restored to 2019 levels of connectivity as quickly as possible.

It is clear to all Members just how crucial tourism is to the Scottish economy. Luckily, the Scottish Government are perfectly aware of that. UK Hospitality is clear that, although the Scottish Government are providing funds through breathing space for business rates, the UK Government are just kicking the can down the road. Moreover, the fact that they have remained committed to imposing a September cliff edge on the sector by ending furlough and the 5% VAT rate is unforgivable.

Chris Grayling: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gavin Newlands: I would love to, but I am extremely pressed for time so I will crack on.

Given the time constraints I just mentioned, my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) will make more comment on the tourism sector in his speech.

I think we all accept that the very nature of the pandemic has meant that reaction to events has had to be quick, changing in some cases day to day based on epidemiological evidence. Believe it or not from my tone sometimes, I am sympathetic to the pressures on Ministers and officials who have had to deal with the pandemic day to day and hour by hour, taking decisions with massive consequences for our economy and society. It has to be said though that the Government's conduct in preventing the further importation of the delta variant was nothing short of a disgrace.

It is difficult to work out whether irresponsible delays in reintroducing travel restrictions to and from India while case numbers were surging were down to governmental desperation and self-interest while trying to set up a trade deal that would not be necessary if the kamikaze mission of Brexit had not been set in motion, or just sheer incompetence. Whatever the real reason, the result has been the importation of delta cases that could have been prevented had timeous action been taken or, indeed, had the UK Government just followed the advice provided on hotel quarantine, as the Scottish Government did. The UK Government even refused to help identify passengers in England travelling on to Scotland so that they could also be required to enter quarantine hotels. We can see the result of that approach right now in the rising delta caseload.

Although some restrictions on air travel are still necessary, aviation more than any other sector needs help and support from the state at this time of emergency. Unbelievably, we are still waiting for the type of sector-specific support promised by the Chancellor right at the start of the pandemic. Even with the limited fiscal and constitution levers at their disposal, the Scottish Government stepped up immediately and provided more targeted support to aviation businesses than the UK through extending 100% business rates relief for the whole of last year, and now for this financial year, too. In contrast, when the UK Government finally followed suit, they did so in a much more limited way when it came to eligibility and capping that support. They have also failed to match the additional year's support, extending the limited scheme by only six months, a position that will surely have to change should their policies continue.

In a coup de grâce, the Government also saw fit to remove the extra statutory concession that had provided vital retail revenue for airports across the country and that was of particular importance outside London and the south-east. That decision has already resulted in dozens of retail outlets closing and hundreds of jobs going from airport retail in Scotland alone. The impact of that lost revenue will not only be felt in retail operations; the income was used to cross-subsidise a huge amount of airport operations, including attracting new routes and retaining old ones. In short, the decision is a hugely myopic one that I hope the Treasury will reverse.

[Gavin Newlands]

We might think that that was plenty for the industry to be dealing with, but there is always one more thing with this Government, particularly if it involves Brexit. UK airlines have been put at a competitive disadvantage versus their EU counterparts when it comes to cargo and chartered routes. In terms of traffic rights, we—in the form of the Civil Aviation Authority—are very quick to grant rights to other European airlines, but the same reciprocity does not occur in many European countries. That clearly makes it much more difficult for UK-based airlines to secure contracts. Indeed, nothing makes that point more starkly than the fact that the Ministry of Defence has given a contract to transport UK armed forces personnel to a Polish airline, bailed out by a Polish Government, which we have quickly given rights to fly. All the while, UK aircraft remain grounded and the air crews and associated personnel remain furloughed at the taxpayer's expense.

So much for taking back control. This is yet another Brexit dividend from people who brought us the sunny uplands—the same uplands our hill farmers are currently wrestling with. This is no way to secure an aviation sector, or the hundreds of thousands of jobs that directly and indirectly rely on it in the short or long term. Building capacity and sustainability in the long term has to be the priority for Government and the industry once the worst of the pandemic is over.

I have lost count of the number of times that regional connectivity has been raised with Ministers in this place. Our economies and wider communities are being held back and damaged by the UK's over-centralising, decades-old policy of reliance on London and the south-east as gateways to the rest of Europe and the world. Regional connectivity is needed if we are to attract visitors and tourists over the coming months as restrictions are lifted. Although VisitScotland, the Scottish Government and the tourism and hospitality industries are all working hard to restart the sector, the fact is that visitors need to be able to get here in the first place.

We have now been waiting 17 months for the regional connectivity review. Local economies need that review to report, and to report now. There is no time to lose for communities that stand to be frozen out of recovery and see jobs and prosperity disappear for want of any strategy or plan from the Government. It must be remembered that for regional airports, Flybe's collapse was a hammer-blow that preceded the pandemic. Even without covid-19, we would still be facing the same substantial challenges and, I rather suspect, the same lack of action from the Government.

I must make an uncharacteristically positive point. With the demise of Flybe, Loganair is now the UK's largest regional airline. The airline is based in my constituency, and I was very proud to see the announcement this morning that it was the UK's first regional airline to become carbon-neutral. I congratulate it on that initiative.

In conclusion, I go back to the gravity of the situation. The lack of action that I have spoken of has extended to sector-specific support, business rates relief and airport retail. Even at this stage, I still urge the Government belatedly to follow up on their promises with action. As the Minister himself has said, pre pandemic the country's aviation sector was the third biggest. The Government's

inaction has ensured that it will not be, as we move out of the situation. It is time to listen to the industry and our aviation communities and map a future that ensures sustainability, economic growth and job security.

2.33 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): The aviation industry was one of the first to face the negative impact of the covid-19 pandemic 15 months ago. Sadly, because of the overly cautious restrictions and the confusion coming from the Government, it will be one of the slowest to recover.

I see this daily as the representative of an aviation community. It is timely for us to remember that we are not just talking about two weeks on the beach in the sun; this is about people's livelihoods, their wellbeing and their jobs. It is also important for our UK economy. Outbound international travel accounts, in normal times, for a contribution of approximately £37 billion to the UK economy, and inbound international travel accounts for about £28 billion, at 2019 levels.

More than 1.5 million people were employed in the aviation and travel sectors. Sadly, many of those have lost their jobs and about half are on furlough. The furlough is coming to an end in September and will need to be extended if the aviation and travel sectors are not able to regenerate themselves by being able to operate at least to some meaningful degree in the coming summer months. This lost summer, which I fear it will be, will cost the UK economy some £19 billion. I am encouraged to hear news from Cornwall today that there will be a UK-US travel taskforce. The fact that we do not have transatlantic travel at the moment is costing our UK economy about £32 million a day, and that puts us at a competitive disadvantage compared with many other countries.

I pay tribute to the Government for the world successful vaccination programme. More than 70 million doses have been delivered, but we are squandering that advantage by being overly cautious and not being able to open up. This is about global Britain. This is about international trade. This is about people's jobs. I urge the Government to allow aviation to safely reopen, which it can do with vaccination and testing. I also urge them to reduce the cost of testing and to remove the VAT on testing to allow greater freedom of movement. If they do not do that, the industry, rather than making money for the UK economy, will be asking for further bail-outs, which will cost every taxpayer much more.

2.36 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab) [V]: Today, I want to focus on a specialist sailing holiday company in my constituency, which has been running for several decades and has essentially been unable to run its business since March last year. It told me that, with the current travel restrictions, it is losing £1 million in revenue every three weeks. This tour operator has not been able to access much of the Government's support, including business rates relief. It also missed out on some council grants because it is classed as offices, which were not officially told to close.

To add insult to injury, the company is now facing repayments for a loan under the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme from the end of this month, at

a time when it is still almost completely unable to trade. These companies have not even been able to take full advantage of the furlough scheme given that cancelling holidays, which so many have been forced to do, takes more work than arranging them in the first place and therefore staff have been needed to deal with disappointed holidaymakers.

Then there is the absolute shambles that is this Government's approach to international travel, which is compounding travel companies' problems. When I asked the Transport Secretary to publish the evidence behind the decisions on the travel ban list, I was told:

"The advice, evidence and methodology which inform these decisions relates to on-going development of Government policy and therefore cannot be published at this time."

If that is frustrating for me, can Members imagine how frustrated travel agencies are given that the future of their business and livelihoods is based on decisions for which there is no publicly available criteria and, in many cases, very little logic? This leaves businesses such as my local tour operator unable to plan in advance on the basis of coronavirus data and hugely damages consumer confidence.

What is most frustrating for me is the lack of leadership. Ministers need to admit that, basically, they are not allowing foreign holidays and to mitigate the impact of that on the travel industry with proper financial support. The current approach is the worst of both worlds, where the travel industry is being allowed to fail and we are not even properly securing our borders against coronavirus threats.

Time is running out for our travel industry and the brilliant local businesses and staff that make it up. I sincerely hope that the Minister is listening properly to the debate today.

2.39 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I listened carefully to the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts). He is a good man and a good minister. I know he does not share the Government's universal view, but today we need him, and his colleagues in the Department and elsewhere across Government, really to step up the pressure on the places where the problems really are.

People in the Department of Health and in the public health world have done a fantastic job in many respects in the past 12 months—the vaccination programme is something of which we should all be proud—but they do not understand the business model of the travel sector, and the decisions they are taking are going to cost hundreds of thousands of jobs, put businesses out of business and leave the sector decimated. The Minister talked about the future of the aviation sector. Well, there is not going to be one if we do not get this resolved pretty quickly.

I was disturbed to hear the Health Secretary talk about getting international travel back up and running in the medium term. That is not good enough. We had an approach. We had a green list. The Joint Biosecurity Centre recommended putting Malta, for example, on the green list. Are we flying to Malta? No. That is inexplicable and indefensible, and it has got to stop. If a country is recommended as safe to fly to, we should be able to travel to it.

We also have an amber list. We are told that we can fly to countries on the amber list, but we have to quarantine when we get back, but we are also told that we should not go on holiday to them. Well, I am afraid that I simply disagree with that. My view is very clear: if people are willing to travel to a country on the amber list, for whatever reason, and if they are willing to follow the rules on self-isolation when they get back, they should be free to travel there. I simply disagree with Ministers who say, "We don't want you to travel to an amber list country for a holiday." We want the industry to recover. If people are willing to follow the rules around quarantining, they should be free to travel wherever they wish, and I think they should do so.

If we do not take steps as quickly as possible—the default really has to be that we open up places as soon as they are safe—we are going to see this industry decimated. We now need a much, much, much less risk-averse approach to international travel. We need a proper road map back into operation for the sector. What are the milestones? When can we open up amber countries to the green list? When can people start travelling freely without quarantining? What are the milestones that have to be reached to achieve that? We have done that domestically; let us now do it internationally and let us do it pretty quickly.

If we do not, the situation is very clear. We had a lively debate in this place on Monday about whether we could afford an extra aid budget. The argument the Government put forward is that the public finances are under huge pressure, and they are right. But they are going to be under even bigger pressure if we do not sort this sector out, because it will make no money until 2022 and we will have a straight choice: either we bail it out to the tune of billions of pounds more, or next year we will have no airlines, closed airports, and lots of little businesses like the one we just heard about in north London will have disappeared. That is not what I want, so my message to Ministers is: get this done; sort it out; get that road map in place; and start to take a less risk-averse approach.

2.42 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Quite unusually, I find myself agreeing with many contributions from both sides of the House today. I want particularly to concentrate on the aviation sector. Clearly, the aviation, travel and tourism sector is unique in this crisis. While other sectors are enjoying a cautious but steady recovery and reopening, the short-term and long-term future of this sector remains extremely uncertain. In addition, it is one of the only sectors whose recovery is not determined solely by the policies of the UK Government, but is highly dependent on the often rapidly changing policies of Governments abroad. However, given the ongoing restrictions that the UK Government are applying to the aviation sector, the sector requires a specifically tailored recovery plan, which this Government sadly have not yet afforded it. Not only is this lack of support putting employers and employees under extreme pressure; it is also putting the UK market at a competitive disadvantage, where European counterparts have provided that much needed support and comfort.

It goes without saying that the workers—almost 230,000 of them in the aviation industry—are highly skilled. They go through a complex process of training

[Grahame Morris]

to gain qualifications, of checking and of certification. The industry is potentially facing an exodus of workers who are going to leave for more stable sectors with a more predictable recovery prognosis. Quite frankly, the industry cannot afford such skill leakages at this time. A further extension of the furlough scheme would afford employees the flexibility to be furloughed at short notice without the potentially devastating impact on their income, and would serve to protect the skillset that the sector desperately needs to retain during the recovery.

I am honoured to serve as a member of the Select Committee on Transport and as such I have become well-acquainted with the particular challenges facing the sector, and in my capacity as chair of the Unite the union parliamentary group I have closely followed the industrial disputes within the sector, including the disgraceful fire and rehire practices at British Airways and Heathrow airport and, as always, I commend Unite on its work in fighting on behalf of its members in these sectors and once again call on the Government to outlaw fire and rehire to prevent more of these cases and end this unacceptable practice.

The uncertainty that has characterised the Government's pandemic response endures with the recent traffic light system for foreign travel. Minister, in the time I have left I want to urge you to extend the coronavirus job retention scheme to the sector; extend the furlough scheme and give this sector and the workforce the support and reassurance it so desperately needs.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I know the hon. Gentleman did not mean to say "Minister" like that; I know he meant to say "I would ask the Minister" rather than "Minister, I would ask you", but I did not want to interrupt him because of lack of time.

2.45 pm

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): I suspect that this is one of those occasions when the Minister would be surprised if any Member on either side of the House were to speak in support of the system that the Government have put in place and I am certainly not going to surprise him myself. I speak of course on behalf of the many thousands of my constituents who depend on aviation, particularly associated with Manchester airport, for their livelihoods, but I speak also for the many thousands more who need that vital connectivity for their businesses or other crucial aspects of their lives.

It is important to reflect on the huge importance of the aviation sector in this country; it has always been a huge British success story, making a £200 billion annual contribution to the economy and generating £4 billion a year in tax revenue. My right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) referred to the debate about overseas aid; coincidentally, the same amount of money involved in that debate is how much we are simply giving up in tax revenue from the aviation sector by requiring it not to fly. Over 1 million jobs are supported by the sector.

Secondly, of course this is not just about holidays, as has been said by other Members: important though holidays are to many people, it is also about millions of British citizens and residents who are being denied the

possibility of seeing their family and friends who live overseas, and it is about business more generally. There can be no global Britain without the aviation sector.

A constituent wrote to me yesterday describing the business-crushing approach the Government are taking to travel. He said:

"We literally have multi million pound potential being postponed because of the decisions of this Government."

That is just one of many small and medium-sized enterprises losing out, unable to make the progress it wants to make.

Finally, I would just make the point that the Minister's opening remarks seemed so encouraging, with the determination to get travel back and get aviation flying again, but it does not seem that way to the aviation sector. The aviation sector does not see the Government laying out a road map to a safe return to international travel; what it sees is the Government putting in place opaque and unpredictable obstacles that prevent that safe return to travel. We need clarity, we need certainty, we need a predictable approach, and quickly we need to see that approach set out in a way that allows the industry to plan for a return to safe travel over the summer.

2.48 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab) [V]: The pandemic has put unprecedented strain on the travel industry and stress on consumers, and the recent decision to remove Portugal from the green list immediately without first placing it on a watchlist has only exacerbated the problems for both. Confidence has been damaged and the lack of transparency by not allowing the data to be scrutinised has compounded the confusion and hindered the ability to plan ahead for businesses and consumers.

To focus on business support for airports like Manchester, the airport and ground operations support scheme is insufficient at £8 million per airport—that does not even cover the rates bill—and support by means of loans will only defer the problem as the start date for any meaningful return to international travel gets pushed ever further back, with no clarity on how and when it will restart. Vaccination was meant to be the key. More than 50% of people are now vaccinated, but we do not hear of covid passports any longer. There will be another travel taskforce between the USA and the UK—a little less talk and a little more action would be appreciated by airports, airlines, businesses and leisure travellers. The covid test scheme is, frankly, an expensive mess. The Government website on providers has no information on whether they are accredited, no guidance on what to do if things go wrong and no advice on the capacity of any provider. Is it acceptable for the Government to expect travellers to do their own research into such a new market, which is prone to scams and fraudulent behaviour? Effective consumer protections must be in place for travellers in the event of any problems with testing, and clear advice for potential travellers is also key.

It is really unhelpful that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office travel warnings do not always echo the amber and red warnings given by the Department for Transport. Indeed, the Secretary of State himself gave incorrect advice regarding refunds for travellers with bookings to an amber country. Travel insurance does not give all the answers; it is confusing and not

well understood. How is the Minister working with the regulators and insurance industry to ensure that this is better understood and better regulated? The Government need to clearly state their priorities. If overcaution and virtual isolation is the aim, the industry needs financial support so that it is protected; if that is not the case, the Government need to let the industry trade more freely. Businesses and travellers deserve clarity and transparency.

2.51 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con) [V]: Let me say at the outset that I am chairman of the all-party groups on business travel and on Portugal, and I do not need to tell the Minister how the decision ignoring the data and the illogical decision about Portugal last week have caused widespread dismay. I have been speaking on hospitality and events in this House since March 2020, as many colleagues have. I am proud of the fact that in my constituency we have international travel businesses such as Swords Travel, which was named the UK and Ireland's top travel agency this year, but like so many it highlights the problems it has had. Unless there is clarity on the future of international travel or more Government support, if the industry is not allowed to reopen more quickly, many of the fantastic services for which Swords Travel and others are recognised will simply not be there in the future.

Like everyone else, I recognise the enormity of the support provided by the furlough scheme, which has been incredibly helpful. However, unlike retail and hospitality, the travel sector has not had that same level of specific sector support. Therefore, if the Government are not going to reopen the industry, I urge them to think about what they may be able to do in terms of grants and support for the industry. I said a moment ago that I am the chairman of the all-party group on business travel, and this is an area that contributes more than £100 billion a year to the UK economy. Business travel management companies have seen a collapse of revenue, which has decreased by some 88% since pre-pandemic levels, and the decrease in business travel trips across 10 key routes alone has cost the Government some £3.3 billion in the past six months. Therefore, when the Government reconsider, I hope they will include priority business travel destinations alongside traditional holiday destinations for the next review of the green travel list. If they cannot be added to the list, that will compound the need for further support.

I listened carefully to the Minister and, like my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), I, too, know him to be a good man, but I have to say to him that if all social restrictions are lifted on 21 June, as planned, aviation and international travel will be the only sector without a meaningful restart date. Therefore, I seriously urge him to use 28 June as the opportunity to repurpose the risk-based system, which does enjoy support but clearly is not working. He should be recognising the vaccination status of travellers. We should be looking at the replacement of the expensive PCR—polymerase chain reaction—test requirement for green countries, which are inherently low risk, and we should be removing the “do not travel” messaging on amber countries. Many of those—the testing and the quarantine-on-return measures—match the risk posed, and I urge the Minister and his colleagues in the Department for Transport to use 28 June to reopen international travel for business, holiday and family reasons.

2.54 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) [V]: This will come as no surprise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will take a slightly different tack from what has been said before. If our country is going to get itself back on its feet once covid thankfully has passed, we are going to have to play to our strengths.

What is one of the greatest strengths of the tourist industry? What is something that was invented in Scotland? What is important as part of global Britain? Golf. During the time when the Kaiser's high seas fleet faced Admiral Jellicoe and Admiral Beatty's grand fleet, a small golf course was built in a place called Pitcalzean, which is near Nigg, near Invergordon. It was greatly used in two wars by Royal Navy personnel. Sadly, in the late 1960s, it fell into disuse and was closed down. I have a constituent called Robert Mackenzie who has tremendous plans to re-establish this golf course entirely using private finance. It has the support of the local authority and goes to planning shortly.

I very much hope that we can see that project come to fruition, but I am making this speech because we recently had a similar project at a place called Coul, near Dornoch. It went all the way to the final stage of the race, if you like, and suddenly having got all that way, the Scottish Government decided to call in the application and turn it down. It is heavily rumoured locally that it happened due to Green party influence on the Scottish Government. This must not happen again.

Jobs do not grow on trees in my constituency—we all know that. Golf can be a terrific tourism product that we can offer people, and it is ultimately sustainable in the longest possible term. I very much hope that both those projects will go ahead. I just say in passing that the name Pitcalzean is one that will fox *Hansard*, I do believe, and I will be happy to furnish them with the correct spelling by email once I have stopped speaking.

Last year, I invited the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to come and see for himself the Scottish whisky industry in my constituency and other things he cared to see. The right hon. Gentleman came, and I believe the visit was a success. It may prove to be something unusual for an Opposition MP to do, but at the end of the day, I am about trying to get the best for my constituency, and I will speak to politicians of any party if it helps bring things to fruition.

I extend the same warm invitation to the Minister responding to this debate today or, indeed, any other member of Her Majesty's Government who would like to come and see what we already have in terms of golf—and in whisky, food or whatever, too—but also what we seek to do for the future. As I said at the beginning, and I say it again, this is all part of the effort to get our great country back on its feet.

2.57 pm

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The UK's vaccine roll-out has been remarkable. Unfortunately, other countries have not kept pace with us and fully opening up our borders to international travel would put our brilliant progress into jeopardy. Tightly controlled travel corridors are a necessary solution, but they clearly present significant challenges to the airline and travel industries. Although international travel is limited, regional

[Scott Benton]

airports provide an opportunity to increase connectivity and help us bounce back stronger as we emerge from the pandemic.

Our extremely high level of air passenger duty is a barrier to expanding domestic flights, as we charge one of the highest levels of APD in Europe. Somewhat astonishingly, as air passenger duty is a departure tax, it is currently applied to the inbound and outbound journeys of a domestic return flight. That double taxation has enormous impacts on small regional airports, such as Blackpool airport, and makes many potential routes financially unviable. It also acts as a disincentive to travelling from regional airports to major UK hub airports. An airline running just one domestic connection with an average of 100 return passengers would need to make about £1 million a year just to cover the duty.

Despite huge support from residents across Blackpool, the airport lacks commercial passenger flights. Scrapping aviation tax for domestic air travel would help level the playing field and give a real opportunity to get Blackpool flying once again. Some capital investment will also be necessary to accommodate commercial passenger flights, including a replacement terminal building, as the previous one was ripped out and sold off by the Labour-run council. Hence, I was disappointed that airport infrastructure was not within the scope of the recent levelling-up fund. Reopening Blackpool airport for commercial passenger flights would increase tourism, help to create more high-skilled, well-paid jobs and bring greater investment opportunities. We know that there is pent-up demand for holidays and that people want to spend quality time with their family and friends. Blackpool is the UK's premier holiday tourist destination, and domestic tourism will bring a welcome boost to our local economy.

The Treasury support to keep businesses viable until the resort could reopen again has been phenomenal. Over £97 million has been given to Blackpool businesses, and it is great to see so many of them reopen once again over the last few months. However, on my recent visits to hotels and tourist attractions, they have made it clear that two points need to be put across to the Treasury to make sure that we can bounce back strongly. The first is the VAT reduction continuing beyond the current extension already outlined, and the second is the requirement for social distancing to be reduced from 2 metres on 21 June.

3 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) [V]: I just say gently to the Minister that the Government need to get real in this debate. Even the industry's figures suggest that it will take at least until 2023 to 2025 for aviation demand to recover from pre-crisis levels. A report by the New Economics Foundation and the TUC suggests that as many as 17,000 jobs could be lost from the sector even if demand returns, thanks to automation and changes to working practices. That could have a devastating impact on my community. In fact, it already is and that has not been helped, as my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) said, by the behaviour of companies such as BA and Heathrow forcing through fire and rehire strategies to cut wages and terms of employment. I thank Unite the union for the work that it has done and the campaign that it has waged against that.

The reality is that we need a concrete and very effective aviation recovery strategy. That means a recognition by the Government that they simply cannot precipitately turn off the support that they have provided so far. We need a continuing job support and retention scheme specifically designed for this sector, just to give us the breathing space for the strategy for recovery to take place. Of course, any recovery or future strategy for aviation must be a green recovery, but this transition to an environmentally sustainable aviation sector will be successful only if it is a just transition. For my constituents, this means providing workers with the training and expertise needed to work in a lower emission and increasingly automated sector. However, it also means providing support and training to enable workers to shift into other emerging industries and sectors. Arrangements are also needed that put protections in place for lower-skilled and lower-paid workers, who will be the most vulnerable, as we have seen.

I also say to the Government that we need to think through the support that is needed to develop local economic strategies for hearty airport communities such as mine and those other Members have raised in the Chamber today. Any review of aviation policy must strike an equitable balance between the benefits that aviation brings and its adverse environmental, economic and health costs. That is why the "growth at all costs" mantra in Government must end. The review of aviation taxation is also necessary to fund the new strategy. As a final point, if levelling up is to be meaningful, Heathrow expansion competing against regional airports has to be cast into the dustbin of aviation history.

3.3 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Here we are again: MPs from both sides are getting up and asking for a plan for recovery for tourism and aviation, and asking for clarity on the border, and yet we have a Minister unwilling to stump up the support desperately needed to save businesses and jobs under threat because of restrictions on travel. These restrictions, while necessary, may be in place for another six months, and if we believe what Ministers are saying, they mean that we should not even be booking holidays this year. I will try not to repeat the points that I have made in numerous debates on aviation that have taken place in the past year because it is a bit like groundhog day: the sector spends time ahead of these debates lobbying for support and clarity on the border, and Ministers get up and offer neither clarity nor support.

Luton airport is one of the foundations of the economy in my constituency. The council depends on its revenue, and local charities benefit so much from the money that it brings in. To protect as many jobs as possible that Luton airport supports—whether that is people who work in its bars or cafes, air traffic control, airport taxi transfers, airport parking or any of the other thousands of jobs that depend on people moving—we need a clear road map for recovery for international travel now. At what point in the vaccine roll-out will it be safe to travel? When will the Government get a grip of the border policy? Where is the cash to support jobs in the sector and its supply chain?

People are desperate to get abroad again, not just for holidays but to see loved ones; yet we have had travellers trying to navigate the traffic light system changing at

the last minute, Ministers saying, “It’s safe to travel, but you shouldn’t,” and people going without water and food for their kids at quarantine hotels. It has been absolute chaos. I absolutely believe that we need as strong a border policy as possible to halt the spread of new variants, but the chaos has not done that, as we see with the delta variant from India. At the very least, there must be clearer guidance for people travelling to and from green and amber destinations, and the Government must improve their communication with the sector.

Those of us in airport towns have been asking the Government to deliver the cash to save jobs. Let us look elsewhere, where this has been done better. The French Government gave €7 billion in state-backed loans to Air France. The Dutch gave €3.4 billion in support to their biggest airline. Our sector has had a pittance for runway maintenance, although any recovery package cannot be unconditional. I have been following the Competition and Markets Authority investigation into Ryanair and British Airways, which have offered cash refunds in very few cases. I want people in Luton North who did the right thing and cancelled trips when it was illegal to travel to get their money back.

In calling for support to protect jobs, I am also calling on the Government to step in and do more to protect jobs from fire and rehire practices from the likes of BA. It is wrong, and businesses should not be using the pandemic as an excuse to water down people’s rights at work or pay. They trade on our country’s name but not in our country’s interest. I hope that the Minister can give the sector the answer that it needs, or else we will be back here in a couple of months asking the same questions, seeing more jobs lost and still getting no answers.

3.7 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I do not doubt for one moment that the Minister, the Secretary of State for Transport and the Department for Transport are pushing across Government to try to get aviation and the travel industry back to where it needs to be, but I feel that the Government as a whole are being far too cautious. As a result, today I have written on behalf of the Transport Committee to the Prime Minister asking him to give more clarity and certainty, and to really set out the rule base of the traffic light system—what it really is, and is not, supposed to be.

I did that because on Monday I asked the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to give a concrete milestone based on the data for when we can get the industry back on its feet. His response was:

“A variant that undermined the vaccine fundamentally would put us in a much more difficult place as a country, and that is why we are being as cautious as we are.”—[*Official Report*, 7 June 2021; Vol. 696, c. 676.]

Effectively, some form of unknown, unforeseen risk means that we cannot do anything right now. To me, that is an absolute tragedy, because our vaccine roll-out has been a tremendous success. By 21 June we hope to have vaccinated all those over the age of 50 and the clinically extremely vulnerable twice, accounting for 99% of the mortality risk. The vaccine is effective against all known variants. Indeed, of 12,383 delta variant cases 126 ended in hospital admissions. Of those, 28 had one dose and three both doses, so we

know that when the most vulnerable are double-dosed we are safe. I have put it to the Prime Minister that that has to be the milestone for when we can unlock this great industry.

For those who say, “Well, there’s still risk,” indeed there is, but there are also risks for those people who cannot go and see their boyfriends or girlfriends and have not done so for over a year. What about their rights? What about their wellbeing and mental health? There is also the risk for those who have not seen their newborn grandchildren and may worry that they never will if this carries on. What about those people? There are also the people who work and rely on this industry to get by. Once delivering for global Britain, and for people to get worldwide global travel experiences, they are now lucky to be delivering for Amazon. Over 5,000 people per month have lost their jobs in this industry since February 2020, and that needs to be looked at as much as this unknown risk that is being talked about.

I have written to the Home Secretary as well—I have done a letter-writing campaign; we are doing our best to push everyone who has influence—because it is also vital that we have the Border Force resources to ensure that people can go through the airports safely and, again, give more confidence to all.

I will not take any more time, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I know you will not let me—but my goodness, this Government, and indeed all the other Front Benchers, need to wake up to this industry that is on its knees.

3.10 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Tourism is the very lifeblood of Scotland. It is no coincidence that our unofficial national motto is “Ceud mile fàilte”—“A hundred thousand welcomes”. Scotland loves visitors and visitors love Scotland, so the covid pandemic and lockdown have been as painful for the tourism and hospitality sector as for any in Scotland—a country so geared up for them and reliant on them.

I noticed that the Prime Minister flew to Cornwall yesterday to talk to the G7 about upping its game on climate change. While I am sure the aviation industry welcomed his visual endorsement, it is yet another tourism sector that has suffered from a lack of targeted support. The French Government provided Air France-KLM with €7 billion-worth of support to help jobs. The German Government have gone way beyond the commitment level of the UK Government by also pledging €7 billion to their largest airline, Lufthansa, thus not just ensuring the survival of Lufthansa but allowing it to compete more effectively post pandemic with companies that may well be weaker as a result of the pandemic—alas, companies such as the UK airlines.

I mentioned the Prime Minister’s private jet trip to Cornwall, for which he has endured some ridicule. On the environment, as with so much else, he is a veritable geyser of hot air rather than substance. While we all recognise the importance of jobs in the aviation industry, we all recognise too the vital need for a greener transport future. The UK Government missed a major environment opportunity when they ignored the 167,000 people who signed a Greenpeace petition calling on the Chancellor to attach environmental conditions for airlines. Not only was the Chancellor’s help for UK airlines much more modest than their European rivals, but the essential

[John Nicolson]

environmental caveats all of us want to see for a greener future were not attached to the assistance given, nor indeed was a requirement to strengthen workers' rights—although with the Conservatives that probably surprises no one.

Finally, I say to the Minister, and to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that however you travel, if you are looking for a wonderful spot to go on holiday this autumn, I would recommend my constituency of Ochil and South Perthshire. I would challenge any Member to find a more beautiful piece of the world than picturesque Perthshire, glorious Kinross, and the stunning Ochil hills. Rocks, castles, whisky and extraordinary food: we have it all and you are more than welcome.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The hon. Gentleman is certainly right about beautiful Perthshire.

3.13 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I would challenge the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) with Staffordshire Moorlands, which is equally if not more beautiful than anything he has described.

I rise to speak on behalf of the many tourism businesses in my constituency—in particular, my largest tourism business, Alton Towers. I have three points to make. First, the Government should be taking credit for and benefiting from the success of the vaccination. We should be celebrating the fact that we have the most successful vaccination programme in the G7. Over the past few days, I have enjoyed watching baseball in the United States of an evening. I watched the Cubs at the Padres a couple of days ago, and the Boston Red Sox, my team, at the New York Yankees. What I saw was a wonderful full stadium. I saw people sitting together with no social distancing, not wearing face masks, and enjoying the sport. I thought, what a wonderful example of celebrating the vaccine programme. I urge the Minister and the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), who is no longer here, to think what we can do to benefit in the same way that people in the United States are benefiting from the vaccine programme. I agree wholeheartedly with my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May)

—how can we be in a worse position this year than we were last year, when we did not have any vaccines? I will make the point again that I made in my intervention, which is that confidence in all of the tourism and travel sector relies on certainty. That means using the green watch list rather than just going straight to amber for travellers in Portugal, many of whom are constituents of mine who were very upset about that.

My second point is about what is essential. I was very pleased to hear the Minister say that this was an essential industry, because for too long we have been told that we can only do essential things. I had begun to worry that the Government seemed to think that life was not about anything more than eating, sleeping and possibly having the occasional glass of wine, which we were still able to do. Actually, life is about far more than that. It is about going to sports stadiums and watching our favourite team—even in the Euros, which are about to start this

weekend. It is about riding rollercoasters at Alton Towers and about seeing loved ones, and it is really important that we stop thinking just of the bare essential.

That brings me to my final point, which is that when locations are allowed to reopen properly, please can they be allowed to reopen properly, not with restrictions? At Alton Towers, we queue outdoors—I am sure many of my colleagues have queued at Alton Towers. I can promise that Staffordshire weather is not always that good, but we queue outdoors, and that is the safest place to be. We need to make sure that venues such as Alton Towers can have maximum capacity. They also need to see the VAT cut extended, because they have been on the knees for far too long, and they desperately need it.

3.16 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): While most of my constituents may have liked the peace of lockdown without planes coming into Heathrow over our heads every minute, we know that our leading national airport should be moving towards full operation at some point, but the big question is when. Apparently, it will be between two and five years before aviation is back to its pre-covid levels. Meanwhile, what will the cost have been to many of my constituents during this time, and when will the Government respond appropriately?

Hounslow Council research has found that the aviation sector and the wider supply chain contribute to over 20,000 jobs locally and support many small and medium-sized businesses across our borough. Some 8,000 jobs in Hounslow have been lost in 2020, and the number of my constituents claiming universal credit has skyrocketed. People have told me the personal cost to them, such as those losing their jobs in roles such as airline catering, and those working for British Airways at Heathrow airport, as well as for Mitre and other companies, who face being fired and rehired.

The Government have provided no sector-specific support for the UK aviation industry, unlike in France, Germany and Austria, where Governments are protecting jobs while imposing strong environmental conditions to help reach net zero. Instead of a strategy and sector-specific support, the UK Government flip-flop over international travel.

In addition to the points made so well in this debate so far, I want to add one about the delay in enabling testing at our airports. Heathrow provided the space and services for testing departing and arriving passengers last summer, yet the Government drag their feet on utilising them. There has been the delay in adding India to the red list and the further delay in setting up an arrival terminal for red list country arrivals. Passengers and staff have been exposed to covid infection in overcrowded arrival halls for hours on end, thanks to Border Force being incapable of fully staffing the immigration desks, despite passenger levels being way below the norm. North-west London public health directors have been raising concerns about the infection risks to travellers and staff at quarantine hotels. On investigating this, they found that staff working for different Government Departments and agencies were not talking to each other, let alone the local authorities.

Going forward, the Government must listen to local leaders such as Hounslow Council leader Steve Curran, who is calling for an aviation communities fund to

support communities that have been so badly affected with support for businesses and for workers on reskilling and skill leak, and on environmental opportunities using the high-level skills we have in the aviation sector. We must put the environment at the heart of our response. Aviation contributes 8% of our emissions total here in the UK, and the figure is rising.

Those travelling, those wanting to travel and those working in the sector have been let down constantly over the past year by the Government and, frankly, they deserve so much better. I hope that the Government listen to them.

3.19 pm

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con) [V]: Tuesday 4 March 2020 was a day I will never forget. Shortly before midnight, the last Flybe flight landed back in the UK. Passengers disembarking from the plane bid farewell to tearful staff. Flybe's new owners decided to walk away from the troubled airline, despite the Government support on offer. Overnight, 2,000 people lost their jobs, many of which were based at its Exeter airport headquarters in my constituency of East Devon.

Back then, the majority of routes from Exeter airport were operated by Flybe. Some 16 months later, all but one of the routes once operated by the airline from Exeter have operators ready to take to the sky. So much work has been done locally to support the sector, with councils working together with the industry and Members of this House to secure additional bespoke support from this Government.

However, all this hard graft is at severe risk. We have an incredibly successful vaccination programme, yet we have one of the most restrictive policies on international travel in the world. I will leave others in this debate to argue the sensible case to open up safe routes, but if we cannot travel internationally planes are grounded, airports are quieter and travel agents remain closed.

Confidence is at an all-time low in the aviation and travel industry, and among passengers. Without confidence among passengers, the furlough scheme may be propping up roles that simply will not exist within months. I ask the Government to seriously consider three main asks.

The first is to extend the furlough scheme for specific sectors, including aviation. Some 50% of aviation staff are still on furlough. We must avoid a cliff edge with mass redundancies in every corner of the country. The second is to extend the welcome business rates relief package for UK airports for a further six months. Thirdly, high street travel agents and language schools have drawn on lifeline support from Government grants. Topping up these schemes with extra cash and encouraging councils to target this funding would lend a lifeline.

If we do not reopen borders, more must be done to give airports, airlines and the travel industry a fighting chance of survival. Global Britain could become little Britain if we do not.

3.22 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: My constituents are significantly impacted by the aviation industry, and I have been hoping to raise their case in this place for a long time. Thousands of my residents in Lewisham East live beneath two major flightpaths, with planes flying overhead to and from Heathrow and London City airport.

Travel restrictions during the pandemic brought a welcome respite for many of my constituents living underneath those flightpaths, but there is no doubt of the important role the aviation sector plays in our economy for travelling reasons and for jobs. However, in reviving the aviation industry, the Government must consider how we can make important improvements. This is all part of building back better.

The noise pollution and emissions from living beneath two busy flightpaths can have a devastating impact on my constituents' health and wellbeing. Noise pollution would be a greater problem for them if London City airport and Heathrow were to expand and increase their traffic.

Prior to travel restrictions, one of my constituents wrote to me to explain that she suffered as a result of the low-frequency noise, describing it as extremely depressing, debilitating and painful. Another constituent has been left feeling depressed and suicidal due to the consistent disruption caused by night-time noise.

These cases are not isolated. In a meeting I held about the issue in summer 2019, residents packed out the room to tell me their distressing stories arising from the lack of consultation from air flight operators and the commonality of noise interruption and pollution, from the early hours of the morning until late at night. This is unacceptable. The Government must not and cannot ignore my constituents. They must address aviation noise before travel begins to increase. It is a serious concern.

Children in my constituency may well be suffering from undetected health issues arising from low-frequency aircraft noise. According to the World Health Organisation, noise is the second largest environmental cause of health problems, yet no regulations are in place to monitor it and to protect our residents.

We need assurances from the Government that areas such as mine with high population density will not revert to having busy flightpaths that constantly disturb people and reduce their and their families' quality of life. Will the Minister carry out an assessment of flightpaths over densely populated areas and work with airports to alter their flightpaths accordingly? For the health of my constituents and the good of the planet, our aviation industry must be rebuilt responsibly.

3.25 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con) [V]: Let me start my contribution and end it on this point: there is no earthly reason why restrictions cannot be lifted on what has been dubbed freedom day, 21 June. Right now, we are in danger of winning the battle but losing the war, destroying our aviation industry and all connected to it in the process. I concur with every word of what my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said in her excellent speech. As she said, our extraordinary vaccine roll-out is working, with half the population inoculated twice, yet after 15 months of restrictions, the traffic light scheme, welcomed as a phased restart to international travel, has proved a false dawn, being used only to further curtail our freedoms.

This week holidaymakers faced chaos after Portugal went from amber to green with no warning. The cost to the travel industry in all its guises is truly terrifying. I have a lot of respect for the Minister, but his fine words ring hollow, I am afraid, and I fundamentally disagree

[Richard Drax]

with the Government's confused stance. The aviation industry has seen its value plummet, with half its staff still on furlough and 1.5 million jobs at risk.

This situation is totally unacceptable. We are squandering the advantage created by our pioneering vaccination programme for fear of new variants, which are here to stay and which we must—must—learn to live with. “Global Britain” is our battle cry, but countries with weaker vaccination programmes than ours are opening up faster. Spain and, shortly, France no longer require fully vaccinated passengers to quarantine. We must urgently move them and other low-risk countries such as Greece, Italy, Portugal and the USA on to the green list.

The travel and tourism industry is planning a day of action on 23 June. We must support it, scrap the onerous burdens it faces, reduce the number of tests and allow fully vaccinated passengers to travel restriction-free. Let me finish as I began: freedom day on 21 June must be respected. It is time for state control to end and for common sense to return.

3.27 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I will echo many of the remarks made by the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), and I also find myself echoing, quite unfortunately, the contribution from the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) in raising concerns about the aviation industry near to my constituency at Edinburgh airport.

The frustration within the industry is significant. It is a simple fact that a plane cannot take off without an engine. The travel industry's engine is travel agencies, and without travel agencies, we will not recover our travel industry. One such business in my constituency is called Travel Your World. Bruce Lamond, who runs that company, signed off one of his emails to me with, “To travel is to live,” which is from Hans Christian Andersen. That business has been without income since March 2020, and many Scottish travel agents are in a similar boat. He has been working full time. He has not been able to furlough his staff. He has had to pay full wages with no income and no means to make an income, and unlike other retailers, he remains open but unable to make any money.

The Department for Transport's traffic light system is disorganised and unhelpful, and the limited notice, which was so evident this week with the Portugal decision, has damaged public confidence significantly. Even visiting green list countries can cost in excess of £170 per person on top of the trip, for testing and other considerations. Bruce tells me that the industry is down and is now being kicked while it is down. What other part of the industry is getting absolutely no support for doing the right thing? Bruce's business is losing thousands of pounds a month and time is running out.

The Government's support and funding grants have not been as available to travel agencies as they have to other businesses. The Scottish Passenger Agents' Association tells me that it has members who have exhausted their savings, remortgaged their homes and emptied their pension funds. What should they do? Close the business they have invested all their life in? Default on debts in excess of £70,000? They need and deserve answers from

the top. Pubs, bars, cafés and restaurants are all open. Retail is open. It is time to put the engine back into the travel industry. It is time to give proper support to travel agencies.

3.30 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am delighted to see my hon. Friend and neighbour, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), at the Dispatch Box, and I am sure he will agree with me on one point. While Perthshire and Staffordshire vie for visitors, the Cotswolds are an even more special place to visit, with their architecture, landscapes and hospitality. Last year, sadly, saw a 76% decline in inbound tourism, and the impact of that on jobs and livelihoods is of great concern to many of the constituents I represent. UK airlines have already announced more than 30,000 job cuts. As others have said, as we make great strides with our own fantastic vaccination programme now being offered to all those over 25, we must accept that many countries do not have the same level of coverage with their own vaccine programmes. On the traffic light system, I would urge the Minister to give a little more notice when we move suddenly from green to amber. We saw the chaotic scenes last weekend as huge queues of unsocially distanced people waited for flights in Portugal.

The inbound tourism industry supports 490,000 jobs worth £2.8 billion, and the wider tourism industry supports 1.6 million people. Travel industry experts predict that tens of thousands of jobs are at risk, including Mountain Kingdoms Ltd, a travel agent based in Wotton-under-Edge. The real fear for such businesses, as the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) said, is that despite the generous schemes that the Government are offering now, if they are not allowed to operate when the furlough scheme comes to an end, they will be in deep trouble. This summer is vital for many tourist industries, to enable their sector to rebound. The week from 22 to 31 May was English Tourism Week in the Cotswolds, which was a great promotion. I visited a number of businesses, including the Tetbury Goods Shed, Wild Carrot and Quayles Cornerhouse Bistro. I fear for them if they are not allowed to open fully on 21 June.

The Health Secretary has given the figures: of the 12,000 cases of the delta variant, only three who had had two vaccinations were hospitalised. Throughout this pandemic there has been very little communication on the wider impact of lockdowns. The emails and letters I have had from constituents about jobs, businesses, paying the bills, their mental health and their children's education have gone into the thousands. I have to say to the Minister that the policy is very risk averse. If we keep locking down every time we have a new variant, we will never unlock, so let us fully unlock on 21 June, and let us open up and attract more countries to green list travel on 28 June. Our citizens will then be really happy.

3.33 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: No one wants to throw away our hard-won achievement of massively reducing the numbers of deaths and hospitalisations from covid by doing anything irresponsible. We have lost too many lives and caused too much pain and suffering to do that. It is, however, a legitimate

expectation that our wonderful and deeply appreciated vaccine roll-out should be laying the foundations to get our freedom to travel back, and there is not enough clarity on how we will do that so that the sector can plan ahead.

Large parts of the travel, tourism and aviation sectors are prevented from trading their way out of the pandemic, with less of a safety net than other businesses that are now open. The fact that the safety net will start to be withdrawn from next month cannot be a fair or reasonable response. London Luton airport, where many of my constituents work, has had to lay off large numbers of people despite the furlough scheme, and the airport continues to lose millions of pounds every month. I know it has plans to be the most sustainable airport in the UK, and I am a strong supporter of zero-carbon aviation and the work of the Jet Zero Council. We need to make sure that international travel fully plays its part in getting to net zero.

One of my travel agents wrote to me to say that she has worked continuously since March 2020, but that work has involved cancelling, rebooking and cancelling holidays again and again, and refunding payments with hardly any income coming in at all. Now she has to pay back £200 every month from her bounce back loan. How is she supposed to do that with no income? A significant number of travel agents are limited company directors and are not eligible for the self-employed income support scheme either.

I think United Kingdom holidays are brilliant, and we have an amazing offer that I have been lucky enough to enjoy myself in the past, but people are not bad if they want to travel overseas. All those whose livelihoods enable people to travel overseas also deserve our support. It has been very disconcerting to have Ministers from outside the Department of Transport speculating on overseas travel. Across the whole Government, can we please just have the relevant Ministers from the Department for Transport providing official information without unhelpful speculation?

I think it is wrong that travel agents are in strand 1 of the restart grant scheme, given that they have, in many cases, virtually no income. Hospitality, leisure, personal care, gyms and sports businesses are in strand 2 and getting the higher £8,000 grant if their rateable value is under £50,000, even though they are open and able to trade. At the same time, travel agents, who have virtually no income coming at the moment, can only get the £2,667 grant. In addition, it cannot be right to reduce furlough payments from next month for any business in the aviation, travel or tourism sector that is still effectively unable to trade because of Government restrictions. That would not be fair or right either.

3.37 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind) [V]: I am going to focus on the issues facing our business travel industry. The crisis facing this sector of our economy cannot be overstated. The Business Travel Association, which is the main representative body of the UK business travel industry, has highlighted that in a normal year its member travel management companies account for 6.4 million journeys and 32 million transactions, which contribute £220 billion to UK GDP. Business travellers do not just include those who strike the deals

and develop the interpersonal relationships that drive international trade; they also include humanitarian aid workers, engineers, scientists, education providers and researchers, all of whom have witnessed unprecedented barriers to their work as a result of the pandemic.

The impact on this industry cannot be overstated. Travel management companies have seen a collapse in revenue of up to 90% in the past 14 months. According to BTA estimates, around 60% of the employees in the sector were made redundant and 80% of the remaining employees continue to be furloughed. Travel management companies are vital in the distribution chain for business travel. Airlines simply do not have the infrastructure to handle the volume and requirements of large-scale business travel, so they rely on such companies to handle those issues for them.

Furthermore, in a normal year, business travel accounts for 15% to 20% of the customer base of most airlines, providing an essential lifeline to airlines as a whole and contributing to the availability of low-cost flights for leisure travellers. If the sector continues to suffer such severe strain, the entire travel industry may experience dramatic knock-on effects.

The BTA has urged the introduction of several measures that could grant a substantial degree of security to the industry and its employees. The BTA would like priority business travel destinations to be included alongside holiday destinations among the next round of countries added to the green travel list. If the Government cannot expand the green list in June, the job retention scheme for the aviation and travel industries should be extended to December 2021. The BTA is also requesting grant funding of the same broad scope as for hospitality and leisure to support the industry until overseas travel can once again resume without restrictions.

I hope that the Government will consider these asks and act to support and reassure our aviation, travel and tourism industries that the UK Government are on their side. The resulting fall-out from our failure to support these industries could imperil them and create shock waves of harm throughout the economy for many years to come.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and a happy birthday to Mr Speaker.

3.40 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I am grateful for this debate being called at a time when there is so much uncertainty in both the aviation and tourism sectors. I pay tribute to my union, Unite, for continuously standing up for this sector, particularly during this difficult time. I also want to draw attention to Manchester Airport, which is owned by the 10 local authorities in Greater Manchester. A good model of a publicly owned and operated service, this airport is one of the largest centres of employment in the north-west, with more than 22,000 people directly employed on site, supporting a further 45,000 jobs in the north-west of England. The airport secures Greater Manchester's position as a hub of trade and investment.

In this House, we all know the devastating impact that this pandemic has had, from the loss of family members and friends to the closure of businesses and the loss of jobs, but it now feels like there is light at the

[Navendu Mishra]

end of the tunnel. As the economy starts to reopen and vaccines have been rolled out, there is a real feeling of hope that we will be able to beat this virus. Unfortunately, for those in the aviation and tourism sectors, the uncertainty that has so defined the past year and a half remains.

As we know, before the pandemic, the UK had the largest aviation network in Europe and the third biggest in the world, yet the sector has been neglected by Government covid policy. There has been the grave threat to jobs, an outrageous resorting to fire and rehire practices, and a complete lack of sector-specific support. The airport and ground operation support scheme launched by the Transport Secretary in January has not covered even a meaningful proportion of any airports' costs or tax, which stands in stark contrast to the policies of our European neighbours. Look at Germany, which has implemented plans to provide additional monetary aid to its airports to preserve infrastructure and jobs. Look at France, where there has also been strong monetary support for the sector. Then we look at the UK, where Government support has been dwarfed by sectoral needs.

No sector operates in isolation. The knock-on impact of Government negligence can be felt across the economy. In my constituency of Stockport, the loss of dividend paid out to Stockport Council from Manchester Airport totalled £6.4 million in 2020-21. It is highly likely that there will be no pay-out this year to next, and the same is assumed for the subsequent year after that. Therefore, in the space of three years, there is a predicted shortfall of £19 million based on pre-covid airport usage that cannot be budgeted for and is not covered by Government grants. This is on top of years of funding cuts, in which the council has already lost 49.2% of its settlement funding between 2015-16 and 2020-21. There are also the additional costs that have been incurred because of the pandemic.

In March last year, when we first locked down, the Government knew the impact that the pandemic would have on the aviation, tourism and travel industries, so why did they not act then? Why did they wait until the last minute to provide a measly and inadequate support package?

Workers in the aviation sector have disproportionately high levels of job losses in comparison with other sectors. We know that the aviation sector is unique and that its recovery does not wholly rely on the Government's decisions, but that unique uncertainty is all the more reason for a sector-specific job protection scheme.

3.43 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): I am delighted to have got in at the end of this debate to make a plea for the cruise sector. We have heard much about aviation today, but rather less about our ships, which is rather bad for a maritime nation such as ourselves.

It has to be said that the impact of this pandemic on the cruise sector has been seismic: there has been a massive loss of capacity in the industry; operators have gone to the wall; and ships have been scrapped. We really need to get that industry, which is a great success story for this country, going again. Let me put some figures on that. We are talking about a £10 billion a year industry that supports nearly 90,000 jobs, and 2 million

passengers a year enjoy going on a cruise. I am certainly anxious that we can all get back to normal, and we cannot be waiting for that for very much longer.

The fact is that all UK cruise traffic ground to a halt in March. I am delighted that, not so long ago, the Minister announced that domestic cruising could recommence, but the truth of the matter is that this sector is not sustainable until it can commence international sailing.

We have heard much about the traffic light system as regards international travel, whereby each country is given a traffic light class, but the problem is that the Foreign Office is currently treating cruising as it would a country and it is not allowing international cruising. We should really be thinking about cruise ships not as a destination, which is how the Foreign Office advice is currently working, but as a method of travel. Ships are very flexible methods of travel. If a country which is on an itinerary goes on the red list, that ship can simply go somewhere else.

I really must encourage the Government: let's give these people a break. The cruise industry has done everything that has been asked of it by the health authorities during the pandemic. It has introduced incredibly sophisticated covid-secure measures, with testing of both staff and passengers. Equally, it can organise self-isolation and quarantine on the ships themselves.

This industry is a great British success story. It is led by a gentleman. They have been suffering in silence, actually, and doing what the Government have asked of them. They are very complimentary of the support they have been given by the Minister, but my message now is to the Foreign Office, the Department of Health and the chief medical officer particularly: give this sector a break and let us get our ships back sailing on the seas, where they belong.

3.46 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): As well as hospitality, leisure and tourism, the aviation sector has been one of the hardest hit industries—not just here, but across the entire globe. While we have clearly had to take tough measures on our international travel regime to stop the spread of the virus, it cannot be denied that businesses—both large and small—are being impacted as a consequence of these measures.

I thank colleagues in the Treasury and the Department for Transport for the work that they have done to support the sector to date, but the ongoing uncertainty means that there is a need for this support to continue. As has often been the case when making decisions throughout the pandemic, a balance needs to be struck. I therefore call on the Minister to continue his engagement with the aviation industry. I have spoken to him many times, and am particularly grateful to him for his work with Manchester airport, to ensure that the decisions that are taken are in conjunction with airport operators and are a reflection of the work that supply chains do with those airport operators, which rely very heavily on the involvement of that sector.

We must remind ourselves that this industry contributes billions of pounds to our economy, supports thousands of jobs, strengthens the Union and develops skills nationally. In my constituency of Warrington South, Manchester airport alone provides 3,500 jobs to local residents, and

Liverpool airport, which is equally close, provides around 300 further jobs. This really is an important sector to my local economy. The airport provides those jobs directly and, through its supply chains, many businesses rely on the airport as a means of income.

I recently heard from my constituent Gaynor Welsby-West, who owns her own travel agency. She hires a number of people locally and has indeed been able to take advantage of measures such as the self-employed income support grant, but her message to me was that she needs more certainty and clarity, which will help to rebuild confidence across the travel sector. Most of us in this place understand that things can change very quickly and that we must be led by the data, but this industry needs to have an element of forward planning.

Restarting the aviation sector is a vital part of the UK's economic recovery. Aviation, the facilities that it supports and the travel industry are crucial to the economic growth of our region: to the north, to the northern powerhouse and to Warrington. I urge the Government to take full steps to ensure that we can help this sector to recover as much as possible.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It might be helpful for the House to know that the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) will be the last speaker from the Back Benches, so anyone else who is waiting—which is not anybody in the Chamber—will, I am afraid, not be called. We now go by video link to Christine Jardine.

3.48 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: There are so many arguments and so many angles from which one can debate this issue: the airlines; the airports; the cruise industry, as we have heard; the travel industry; tourist-related businesses; and individual constituents for whom this issue has taken on huge significance. For many, it is about not just the thought of a holiday in the sun—even though we seem to have plenty of it in this country this summer—but the possibility of seeing family and friends, from whom they have now been separated for so long.

My constituency of Edinburgh West is very much economically linked to the future of the airline and travel and tourist industries. Not only do inbound visitors contribute so much to the economy of my city and region, but they contribute more than £1 billion to Scotland every year. The industries are important for the growth of Edinburgh airport, which now supports 28,000 jobs in the economy, including jobs in my constituency for individuals, families and small businesses.

Much has already been made of our status in the international travel industry, the need for us to re-establish our position, and the need for a safe, sustainable return to international travel. Perhaps the biggest thing for all those involved is clarity and an end to the confusion and chaos we have seen recently in respect of the traffic light system and vaccine passports. It helps no one. That is not to minimise the difficulty of the situation and the decisions to be made: to fail to reopen could deal a fatal blow to sectors that are already struggling; to reopen without taking into account the risk to public health and future safety would be irresponsible.

For me, there are three key issues. First, safety for the public and protection from the danger of new variants through clear testing and means of knowing where people are going and how safe it will be; secondly, support for our vital airline travel and tourism industry through the extension of furlough and the job-support schemes; thirdly, sustainability, particularly in respect of air travel, is a must, to which end I recommend to the Government the Liberal Democrat proposal for a graduated scale of air passenger duty that increases costs for those who take frequent business flights but does not tax those who take annual holidays or visit family.

We must think about our future and our economy. As the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) pointed out, the pandemic is going to have long-term implications that must be taken into account. We need to take them on board and look at how we can open up while protecting jobs and vital industries and ensuring the safest travel possible. I urge the Government to look at how we can do that as quickly as possible, with the maximum support, and remain safe.

3.51 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): In 1919, Sir John Alcock said:

“There is always satisfaction in being the first to do anything, whatever it may be”.

I am sure the Minister recognises that name, because it was Sir John, along with Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Brown, who flew a Vickers Vimy—built at Brooklands in my constituency—in the first non-stop Atlantic crossing. Aviation is in my constituency's blood. We are five miles south of Heathrow and Gatwick is right next to us, and I speak on behalf of the thousands of my constituents who work in the sector, whose jobs are dependent on aviation. Those jobs include flying and refuelling the planes, working as ground staff and working in the hotels where people stay when they come to visit us. There are jobs in logistics, and SMEs set up in my constituency because of the aviation and infrastructure there. People also come to the tourist attractions, such as Magna Carta and Thorpe Park, and they stay over.

It is not just about jobs; people need to travel to see family. As many Members from all parties have said, that has been the cruellest part of the restrictions on international travel. People need to see their relatives—we are global Britain, an international family—and we need to get the vital routes back as soon as possible.

We have had a phenomenal, hugely successful vaccination programme. Will the Minister explain what needs to happen next so that we can start to evolve and change the restrictions and the process on international travel? Rather than wait, can we use that 1919 spirit again to be the first to drive things forward? We have always been at the forefront of aviation; can we use that aviation spirit to go forward and bring in international vaccination passports, or whatever is needed to get aviation and our international borders open again?

3.53 pm

Alex Sobel: There were so many excellent speeches from the Back Benches in this debate that someone would think, if they did not know, that they all came from the same party. I am sure the Minister will reflect on that. It does feel like the House speaks with one

[Alex Sobel]

3.57 pm

voice on this issue. I reiterate that, even if the Government publish the tourism recovery plan this week, it is still too late for the spring season and we are playing catch-up.

I completely agree with the right hon. Members for Maidenhead (Mrs May) and for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) and the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady). That might be the first—and possibly last—time that I will ever say that, but they were clear that the mixed messaging has created an existential threat to outbound tourism.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) was absolutely right that we are still waiting for the sector-specific support that was promised right at the start of this crisis. My hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) is right that outbound tour operators, especially small specialists, have been disproportionately hit and need the tourism recovery plan now. My hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) was right about the need to retain workers and skills—something that the tourism recovery plan should do. I also wholly support his call, echoed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) and others, for the Government to legislate to outlaw fire and rehire, an absolute scandal. My hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) was right that we need grants as well as loan finance, as loan finance just defers the pain, and that we need to beef up consumer protection.

The hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) was right that business travel, especially for events and conferences, has been hugely hit and I look forward to seeing them included in the tourism recovery plan. The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) rightly recognised the importance of domestic tourism and I look forward to visiting Blackpool this summer—a great British holiday. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) is right that the sector has been let down by late and poor communication. She is absolutely right about consumer refunds, which many airlines have sadly been lacking in making. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) made excellent points and I support his call for more resources for the sector and related services.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) was right that France and other countries have put climate conditions on support for the aviation industry. We need more support, but conditional support, for net zero, and our Government did not make those conditions. They talk loudly on net zero but are failing to deliver. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) is a doughty defender of her constituents' health, especially on noise and air quality, and she is right that we need to look again at flight paths over cities, including hers and mine. The hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) called for support for shipping and cruising. She is right that the multi-nation aspect of cruises going from country to country means that the chaotic handling of the traffic light system makes it impossible for them to restart. The Minister needs to take her points on board.

I thank all who have contributed to this excellent debate and look forward to the Minister's response.

Robert Courts: This has been a very thought-provoking and wide-ranging debate, in which many excellent points have been made. The importance to the whole country of aviation and travel was perhaps most beautifully expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), but we have heard all sorts of other points, from the importance of the supply chain, mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), through to the beauty of our constituencies, as stated by so many hon. Members that I dare not recount them all, although I do perhaps lean towards the points made by my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), for fairly obvious reasons. We in this House are united, however, on the critical importance of tourism, travel and aviation, for all sorts of reasons: because of the jobs they support in our constituencies; because of the economic support they bring; because of culture; because of the businesses that operate; but above all because of people's lives: because of the families, because of what this means to people on a real, everyday personal basis.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) for his tireless advocacy for Gatwick airport and the sector and for his expertise. Similar points were made by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) and the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine). My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley said that this is not just about two weeks in the sun, and I agree. Leisure is vital and travel broadens the mind of course—it increases understanding and culture—but it is also about jobs and people's livelihoods and families. I agree with him that a safe reopening of aviation should very much be, and is, our aim.

A number of other points were made. I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for his points. I had to disagree with him when he said that the Government's response has been "lacklustre and patchy" given that Christine Lagarde of the International Monetary Fund said it has been extensive and "unprecedented" and

"one of the best examples of coordinated action globally".

So, as he would expect, I do not agree with him about that. The tourism recovery plan is due soon, and we will be able to update him more on that when we get to that stage.

I am hugely grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) for her great expertise. She mentioned international standards and we continue to work with international partners such as the International Civil Aviation Organisation, the International Maritime Organisation and the World Health Organisation, as well as with bilateral partners. Of course, the announcement by the Secretary of State for Transport of the US-UK travel taskforce is hot off the press. My right hon. Friend asks why we are in the position that we are today as compared with where we were last year. Of course, there has been a change through the variants of concern and the huge success of the vaccine rollout, which we must protect. She says that we will not eradicate covid and she will remember that I referred to its being an endemic disease in my opening speech. As my right

hon. Friend and others talk about the freedom that will be brought by vaccines, I can confirm that we are working to see what more we can do to open up international travel with the aid of vaccines.

I am conscious that I am very short of time, and that you are worried about the next debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise in advance to all right hon. and hon. Members. I have a detailed note of all the points they made and will write to them if there are any specific points that they wanted me to make. If I may trouble the House for 30 seconds more, I would like to say thank you to the Chairman of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), who made a number of great points, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous). They talked about the vaccines and how they are the way out and our hope for the future.

Let me close by referring the House to my understanding and that of the Government of how difficult things are for the sector at the moment. We have a plan in place to restart tourism and aviation recovery in the short and long term. We are seeing the relaxation of restrictions as we are building out from covid. I shall end by quoting my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands. She says that life is about more than just eating and sleeping; it is about experiences and people. The hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey), quoting Hans Christian Andersen, said:

“To travel is to live”.

Of course, I entirely agree with that. The tourism recovery plan, due to be published shortly, in conjunction with the forthcoming aviation strategy, will set out and reinforce the Government’s commitment to both sectors and help us to reconnect and see the world with the help of our world-beating vaccination programme.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the aviation, travel and tourism industries.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We almost made it by 4 o’clock. I will now suspend the House very briefly for two minutes so that arrangements can be made for the next debate.

4.2 pm

Sitting suspended.

Safety of Journalists

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Before I call the Minister for Media and Data, may I say that those contributing from the Back Benches should be looking at speaking for no longer than three minutes, as this is a relatively short but very important debate?

4.4 pm

The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the safety of journalists.

I very much welcome this opportunity to debate what is, as you have rightly said, Mr Deputy Speaker, an extremely important subject. It is the second such debate we have had in the space of two weeks, as we recently debated World Press Freedom Day. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) who has been an assiduous campaigner on this topic and who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on media freedom.

The safety of journalists is of critical importance, as journalists play a vital role in ensuring that democracy functions properly and in contributing towards a free society. The role that journalists play in exposing corruption, holding power to account and informing the electorate of the truth is absolutely central to a democratic, free society. Investigative journalism plays a critical role and we will all remember examples, such as the exposure of the thalidomide scandal, the corruption that riddled FIFA, the Panama papers and even MPs’ expenses.

Such journalism shone a powerful light into areas that needed to be exposed. That is particularly important at the moment. The need for the provision of trusted and reliable information is absolutely critical, and has been over the course of the last year, at a time when fake news has been so prevalent and it has been all the more important for people to be able to turn to trusted journalism for reliable reports of the truth.

For that reason we regarded it as vital to support the media during the pandemic. The media came under significant economic pressure and we were able to provide support to local newspapers and radio, and recognised the important role that journalists play by affording them key worker status.

While the role of journalists has never been more important, it is the sad truth that it is also increasingly dangerous. I pay tribute to the organisations that regularly highlight the harassment and intimidation of journalists that takes place in far too many countries.

Reporters sans frontières, which is responsible for the world press freedom index, has recorded that 50 journalists were killed in the course of their duties last year. The deadliest countries in the world are Mexico, Iraq, Afghanistan, India and Pakistan.

Justice for Journalists monitors the treatment of the press in the countries of the former Soviet Union. It lists 84 journalists currently held in detention or imprisoned. The most recent and most shocking example of a journalist being illegally detained is that of Raman Pratasevich, whose flight was forced to land in Belarus and who has since been held, with significant concern about his future wellbeing.

The Committee to Protect Journalists has identified 1,404 journalists who have died since they started keeping records in 1992. I pay tribute to the courage of those

[Mr John Whittingdale]

journalists around the world who are operating in extremely dangerous environments, particularly a number of British journalists who are on the frontline of conflict or reporting in authoritarian regimes. As we did two weeks ago, we remember Marie Colvin of *The Sunday Times* who was killed alongside her French colleague as a result of being deliberately targeted because of the job they were carrying out as journalists.

The UK has taken a lead in campaigning for the safety of journalists. We established the global conference on media freedom in July 2019 and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) who led that initiative. We continue to co-chair the Media Freedom Coalition, which now comprises 47 member countries.

We have used our presidency of the G7, which is coming to its conclusion over the course of this weekend, to continue to highlight the importance of the protection of journalists. Indeed, we have included that in the communiqué that was issued by the Foreign Ministers, which has a number of paragraphs setting out exactly why it is so important that journalists should be afforded protection.

We established the global media defence fund, to which the Government are contributing £3 million over five years, and I am going to be speaking tomorrow at the Council of Europe in support of the resolutions being passed there highlighting the protection of journalists.

However, we are also conscious that if we are to be able to campaign on this issue, we need to set an example, too. The UK currently ranks 33rd out of 180 in the press freedom index, which represents a small improvement but it is nothing like enough. For that reason, the Government established, a year ago, the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists, which I co-chair along with the Minister for safeguarding, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins). That committee brings together representatives of the police, from the National Police Chiefs Council, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and Police Scotland; the prosecuting authorities—the Crown Prosecution Service and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service in Scotland; the Society of Editors; the National Union of Journalists, and some of those campaigning organisations such as Index on Censorship and Reporters Without Borders. As a result of the committee's establishment, we published in March the national action plan for the safety of journalists, whose aim is to increase our understanding of the scale of the problem and enhance the criminal justice system response, so that in future there will be new training for police officers and a police officer in every force dedicated to investigating complaints relating to the safety of journalists. It will give greater resources and advice to journalists, agreed by their employers, and there will be a commitment from the online platform to do more.

Finally, greater efforts will be made to improve the public recognition of the value of journalists. Last week, we published our call for evidence, to try to establish hard facts on the scale of the problem. It closes on 14 July and I hope very much that anyone who has experience will make a submission to it, but we have already received 200 responses which make it clear that

online threats and harassment are indeed widespread and that this is a significant problem, which we need to do more to address. The committee will continue to meet to review the plan, but we are determined to ensure that the UK is as safe an environment as possible for journalists to carry out their job. We will also continue to campaign to raise the importance of this issue in every country around the world.

4.12 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Freedom of the press is at the centre of a free society, so I would like to start by talking about West Papua, whose people have been fighting for self-determination from Indonesia for 50 years. In the past month, hundreds of Indonesian soldiers have been deployed to the region and thousands of people have been displaced. In the Papuan struggle for liberation, journalists have been one of Indonesia's key targets, with restrictions in place on foreign journalists and obstacles to receiving permission to report in the country. Once again, the prominent West Papuan journalist Victor Mambor was targeted in an attack after his reporting of the shooting of two Indonesian teachers in April. Similarly concerning is the fact that the capital of Papua province and surrounding areas have been subject to a month-long internet blackout, complicating the media's efforts to report on the escalating conflict. The curtailment of journalistic freedom in West Papua is not completely new. In 2018, the Indonesian military deported BBC journalists Rebecca Henschke, and her co-reporters Dwiki and Affan; the crew were deported from West Papua after they hurt soldiers' feelings when covering the ongoing health crisis in the Asmat region, which involved malnutrition and a lack of measles vaccinations causing a measles outbreak that killed dozens, perhaps hundreds—a lack of reporting means we will never know. According to the Alliance of Independent Journalists in Indonesia, there were 76 cases of journalists having to obtain prior permission to report in Papua, with 56 of these requests being refused.

The unacceptable targeting of media officers in Gaza by Israeli airstrikes earlier this month was another reminder of the importance of upholding press freedom. The freedom to inform is a crucial indicator of democracy and efforts to curtail it often come with human cost. Anna Politkovskaya was a reporter for the independent *Novaya Gazeta* in Russia and a critic of President Putin. Like many others, I was shocked and horrified when she was shot to death in the lobby of a Moscow apartment in 2006. In the trial relating to her death, the judge was clear that she was killed for her work

“exposing human rights violations, embezzlement and abuse of power”.

The sad reality is that I would no longer be surprised at such a death; it is estimated that 21 journalists have been killed since Putin came to power, and in the great majority of cases no one has been convicted and sentenced for the murders. That is not to say, of course, that the murder of journalists is a uniquely Russian issue. Many other countries have higher death rates, but nearly 15 years after Politkovskaya's death the space for independent journalism in Russia has become smaller and smaller, while state-backed media have grown stronger and stronger. Many independent publishers have been forced to cease their publications, while Russian state-backed channels such as RT seem immune from accountability.

The lack of accountability may or may not be a result of the clear message from the Russian authorities. Action taken against RT in the UK resulted in measures being taken against the BBC in Russia, while the Russian media are free to criticise the BBC as they see fit.

Russia is not the only state on a mission to reduce or remove BBC influence. Last month, I chaired a joint British Group Inter-Parliamentary Union and BBC event on the media in China, and heard how the BBC's reporting of coronavirus and the persecution of the Uyghurs meant that the Chinese authorities cracked down, removing the BBC World News TV channel outright and banning the BBC World Service in Hong Kong.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman and I share concerns about the escalating persecution of ethnic and religious minorities across the world. Does he agree that journalists have a role to play in raising awareness of issues in China, Russia or wherever it may be, because that is how the rest of the world knows what is going on?

Alex Sobel: The freedom of journalistic expression is paramount, including in terms of freedom of religion. The hon. Member makes vital points.

The BBC's China correspondent has had to move to Taiwan because of safety fears. China's lack of press freedom is well documented. It sits at 177 out of 180 in the 2021 world press freedom index. Only Turkmenistan, North Korea and Eritrea fall below it. In 2020, a year in which a historically high total of 387 journalists and media workers were detained worldwide, China was the worst offender. In its record-breaking year, at least 274 journalists were locked up for their work. The UK Government must move further and faster in developing an international strategy to defend journalists, media freedom and internet access from authoritarian tendencies across the globe. I hope that that is being discussed at the G7 today.

Of course, the UK is not without fault. The UK ranked just 33rd out of the 180 countries in the 2021 world press freedom index. In February, Andy Aitchison was arrested at his home after photographing a fake blood protest outside the Napier barracks, where asylum seekers were being housed, and still are, even though there has been a High Court ruling against the Government. The police held Mr Aitchison for seven hours and seized his phone and memory card. Mr Aitchison was just doing his job, exercising his right to report freely on the conditions in which asylum seekers are held. He was wrongly arrested and his journalistic material was taken. Still no apology has been forthcoming.

The Government must do better. How can we talk about press freedom without talking about the clearing house: the Orwellian unit that obstructs the release of sensitive information requested by the public under the Freedom of Information Act 2000? In a written judgment, made public on Tuesday, Judge Hughes concluded:

"The profound lack of transparency about the operation...might appear...to extend to Ministers."

I look forward to the Minister clearing that up for us. As well as blocking FOI requests, the unit is alleged to have profiled journalists. Such a profound lack of transparency at the very heart of Government paints a very concerning picture.

Strategic lawsuits against public participation are taken out with impunity both in the UK and elsewhere. SLAPPs are legal actions, the goal of which is not necessarily to win in court but, rather, to silence the target. Powerful interests wanting to shut down stories can do so by taking legal action that they know will cost the defendant huge sums of money in legal fees and potentially take years to resolve. SLAPPs can be taken out by individual businesses, state actors or any other individual or group with enough money to do so. They may target academic freedom, political expression or, more commonly than ever, the freedom of the press.

SLAPPs can kill an uncomfortable story. They can also have the bigger impact of silencing other critical voices, creating the same culture of fear and silence as through illegal means. The Conservatives talk a good game on freedom of expression, but let us not forget that they have been known to exclude newspapers that they do not agree with from official briefings. I hope that the Minister can give us some assurances on those points.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The former Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee has four minutes.

4.18 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): This is an incredibly important debate. I am grateful to the Minister for leading it for the Government. He is quite right to say that we had a similar debate in Westminster Hall just before the recess, but it is an important enough subject to demand scrutiny again.

I was interested to note from press reports this morning that in Cornwall today the Prime Minister and the President of the United States will have their first meeting together and on the agenda is a reaffirmation of the principles behind the Atlantic charter, signed 80 years ago by Winston Churchill and President Franklin Roosevelt. That charter was based on what was known as the four freedoms: freedom from want, freedom of worship, freedom of speech and freedom from fear. This debate is about freedom from fear in part, because there are journalists around the world who face direct persecution or who have been murdered because of the investigations they have pursued, which have threatened the positions of powerful people in those countries. We are seeing authoritarian Governments around the world with greater boldness deliberately persecuting and targeting people who are critical of their regimes.

Yes, this debate is in part about freedom from fear, but it is also about freedom of speech, because the persecution of journalists is taking place. That intimidation, the deliberate closing down of an opposition voice, and the example that is designed to send to other people are about suppressing speech and silencing criticism, and we must be increasingly concerned about the boldness with which many authoritarian Governments around the world act.

As the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) rightly pointed out in his remarks, strategic lawsuits against journalists are something that is happening in this country today, including to journalists such as Catherine Belton, who has faced multiple lawsuits from Russian oligarchs because of a book she has written.

[Damian Collins]

Those lawsuits may ultimately fail, but they are principally designed to tie down a journalist in potentially expensive litigation for years and to dissuade others from seeking to criticise or investigate powerful people for the same reason: because they know their work will not be completed and they will be frustrated and exhausted in the courts for many years.

We see that again with increasing boldness in authoritarian countries around the world, and particularly in the Philippines, where the campaigning journalist Maria Ressa, chief executive of the Rappler news organisation, has faced repeated lawsuits from the Government of that country, led by the president. That includes cases where the law has retrospectively been changed and the Government seek to enforce it against the journalist for doing something that was not an offence at the time and, many would argue, is not an offence anyway. We are seeing that happen increasingly, too.

The suppression of speech in the digital age can also be conducted highly effectively through social media and online, with people creating hate mobs to crowd out the legitimate voice of people speaking with passion and concern about particular issues. I was pleased that my right hon. Friend the Minister mentioned the work that the Government have done in this regard on protecting journalists. I will be very interested to see where the Government come out with regard to the action plan for the safety of journalists in the context of the online safety Bill. It is incredibly important that journalists are allowed to do their work.

The active denigration by some politicians of the mainstream media is also an attack on democracy and democratic principles. To run down our institutions, including our great media institutions, is also an attack on speech and an attack on our institutions as a democracy. As we all know, there is far more to being a democracy than having elections. The ability to challenge, debate and question those in authority is vital, and it is vitally important for citizens when making informed decisions in elections.

I welcome this debate today, and I welcome the combined efforts we will take to ensure the freedom of journalism, the safety of journalism and the freedom of speech in our open democracy.

4.22 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I understand that time is very tight, and as a courtesy to those Members wishing to participate, I will be as brief as possible. A free and independent press is vital to democracy, and it should go without saying that journalists—indeed, all media—must be able to work free from intimidation or persecution.

Democracy relies on people who have the bravery, the tenacity and the ability to hold the powerful to account, yet according to the 2021 world press freedom survey, 75% of the 180 countries examined are considered problematic, bad or very bad environments for a free press. In that survey, the United Kingdom ranks 33rd. While not the exemplar we probably hoped for, it is better than most. Rather than a blanket condemnation of those we know who would take no notice, I want to

appeal to the Government to use what influence they have on their closest friends and allies: Saudi Arabia, Hungary, Bahrain, India, Pakistan and Israel.

Recently, we saw the Israeli air force deliberately targeting and destroying media facilities in Gaza, including two tower blocks that were home to numerous Palestinian and international news agencies, and causing the death of a Palestinian journalist Yousef Abu Hussein when they bombed his home. These attacks have been condemned unreservedly by the International Federation of Journalists, the world's largest organisation for media professionals. It called on the UN Security Council to intervene to stop what it calls the "systematic targeting" of journalists by Israel. I hope that the Minister will also condemn those attacks and insist that Israel abides by its international obligations to protect media professionals and ends the practice of targeting buildings that house news outlets.

The world press freedom index ranks Saudi Arabia at 170 of 180 countries, and the savage murder of Jamal Khashoggi by the regime in 2017 showed just how frightened it is of a free press. Reporters Without Borders says that Saudi Arabia is the third most censored country on earth, where, with no independent media, journalists are kept in their place through draconian laws, which include harming the image and the reputation of the King and the state. There are about 30 journalists currently in prison in Saudi Arabia, among them the perceived dissidents Ahmed al-Suwian and Fahd al-Sunaidi, who were sentenced to three and a half years each just last year.

This is also a problem much closer to home. Just two weeks ago, the Prime Minister met the Hungarian leader, the right-wing populist Viktor Orbán. I would like to think I am not naive enough to believe that the Prime Minister would have tackled Mr Orbán on his illiberal and authoritarian crackdown on and censorship of Hungary's free press. In recent years, almost 500 media outlets have been centralised into one giant pro-Government grouping, resulting in Hungary tumbling to 92 on the 2021 index.

Another of the UK's greatest allies is Bahrain, currently just two places above Saudi Arabia at 168. Bahrain has now made it illegal for journalists to openly criticise Government policies or their decisions. There are several Bahraini journalists currently in jail, including leading human rights activist Nabeel Rajab, who is serving five years for tweeting about Government corruption, and Mahmoud al-Jaziri, who in recent years has been sentenced to 15 years in jail. In November, 18 individuals, including a 16-year-old girl and a 14-year-old boy, as well as a respected TV producer, were arrested for simply commenting on the death of Bahrain's longest-serving Prime Minister on social media.

These are the actions of our closest friends and allies—allies that include India and Pakistan. They are at 142 and 145 on the index, which makes them among the most dangerous and repressive countries in which a journalist can work freely. In India, journalists are reported to have been attacked by the police, ambushed by political activists and targeted by criminal gangs or corrupt local officials. Again, the election of a right-wing populist in the shape of Prime Minister Modi has increased the pressure on Indian media to toe the Government line, and those who resist face calls for their murder in what are clearly co-ordinated hate campaigns on social media. In Kashmir, the Indian

Government can and do, without explanation, shut down dissenting media outlets, as they did with the *Kashmir Times*, while journalists continue to be harassed by police and paramilitaries, among them Aasif Sultan, who was arrested in 2018 and remains in detention today.

It is a very similar story in Pakistan, with reports of the military increasing its influence in civic society, including on free and independent journalism. There are deeply worrying reports of journalists being kidnapped and threatened as to their future actions. Indeed, four journalists were murdered in 2020 in connection with their work, especially when investigating local political corruption and drug trafficking.

There is so much more I would like to say, but I realise that time is short and others wish to speak. In conclusion, I think it is absolutely right that we condemn China, North Korea, Eritrea and others for what they do, but I urge the Government to look at the action and behaviour of their friends and their allies, and to use what influence they have on them to get them to change their ways.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The wind-ups will begin at 4.50 pm. We are now on a three-minute limit.

4.28 pm

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con) [V]: As a foreign correspondent, I have reported from wars in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq. I hope you will indulge me, Mr Deputy Speaker, in reading the names of those British-based journalists who have died in the course of their work since I was the ITN correspondent in Sarajevo. The list is not exhaustive, and of course there are several still missing. It reads: Paul Jenks; Ibrahim Goskel; John Schofield; Vincent Francis; Martin O'Hagan; Roddy Scott; my colleague from ITN, Terry Lloyd; James Miller; Richard Wild; Simon Cumbers; Kate Peyton; Paul Douglas; James Brolan; Martin Adler; Rupert Hamer; Tim Hetherington; Marie Colvin, who I was with during the war in Iraq in 2003; Mick Deane; and most recently, as far as we know, Lyra McKee.

That long list of names is evidence of the fact that proper journalism is eye witness journalism—you have to bear witness yourself; there is no substitute for being there on the ground. This kind of journalism cannot be pursued over the internet, at a distance or even using local sources. This is what gives us a true picture of the world that we cannot get from fake news, internet memes, propaganda and sophisticated Government propaganda, often over Twitter.

But there is a terrible cost to this type of journalism, and we owe a debt to those who have lost their lives in pursuit of the truth. All too often today, news is confused with entertainment—what I call “news entertainment”—and many of those who currently call themselves journalists should be ashamed of themselves. We need to reclaim this heritage and support real news by real journalists.

4.30 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I want to start by condemning the recent Israeli air force attacks that destroyed the building housing al-Jazeera and over a dozen media outlets during the assault on Gaza. They say that truth is the first casualty of war. It is clear that this was done to try to stop the world seeing the truth about that horrific assault on Gaza and the humanitarian crisis that it created.

I want to focus today on the role that brave journalists play in exposing war crimes. Regrettably, our country has been involved in too many unjust wars in recent years—wars of conquest, wars for control and wars for oil. Crimes were committed in those wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, including, in Iraq, the killing of journalists. Much of what we know about those crimes was exposed by the fearless work of a journalist—a journalist who exposed unlawful killing; a journalist who exposed US renditions; a journalist who exposed the horrors of Guantanamo Bay; a journalist invited to work in this country by *The Guardian* newspaper; a journalist, who, as we meet today in Parliament for this debate, is sitting in a British high-security prison, solely because of his journalism; a journalist who faces extradition to the United States for his award-winning journalism, carried out here in Britain; a journalist who faces a 175-year sentence for exposing war crimes, which would mean he would spend the rest of his life behind bars in a super-maximum security prison; a journalist whose potential extradition is opposed by Amnesty International, the National Union of Journalists and Reporters Without Borders. That journalist is Julian Assange.

I appeal to President Joe Biden, who is in this country for the G7 summit, to drop the charges so that the extradition is called off. Present Biden was, of course, vice-president when President Obama took the decision not to prosecute Julian Assange because of the huge damage it would have done to press freedom. Prosecuting Julian Assange would, in the words of Amnesty International, still have

“a chilling effect on the right to freedom of expression”.

That is why I raise this case today. That is why I urge President Biden to do the right thing.

4.34 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP) [V]: As colleagues have said, a free press is integral to democracy and fundamental to ensuring that a society is underpinned by transparency and accountability. At the heart of that is ensuring that journalists are free and safe to do their jobs unhampered and without fear of intimidation or attack.

At home in Northern Ireland, unfortunately, attacks on journalists are not new and have not been confined to the past. This is a society that has always had a sick seam of coercion and intimidation and, unfortunately, that did not disappear with the Good Friday agreement. The last year has seen an alarming rise in the number of violent threats against journalists. Intimidation and threats are exacerbated by a poor legal climate, including overdue libel reform, the vexatious use of injunctions and, indeed, the landmark case against investigative journalists Trevor Birney and Barry McCaffrey over their treatment of the Loughinisland massacre.

An NUJ report from 2020 highlighted some of the attacks that journalists have experienced physically, verbally and online. It is not hyperbole to say that this is among the most dangerous places in the western world to be a journalist, and that has consequences for public debate. These threats come primarily from paramilitaries and the paramilitary-adjacent, who, in 2021, continue to exert undue influence and coercive control, intimidating communities and silencing those journalists who seek to expose them.

[Claire Hanna]

In the last year, alongside relentless on and offline intimidation of several journalists, a *Sunday World* reporter was issued with a credible threat against her newborn baby. A *Belfast Telegraph* photojournalist was beaten up and called a “Fenian” at loyalist riots this Easter. A member of the “Panorama” team was forced to flee his home after reporting on a notorious crime gang. And, of course, April 2019 saw the murder of journalist Lyra McKee by dissident republicans—the bloody and devastating consequence of bringing guns and disorder on to the streets.

We cannot talk about the safety of journalists and the freedom of the press without addressing the issue of paramilitarism and organised crime in Northern Ireland. It is still a reality of everyday life for many communities and journalists. It is welcome that the Government have stated their commitment to press freedom and that the Foreign Secretary will continue, he says, to hold to account

“those who repress, block & intimidate journalists”.

The question is: will this include Northern Ireland? Will the Government commit to ensuring that journalists are able to do their job in safety? Will they ask why, decades after the Good Friday agreement had ceased and paramilitaries had ceased to exist their emblems are allowed to fly on lamp posts across the city I live in? Why are they courted and empowered by public bodies, including this Government, who met loyalist paramilitary representatives to discuss post-Brexit arrangements? A cross-party and cross-civil society group has made it clear that no group can be allowed to undermine the freedom of the press and public interest reporting.

4.37 pm

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Politicians and journalists do not always make easy bedfellows, but as MPs we fundamentally respect the right of journalists to report without fear or favour, to comment without the prospect of harassment by the forces of the state. In too many countries, this is still not the case, sometimes with the most horrendous or even fatal consequences, so as a former journalist turned politician I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this important debate.

I began my career in the autumn of 1989—a momentous time, as communism was collapsing and the Berlin wall fell. Many years later, I went to eastern Europe and the middle east to train TV news teams. They had spent most of their working lives terrified of upsetting tyrants. One man told me how colleagues would sometimes just disappear from the newsroom from one day to the next, with no explanation given. This particular journalist was even scared of the consequences of putting a comma in the wrong place in his copy.

Sadly, more recent events in parts of both eastern Europe and the middle east suggest that those days have not entirely disappeared. We have heard of 50 journalists being killed around the world last year and of around 274 imprisoned now, of which about 47 are in China, where there is brutal suppression of the truth about the regime’s repression in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. The BBC World Service has a long and depressing list of examples of the persecution of its journalists. Staff at the BBC Persian service are being consistently harassed and intimidated by Iran. This includes death threats to

journalists based here in the UK, along with frightening and aggressive targeting of elderly parents, siblings and extended family members in Iran itself.

The regimes putting journalists at risk do it for one reason: they are scared of the truth. We must stand up to them, because along with the physical harm there is the psychological impact—a justifiable and understandable nervousness that can result in self-censorship. Nor can we be complacent here in the UK—reporters here, especially in broadcasting, face malicious abuse online every day. As ITN says, this creates a chilling effect on journalism. The BBC’s Marianna Spring, whose very job is to tackle disinformation, receives frequent threats. Only four years ago, the BBC’s political editor, Laura Kuenssberg, had to be accompanied by bodyguards at the Labour party conference.

None of that is acceptable. Journalists are not fair game, and we must not turn a blind eye. With a Prime Minister who was formerly a journalist himself, it is apposite that the British Parliament today focuses on the safety of journalists, and that we reaffirm our determination to support a free press in every country of the world—including, of course, our own.

4.40 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) [V]: I speak as the secretary of the National Union of Journalists parliamentary group. I pay tribute to the work of the NUJ here in the UK, led by its general secretary Michelle Stanistreet and president Sian Jones, and to the work of the International Federation of Journalists to protect journalists across the world.

According to the figures we have received, there are at least 235 journalists in prisons across the world today, and 42 journalists have been killed for doing their job in the last year. It is strong and fearless journalism that makes press freedom worth defending, and we must protect it here and abroad against violence and suppression. I agree with others that the whole House should be condemning the bombing of media companies and the harassment and arrests of journalists operating in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including the ongoing harassment of the al-Jazeera correspondent in Jerusalem, Givara Budeiri. We must also condemn the jailing of the 12 journalists in recent months in Belarus. We even hear that journalists have been threatened and arrested while covering the Black Lives Matter protests in the US.

We should not be complacent about press freedom on our own shores, either. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) that it is a continuing stain on the reputation of this country that Julian Assange remains in Belmarsh prison. There are no justifiable grounds for keeping in prison a journalist who had the courage to expose the war crimes and abuse of human rights committed by the world’s leading military powers.

We also have a Government who just yesterday were forced by the courts to release documents detailing how the clearing house unit in the Cabinet Office has blocked freedom of information requests from journalists. I pay tribute to openDemocracy, which pursued this case. I quote the findings of the judge, who said that there was a

“profound lack of transparency about the operation”

of this unit that “might appear” even “to extend to Ministers”.

It also does not build confidence in the Government when a Treasury and Equalities Minister publicly attacks a young black journalist and makes false statements about her on social media, seemingly for simply daring to ask the Minister a question. That the Government have been found to be attempting to bully journalists should not come as a surprise when they are led by a Prime Minister who once offered his help to have a journalist beaten up.

In honour of World Press Freedom Day, I offer my thanks to journalists here and around the world who face obstruction, threats and intimidation simply for doing their jobs. We all pay our tribute to them.

4.43 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) [V]: In a way, today's debate is slightly poignant for me, because I knew Rory Peck very well as a friend. He was a fantastic journalist, and he was also a bit of a rogue. Shortly before he died in 1993, he bet me a bottle of wine that he would have a little boy for his first child, and I bet him that he would have a little girl. He wrote down the name of the bottle of wine that was the bet, and when I lost it, I had to go and buy a bottle of Haut-Brion, which is one of the finest wines in the world and the most expensive bet I have ever lost. I have never, ever bet a bottle of wine since. That is to digress, but it is poignant for me.

I have several times in this House been a champion of the BBC. I really believe we have to get our own house in order, and I deplore some of the political attacks that we have seen on the BBC. I believe these political attacks undermine our own moral standing when it comes to criticising the arrests, as previous speakers have mentioned, of journalists in Belarus and pro-democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong, and the whole awful Ryanair event. My view is that we ain't got any room for grandstanding until we make ourselves absolutely beyond reproach. In doing so, we will have the moral high ground, and I think it is worth striving for.

Let us just remind ourselves that only last year our special envoy on media freedom quit due to what she saw as the Government's intentional breaking of international law through the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, saying that their actions threaten to

“embolden autocratic regimes that violate international law with devastating consequences all over the world.”

That shows us where we should not go. We have to do an awful lot more about reaffirming our existing commitments to media freedom, as other speakers have said.

In addition to protecting our journalists in their ability to speak truth, we have to protect those who help them to facilitate the truth being told. That is why I make no apologies for today reiterating my call to offer asylum to the interpreters in Afghanistan, for instance, who have helped British journalists with translation and have been absolutely invaluable to getting the media coverage out. We have a debt of honour to those interpreters.

If we rebuild and enhance our reputation, we will be striking a mighty blow for the truth being the truth in an age when there is so much that is not true.

4.45 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: Dictators hate journalism. Journalism at its finest speaks truth to power. That is why tyrants the world over hate both what they say but also what they represent. Alexander Lukashenko, the Belarusian dictator, was so desperate to silence the brave young journalist Roman Protasevich that he was prepared to hijack his plane and force it to land in Minsk, the capital of his dark regime. Lukashenko wanted him silenced. But we will not rest until he is freed, and we stand with the brave people of Belarus and their journalists against the evil dictator who uses kidnap, rape and murder to try to silence them. It is dangerous to be a journalist.

Israel, a country that sees itself as a western democracy, took the opportunity afforded by its recent onslaught against Gaza to use fighter jets to bomb the building housing Associated Press and al-Jazeera. It was a direct attack on press freedom and an attempt to silence those reporting the bombardment of a captive Palestinian population by a military superpower. No journalists were killed that day. But Israel has form, and we remember that in a previous Israeli onslaught in 2003, James Miller, a multi-E Emmy award winning Welsh cameraman, was murdered by Israeli troops who continued to fire on him even after the reporter he was with shouted, “We are British journalists.”

There have been so many killings of journalists that it seems almost invidious to single any individuals out. But we all remember Marie Colvin, the celebrated *Sunday Times* correspondent killed when Assad's troops, almost certainly targeting her, shelled the building in Homs where she was sheltering as she covered the regime's atrocities. Closer to home, it took the shooting of Lyra McKee in Derry by IRA thugs 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 survived an al-Qaeda attack, we are forever reminded of the price he paid when we see him reporting on our screens from a wheelchair. Brave and fearless every one of them, armed only with a pen, microphone or camera, killed by cowards bombing and shooting from afar.

Today here in this House we honour a fine craft and resolve, I hope, as parliamentarians, to affirm, whatever our politics, the right of journalists, whether at home or abroad, to scrutinise and examine, to probe and uncover without fear or favour. It is an ever more dangerous craft, but never has it been more needed.

4.49 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I will be as quick as I possibly can.

One of the most outstanding achievements of the 2014 referendum movement was the creation of new media. One of the strongest voices in that new media was former British ambassador and former Dundee University rector Craig Murray. Craig—a man who is over 60 and in poor health—has recently been sentenced to eight months' imprisonment for the contempt of jigsaw identification, which is imprecise, ill-defined and unable to be demonstrated or tested rigorously because it would identify people who are meant to remain anonymous.

[Neale Hanvey]

Various opinion polls have been conducted, including two by Panelbase. None has identified Craig Murray as a source of jigsaw identification. In fact, the top hit on that Panelbase poll was a journalist, Dani Garavelli—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Sorry, we have to go to the wind-ups.

4.50 pm

Alex Sobel: I think this is one of those subjects where, in principle, every Member of the House can agree, but it is in the detail—whether domestically or internationally—that we need to scrutinise Government action. Members right across the House have raised issues on which the Government must and should do more.

I thank the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), for his support on SLAPPs and for raising issues around journalistic freedom in the Philippines, one of the world's most brutal regimes. He spoke about the need to protect journalists in the upcoming online safety Bill. I am sure that we will work closely with him on that.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) commented on a wide range of countries—some of which I failed to mention, so I thank him for that—including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Hungary, where Orbán has used Government media for racist attacks, but restricted the free press; indeed, in some cases, he has expelled the free press from the country. The hon. Member also spoke about Israel, which I mentioned, as did many Members, in the context of the attacks in Gaza. It was no accident that many countries that he mentioned have right-wing populist Governments. Something that those Governments have in common is the restriction of freedom of the press, so that they can carry out their agenda.

I associate myself with the speech of the hon. Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway), who has had a distinguished journalistic career. I pay tribute to those British journalists who have been killed for reporting the truth to the world.

I thank my not quite constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who pointed out that destroying the AP building in Gaza was about restricting reporting on that conflict. They have a strong record and history in seeking the fair judicial treatment of journalists facing prosecution related to reporting, and I am sure they will continue to do so.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington also rightly praised the NUJ, which fiercely defends the rights of its members—our journalists—whether they are here in the UK or around the world. He also mentioned the work of openDemocracy, which does a brilliant job of safeguarding our freedoms here in the UK and holding the Government to account.

My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) made an exemplary speech, and was absolutely right to remind us that journalists in Northern Ireland continue to receive threats and restrictions on their reporting. The Government must do far more to protect journalists in Northern Ireland. The murder of Lyra McKee must result in justice, and the lessons need to be

learned so that no more journalists are killed in Northern Ireland. It is vital that we, on our own shores, protect our own journalists.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) was right to highlight the fact that Amal Clooney quit as UK envoy on press freedom, as our own Government failed to stick to international law.

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) was totally correct to highlight the horrendous kidnapping of the journalist Roman Protasevich, whose only crime was telling the truth about the brutal regime of his country, Belarus.

I hope that the Minister will give us assurances that he can and will do more to ensure press freedom both here—I did not hear very much in his opening speech to make me feel confident that he will do more here—and globally. He has made many assurances, not just today but last week and in the past, about protecting British journalists and international journalists right around the world, so that they are free to report.

4.54 pm

Mr Whittingdale: I thank every Member who has contributed to what has been an excellent debate, even if it has been brief. Inevitably and depressingly, it has been something of a tour of the globe, which is a reflection of the number of countries where to be a journalist is still a dangerous occupation.

I cannot go through every single country that was mentioned, but I was interested to hear the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), refer to the work he has done with the Inter-Parliamentary Union. I thought I would mention that since you, Mr Deputy Speaker, were a distinguished chair of the British Group Inter-Parliamentary Union and I had the privilege of taking over from you. I know that the hon. Gentleman is also active in the BGIPU. Alongside the Government's efforts, the IPU has done a lot to highlight the importance of freedom of the press. We will continue to work internationally through organisations such as the G7 and the Council of Europe. I should also mention the work of my colleague in the Foreign Office, Lord Ahmad, who is the Minister responsible in this policy area and who is extremely active.

I want to talk specifically about what is happening in this country and to highlight one or two contributions to the debate. My hon. Friends the Members for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) and for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) spoke with considerable experience, having both worked as broadcast reporters, and recounted some of their knowledge of this issue. I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham, who reminded us of the sadly long list of British journalists—a number of whom were referred to—who have lost their lives in the course of their duties. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) talked about Rory Peck, and it is worth paying tribute to the work done by the Rory Peck Trust, which was established in his name, to support freelance journalists who suffer in the ways mentioned.

There are of course still challenges to meet in this country. My hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) highlighted the use of

what are now called strategic lawsuits against public participation. He will know that the Government have made changes to the law on defamation that we believe make such lawsuits more difficult, but he also cited current examples, so it is certainly something that we need to monitor. It has been highlighted as a way in which people can try to suppress legitimate journalism. My hon. Friend also mentioned the online safety legislation that we will use to put in place extra protection for the work of journalists, in recognition of the importance of the freedom of the press.

The hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) made an excellent speech. She highlighted the particular risks of being a journalist in Northern Ireland. A representative of the Police Service of Northern Ireland serves on the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists, and I have had meetings with the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) to discuss these matters, but we are conscious that great abuse of journalists who operate in Northern Ireland still takes place. Of course, as the hon. Member for Leeds North West said, the most recent tragic death of a journalist in the course of carrying out her work was that of Lyra McKee from Belfast.

We have taken a really strong lead in this policy area with the establishment of the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists. We have published a national action plan, and we have the commitment of all those who serve on that committee to take more action, but of course we recognise that more needs to be done.

As I say, I am grateful to all those who have contributed to this afternoon's debate and brought with them her own experience of having previously worked in journalism. I finish by paying tribute to all journalists, and in particular to those who have risked their lives and continue to do so on a daily basis in pursuit of exposing truth.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the safety of journalists.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): From all of us at the House of Commons I wish all the team working for the launch of GB News on Sunday the very best of British as they start an important role reporting the news that impacts on all our lives. That team contains many journalists whom we all know and greatly respect, so good luck to them all.

Land Banking

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before the debate starts, can I ask for the Dispatch Box on the Government side to be sanitised while Christian is speaking? I know the Minister is used to not touching it until it is fully sanitised.

5 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to bring this important debate before the House this evening, which is important not only for me and Bury South, but for many across the country. Thank you, too, for marking this, my first Adjournment debate since being elected.

We have spoken frequently both in this place and in Westminster Hall about protecting our green belt and about the need to build houses. Over the past few years, plans to build new homes on our precious areas of green spaces have become one of the biggest issues in my constituency, in Greater Manchester, and, indeed, across the country.

Throughout my time in this House, I have pledged to preserve Bury's green belt, over at Elton reservoir and in Simister, and ultimately to protect our environment from unnecessary development. I reaffirm that commitment right here, right now, because it is a commitment to seeing the borough at the forefront of brownfield development.

I thank the Minister for having many discussions and for coping with my concerns and complaints about the impact of green-belt development. We really need to tackle some of these issues, especially the land banking issue, which I will be coming on to.

Bringing forward brownfield regeneration will deliver more affordable and, ultimately, safer and better homes for all, which is something that, as a country, we desperately need. Our country desperately needs new homes to be built, and built in great numbers, but we cannot achieve that by encroaching on our green belt to find extra space when there are plenty of empty plots already waiting to be built on.

In 2019, almost 400,000 homes were given planning permission in England, but only 240,000 were actually built. Over a 10-year period, from 2009, 2.5 million homes were given planning permission, but only 1.5 million homes were actually built. That translates to a backlog of roughly 1 million unbuilt homes.

Planning in this country is already providing more land than needed to meet the Government target of 300,000 homes a year and we should not be looking to encroach any further on our green belt. In fact, we had a manifesto commitment to not only protect, but enhance the green belt, and that is something that we, on the Conservative Benches, can make sure we hold the Minister to.

Why is there this huge disparity between the number of planning permissions granted in the UK versus the number of homes actually being built? It is not the planning system. The planning system is not the constraint on house building; it is the property industry and land banking itself. Land banking is a pitfall in our complex planning system where developers buy and store a pipeline of land and obtain planning permission for that land, with no immediate intention to build the homes that have been approved.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his first Adjournment debate. I have no doubt that it will be the first of many. Does he not agree that, while we are sympathetic to those genuine developers who are outpriced in building on their site due to the rising price of steel, wood, plastic and other materials at this time, there are also those—and they are the ones that he is referring to—who deliberately hold land with planning permission to enhance the cost? Steps need to be taken to address those whose business is simply land banking, which can lead to price gouging. The Government, and the Minister in particular, must consider imposing penalties against these people, and one of those penalties should be taxing them heavily.

Christian Wakeford: I thank the hon. Member—indeed, he is my hon. Friend in this instance—for that helpful intervention. I will certainly get on to that point later in my argument. I have a particular concern when developer A holds field X, gets planning permission and then does not build, but they also happen to hold fields Y and Z, and it is just to create a greater need to get planning permission on those. The only real benefit is to the developer and their balance sheet. As my hon. Friend said, it is very much these developers who take advantage of the planning system; it allows them to profit without the homes being built—homes that we desperately need—in the locations that we need them.

As I was saying, land banking is a pitfall in a very complex planning system where developers buy and store a pipeline of land and obtain planning permission for that land, with no immediate intention to build the homes that have been approved. Being granted planning permission can increase the value of the land by more than 100 times in some instances, but instead of building homes, the developer sells the land off for profit. This practice is purely an investment for big property developers, and it inflates land prices, making it even more difficult for people to buy the homes they desperately need. It prevents young people and families from getting on the property ladder, and it also prevents the elderly from being able to downsize and move into bungalows, because we are not building the homes that we need.

In Britain, the timescales involved in land banking are particularly long, with people seeming to land bank in some instances for between five and 10 years of their building supply, compared with other countries such as Germany, Japan, the USA and even France, which have much shorter timescales. Indeed, in some of those countries, the phenomenon barely exists, so why is the UK different? Unfortunately, it is because of our planning system.

Land banking is also posing a serious threat to our green belt as the Greater Manchester Mayor, Andy Burnham, has sought to look for extra space to build several thousand new homes by encroaching on green-belt areas such as Elton reservoir and Simister village in my constituency. I made a pledge during the election campaign to oppose those green-belt developers and find a meaningful solution so that we do not need to build on that land, and I make that commitment again to the electorate and the good people of Bury South.

I carried out a survey of my constituents recently. It found that roughly 56% of residents in Bury South felt that the green belt should never be built on, and that 95% took the view that Elton reservoir needed to be taken out of Mayor Andy Burnham's house building plan, so

if there is anything the Minister can do to assist in helping with that, it would be greatly appreciated. To add to the pushback against green-belt development, my local green-belt protection group in Bury South, Bury Folk Keep It Green, is roughly 10,000 members strong across a borough of 180,000 people, so it is a very large group. I hugely respect and admire the work it has been doing not only to bring the consensus on protecting our green belt to the fore, but to ensure that everyone in the constituency is aware of what is at risk and what could be destroyed.

The results speak for themselves. Let us listen to the people, and let us not destroy these precious areas of green space that we have pledged to protect. The planning White Paper talks about democratising a planning system that unfortunately fails far too many people. These are areas that have helped so many people mentally and physically during the pandemic, when we were all being told to go out and take advantage of our green fields and open green spaces. Indeed, I myself have taken my daughter for walks around Elton reservoir. We need to ensure that those areas are there for many years to come, so that many families can carry on enjoying them.

We need to look at changing the rules around the English planning system, ensure that legislation reflects ways to tackle the housing crisis and stop egregious cases of land banking, ensuring that land is built on and not stored. The 2017 Local Government Association report suggested introducing a council tax charge 12 months after planning permission had been granted, which would act as a disincentive for large property developers to land bank. It could also incentivise those developers to start building in the first place, further negating the need to build on our green spaces. If developers were forced to pay all that money every month, they would start building pretty quickly.

The Government should also work to bring thousands of empty homes and other types of property back into use, to ease the housing shortage and maximise the use of existing stock. The latest report suggested that there were roughly 665,000 vacant dwellings in the UK, and we need to make use of them. We are saying that we need to build 2 million homes, and those empty homes and those that are land banked represent a huge proportion of what we need to build.

I welcome the Government's dedication and success in addressing the housing crisis and the protection of the environment. However, I urge them to reconsider the system we are currently operating in. We need a planning system that can bring about a better quality of life for all and a more sustainable future. We need a system that can bring down the price of land, capture land values for the public benefit and make housing truly affordable so that every family can ultimately benefit from the right to buy, get on the property ladder and take advantage of what we all should have as a fundamental right. I shall close by thanking the Minister for his kind words in our many conversations. I hope he will agree not only that we need to change, which is why we are bringing forward these changes now, but that we need to ensure that democracy and ultimately the people have a final say in this.

5.9 pm

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): May I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) on securing this,

his first Adjournment debate? I am particularly grateful that he has chosen a topic that is so important to his constituents and to all our constituents.

Let me begin by saying that the Government are committed to providing the homes that this country needs. The debate provides an excellent opportunity, as expressed by my hon. Friend, to discuss the Government's position on build-out rates, which, we recognise, are an issue that many communities feel strongly about.

My hon. Friend spoke eloquently about the challenges his constituents face. It is important to recognise at the outset that Sir Oliver Letwin's independent review of build out, which builds on that of Dame Kate Barker and many others before them, highlighted that the repeated arguments of house builders sitting on land is overstated. Sir Oliver's work found no evidence that speculative land banking is part of the business model for major house developers or that it is a driver of build-out rates. Of course, not everybody agrees with the conclusions reached by Sir Oliver and his report. The Local Government Association, as referenced by my hon. Friend, has recently stated that in some cases there are legitimate reasons why development stalls. It could be, for example, that the land owner cannot get the price for the site they want, that the development approved is not viable or that there are supply chain or other economic hindrances to starting. However—

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Christopher Pincher: I had begun a sentence, but as it is the hon. Gentleman I shall end it and give way to him.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister. In the past year, we have seen a massive increase in the price of houses. In my constituency, house prices have risen 20% and that has been the case across the whole United Kingdom. It probably is not right to say now that developers could not get their price out of a site—they clearly could.

Christopher Pincher: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. House prices have increased and that is a very good reason why we need to build more homes of different types and tenures across the country to ensure that people can get the home of their dreams either to buy or to rent. I was going to say to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), both doughty campaigners on behalf of their constituents, that we recognise that build out is important to ensure that communities see the homes they want and need built promptly.

The Government want homes to be built and expect house builders to deliver more homes more quickly and to a high quality standard. Indeed, we are exploring further options to support a prompt and faster build out as part of our proposed planning reforms. We are now analysing the responses to the consultation on our White Paper, "Planning for the future." We had some 40,000 responses. That work will include pursuing further options to support faster build out of our proposed planning reforms. More details will follow.

I was interested to listen to my hon. Friend and hear ideas raised such as charging council tax on unbuilt permissions. It is an idea that has been mentioned previously, too. That will require some careful thinking because council tax is levied on properties and paid by the residents. Who would pay council tax on a permission?

Would it be the developer, the land owner or the promoter? Those are questions we need to address if that option were to be further pursued.

Christian Wakeford: The council tax proposal is just one idea. Obviously, council tax as a policy is open to interpretation in this place. However, there are other ideas and notions, such as land value tax as soon as an application has been granted and the land value increases. That would certainly be an incentive to get people building again. What are the Minister's thoughts on the potential of a land value tax?

Christopher Pincher: My hon. Friend is right that there are many options. I used that example because it has been positive, but it is also complex and needs to be thought through. Let me assure him that we are thinking through a number of options we can employ to ensure that more homes are built more quickly, to that high-quality standard that we expect, and that build-out occurs, as we all want to see.

We will also be looking at enforcement rules for landowners who wilfully abuse the planning system. We will talk more about that when we introduce the legislation. We know that our country does not have enough homes. It is a decades-long problem of demand consistently outstripping supply and it has undoubtedly fuelled rising house prices. Indeed, the median price in England is nearly eight times higher than the median gross annual earnings outside London. In London, it is nearly 12 times higher. How are people expected to get on the property ladder and buy their own home—even rent their own home—with such challenges? It is clear that things have to change.

Building the homes the country needs is at the heart of the Government's commitment to levelling up across our United Kingdom. Our vision for the future of planning and home building in England has to be bold and ambitious. That is at the heart of our White Paper. It proposes changes to the focus and processes of planning, to secure better outcomes for local communities, in terms of land for homes, for beauty and for environmental quality.

Simplifying the content of local plans will be a big part of this. It will make it easier to identify areas suitable for development, such as brownfield land, and to protect the all-important green-belt land sites, which are the sorts of sites that my hon. Friend referred to. A good example of brownfield land development can be found at the East Lancashire Paper Mill site in his own constituency.

These changes will transform a system that has long been criticised as being too slow to provide housing for families, key workers and young people, and too weak in getting developers to pay their fair share towards supporting essential infrastructure such as local schools, roads, GP surgeries and clinics. It is our ambition to deliver 300,000 homes per year by the mid-2020s and one million homes over this Parliament.

Increasing the number of up-to-date local plans across England is central to achieving that goal. Local plans not only unlock land for development and ensure that the right number of new homes are being built in the right places, but they also provide local communities with an opportunity to have their say on how their local areas will transform over the coming years.

Christian Wakeford: I thank the Minister for being very generous and giving way a second time. The Labour council in Bury does not have a local plan. We have been working on the Greater Manchester spatial framework but that has been pushed back time and time again, as the people say, “No.” What message can the Minister give to the Labour councillors about bringing forward a local plan, and doing so quickly?

Christopher Pincher: My message to all local authorities that do not have up-to-date local plans is: “Move as quickly as you can. If you do not, you do your constituents a disservice, because you leave them open to speculative development based on the presumption of sustainable development. It means you cannot protect your land, or support the communities that live on or around it, because you do not have a plan in place.”

Home building statistics show that in 2019 to 2020 there were nearly 244,000 net additional homes, including 220,000 new build homes. That is the highest annual increase for 30 years. The 2020 housing delivery test measurement, which we published in January, shows that around two thirds of local authorities have risen to the challenge and are supporting the delivery of the homes they need. The other third need to follow suit.

My hon. Friend referred to empty homes. I am pleased that the number of long-term empty homes has fallen by more than 30,000 since 2010. We have given councils powers and strong incentives to tackle long-term empty homes, including the power to increase council tax on them by up to 300% and to take over the management of them. Councils also receive the same new homes bonus for bringing an empty home back into use as for building a new one. It is probably worth mentioning that not all empty homes are habitable without some significant expenditure, or are in places where people need and want to live, but he raises an important point. I hope that I have demonstrated the Government’s commitment to getting appropriate empty homes back into use.

My hon. Friend also mentioned infrastructure. If we are to build new homes, we must have good infrastructure to support them. We recognise the crucial role that infrastructure plays in supporting new communities and improving neighbourhoods. Our manifesto committed to amending planning rules to ensure that the right infrastructure is in the right place before people take the step of moving into their homes. That is why we announced the national home building fund in the 2020 spending review.

The fund brings together existing housing, land and infrastructure funding streams into a single, flexible, more powerful pot, ensuring that roads, GP surgeries and schools are ready for people moving into new neighbourhoods, and driving an increase in supply in the areas of greatest need over the long term. At the next spending review, we will set out our proposals for the future of the national home building fund, to deliver on the Government’s commitment to invest £10 billion to unlock homes through the provision of infrastructure. That is on top of the £7.1 billion that we have already allocated, which we believe will unlock 860,000 new homes.

My hon. Friend mentioned the Government’s commitment to building back better after the pandemic and the importance of protecting the environment.

Through the national planning policy framework, we have made it clear that planning policies and decisions should minimise the effects on biodiversity from development, protect our most sensitive habitats and provide net gains. That means that opportunities to incorporate biodiversity improvements in and around developments should be sought, especially where they can secure measurable net gains for biodiversity.

We intend to go further: 2021 will be a landmark year for environmental policy because in November we will host the UN climate change conference in Glasgow. Our Environment Bill will be a pivotal part of delivering the Government’s manifesto commitment to create the most ambitious environmental programme of any country on Earth. We will make provision for a mandatory 10% of biodiversity net gain improvements for a range of developments, including house building. That will ensure that future developments result in measurable enhancements to nature, strengthening the biodiversity of our environment overall. We will also give new powers to local authorities to tackle air pollution in their areas.

My hon. Friend made important reference to the green belt, and our priority as a Government is to continue to protect the status of our green-belt land. We stand by our manifesto commitment:

“In order to safeguard our green spaces, we will continue to prioritise brownfield development, particularly for the regeneration of our cities and towns.”

We are clear that green-belt land should be considered for release only if an authority can fully evidence that it has examined all other reasonable options for meeting its development needs.

In addition, the national planning policy framework makes it clear that there should be no approval of inappropriate development in the green belt, including most forms of new building, except in very exceptional circumstances, as determined by the local authority. That means that the authority should use as much brownfield land as possible, optimise development densities and co-ordinate with neighbouring authorities to accommodate development.

We are committed to working with local authorities to turn old, disused brownfield land back into use for vibrant, exciting new places, levelling up for communities across the country. We have announced a package of measures that sets a new and far-reaching cross-government strategy to build more homes, protect and enhance the environment and create growth opportunities across the country. It includes: our home building fund, providing £2 billion of funds to support often SMEs in the delivery of larger, mostly brownfield sites through loans for infrastructure and site preparation; and £2.9 billion to support small and medium-sized enterprises, custom builders and construction innovators to build housing, including on brownfield land.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Christopher Pincher: I will not give way to my hon. Friend, because I have not got very long left and I appreciate he has only just arrived in the Chamber. If he will forgive me, I will continue.

Additionally, we have made available £400 million in brownfield housing funding, which has been allocated to seven mayoral combined authorities, including that

of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South, enabling around 26,000 new homes across the region—brownfield site homes. He asked me what we can do to encourage Mayor Burnham to build the right homes in the right places in the right way. I point him to the investment we are making in the combined authority in Manchester to ensure we are unlocking the opportunity to build homes on brownfield sites and not greenfield or green-belt sites, which people understandably want to see preserved.

My hon. Friend has spoken passionately and eloquently in support of his constituents in this, his very first Adjournment debate. I congratulate him again on securing it and being such a champion for his constituents. I hope it is clear to him and to others that the Government are committed to delivering a planning system that is fit for purpose and that works for everyone.

The Gracious Speech announced that the Government will bring forward a planning Bill in the current Session of Parliament. We are working hard with our stakeholders, and with colleagues across the House and in the other place, to make sure that we get the Bill right. We want to hear people's views. We want to ensure that we refine our proposals in such a way that we introduce legislation that works for everyone in our country and provides the right homes that the country needs. It will be a Bill that gets more infrastructure built, that will modernise the

planning system and that will bring the entire system—more democratic, more engaging—into the 21st century. It will propose simpler and faster processes, giving communities and developers much more certainty over what development goes where, what it looks like and what the infrastructure should be, and ensuring that developers have to contribute their fair share to funding affordable homes.

Our reforms will empower local people to set standards for beauty and design in their area through design codes that put beauty at the heart of our system. We want to grow the supply, boost affordability and unlock opportunity, and to do so for every community in every region in our United Kingdom. I am very pleased to be able to say those words and to commend my hon. Friend for his debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the technical and broadcasting teams for ensuring that all Members of Parliament have been able to participate in our democracy, whether they are in this iconic Chamber or not.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 10 June 2021

[MRS MARIA MILLER *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Tobacco Control Plan

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 25 February).

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

1.30 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (in the Chair): I remind Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the new hybrid arrangements, and timings of debates have been amended to allow technical arrangements to be made for the following debate. There will also be a suspension between each debate.

I remind Members participating virtually and physically that they must arrive at the start of the debate in Westminster Hall, and Members 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, could they contact the Westminster Hall Clerks? Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them, and when they leave the room.

I also remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn, except, of course, when speaking. Members attending physically who are in the later stage of the call list can use the seats at the back of the Gallery, but I think we are okay on space today.

1.31 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered recommendations for the forthcoming Tobacco Control Plan.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Miller. In December, the Minister confirmed to Parliament that the Government will publish a new tobacco control plan this year, setting out measures to deliver the smoke-free 2030 ambition in the 2019 prevention Green Paper. I welcome this announcement: as a former chair of the Gateshead tobacco control alliance, this issue is close to my heart. In my own area of County Durham, adult smoking prevalence is 17%, compared with 13.9% nationally, and rising to 27% among people in routine and manual occupations. Some 16.8% of mothers smoke during pregnancy, compared with 10.4% in England, and smoking in County Durham has an annual cost to society of approximately £122 million.

The Secretary of State himself stated that the “extremely challenging ambition” of a smoke-free 2030 will not be delivered by business as usual. The new report from the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health sets out the evidence-based recommendations needed to achieve that ambition. Smoking is responsible for half the difference in life expectancy between rich and poor, and the impact is passed down through generations,

with those who grow up in smoking households far more likely to become smokers. With 1,500 people dying from smoking-related diseases every week, and less than a decade to go to achieve a smoke-free 2030, there is no time to waste.

However, this will not happen without investment. That is why the key recommendation of the APPG’s report is for a smoke-free 2030 fund, requiring the tobacco industry to pay for tobacco control. This is the “polluters pay” approach that the Government committed to considering in the 2019 prevention Green Paper. As such, can the Minister assure me that the proposals put forward by the APPG on smoking and health will be considered as part of the forthcoming control plan? In particular, will the Government deliver on their commitment to consider a US-style “polluter pays” approach to fund the tobacco control measures needed to deliver a smoke-free 2030?

More investment is needed, because the huge gap in smoking prevalence between those in routine and manual occupations and those in other occupations is stubbornly persistent. Ending smoking would lift around 450,000 households out of poverty, including more than 250,000 million children and 140,000 pensioners, concentrated in the most disadvantaged parts of the country. That would not only benefit the health and wellbeing of individuals but inject money into local economies, which would show just how serious the Government are about the levelling-up agenda.

Smoking is linked to almost every indicator of disadvantage, and those indicators overlap different communities. Smokers in routine and manual occupations or who are unemployed are also more likely to live in social housing and to be diagnosed with mental health conditions. The Government have been unsuccessful so far in reducing the inequality gap in smoking and need to redouble their efforts to achieve a smoke-free 2030 for all. There is a clear need for a national strategy that targets investment and enhanced support at disadvantaged smokers.

Unfortunately, smokers from deprived communities with higher smoking rates tend to be more heavily addicted than those from more affluent areas. Analysis of Government data shows that in 2019 nearly half of England’s smokers were in routine and manual occupations or were long-term unemployed. They are just as motivated to quit as other smokers, but it is harder to succeed when smoking is more commonplace and cheap, illicit tobacco is widely available.

Regional tobacco control programmes have been effective in tackling these disparities, as shown by the example of Fresh in the north-east, which is the longest-running—indeed, the only surviving—regional office of tobacco control. When Fresh was founded in 2005, smoking prevalence in the north-east was over 20% higher than the national average for England, and the disparity was growing. Since then, the north-east has seen the greatest decline in smoking prevalence of any region: smoking prevalence in the north-east is now only 10% higher than the England average. However, the regional work done in the north-east and elsewhere has been limited by cuts to the public health grant for local authorities since 2015-16. This led to the closure of the regional offices in the north-west and the south-west, and funding in the north-east has been significantly reduced. New funding streams are needed.

[Mary Kelly Foy]

Smokers can successfully quit only if they are motivated to make an attempt to quit. Sustained mass multimedia behaviour change campaigns are the most impactful and cost-effective way to provide that motivation. The US Government's "Tips From Former Smokers" campaign was funded by tobacco manufacturers through the USA's user-free scheme, which raises \$711 million annually from the tobacco industry. The Food and Drug Administration campaign led to over half a million sustained quits in three years, and it was associated with healthcare cost savings of \$11,400 per lifetime quit.

Such campaigns have an immediate impact and can be targeted with precision at disadvantaged smokers, yet investment in behaviour change campaigns has fallen year on year in England. This has coincided with a significant decline in the number of adult smokers who have tried to quit. In 2008, 40% of adult smokers in England had tried to quit within the previous year; by 2018, that had fallen to just 30%. Over the same period, funding for mass media campaigns fell by over £20 million.

Behaviour change campaigns need to be targeted at key groups and communities to reduce socioeconomic inequalities. The effectiveness of national campaigns can be significantly enhanced when they are supplemented by targeted regional campaigns. Regional funding for stop-smoking behaviour change campaigns in the north and midlands would support the levelling up of some of the more deprived regions of England. These are the regions with the highest rates of smoking, combined with the lowest gross disposable household income. Supporting smokers in these regions to quit will prevent people's hard-earned incomes from going up in smoke, lifting thousands of households out of poverty and providing a boost to local economies.

Modelling by University College London for the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health estimates that a sustained national behaviour change campaign aimed at deprived smokers, combined with regional campaigns in the north and midlands, would result in an additional 1 million quit attempts, 179,000 successful quit attempts and 45,000 more ex-smokers in C2/DE occupations in England by 2030. The investment required is estimated to be about £28 million a year, which the tobacco manufacturers could easily afford to pay from their £900 million profits in the UK—and more than three quarters of the public want the tobacco manufacturers to pay for those measures. Does the Minister agree that targeted investment to tackle high rates of smoking among our most deprived communities is vital to delivering the Government's levelling-up agenda?

Sadly, illicit tobacco is more accessible to children, and as it is cheaper than legally sold tobacco it reduces the incentive for adult smokers to quit. In 2018-19, the total tax revenue lost because of illicit tobacco was estimated by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to be £1.9 billion. The illicit trade is heavily concentrated in the more deprived communities, contributing to higher smoking rates. Addressing that disparity requires tackling both the supply and demand for illicit tobacco in communities where it is endemic.

In the north-east, there have been dedicated multi-stranded programmes of work in place since 2007 to reduce the supply and demand as part of a broader activity to reduce smoking prevalence and improve the

population's health. Such programmes drive a strategic approach to tackling illicit tobacco at local, regional and national level. One programme was described as follows:

"an exemplar of partnership working...and...deserves to be widely disseminated"—

a recommendation supported by the National Audit Office. Unfortunately, that has not yet been possible owing to lack of funding, and the funding in the regions where it does exist is under threat because of cuts to public health budgets. Fresh and the Greater Manchester health and social care partnership have estimated that it would cost approximately £5 million annually to roll it out across England.

As the Minister said at the launch of our report, we need to get HMRC to do more to tackle illicit tobacco. Just £5 million for a highly effective regional programme is peanuts and would return far more in lost revenue than it costs. Will the Minister commit to discussing with HMRC how funding can be found for the illicit tobacco partnership to extend cover to all the regions of England to reduce the use of illicit tobacco, which is endemic in poorer communities in every part of England?

We are delighted that the Minister was able to attend the launch of the report by the APPG. I know how passionate she is about the issue. I look forward to hearing her response to our report and recommendations. I am confident that if the Government can embrace our recommendations in the forthcoming tobacco control plan, we will be well on the way to a smoke-free England by 2030.

Mrs Maria Miller (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I should say that I shall be moving to Front-Bench contributions at 2.35 pm. I suggest an informal five-minute time limit to enable all colleagues to make their contributions. I call Bob Blackman.

1.43 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Miller. I am the co-sponsor of the motion, so I crave your indulgence slightly because I have a rather longer speech than five minutes will allow. It is a pleasure to follow my co-sponsor, the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy). I chair the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health, which published the report on the tobacco control plan yesterday.

We were delighted when my hon. Friend the Minister set out the need for a new control plan last December, and we commissioned Action on Smoking and Health and SPECTRUM, a widely acknowledged scientific research consortium, to put together a report for us on what needed to be done and why. The importance of the ambition is very clear: the chief medical officer, Professor Chris Whitty, recently said that smoking is likely to have killed more people in Britain than the covid-19 pandemic, with more than 70,000 people dying from smoking last year in England alone—and for every person killed by smoking, another 30 live with the serious consequences of smoking-related illnesses. Ending smoking is essential if we are to reduce health inequalities between rich and poor, level up the nation and increase healthy life expectancy by five years, in line with the Government's manifesto commitments.

The smoking rate in my Harrow East constituency is lower than average for England, but there is no room for complacency. More than one in 10 of my constituents smoke, and smoking kills 250 of my constituents every year. In 2018, there were 1,566 smoking-attributable hospital admissions in Harrow alone. Research shows that smokers are likely to need social care a decade earlier than non-smokers because of the impact of smoking-related diseases and disability.

Inequalities in smoking have grown, not shrunk, in recent years. To be smoke free by 2030, we need to reduce smoking by two thirds in only a decade, and by three quarters for smokers in routine and manual occupations. Cancer Research UK has said that, at current rates of decline, we will miss the target by seven years, and by double that for the poorest in society, because there are still 6 million smokers in England. We will achieve a smoke-free 2030 only by motivating more smokers to attempt to quit using the most effective quitting aids, while reducing the number of children and young adults who start smoking.

It is right that the Government brought forward the ambition of the prevention Green Paper, and we need to ensure that bold action is implemented, with appropriate investment. The Health Foundation estimates that a minimum of £1.2 billion is needed to restore public health funding to 2015 levels, and that a further £2.6 billion is needed to level up public health across the country.

The APPG's view is that when it comes to ending smoking, the industry that makes excess profits from the sale of tobacco should pay, as it does in the US. The US's user fee legislation raises \$711 million annually from the tobacco industry; a similar approach could be introduced in the UK, with a statutory smoke-free 2030 fund imposing a targeted tobacco manufacturer profit cap and utility-style price controls in order to raise funds from the industry through a charge-based mechanism on sales volumes. It would not apply just to tobacco, because obviously this is about incentivising the industry to deliver on making smoking obsolete by 2030. It is quite clear that this is more than demonstrated by the market failure that has happened, and we need to get on with it. Will the Minister commit that the APPG recommendations for a "polluter pays" approach will be considered as a funding mechanism for the forthcoming tobacco control plan?

We also need to look at raising the age at which young people can buy cigarettes. Clearly, young people who start smoking continue to smoke into adulthood, so one of the areas that we have explored is raising the age of sale. It was raised from 16 to 18, which produced a 30% reduction in smokers aged 16 to 17 years old. It would be helpful if we could get to a position whereby 18 to 20-year-olds were prevented from smoking, so will the Minister commit to conducting a consultation on raising the age of sale from 18 to 21 and to coming to a decision about whether to go ahead by the end of 2021?

We have been a leader in the tobacco control plan, but obviously the position is that we have set the record. Now that we are free from the European Union, we can make decisions on our own. Will the Minister investigate extending official development assistance funding for the framework convention on tobacco control 2030 project for a further five years?

Finally, the Minister is the lead for the World Health Organisation's FCTC in the Department of Health and Social Care, so will she commit to provide the leadership

in other Government Departments and public authorities that we need to fulfil their legal obligations to prevent tobacco policy from being influenced by the tobacco industry?

I have been able to touch on only four of the recommendations that we have made, and there are 12 in the report. I urge all Members to read the full report and the recommendations. The recommendations are supported not just by the APPG, but by leading health organisations too numerous for me to mention. There is good evidence that the recommendations will work in synergy to drive down smoking rates, and the forthcoming tobacco control plan offers the perfect opportunity to put them in place. I commend our recommendations to the House, and look forward to the reply of my hon. Friend the Minister.

1.50 pm

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Miller. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for having secured this important debate and speaking so eloquently, especially as the Department of Health and Social Care is looking to publish a new tobacco control plan later this year. The forthcoming plan is an enormous opportunity for the Government to cement the UK as a global leader in tobacco harm reduction. Having left the European Union, the Government must—alongside the post-implementation review of the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016—set a clear direction for reducing smoking prevalence and improving public health.

However, if the Government are to achieve their ambition for a smoke-free society by 2030, their forthcoming tobacco control plan must champion the less harmful alternatives to combustible tobacco. In particular, a significant and growing body of scientific evidence shows vaping to be the most effective alternative for adult smokers looking to quit smoking. In their blueprint for better regulation, the UK Vaping Industry Association made a series of recommendations to the Department of Health for consideration when reviewing the tobacco and related products regulations—a process that is already under way. These recommendations, many of which I support, can also be applied to the Government's tobacco control plan.

The first recommendation involves effectively tackling the increasing levels of misinformation, as well as the increasing misperception of the relative harm of e-cigarettes versus combustible tobacco. Action on Smoking and Health data suggests that millions of smokers—more than half of the 6.9 million remaining in the UK—could now be dissuaded from exploring switching to e-cigarettes because of incorrect views or confusion about the harm of e-cigarettes. To combat increasing misinformation, the UKVIA recommends that the Department of Health launch an effective communication strategy. This should include the introduction of approved health claims and switching messages that can be displayed on vape device and e-liquid packaging alongside nicotine health warnings, a proposal similar to those explored by the Governments of Canada and New Zealand.

In addition, it is important that medical professionals at local stop smoking services are sufficiently supported, with clinicians signposted to the latest clinical guidance

[*Mary Glendon*]

and evidence on e-cigarettes. An evidence-based approach to smoking cessation must be adopted consistently by local stop smoking services to support patients in their harm reduction journey. This is critical, considering the upcoming trials in NHS A&E departments. The forthcoming tobacco control plan should also make provisions for a review of the regulation of nicotine in e-cigarettes, to better understand the role nicotine plays in allowing e-cigarettes to be a satisfying alternative for adult smokers wishing to make the switch away from smoking. For them to compete with combustible cigarettes and provide a satisfactory alternative for those looking to switch, they must provide a comparably satisfying nicotine experience. It is the toxic by-products of combustion, not the nicotine, that are responsible for smoking-related death and disease.

Understanding the alternatives to combustible cigarettes and making a clear distinction between smoking and vaping is critical to our smoke-free ambitions and changing misconceptions. Our all-party parliamentary group for vaping made several recommendations in our report on vaping in workplaces and public places. These are endorsed by the UKVIA and, if implemented, would support adult smokers in their transition to less harmful alternatives and give those who have already made the switch the best chance of sticking at it. I can provide the Minister with a copy of that report, if she so wishes. My late husband, Ray, is an example of such a switcher: having smoked from the age of nine with a couple of interludes, he made the switch to vaping several years ago, and was never separated from what he called his “pipe”. I might add that he did not die of a smoking-related illness.

Finally, I turn to another opportunity to enact the meaningful regulatory change to support smoking cessation. The Government are currently considering the submissions made to the consultation on the review of the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016. Like many others, I eagerly await the publication of the Department’s response, which has already been delayed from May 2021 until later this year. It is hoped that the Department of Health and Social Care will continue to take an evidence-based approach to the regulations and listen to the experts. The TRPR review can help shape the UK’s approach to tobacco harm reduction considerably and can significantly support the next tobacco control plan. I look forward to the Government’s response to the tobacco and related products regulations review and the publication of the tobacco control plan. I hope that they make the most of these unique opportunities to support adult smokers in their transition to a less harmful alternative.

1.55 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): It is good to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Miller. I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and the APPG on securing this debate. I declare an interest: I am an honorary life governor of Cancer Research UK.

Smoking is, of course, a significant cause of ill health and death in this country, and the Government should be congratulated on the progress they have made to reduce the incidence of smoking, but the rate of reduction is sadly still not enough. A recent Cancer Research UK report found that, at current quit rates, the UK will not

reach its smoke-free target until 2037 at the earliest—seven years late. To meet the target, quit rates will need to increase by some 40% over the next 10 years. In other words, we are at risk of enduring several more years of heartbreak for families, strain on the NHS and avoidable deaths—a pattern that can, and of course should, be broken.

Three months ago, I was fortunate enough to be selected for a Westminster Hall debate on this issue. I made the point then that the tobacco control plan was our chance to break that pattern. Now is our opportunity, and if we are to seize it, the control plan must be ambitious. I would like briefly to propose three courses that I believe should form part of the plan’s recommendations.

First, the key issue with smoking is, of course, the smoke. An evidence-based policy that seeks to assist the 7 million cigarette smokers in the UK must put forward alternative products to combustible tobacco. Continuing to raise awareness of those products is key, so I suggest that the plan should facilitate the use of cigarette pack inserts and online communications as ways of reaching smokers directly. E-cigarettes and other alternatives to combustible tobacco save lives, and we should make sure that that message reaches every smoker in Britain.

My second point is about access to those alternative products. E-cigarettes have been hugely important in the fight against smoking, and I commend NHS England for promoting them to smokers. The strategy is based on evidence, and has a proven positive effect on the health of the nation. In 2017, more than 50,000 smokers who would otherwise have carried on smoking stopped with the aid of a vaping product.

The tobacco control plan should advise what else can and should be used to assist smokers to quit, in addition to e-cigarettes. That is crucial when we consider that, for all the impact vaping has had, 50% of people who have tried e-cigarettes go back to smoking. We should not limit our response to one weapon. Nicotine pouches, heated tobacco and other emerging products are there to be used, and their efficacy and utility should be the subject of urgent study. The tobacco control plan should embrace the new products and allow for more measures for companies to promote.

Thirdly—this relates to my previous point—the plan should contemplate legislation for a new robust regulatory framework that can cover all the products within the market. We should not allow our focus to be narrowed to e-cigarettes alone. New products are entering the market, and the UK must be open to the kinds of innovations that save lives.

I have two brief final points that I wish to make, to which I hope the Minister will respond. First, there is a slight lack of clarity about whether the new plan will take account of the conclusions of the post-implementation review of the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016 and the Standardised Packaging of Tobacco Products Regulations 2015. On Monday, I received a written reply from the Minister, in answer to a written question, which said:

“Evidence gathered from this Review will be considered as part of the development of the new TCP.”

I hope the Minister will confirm that all the evidence from the review will be fully reflected in the plan.

Secondly, I return to a point I made in the previous Westminster Hall debate—that is, the opposition of the World Health Organisation, which has called for a ban on reduced risk alternatives to combustible tobacco. To listen to that call would run counter to the success in smoking reduction that has been achieved in the UK, and I strongly urge the Government to stand up to the WHO at COP9 and to advocate a change in policy from it.

2 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP) [V]: It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Miller, and lovely to see you in the Chair. I refer Members to my registered interests. I am the chairman of the Gallaher charitable trust, which was formed after the closure of a tobacco company in Northern Ireland.

Let me turn to the subject of the debate. Facts are stubborn things. We all appreciate that, and we must ensure that any actions we take to address facts are based on evidence. I am a non-smoker. I do not encourage people to smoke. I do not want people to smoke, and I recognise the impact that smoking has on people's lives, but like many substances, tobacco is a lawful product, and I will not tell other adults what they should do or not do with lawful products.

Tobacco is one of the most highly regulated products and the most highly taxed product in the UK—about 90% of the cost of an average packet of cigarettes is taxation. That tax disadvantages poorer households in my constituency and across this country more than the most affluent. The UK tax regime is designed to control tobacco and the sale of tobacco, but it has had the opposite impact. It has driven up the price of the product and encouraged smuggling of illicit product. Many people have made the wrong choice to purchase that illegal product. Therefore, under the current mechanism, everyone is a loser. It is not working.

On 2 June—just nine days ago—the Northern Ireland Border Force, at the real border in Northern Ireland, which is the land border, seized 4.4 tonnes of illegal tobacco, which, if sold, would have stolen from you, Mrs Miller, and me and our taxpaying constituents £7.24 million in unpaid duty. Tobacco control measures ought not to be about trophy taxation or gimmicks, but should be primarily about reducing consumption by good education and good enforcement, and secondly about minimising crime by directing resources to the tackling of criminality associated with activities related to illegal tobacco.

None of the control measures addresses that issue seriously. Government policy has failed to do that, and I believe that today's proposals fail to do it. Instead, they are about unnecessary tax and minor tinkering such as putting another written warning on the cigarette stick. When the cigarette is in a person's mouth, it is too late to put such a warning to them.

HMRC already generates £11.8 billion in tax on tobacco, yet it loses almost £2 billion in revenue annually in illegal sales of tobacco product. That is because the control plan is one-dimensional and, frankly, stupid. It does not work. Since 2000, tobacco smuggling has stolen from you, Mrs Miller, and me and our taxpaying constituents revenue of—wait for it—£47.2 billion. That has been stolen from us by tobacco smugglers. Surely we can have a plan that, instead of punitively taxing a

lawful product more, lets consumers see that money being spent on tackling this international, multibillion-pound crime of racketeering. Imagine a control plan that, over the next 10 years, would deliver £40 billion in revenue to hon. Members' constituencies. Imagine what we could do for hospitals, schools and the defence budget. Imagine what we could do with the overseas aid budget.

I want the Government to be creative and to stand up to people who say, "Just put on more tax," because clearly that does not work. Frankly, the control plan will not save one life from the effects of smoking, will not stop one smoker smoking, and will not stop one smuggler bringing in illegal products. If the Government want, unintentionally, to fill the pockets of organised crime gangs, undermine legitimate businesses and ruin small shops throughout the country, they should stick with the plan, but they should not be smug about it, because the plan is not working.

2.6 pm

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your strong and stable chairmanship, Mrs Miller. It is a great privilege to speak in the debate, and I thank the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for introducing it.

We are debating a vital issue, and the UK can be No. 1 in the world for its approach on reducing smoking and the harm it causes. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for his input into the report and his earlier contribution, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) for his apposite remarks, which I am sure the Minister took on board. I also commend the Minister herself, and the Government, for their approach. I would say that she is mistress of the brief, as we have had many conversations and interactions through correspondence, and there is no doubt that she gets all the issues to do with smoking cessation devices and the tobacco control plan.

The industry in the UK seems to be aligned with the Government's objectives on reducing smoking, as Philip Morris, British American Tobacco and many of the other firms recognise that this is the end of the game—it is the end of smoking in the United Kingdom, even if that might not be the case in certain far eastern countries, in Africa or elsewhere. The companies accept their responsibilities, and it would be of no surprise to them—they would not be disappointed about this—that they needed to make contributions to a fund to help to secure the goal of a smoke-free Britain, which should certainly be firmly on the table.

I speak as chair of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology and a member of the all-party group on e-cigarettes, and it seems to me that we are in an era in which we must be driven by data and evidence. There can be no doubt that the data is completely one way on vaping devices, electronic nicotine delivery systems and all sorts of other technologies to help smoking cessation. Vaping, using an electronic device or even using snus is so much safer than smoking. Smoke is the killer; tobacco is the killer. I urge the Minister not to do what the European Union has done, or what the World Health Organisation seems to be doing, by mangling the two issues. Tobacco is one thing; smoking cessation devices, which in most cases contain nicotine, are a completely different thing, with a completely different scale of harm and risk.

[Adam Afriyie]

I recognise that other hon. Members will talk about various recommendations from the all-party group on smoking and health, so let me briefly focus on three. Recommendation 5 says that smokers should be advised annually of their options for quitting. Reminding people that they can choose an alternative to smoking is an important step forward. If we ask any smoker—I was a smoker for a few years, some time ago—“Would you like your children to smoke?” they all say no. It is clear that no one really wants to smoke, no matter what their brain says about dopamine levels. In that scenario, I think it a good idea to remind people annually that there are alternatives. Nicotine patches are not the only alternatives. Those have some efficacy, but, to be frank, very little for the money that is paid for them. People should certainly consider vaping devices.

The second recommendation I draw to hon. Members’ attention is No. 6, which is support for those with mental health challenges. It also says

“for those living in social housing”,

but I will broaden that slightly to those on lower incomes and in lower-paid jobs, among whom there is a far higher incidence of smoking than in the general population. There is work to be done to focus the efforts in those areas.

Recommendation 11 is also important, because there is still an ambiguity about whether vaping is a smoking cessation device or just another way of inhaling nicotine. It is clear from the evidence that it is a smoking cessation device that works, and it is twice as effective—if not more—at helping smokers to cease smoking as the other available treatments. Let us dig into the pockets of the tobacco companies—they are actually happy for their pockets to be dug into—and use that money to publish the relative health benefits of vaping, e-cigarettes and other alternatives to smoking.

Windsor is a lovely seat, and thankfully we have slightly lower smoking rates than the rest of the country, but we still have perhaps 200 or 300 people a year dying of smoking-related diseases, as well as all sorts of other challenges.

In conclusion, we are first in the world for genomics, for the vaccine roll-out, and for FinTech and financial services. Let us make this another one: let us be the first in the world to implement a tobacco control plan that completely takes on board the wonderful innovation of vaping devices, e-cigarettes and all the other technology, and let us not mangle it together in a tobacco directive.

2.11 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Miller. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing this important debate to consider smoking cessation.

I will start with a few figures, just to show why this issue is important to me. It is very difficult to get constituency figures, as I am sure colleagues have found, so we are looking at local authority areas. The covid-19 pandemic recovery makes it particularly important to set out an ambitious national strategy to tackle smoking and to address, once and for all, the tragic health inequalities that smoking causes.

In Gateshead, 17.1% of the population smokes, compared with 15.3% across the north-east. That figure is well above the England average of 13.9%. It is estimated that smoking costs Gateshead around £48.3 million a year through smoking-related health and care needs, lost productivity and premature death. Between 2016 and 2018, there were 1,227 deaths attributable to smoking in Gateshead, which is significantly higher than the per population average for England. Between 2016 and 2018 in Gateshead, there were 515 deaths from lung cancer and 412 deaths from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. More than 80% of those disease cases were caused by smoking. Between 2016 and 2018, there were, sadly, 29 stillbirths in Gateshead, which is above the per population average for England. Smoking during pregnancy has been shown to double the risk of stillbirth.

Although adult smoking rates have declined in recent years, inequalities in smoking rates between different groups have remained stubbornly high. The next tobacco control plan must go further in providing additional quick support for smokers in communities and groups with high rates of smoking. That is essential if we are to tackle the health inequalities in our society after covid-19, and indeed before that time comes.

I support wholeheartedly the recommendation of the APPG that tobacco manufacturers should pay the costs—on the “polluter pays” principle—of creating a smoke-free 2030 fund and helping to meet that target. Indeed, it is absolutely essential that we achieve that target.

Smoking during pregnancy is the leading modifiable risk factor for poor birth outcomes, including stillbirth, miscarriage and pre-term birth. The Government’s ambition is to reduce smoking in pregnancy to 6% by 2022, but with a rate of 10.4% in 2019-20, that target is unlikely to be met. National rates of smoking in pregnancy have only declined by 0.6 percentage points since 2015, although some regions—such as the north-east, I am glad to say—have seen much larger declines. Clearly, there is much to be done.

Ensuring that pregnancies are smoke-free and that there is greater consistency across the country must be a major focus of the next tobacco control plan, if we are to deliver a smoke-free start for every child by 2030 and give them the best start in life. The highest rates of smoking among pregnant women are in young pregnant women. Nearly a third of pregnant women in England under the age of 20 are smoking during early pregnancy and at delivery, compared to around one in 10 pregnant women overall. As well as being more likely to smoke in the first place, younger mothers are less likely to quit prior to conception, whereas older mothers are more likely to have quit when planning a pregnancy. As such, driving down rates of smoking in the younger population should have a rapid impact on rates of smoking in pregnancy.

A woman’s circumstances also greatly affect the likelihood that she will smoke in pregnancy, with smoking in pregnancy concentrated among those who live in an area of deprivation or high smoking prevalence, those who live with a smoker, those who smoked through a previous pregnancy, and younger women.

There is so much more we could say on this issue, but the key thing is that we need to consider ideas such as financial incentive schemes. Those that have been implemented in Greater Manchester and south Tyneside

are highly effective at reducing rates of smoking in pregnancy among women from deprived backgrounds. They are also cost-effective, with an estimated return on investment of £4 for every £1 invested.

To finish, can the Minister assure me that the next tobacco control plan will include a national strategy for reducing rates of smoking in pregnancy, learning the lessons from the areas where the greatest declines in smoking in pregnancy have occurred? Will she commit to introducing a national financial incentive scheme to achieve the aim set out in the tobacco control plan? Will she also commit to consulting on raising the age for the sale of tobacco to 21, to reduce the number of young people who become addicted to smoking?

2.17 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Miller, as others have said.

I also follow others in thanking the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for securing this debate. I also thank Action on Smoking and Health for providing a briefing for it. I am conscious that most of this debate and this documentation relates to England. There are some aspects that apply to Scotland; indeed, I hope they will be replicated in Scotland and I will do my best to encourage some action to be taken, because some actions are cross-border, if not universal. It is from that perspective that I come to this debate.

As others have said, or confessed to, I do not smoke; I never have smoked and I have discouraged my family from so doing. I come from a generation in which youngsters, such as myself, who were quite interested in sport were told by Jim Watt, the boxer, that he could be caught by a right but never with a fag in his hand. I think that Scotland would be a better place if we had had similar efforts on alcohol, but we only concentrated on smoking. That is where we are coming from. We have made progress from the time of my childhood in the '60s and '70s, but there is still a considerable distance to travel, especially when we find smoking rooted in the poorest areas, where there are already underlying health vulnerabilities, and indeed in other sections of our society. There is considerable work still to be done.

The question is this: what action is to be taken? It is not a question of what action per se, because action has to be taken; it is more about the extent and calibration of the action that is taken. I say that because I wish to ensure that the social progress that we need to make, and want to make, in tackling smoking and the social ill that it does not come at a cost to other communities or, indeed, in the form of other aspects that cause harm in our community.

I come from the perspective of having served as Justice Secretary in Scotland for seven and a half years. I established a serious organised crime taskforce. As other speakers have mentioned, there is a link between illegal tobacco and serious organised crime. Not only is there a link between them; it also turns into other harms that plague our communities. In my interlude between Parliaments, I chaired the Scottish Anti-Illicit Trade Group, which sought to bring together all organisations involved in law enforcement and keeping communities safe, at whatever level and in whatever jurisdiction. Indeed, it also brought in business, because a problem shared is a problem halved.

I want simply to highlight that cost loading has limits. That is not to say that there should not be cost loading. It is quite correct that the "polluter pays" aspect should be considered. I certainly argued that as Justice Secretary in the case of alcohol, and that has been taken up. Equally, to what extent do we load it? I am no free market capitalist, but I recognise, as did Adam Smith, that there has to be some regulation and that we have to ensure that there is some control over the market, because we know that in other aspects of society, if we close down supply, we find it simply results in aspects coming around in other ways.

I am not here to make a special plea for big tobacco. I would not seek to do that. They can fight their own battles, but there is an effect on others. As was mentioned by the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), small grocers—people who pay their taxes—are affected. They employ staff, provide for their communities, work on limited margins and yet they lose out. The tragedy we face is that people view illicit tobacco as simply ripping off big tobacco or, even more likely, ripping off the taxman—they have no love for him either—but the reality is that they are harming their communities and those who pay their taxes and work hard. They are harming their families and, indeed, their neighbours who work in and depend on employment in local stores, whether they purchase from a pop-up Facebook page or from a white van man.

Action has to be taken, and I support calls for an improvement in what we do to tackle the illicit trade. Much more could be done at a governmental level on both sides of the border. In terms of today's debate, I welcome progress and fully support what has been called for here today. I simply emphasise that we have to ensure that we get the calibration right. In seeking to tackle harm within our communities, we must keep it proportionate and at a level that will not be counterproductive, because we do not want to make further progress in tackling tobacco that at the same time results in fuelling organised crime and in other aspects being abused. It is therefore a matter of balance.

2.23 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab) [V]: Thank you for calling me to speak in this important discussion, Mrs Miller. It is a pleasure to speak here under such a distinguished Chair. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who secured this important debate.

I should declare an interest as a member of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health. We have made fantastic strides in this country to reduce smoking, but black and minority ethnic communities are being left behind. Rates of smoking among Asians are declining more slowly than the national average, so I want to see more done to empower them to choose to go smoke-free. One size fits all does not work anywhere. When I chaired the health scrutiny taskforce on smoking cessation as a councillor in 2003, we knew that differential outcomes were inescapable while we did not offer a range of options. Now, nearly 20 years on, we have gone backwards. Government money for cessation services has dried up.

The report that our APPG launched yesterday says that polluters should pay. That is a principle we all recognise, and I agree with it. Some tobacco companies

[Mr Virendra Sharma]

have been clear that they will fund smoking cessation services for local authorities at this time of massive pressure on local health budgets. I assume that that would be welcome. The real costs of losing smoking cessation services are the years of good health lost, and there is a range of lower-risk options out there right now. Any of them is better than smoking.

I come from a family of non-smokers—I do not smoke and have never done so. Personally, I do not see the appeal, but clearly people are addicted, and addiction needs treatment, not moralising. Three million people now vape, and nearly all of them are former smokers. That is 3 million fewer people choosing a less harmful option. This is good news, but BAME communities, and people with manual jobs and without university degrees, are about two and a half times more likely to smoke than their white, office-working and university-educated colleagues. That has to be addressed, and it has to be part of our future plan to support everyone we can to be smoke-free.

Emerging opportunities, such as tobacco-free nicotine pouches and “heat not burn” products, still present a health risk, but it is less than that of cigarettes. I want my constituents, and anyone who wants to smoke less, to know about the opportunities to improve their health. A range of options make it easier to quit eventually, as we noted in the health scrutiny taskforce on smoking cessation. We need an ambitious tobacco control plan that recognises the wins vaping made possible and legislates to make them possible again with new products. “Heat not burn” products and tobacco-free nicotine pouches will play a role, just as vaping has persuaded more people to quit smoking or to move to less harmful alternatives.

In Asian communities, we need to offer alternatives to chewing tobacco and betel. There are terrible statistics about the rates of oral cancers, and anything that reduces those rates will save lives. Pretending that millions of people will give up smoking just because we hope they will do so will get us nowhere, but working to move people down a ladder of lower-risk products really would save lives.

Thank you, Mrs Miller, for giving me the opportunity to contribute my few thoughts.

2.28 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Miller. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and the APPG for securing this important debate.

I must first announce my interest in the debate as a former smoker. I grew up in the '80s, and most of my peer group smoked. I can recall purchasing cigarettes at the local sweet shop, which was happy to accommodate the limited budget of schoolchildren by allowing us to buy our cigarettes individually. I came from a household in which there were adult smokers, and for me to take up the habit seemed almost inevitable. I have fought a lifelong struggle against smoking to kick the habit, but it was not until I was pregnant with my first son that I felt able to give up. Although I have returned to it once or twice, I am pleased to say that I have now not smoked for more than a decade.

The tobacco industry's excessive profits are built on establishing an addiction in people like me in their teens, who unfortunately will often not succeed in stopping before it kills them. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) spoke about the figures in Gateshead, which is one of my local authorities. Smoking is estimated to cost my other local authority, South Tyneside, about £37.9 million every year. That is through smoking-related health and care needs, lost productivity and premature deaths.

I support the recommendations made by the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health for a comprehensive strategy. It calls for additional regulation and targeted investment, with the full engagement of health and care services and a shared mission to end smoking. The communities where smoking is still part of the daily fabric of life need investment to ensure that the support is there, particularly for those with high levels of addiction. Services need to be much closer to the people who need them—in social housing, mental health services, children's centres and LGBT service settings. Wherever the need is greatest, we should make the support available. I agree with the APPG that it is not the taxpayer but highly profitable tobacco companies that should foot the bill for these important services. Funding is needed now—we cannot wait—so does the Minister agree that the Government should include provision for a smoke-free 2030 fund in the health and social care Bill and bring this measure into force in 2022?

Funding and investment in communities with the greatest need are important to help more smokers to quit, but we also need to prevent young people from starting. Reducing the availability of tobacco to young people can help to achieve that, and existing laws on age of sale need to be fully enforced. Although retailers need a licence to sell alcohol, no licence is required for the sale of tobacco products. Therefore enforcement action can be slower and more complex and, ultimately, have less impact on retailers that break the law than would be the case if a licensing scheme were in place. Data from both YouGov and ASH, which I thank for their help with my contribution, show that retailers and the public support the introduction of a licence for retailers selling tobacco products.

Introducing a licence need not be costly. The tracking and tracing system is already in place for tobacco retailers. As a result, there would be minimum extra burden for retailers and wholesalers in turning it into a public health licensing scheme; there would be little additional administrative cost. At the same time, it would equip local authorities with more effective powers to protect their local communities from those who sell tobacco products to children. Will the Minister commit to establishing a public health licensing scheme for tobacco retailers to make it easier to prevent under-age and illicit sales of tobacco in order to further protect children from taking up smoking?

The NHS has committed to supporting more smokers through the NHS long-term plan, but as with all plans, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. With all the pressures in the system right now, there is a risk that the roll-out is uneven, with smokers who need support missing out. Integrated care systems are responsible for putting in place prevention plans for their populations, and those plans need to meet the needs of smokers and ensure that the commitments in the long-term plan are

delivered on. Will the Minister ensure that all ICS prevention plans are published and include as an objective achieving a smoke-free 2030? Finally, I hope that the Minister will consider tasking NHS England with establishing an operational plan to support all smokers in primary care and community mental health settings.

2.33 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Mrs Miller. I say a big thank you to my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for their doughty leadership on this issue, for their work in the APPG on smoking and health and for securing this debate, which has been a particularly good one. The points that my hon. Friend made about regional disadvantage and the way in which that links to every indicator of social deprivation and then to smoking were really good ones. It was very interesting and pleasing to hear about the work that has been done in the north-east about closing the gap. That, to me, served as an endorsement of regional approaches and, beyond that, sub-regional approaches, which I think we have lost in recent years and which I hope, through this plan, we can rebuild.

On the regional theme, my hon. Friend was joined by a fine array of north-east MPs, who surround me here—I did feel rather out of place. My hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) made a really strong and compelling case for alternatives such as e-cigarettes and vaping. The thing I took away from that was how unequivocal it was. There is a real danger of being squeamish and equivocal about these new models, and I do not think that serves anyone. That is a theme that I will come to shortly.

That theme was shared by the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones). I agreed with the points he made about the new regulatory framework and the regulations. The review gives us a real chance to look at these things, so I hope we will hear some more from the Minister on that. Similarly, the hon. Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) talked about data and evidence. We have a common goal: we want fewer people to smoke and die. It behoves us, therefore, to follow the data and evidence about how to do that and not to be squeamish when they point one way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) made very poignant points about baby loss and smoking during pregnancy. She and other hon. Members will have heard some of the reasons why women smoke in pregnancy, which include perceptions about having a smaller baby and family traditions of doing so. The reasons are complicated and various, so we need ground-level, peer-led services to tackle that. Much of the content of the Leadsom review will help us in that space, so I hope to hear a commitment to that from the Minister.

My hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) talked about regional inequalities and made a point about having services nearer to people. I will return to that shortly. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) also talked about inequalities—this time around ethnicity. We should not lose that in this debate. He also talked about localised approaches by service leaders who know their communities and have effective ways to reach different people. I think that is the whole battle here.

The hon. Member for Harrow East spoke with characteristic plainness, but we needed a bit of that. The 2030 target is a stretching one. At the current rate, we are seven years behind, but in the poorest communities it is 14. That means that we need big ideas. The document that he co-authored through the APPG has big ideas, and I will touch on a couple shortly.

I agree with the points that the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) made about organised crime. Again, that can form part of a tobacco control plan. I think there is complete political consensus about that. I do not agree that increasing the cost has not been an effective way of reducing smoking. Over two decades, it absolutely has. I also do not agree that tobacco control plans over the past couple of decades have not had an impact. Clearly, they have, and I will touch on that shortly.

For me, smoking is the ultimate equalities issue. It accounts for half the difference in premature death between the best and the worst off, so if levelling up is to be the theme of this Parliament, post covid, it seems that smoking is a very good place to start. I have similar statistics to those of my colleagues. In Nottingham, where I live, smoking rates are well above the national average: 20.9% of our community smokes, compared with an England average of 13.9%; and 16.5% of pregnant women are smokers when their baby is born, compared with 10% nationally. The cost to us is about £75 million every year through health and care needs, lost productivity and premature death, so tackling this is a really big prize for a community such as mine.

We should be confident that we are building on a platform of two decades of good progress on smoking cessation. Under Labour and Conservative Governments, we have implemented a comprehensive approach to tobacco control, including banning smoking in public places and cars, point-of-sale display bans and standardised packaging. All that has contributed to driving down smoking rates and discouraging young people from starting. We are here in a spirit of cross-party co-operation, and we are in lockstep in support of the goal of being smoke free by 2030.

I very much welcome the APPG's report, which sets out the bold steps that we ought to take if we are to achieve this extremely challenging ambition. Among other things—this is always a very good place to start—it highlights the strong public support for that ambition: three quarters of the public are in favour, and that includes majority support for key recommendations from voters of all political parties. There is a clear mandate for action. I want to take the opportunity to thank Action on Smoking and Health, both for its work as the secretariat to the APPG and for the support it has given me in developing policy.

In this debate and the one we had a few months ago, colleagues have given the Minister plenty of content for the new control plan—in fact, probably a whole control plan and a bit more—but I want to offer a few points myself. First, the focus must now be on inequalities. Yes, this is a national goal and effort, but to make the most progress, we need locally led, community-sensitive smoking cessation services. The evidence for those is very strong indeed. It is a source of sadness that the Government have lopped away at the public health grant to the point that it has reduced by more than 40% since 2013, and those cuts have of course fallen disproportionately on poorer communities. If we are wondering why progress

[Alex Norris]

is stubborn in those areas, that is a significant reason, so I hope to hear a commitment from the Minister today to restore funds lost, with a particular focus on need. The report helpfully suggests an industry fund to cover the cost. Frankly, we should never have disinvested in the first place—cutting smoking cessation services is the falsest of false economies—but if the Government come up with an alternative along those lines, we will of course be supportive.

I want briefly to mention raising the age of sale to 21. We know that the best way to reduce smoking is never to start and we know that young people who start smoking generally tend to regret doing so. Seventy per cent. of adult smokers in England want to quit and an even bigger proportion—three quarters—regret ever having started, which makes an interesting point about raising the age of sale to 21. One of the things that surprised me in the report was the level of public support for that proposal—I did not think it would be as popular as it is—so the recommendation of at least a public consultation is a sound one. I would be interested to hear the Minister's views on that, because it would be a very interesting public debate to have.

Turning to e-cigarettes, vaping and similar, this must be a feature of the tobacco control plan. I hope that the Minister and the Government more generally, via their role in the World Health Organisation, can push harder for stronger and clearer messages, based on the data and evidence, at the WHO level. I looked at the WHO website yesterday, and while I fancy myself as quite a smart guy—I might hide it well sometimes—I could not fathom what it was trying to tell me. It was incredible. That sort of equivocation makes it really hard for people thinking about alternatives to know whether they are supposed to go ahead or not.

I always rely on the Public Health England position in 2018 that these products represent a 95% reduction in harm, which seems a pretty good place to start. The APPG report says that in 2017 they helped 50,000 people to stop smoking and that concerns around children's starting have not materialised. The 2017 tobacco control plan included a promise that:

"The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency...will ensure that the route to medicinal regulation for e-cigarette products is fit for purpose so that a range of safe and effective products can potentially be made available for NHS prescription." This has not happened; it now must happen, and I hope it is a main feature of the new plan. The Government should also seek to regulate this market through the regulations review, to ensure that it promotes quality, safety and protection of young people.

Finally, the 2030 target is a vital and unifying goal, but we cannot wait until 31 December 2030 to look at the stats and see whether we have made it. We know it is a stretching target and we know we are currently not on course, hence the need for a new plan as soon as possible, but that plan has to have interim goals so that we know whether we are making enough progress. Again, the APPG report made some very good suggestions on that.

The report also makes strong recommendations on the data we do not currently have, which is a particular challenge in the case of people living with mental health conditions, who we know have disproportionately high

rates of smoking. Data is collected in primary care on smoking status and mental health, but not routinely analysed. Smoking status data can also be collected through the mental health services dataset, but this is not done routinely. As a result, our data for folks with serious mental illness and others in secondary mental health services is not good. Reliable data is an important part of being sure that we are making the progress that we want to in this area, so I hope we will hear a commitment from the Minister on interim targets and better data.

To conclude, if we want a big public policy win—and goodness, this is about as big as they come—whether it is early intervention we are into or reducing inequalities, this is a major chance to make a step change. We need a plan, we need a good plan, and we very much look forward to playing our role in that process.

Mrs Maria Miller (in the Chair): May I remind everyone that only Members physically present can intervene on the Minister?

2.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Miller. I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this important debate. I also thank everybody for the constructive tone in which we have discussed what is an incredibly important subject and for the acknowledgement that if we are to meet what is a very stretching target, we will all need to work together.

The hon. Member for City of Durham has highlighted the excellent work being done through the smoke-free programme in County Durham to drive rates in her area down, and I know that she fully supports that. As she alluded to, the aim is to reach 5% by 2025 through the regional tobacco control plan that Fresh drives forward, but since the launch of that in 2005, the north-east has seen a massive—47%—drop in smoking rates. I know that those rates are still above the national average, but I wanted to highlight how much I agree with that localised approach to delivery, making sure that we can focus services on those living in the local area.

I congratulate people on their successes so far, but as several right hon. and hon. Members have said, we cannot be complacent. Smoking rates at the time of delivery are among the lowest the country has ever seen, and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has a relatively low rate in his area. I appreciate the passion shown through the cross-party work that has taken place to bring together these recommendations, because, as many have highlighted, one of the big challenges is the variation—across different groups in our society, but also across different regions of the country. If we are going to target those with higher incidence, we are going to have to accept that some areas will probably need more help than others.

We need to work together, and yesterday I was incredibly pleased to go to the launch of this report. I found the speech by the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) incredibly poignant. I could not agree more: specialist cessation to help young mothers quit is so important, and the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) has

said that it was that point in her life that was pivotal in helping her make that decision. Yesterday, we listened to a respiratory consultant who said that she ran out of her office and downstairs to speak to a young mother who was pregnant with twins, to try to get her to stop smoking. I do hope that mother was able to quit, and I assure hon. Members that this is a particular focus of mine. I have already spoken to the chief medical officer about the new Office for Health Promotion making smoking, and particularly smoking in pregnancy, a real focus. As I said yesterday, we get more bang for our buck here: not only do we help Mum but, in this case, we helped twins—that is three people—and as I have seen through some fantastic smoking cessation work in Bolton, we often get a partner, a mother, or someone who is supporting Mum to quit as well. That helps everybody to move forward.

The report and its recommendations are excellent, and I have listened with interest to the remarks made by right hon. and hon. Members today. Smoking prevalence is at an all-time low—just under 14%, and almost half the rate it was back in 2002—and it is right to celebrate where we have come to, but it is also right to say that we have a long way to go. The continued support through stop smoking services across England has been pivotal: since 1990, these services have stopped 4.7 million people smoking. That is more people quitting than the combined populations of Birmingham, Greater Manchester and Leeds, which is quite a remarkable achievement.

Smoking is linked to half a million hospital admissions each year, so the role that the NHS and charities play in helping smokers quit is also essential. The NHS long-term plan commits to supporting smokers admitted to hospital to quit, as well as pregnant smokers—pregnant mums—and their partners. It also commits to helping long-term users of specialist mental health and learning disability services, and we are ensuring that there is sufficient training, with challenge groups making sure that people get the right interventions and the right help when they intersect with these services. Funded early-implementer sites and services are also being stood up, because we cannot be complacent and we cannot wait for these timelines. I heard strongly that people want interim targets, and we will look at that in the strategy. It is important that we try to keep on track and ensure that we keep our focus on 5%.

Smoking is responsible for an estimated 75,000 deaths in England each year. That is unacceptable because it does not just affect the individual; families and everybody around them also suffer. As many hon. Members pointed out, it has a substantial financial impact on the country, as well as a health and emotional impact. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) said, we have to go at things hard if we are to see that success.

I assure everyone that we are considering alternative products in the plan in so far as they are alternatives. Ultimately, we want people to quit, but as the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) said just a few moments ago, the indication is that e-cigarettes, for example, are 95% better than smoking, so let us be sensible about how we take people on this journey. My hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie) will be interested to hear that, although snus is currently banned under the regulations, we are undertaking a review and will consider the evidence base.

The Government will publish the new tobacco control plan, which will set out how we achieve this, and I am pushing hard to ensure that the strategy is published as soon as possible; I am ambitious to try to publish ahead of the recess in July. However, as I am sure all right hon. and hon. Members are aware, new data on smoking prevalence will be released in July and I want to have time to ensure that the plan takes appropriate, targeted action on that data. Anecdotal evidence causes me some concern that we may have seen individuals taking up smoking. The new plan, which will expand on the success of the 2017 plan, builds momentum to support communities and groups where rates are not falling enough. As I say, I am exploring many of the issues we have covered to guarantee that the new plan will be bold enough for smoke-free 2030.

We know that reductions in smoking at a national level mask the significant health inequalities that many right hon. and hon. Members have spoken about. Smoking remains very high in certain areas of the country, particularly in deprived areas and among communities who can least afford the financial effects—as if anyone can afford the health effects. For example, prevalence in Blackpool is nearly 24%; in Richmond, it is down at 8%.

Adam Afriyie: I am encouraged by the Minister's words. Will she confirm that she sees this as part of the levelling-up agenda? Given that particular regions and social groups have more of a challenge than others, it seems to me that it collides well with the Prime Minister's levelling-up agenda, certainly in terms of health inequality.

Jo Churchill: Indeed I do. Actually, the levelling-up agenda and our manifesto commitment to ensure five more healthy life years must be driven by achieving the targets we have set ourselves. Smoking has such a direct correlation with other illnesses. My right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West mentioned his interest with Cancer Research UK, and we know about the link to cancer, but there is also a link to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease as well as other respiratory challenges and so on. As I say, a disproportionate burden is borne by those disadvantaged families and communities.

I thank the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) for making an interesting point. I assure him that we are focused on the need to make these interventions local. The local directors of public health and PHE drive plans in localities. I would like to think that we have taken, and can take, much learning from the successful local interventions of the past 18 months, such as with the vaccination programme. There are also clever uses of technology, where we have prompted people to take a vaccination. That might be interesting to look at in connection with recommendation 11, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor alluded—I think it was him—requiring people to be prompted annually. They might look at that particular behaviour in order to modify it.

I could not agree more with the person who said that data saves lives—indeed, it does. The more we understand about the data held across the NHS, the more we can use it effectively to target interventions and to ensure that people get not only the right treatment but the right care, at the right point on their life's journey.

[Jo Churchill]

In the new plan, we will ensure that we have a strong focus to drive down rates across the whole country, ensuring that they are level to where rates are the lowest, because everybody deserves to live in an area where we have targeted smoking rates and are achieving success. For too long, the harms from smoking have hit those areas that already face challenges. One in 10 babies is born to a mother who smokes. It is estimated that one in five new mothers smokes in Kingston upon Hull, compared with one in 50 in west London. It is those disparities that we need to tackle.

We must also close the gap seen among smokers with mental health conditions and smokers in routine and manual occupations. Could we be cleverer? Could we work in workplaces, for example? It is vital we continue to support interventions that make the most difference, helping people to cease smoking and encouraging them to move to less harmful products.

Liz Twist: We have not had much time to talk about mental health in any detail. Will the Minister ensure that funding is found to deliver the original NHS long-term plan commitment to provide tobacco dependence treatment to all smokers accessing secondary mental health services?

Jo Churchill: If I have time, I will come on to that—I will try to speed up.

Many Members will be pleased to know that, within the plan, we will recommit to our evidenced approach to e-cigarettes. The products certainly have a role in supporting smokers to quit, and we will ensure that they remain accessible to smokers, while protecting non-smokers and young people.

The fight against tobacco is not one we can win alone. It requires a joint effort through the health and care system and working across Government. There are good examples of that, because while NHS England is working to roll out the tobacco dependence treatment and the commitments in the long-term plan—we know there have been some delays—we are putting effort into

driving the agenda forward, funding seven early-implementer sites across England and establishing services as we speak.

Other Departments, such as HMRC, are tackling illicit tobacco. Her Majesty's Treasury has taken action to raise tobacco taxation. We have also introduced a ring-fenced grant of £1 million to support an HMRC and trading standards intelligence cell called Operation CeCe. That was operational earlier this year. We are also working with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the suitability of options for littering.

I shall have to come to a close, but I will address the question of my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West about how we are working with the WHO. We are a global leader in tobacco control and were instrumental in the framework convention on tobacco control. We will continue to take our treaty obligations seriously, including the commitment under article 5.3. I was particularly proud that we have been recognised in that work. The recognised commitment to our global prevention work with the WHO is important.

I hope the Chamber is aware that I am determined to protect the population from the harms of tobacco. As we build back better, we must make smoking a thing of the past, to improve the health of the nation and level up society, freeing up the billions of pounds spent on smoking by disadvantaged families and protecting the NHS. Clearly, with investment and with us all pushing in the same direction, we can truly make that target.

2.59 pm

Mary Kelly Foy: I thank you, Mrs Miller, the Minister and right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I am so pleased that there is cross-party support. I just want to reiterate that in order to go some way towards reducing inequalities, levelling up and increasing healthy life expectancy—especially in poorer communities—we must implement this plan.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

3 pm

Sitting suspended.

Winterbourne View Hospital and the Transforming Care Programme

[ESTHER McVEY *in the Chair*]

3.15 pm

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the new hybrid arrangements. Timings of debates have been amended to allow technical arrangements to be made for the next debate. There will also be suspensions between each debate.

I remind Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive for the start of debates in Westminster Hall. Members are expected to remain for the entire debate. I must also remind Members participating virtually that they are visible at all times 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' email address, which is: westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and before they leave the room and please take the cleaning materials they have used with them and put them in the bin.

3.16 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the 10th anniversary of the investigation into the Winterbourne View Hospital and the Transforming Care Programme.

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you in the Chair, Ms McVey. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this important debate.

The debate is being held to mark the 10th anniversary of the BBC "Panorama" programme that revealed the scandalous treatment of autistic people and people with learning disabilities in Winterbourne View Hospital. One of the experts on the programme said that Winterbourne View was

"run by a group of bullies for their own entertainment."

It should shame everyone involved in the healthcare system that it took a team of journalists to uncover those abuses, when complaints from whistleblower Terry Bryan were ignored by the management of Castlebeck, which ran the hospital, and by the regulator, the Care Quality Commission.

I recently re-watched the programme—a decade on, the abuse shown is still shocking. At the time, it was rightly described as "torture". One resident was showered while fully clothed, and had mouthwash poured in her eyes. On the same day, she had jugs of cold water poured over her head and was kept outside in March until she was shivering. Another resident was asked by a member of staff whether they wanted the staff member to

"get a cheese grater and grate their face off".

Residents were slapped and held down under chairs. They had their hair pulled and were pinned down while medication was forced into their mouths. One resident was so distressed by that treatment that she tried to throw herself out of a second-floor window and was then mocked by staff.

That behaviour was the end result of a system that did not see residents as people. Rather than the person-centred support that we would rightly expect in any hospital, a closed culture developed where abuse became normalised. Such abuse should not have been left to be uncovered by a journalist and secret filming. A whistleblower, Terry Bryan, had taken his concerns to the management of Castlebeck, then to the local safeguarding board, then to the Royal College of Nursing and then to the Care Quality Commission on three separate occasions. It was only when all that led to no action that he approached the BBC.

Ultimately, 11 members of staff at Winterbourne View pleaded guilty to neglect or abuse, and six of them ended up spending time in jail. However, Winterbourne View was not just a failure of one hospital or a few staff—although it certainly was that. The people in that hospital were let down by the entire system: from a provider that did not pay enough to attract or retain dedicated or qualified staff and did not supervise or manage them, to a regulator that failed to listen to the concerns of a whistleblower and to commissioners who were happy to put people in that hospital and then fail to monitor the placement or follow up with discharge plans.

Since 2011, residents in other in-patient units have been subject to similar abuse. As recently as 2019, another BBC "Panorama" programme uncovered similar treatment at Whorlton Hall in County Durham. Staff there were filmed verbally and physically abusing residents.

If the residents of Winterbourne View were let down by a system that simply did not place enough value on them to intervene, everyone who has faced abuse in those units since 2011 has been let down by a string of Governments, who have failed to take the action necessary to stop the abuse happening.

The only way we can ensure that there is no abusive treatment in those units is to move autistic people and people with learning disabilities into the community, where they can be given appropriate support to live independently. In 2011, following those shocking revelations, the Government seemed to recognise that, and David Cameron pledged to close all inappropriate in-patient units by 2014—but that was only the first in a long line of broken promises. By 2014, there were still thousands of people detained in those inappropriate institutions.

In 2015, NHS England pledged to reduce the number of people in assessment and treatment units by between 35% and 50% by 2019, but that target was missed, with the number falling only 5%. NHS England then pushed the target back a year, but that was also missed. By April 2020, the number of people in in-patient units had fallen only 15% in five years.

The NHS long-term plan then committed to reducing the number in units by 50% of the 2015 level by 2024, but on the current trajectory that will be yet another target the Government do not get close to meeting. A decade after the abuse at Winterbourne View was uncovered, more than 2,000 people are still detained in inappropriate institutions. As today's learning disability mortality review shows, people with learning disabilities who end up in mental health units are nearly five times more likely to die young than their peers. The mistreatment people experience in those units stays with them for life, even after they are discharged. On average, people in such units have been detained in some form of hospital placement for more than five years.

[Barbara Keeley]

What progress we have seen has been painfully slow. We still see hundreds of people admitted to in-patient units every year, and the number of children detained has risen by a third since 2015. We normally talk of admission to hospital being for care or for treatment, but neither of those words is appropriate here, and far too many people admitted to such a unit will have stories of poor treatment and abuse by staff.

Dan was left scarred by poor treatment in in-patient units, which led to him trying to overdose on pills when he was discharged, and then being detained in hospital for another 18 months. Kayleigh was moved from Winterbourne View to another hospital. Within weeks, she had been pushed and hit, and had made more serious accusations against the staff. Ryan was first detained when he was 17. Over the years, he has been isolated and held in long-term segregation. He has been heavily medicated with drugs so powerful that their side effects meant he had to have 18 teeth removed.

Hospital reports show that Ryan has experienced broken bones, and other injuries that sometimes were treated only after a week had passed. Ryan was supposed to be discharged three years ago. He has had an independent case review, which flagged urgent issues with his care. Over the past year, his family have seen their visits restricted and there have been covid-19 outbreaks on his ward. Despite media attention and legal support, Ryan's discharge plan stalled repeatedly. While things are now looking up for him, hundreds of other people have not been so lucky, and it should not need TV crews and lawyers to get people basic dignity and proper care and support.

People end up in these totally inappropriate units because the funding is not available to support them in the community. One Winterbourne View resident, Dan, had previously been supported at home by a small specialist provider. When it asked for funding for two more hours a day of support so it could manage the triggers that set off Dan's challenging behaviour, it was turned down. Dan's family were then told they had no choice but to allow him to be moved to an assessment and treatment unit. That removed him from his home and from his support network. In the unit, Dan was forcibly restrained and ultimately ended up in Winterbourne View. That abusive care cost the Government £3,500 a week—far more than the extra couple of support hours he needed to remain at home.

Clearly, that was not inevitable. After the BBC's "Panorama" programme, Dan's family were supported to move him back home. A suitable property was found in his home village and the care staff who had worked with him before he was admitted to Winterbourne View were rehired. Nearly a decade later, he is still living independently in his own home. Unfortunately, such success stories are far too rare.

A similar story is that of a young autistic woman, Bethany, which I have raised many times in the House. She ended up in in-patient units because her local authority said it needed

"a break from paying for her support".

By sending her to an assessment and treatment unit, it could shift the burden of funding to the NHS. That is the root cause of the Government's failure to address

this scandal over the last decade. If people are moved out of an in-patient unit, they need to be moved somewhere they will be supported. Under our current system, that kind of community support is funded by local authorities, which have had £9 billion taken out of their social care budgets over the past 10 years. Supporting a person with learning disabilities who might have complex needs is not cheap when compared with many other social care packages, so it is not surprising that cash-strapped local authorities have tried to pass the buck on funding to the NHS.

In the 1980s and 1990s, when the long-term psychiatric hospitals were closed, there was a system of dowries whereby the funding moved with the person as they were discharged to a local authority. That discouraged the kind of siloed thinking that sees a person's human rights denied because a local authority cannot afford to fund the care they need. The Government could have reinstated those dowries. They could have given local authorities far more funding to ensure that they can support autistic people and people with learning disabilities properly in the community. They could have matched the ambition of their rhetoric with the resources that are needed.

Instead, we currently have a £62 million funding pot spread over three years to support people to be discharged. High-quality community support for people moved out of those units can cost as much as £100,000 a year, but even that is much less expensive than placements in private hospitals, which can cost six times as much. That means that the Government's funding settlement is probably only enough to discharge 200 of the 2,000 people currently trapped in in-patient units. Because the funding only runs for three years, there is a real risk that when the funding runs out, those people will be readmitted to an in-patient unit.

We are not talking about huge sums of money when compared with the expenditure the Government have taken on over the last year. In 2019, the Labour party proposed spending £355 million a year on dedicated and targeted support, which would have been sufficient to move everyone currently in an in-patient unit into their community.

At the same time as discharging the 2,000 people currently detained, we also need to ensure that nobody else is admitted to those units, and we may need legislative measures to ensure that that happens. Underpinning any changes must be the reform of our adult social care system. We are still awaiting the details of that long-promised reform, but perhaps the Minister can tell us more today. Perhaps she can tell us whether the Government's reform will increase funding so that local authorities can afford to support everyone who needs help to live independently in their community, including autistic people and people with learning disabilities. If it will not, one of the largest issues in our social care system will be left unaddressed.

It is a decade since BBC "Panorama" revealed the appalling treatment of the residents of Winterbourne View. As a society, we could and should have taken that as a cue to say, "Never again," and to ensure that all autistic people and people with learning disabilities were given the support they needed to live independently in their own communities. Instead, we have had a decade of broken promises and broken targets. Rather than putting in place an ambitious programme of change,

the Government have repeatedly promised reform while simultaneously cutting the funding for the very local services that would deliver that reform.

Autistic people and people with learning disabilities trapped in those inappropriate institutions cannot afford to wait any longer. Rather than more empty promises, they need legal changes to end the use of detention. Alongside that, we must see a radical programme of investment in community social care services to support them to live independently in bespoke accommodation, with care packages designed around their needs. We need a new commissioner, independent of Government, to oversee the process of moving people out of those institutions and hold the Government to account if they fail to make the progress that is needed.

After a decade of failure, I hope today the Minister can give autistic people and people with learning disabilities and their families the reassurance that they need and deserve, because it is long past time that we fixed this problem. However slow the progress, there is no excuse for not making sure all the people detained in institutions are safe. That needs to happen now—today. The two most important changes are the proper oversight of community provision, which is centred round choice and personalisation. We need bespoke packages of accommodation and care, not institutions. People can live happily and independently with an environment and support made for them.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I remind Members that we will be going to the Front Benchers no later than 4.25 pm, and we would also like to hear Barbara Keeley wind up within that time limit.

3.29 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Thank you, Ms McVey. First, let me put on the record a declaration of interest: I chair the all-party parliamentary group on learning disability, so that is the context in which I am speaking. Mencap, which provides the secretariat for the APPG, has provided a very helpful briefing for the debate, which it has made available to all Members.

It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley). I do not propose to repeat everything she said, although I agree with the large bulk of it and the thrust of her remarks. I want to focus on the specific commitments that the Government have made. I am afraid—I say this with no great pleasure as a Government Back Bencher—that the Government have missed commitments on a number of occasions. I want to put on the record some very specific questions for the Minister about what the Government are doing to ensure they hit the revised targets that they have set out. I also want to remind people listening that the Government have now made a clear commitment to introduce proposals to reform social care this year. I know the Minister is well aware, as is the shadow Minister and everyone present, that social care does not just include care for older people; it includes care for people with disabilities.

I say that is because, when the public conversation happens, after about five seconds it immediately turns into a discussion only about older people—usually older people in a residential setting. We tend not to talk about older people who receive domiciliary care that enables

them to stay in their homes, and the media do not focus on the fact that, actually—I think it is still the case—the majority of public spending on social care in England is not on older people; it is on people of working age. If we are to introduce social care reforms, they will not be worth having unless they properly encompass people of working age, including people with learning disabilities or autism. They will need to be very different reforms from those that deal with older people, because although many older people, though not all, have assets that enable them to make a contribution—obviously we will have a debate about the appropriate level of contribution—people of working age do not have such assets, particularly if they have been disabled from birth. If we were to have a means test of any description, we would simply build in a new barrier to people of working age with learning disabilities or autism getting into the workplace and working, which is what most of them want to do. Most of them are able to do so if we provide the tools.

I want to focus specifically on some questions for the Minister. I am mindful about what you said about ensuring we can get everyone in, Ms McVey, so I will try not to make my remarks too lengthy. The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South set out the various targets that have been missed. As I said, I take no great pleasure in that as a Government Back Bencher, so I will not repeat all the misses. I want to focus on the latest target in NHS England's long-term plan, which is to deliver a 50% reduction in in-patient beds by March 2024.

First, I want to ask the Minister whether the Government have done any thinking about whether the 50% reduction is ambitious enough. It would be ideal if we did not have anybody in such settings and we were able to support almost everybody in the community. Perhaps the Minister could comment on whether the target remains ambitious enough. Given that the original target was to deliver a 35% to 50% reduction by March 2019, and that another five years has been added on and we are only in 2021, is March 2024 an ambitious enough target to hit the 50% reduction? Given that the previous targets have been missed, I accept that it might seem ridiculously ambitious to talk about introducing the latest target. However, given that we have let it slip by another five years, I want to test whether it is actually the right target.

The second thing is to focus on how we will reach the target. The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South rightly said that the only way we can really stop people being in those institutions is to provide proper support in the community. The Government have set out how they will do that with their transforming care plan and objectives about building the right support. I understand that the intention is that a cross-Government action plan will be produced, so it will be helpful if the Minister will tell us how that is going and when it will be published. To what extent will the proposals to reform social care that are being worked on improve or transform care in the community for people with learning disabilities and autism? Will the decisions to be taken this year—alongside the comprehensive spending review, I presume—provide an opportunity for a step change in getting this ambitious target delivered on time?

The Minister will be familiar with the fact that the cross-party Joint Committee on Human Rights said in its report that it had no confidence that the Government

[Mr Mark Harper]

would hit the target in the NHS long-term plan. It proposed a No. 10 unit with Cabinet-level leadership to ensure reform. I listened carefully to what the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South said about a commissioner, but I am slightly traditional and old-fashioned, and I think that accountability in Government is held by Ministers. They are elected and accountable to both Houses of Parliament, and political responsibility for delivering on the proposals sits with the Secretary of State and the Minister. I am not keen on having a commissioner as another person who feels that it is their job to chivvy Ministers along, because that is our job, collectively, in Parliament.

I do want to know, however, what mechanisms are in place whereby the Secretary of State for Health and the Minister for Care can monitor what NHS England is doing. At present—this will not be the case under the proposed legislation—NHS England is an arm's length body with a chief executive, so what are the Secretary of State and the Minister doing, on a regular basis, to hold NHS England to account to ensure that it delivers on this ambitious timetable, and perhaps achieves a more ambitious one?

My experience in Government is that if something challenging has not happened in the past, there is only one way to get it done: Ministers making it clear, and saying, that they care about it; and, most importantly, showing that they care about it by focusing on it regularly, asking for information about delivery across the country—Mencap's report shows that delivery is inconsistent throughout the country—and getting regular updates on progress, putting a bit of stick about when things are not on track. To do that, they need a plan with regular milestones so that progress towards a target can be measured. It would be helpful—there is no reason why it could not be done—if progress towards such milestones were not just shared with the House, but published, so that the families of people who have been badly treated, including those at Winterbourne View, can see that we are making progress.

Before I conclude, I wish to focus on the use of restraint, seclusion and segregation. I understand that a trigger for the Joint Committee on Human Rights inquiry and a CQC investigation was a BBC Radio 4 "File on 4" programme revealing the shocking use of restrictive practices in in-patient units. The CQC report, which was ordered by the Secretary of State, revealed widespread and frequent use of restrictive practices, including physical and chemical restraint, long-term seclusion and segregation. I understand that we are still waiting for the Government's response to the report, so it would be helpful if the Minister would set out when it will be published so that we can find out what the Government will do as a result.

I hope that the Minister will set out a plan to make sure that we deliver against the new target so that we will not sit here in a few years saying, "The target that was set has been missed and rolled forward again," with the families who have been subjected to unacceptable care feeling that no one is listening to them, and we are back on the hamster wheel with nothing having been done. If the Minister can focus on that, we will have taken a big step forward.

3.40 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Ms McVey. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) for having secured today's debate, and for the depth of her commitment to the rights of disabled and autistic people over many years.

The 10th anniversary of the screening of the "Panorama" documentary that showed the horrific abuse of vulnerable residents at Winterbourne View near Bristol is a time for sober reflection. We remember the victims and their families, and the horrific trauma they suffered. What happened at Winterbourne View was sickening, and it was chilling that despite safeguarding concerns having been raised several times previously, it took an undercover documentary to prompt urgent action. The Winterbourne View scandal should have led to a genuine transformation of care and support for people with learning disabilities and autistic people. The scandal revealed a system that was not fit for purpose; a level of institutionalisation that resulted in a dehumanising culture; and huge problems with transparency and accountability. The Government acknowledged that hospitals were not the right place for people with learning disabilities and autistic people to be living, and promised to end that practice.

However, in a terrible failure, not only are around 2,000 autistic people and people with learning disabilities still trapped in inappropriate hospitals, but there have been further appalling scandals. At Mendip House, eight years after Winterbourne View, we saw the taunting, bullying and abuse of autistic people. At Whorlton Hall, nine years after Winterbourne View, we saw a disturbingly similar revelation of horrific abuse in a private hospital behind closed doors. There have been many, many individual stories of families whose loved ones end up in assessment and treatment units under the Mental Health Act 1983, who battle—sometimes for years—to get them out, and live in fear for their health and safety every single day as they do so.

The failures are all the more distressing because we know what good care and support in the community looks like, from examples such as Alderwood LLA in Northamptonshire. It runs small homes for autistic people, and all of its services are rated by the Care Quality Commission as good or outstanding. I have spoken many times in this place about my constituent Matthew Garnett, who as a 15-year-old was sectioned and taken to an ATU. I supported Matthew's parents as they battled for months to get him out of hospitals. With his parents, I visited him in hospital—at St Andrew's in Northampton—where I was shocked both by how ill Matthew had become, particularly how much weight he had lost, and by the attitude of some of the staff who were responsible for his care. St Andrew's has been found by the CQC to have multiple failings in several different inspections. Later, I visited Matthew in his new home, provided by Alderwood, where he was almost unrecognisable—a healthy, happy young man, enjoying football and trips to the seaside, volunteering in his local community, requiring a tiny fraction of the medication he had been prescribed in hospital, and living life to the full.

One of the keys to Alderwood's success was undoubtedly the training and skill of their staff, who are highly specialised in communicating with, and supporting, autistic people. They were able to see such huge improvements in Matthew's health in part because they

were able to communicate with him in ways that reduced, rather than exacerbated, his anxiety. I pay tribute to the campaigning work of Matthew's mother, Isabelle Garnett, who in recent years has used her family's terrible experience to campaign under the banner of Homes Not Hospitals. Matthew should never have been in St Andrew's, yet the Government continue to funnel millions of pounds into inappropriate hospital-based accommodation—places where health and wellbeing deteriorates, where people are physically and chemically restrained or put into seclusion, where contact with friends and family is limited, and where patient advocacy is in short supply.

The Government's failure to deliver transforming care has been due to a lack of political will. It is not enough to just close hospital beds if the funding is not available to deliver homes in communities. It is not enough to expect that people will not be admitted to hospital if there is such limited support available for people with learning disabilities and autistic people in communities that many families find that they are unable to cope, and face crises of mental health or increasingly challenging behaviour.

The failure to deliver transforming care is also fundamentally linked to the failure to deliver social care reform more widely, and to the paucity of the Government's vision. We need a sustainably funded social care system that enables everyone with support needs—whether they are working-age adults or older people—to live as independently as possible with dignity and love, but the Government have dragged their feet, ignoring social care for more than a decade.

We have heard far too many statements of outrage and warm words from the Government; we need action. I call on the Minister to put in place the funding needed to deliver homes not hospitals for people with learning disabilities and autistic people, and to stop funnelling NHS money into inappropriate private hospital placements, which so often do more harm than good.

3.45 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) on securing this important debate.

Winterbourne View Hospital was in my constituency. The horrifying evidence of the systematic abuse of some of the most vulnerable people in my society, which happened in a place where they were meant to be safe and looked after, came to light just a year after I was first elected to serve as the Member of Parliament for Filton and Bradley Stoke. Immediately after the "Panorama" documentary was broadcast, I summoned to Westminster the chief executive of Castlebeck, which ran the hospital, and told him that the hospital had to close and that patients must be properly looked after in a sympathetic and caring manner.

Nobody who watched the documentary could be anything other than horrified by what they saw: a total and complete failure of humanity, a lack of any sort of care on the part of the staff responsible for those vulnerable adults, and the catastrophic failure of agencies and organisations to act sooner, which could have stopped the abuse before so many people fell victim to it.

In 2010, Terry Bryan, a former senior nurse at the hospital, brought forward concerns to the review. As the council states in its report on the hospital, his concerns

"made no difference in an unnoticed environment."

The Care Quality Commission also acknowledged that it did not respond to Mr Bryan's concerns. According to the report, it did not follow up because it thought Castlebeck and the council were doing so.

As I said in the House in September 2012, 40 safeguarding alerts were sent to the council but not acted upon, because the council assumed that the hospital was being honest. Many of those terrible incidents could have been avoided had those alerts been dealt with. Twenty-nine contacts between the hospital and Avon and Somerset police were reported between January 2008 and May 2011. The police acknowledge that for staff-on-patients incidents, they relied far too heavily on the hospital's information instead of listening to what patients were telling them or properly investigating concerns. Only one member of staff was ever prosecuted before the documentary was aired. Winterbourne View was a catastrophic failure of corporate responsibility and care for the most vulnerable.

In October 2012, I asked at Prime Minister's questions whether care providers should be prosecuted for wilful corporate negligence if patients in their care had been abused. In 2013, I co-sponsored a private Member's Bill to hold corporations criminally accountable for abuse and neglect in care settings. I am glad that since that dreadful incident, the Government have put in place some measures to improve the care of residents, and I welcome the steps that the Government have taken through national agencies such as the NHS, and local authorities, to ensure that care providers and givers are adequately resourced, and that patients are adequately protected and that their families can have confidence in the care system.

In December 2012, the Government published the "Transforming Care" report. It was of course vital to look at what lessons had to be learned and at what actions the Government must take to stop that abuse ever happening again. Some changes were made. The Government introduced a more rigorous registration, assessment and inspection process for learning disability services, and the Care Act 2014 set out a new basis for adult social care, which included the concept of wellbeing for individuals, including people being in control of their day-to-day lives, and residents having suitable accommodation and being able to contribute to society. The Act also reiterates the importance of good-quality, independent advocacy, and supports people, their families and carers, to help them raise concerns. It also requires local authorities to consider people's views, wishes and beliefs, and focus on the end results that the people themselves want to achieve.

In January this year, the Government closed the consultation on reforming the Mental Health Act 1983. The changes that the Government are proposing are based on four patient-centred principles. Those principles are choice, autonomy—using the Act's powers in the least restrictive way—ensuring that patients are supported to get better and, crucially, ensuring that patients are viewed and treated as individuals. The changes will allow people to make choices about their own care when they are well, and choose who might represent

[Jack Lopresti]

them should they become unwell. The Government have focused, as has been said earlier, on reducing levels of in-patient care for people with a learning disability and/or autism. Hospitals are not where people should live, and the Government have committed to move more people into community-based support. However, as we all know, that ambition has been postponed. The most recent target, as set out in the NHS long-term plan, is for a reduction in in-patient provision of 50%, compared with 2015 levels, by 2023-24.

As the commission recommended, the priority for the Government now must be to improve access to community-based mental health support, including crisis care, to prevent avoidable detentions under the Mental Health Act. I am pleased that this is already under way, backed by a ring-fenced fund of £2.3 billion a year as part of the NHS long-term plan.

We must continue to learn the lessons from the terrible events at Winterbourne View. Those who are entrusted to the care system, and their families, must be confident that their wellbeing is the highest priority for those responsible for their care, and of course we must all continue to ensure that such horrific abuse can never be repeated. It cannot be in any way justifiable that alerts are ignored by local authorities and the police, as they were with those terrible incidents, which could have been prevented and should never have happened.

3.51 pm

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) for securing this debate. I am pleased to be here to speak on such a crucial topic. First, I want to reflect on the past 10 years since the Winterbourne View scandal, and secondly, look forward and ensure that such horrific events cannot happen again.

What the BBC “Panorama” programme exposed was absolutely shocking, disgusting and heartbreaking. It revealed patients with a learning disability and/or autism being repeatedly pinned down, slapped and taunted by staff. That community was let down. Following that, the Government promised to transform care for people with a learning disability and/or autism by 2014 by supporting those in assessment and treatment units to move out of those settings and get the right support in the community. The Government still have a long way to go before they achieve what was promised. It is vital that we continue to learn from Winterbourne View. The Government have shown that they are willing to make the necessary changes, by publishing the White Paper on reforming the Mental Health Act. I commend the reforms that it has set out.

I want to send my personal thanks to the Department of Health and Social Care as well as the Lord Chancellor for driving forward reform of the Mental Health Act. The Act has long been outdated, and I hope that implementing many of the recommended changes will fire the starting gun on changing the way our country views and treats mental health conditions.

There is a clear desire, set out in the White Paper, to change the culture surrounding mental health by enacting a person-centred approach to care. That is a new approach

to the way in which our mental health service is run, and will begin to achieve the desired goal of bringing the Mental Health Act in line with 21st-century principles in medical care.

Having spoken to stakeholders, including Mind, the National Autistic Society, Rethink Mental Illness and the Mental Health Foundation, I want to share the conclusions that I have drawn and the lessons that must be learnt following the atrocities of Winterbourne View. Broadly speaking, they are, first, ensuring that the shift from in-patient care to care in the community is backed by a Government commitment to provide community support services. Secondly, all in-patient facilities must take into consideration the requirements of all their residents, and ensure that when individuals are ready to be released, the right care in the community is in place for them. Thirdly, to prevent situations from reaching a stage where individuals have to be placed in an in-patient facility, we must emphasise early intervention.

I applaud the long overdue decision in the White Paper to remove autism and learning disabilities from the definition of mental disorder in the Mental Health Act. For too long, autism and learning disabilities have been grounds for detention under the Act. I also welcome the commitment to build new mental health hospitals, with two schemes already approved and more to come. And we will tackle the maintenance work needed in the mental health facilities where patients are treated.

Before new projects commence, however, it is essential that we ensure that all new facilities that are built take into account the needs of those with autism and learning difficulties. Removing autism and learning disabilities from the terminology of the Mental Health Act will not mean that individuals with autism and learning disorders will not suffer from poor mental health, so they will require access to those facilities in time. Therefore, we cannot continue establishing new mental health facilities that are not constructed with all those who will access them in mind. The needs of those with autism and learning difficulties may be different from those of others who access in-patient services, and those needs must be catered for. I would welcome a new approach to the creation of in-patient facilities that means that the needs of those with autism and learning disabilities are given greater consideration.

The White Paper states that care and treatment reviews will have statutory force to help to address inappropriately long stays in in-patient units. This is a welcome development that will ensure that people with autism and learning disabilities do not become trapped in in-patient care. In total, 2,040 people who have a learning disability and autism remain detained in in-patient settings and 59% of those people who have been detained in hospital have had a length of stay of over two years. That is simply not good enough. However, there are other barriers in place, ensuring that individuals are not being released from in-patient care at the appropriate time. There is a lack of programmes and facilities for people to be released into.

Without the appropriate resources in place, individuals are becoming trapped in facilities that may no longer have the correct environment. I spoke about this today with one of my constituents in Broxtowe, Justin Donne, who is chairman of the board of trustees at Autistic Nottingham. He had this to share:

“What has become clear in our communities is that the suffering of autistic people being locked up is needless, as our advocacy, social and personal assistance services have successfully kept most of our service users out of that condition. Moreover, we get occasional requests from outside our geographical remit”—

that is Nottinghamshire—

“regretting that they do not have the appropriate facilities in their location. This proves that we obviously need to significantly invest more funding in organisations such as ours”—

that is Autistic Nottingham—

“who provide real, tangible help that benefits both the individual and the community, and saves money and hospital resources by investing in essential preventative services.”

The National Autistic Society’s vital community work is a testament to just how successful community support can be in helping individuals outside an in-patient facility. More must be done to address these issues and I look forward to hearing the Government’s comments on this area in particular. I would welcome a commitment to evaluate and improve the services that are currently in place across the UK to support individuals with autism and learning disabilities when leaving in-patient facilities.

The Government have committed £31 million of mental health recovery funding for a range of projects, including admission avoidance and quality of in-patient care. I would welcome a breakdown from the Minister of what specific projects will be funded.

The focus of the White Paper is on a new person-centred approach to care. Putting the individual at the centre of their own treatment enables them to make their own decisions surrounding care and results in a more tailored approach. To those with autism or learning disabilities, it is even more vital that the care is centred on their specific needs. The introduction of a statutory advanced choice document will go a long way to ensuring that that is acted upon and to enable people to express their view on the care and treatment that works best for them as in-patients, and that is before the need arises for them to go to hospital. As the White Paper states, putting these plans on a statutory footing for the first time will require them to be developed in good time in partnership with patients.

My concern about shifting the emphasis of care away from in-patient facilities to community support relates to whether properly established and funded support is in place in the community. The NHS long-term plan established a commitment for increased community support for early mental health intervention, which is echoed in the White Paper. I would welcome a detailed outline of what this expansion of community support will look like at all levels, how and when it can be expected and how it will be implemented across the UK to ensure that all areas of the UK have the same levels of support. As I have stated, we need to focus on prevention. If that is not possible due to the complex needs of the individual, how can we ensure that individuals with learning disabilities and autism in hospitals are safe and respected, that their dignity is maintained and that their human rights are not violated?

I spoke recently with another constituent of mine, Ashley Swinscoe, who does vital work supporting those with autism and/or learning disabilities within our local community. He discussed early intervention and proposed that schools needed to offer support to individuals until they were 21 years old. He said that, through this stage, consistent support should be offered from childhood to

adulthood. This consistency would help the individuals manage the stress caused by the changes in life. That would also reduce the risk of behavioural and mental health declines.

If individuals are not ready for supported living and require residential care, providers must also offer supported living in the future. Residential care is not long term, and providers should promise to progress individuals to become more independent, with fewer restrictions, and to move to supported living. That is a suggestion from Ashley Swinscoe from my constituency.

4.2 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I am incredibly grateful to speak in this debate on such an important topic, which many of my constituents have written to me about. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) for bringing this matter to the House.

It was my constituency predecessor, the Care Minister at the time, Sir Norman Lamb, who publish the in-depth review commissioned by Paul Burstow into what happened at Winterbourne View. As we know, the abuse and neglect inflicted on patients there was utterly horrific. Inspections by the CQC of 150 hospitals and care homes for people with learning disabilities found inadequate practice in in-patient services, including poor person-centred care, limited appropriate activities and a lack of monitoring and learning from incidents of restraint. The inspections were clear: we can and, as it was pledged, must do better.

In my constituency it is a real pleasure to support Frances Dawney and all the staff and residents at Abbottswood Lodge. It is an exemplary care home for residents with complex needs and, sadly, with the pandemic I have been unable to visit as much as I would like to. It is a real model of what care and love with dignity should be for adults with learning disabilities.

Ten years on, we must recognise the NHS long-term plan and the much-needed changes that it will bring to in-patient units for those with disabilities and autism. Crucially, the plan states that by March 2023 or 2024 in-patient levels will have reduced to less than half of those in 2015, and that for every 1 million adults there will be no more than 30 people with a learning disability or autism in an in-patient unit. That is something that we absolutely must achieve, because we probably all recognise that progress has not been fast enough. It is also important to recognise, as I am sure we all do, that hospitals are not where people should live. As such, I absolutely support the long-term plans and that commitment, as we move people towards community-based support and, ultimately, closer to home.

Drawing on the new care models in mental health services, local providers will be able to take control of budgets to reduce avoidable admissions, enable shorter lengths of stay and end out-of-area placements. Where possible, more people with a learning disability, autism or both will be able to have a personal health budget, which will give them a real opportunity to live in their own homes or with their families, rather than in an institution. In North Norfolk, I have worked tirelessly on mental health—my predecessor was such a champion of it. It is so important across the country that we get mental health hubs implemented in areas, and see mental

[Duncan Baker]

health practitioners in primary care GP networks. That is something that is beginning to be rolled out in my constituency.

Since 2015, the number of people in in-patient care has decreased by almost a fifth, and about 635 people who have been in hospital for more than five years have been supported to move back into the community. Although that is encouraging, it is also a sign of how much we still need to do to ensure that every single person with a learning disability can lead a fulfilled life with the dignity and respect that they deserve.

Social care reform cannot come soon enough. It is rather nice that I have the Minister sitting so close to me. I regularly talk about this matter, and I want to go back to what was said earlier: older people dominate this agenda, but about 50% of all people requiring social care are adults with disabilities, and we must not forget them. The golden question for the Minister to answer is: will we see the social care reforms later this year? We must address social care reforms, not just for older people but for people with disabilities, right the way through to young carers. That is an apt point, as this week is Carers Week.

4.7 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I direct Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I congratulate the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) on securing this important debate.

The circumstances of the Winterbourne View scandal have already been described, so I do not want to repeat that history, but I share others' shock and outrage at the way in which some of the most vulnerable patients in our healthcare system have been treated in assessment and treatment units. Those attitudes and that kind of abuse should be historical; the shameful thing is that they are still with us a decade later. Ten years after the NHS should have changed for good, new scandals keep emerging.

Across the system, the levels of physical and chemical restraint remain disturbingly high. The CQC report is the latest to recommend change, and the Government's response is needed urgently. Although there has been a welcome emphasis on moving patients into other settings, we know that there are more than 2,000 people with a learning disability or autism in assessment and treatment units right now, and about 200 of them are children.

Progress has been slow. Admissions are not falling, and those patients are still staying in ATUs for an average of five and a half years. We have yet to build enough support in the community. The building the right support programme is a catalogue of missed targets, and I hope the Minister can tell us why. We should have done more, and we should have more confidence in the targets set by NHS England's long-term plan.

The record to date is not encouraging. Until the cross-governmental action plan is published, as promised, scepticism will prevail. We have heard why families are worried. There are two aspects of current care that particularly trouble me. The first is the widespread use of anti-psychotic medication. Drugged-up patients are

no doubt easier to manage, but it can take years to wean them off those drugs, and even then the consequences continue.

The second aspect, which can be read about in *The Daily Telegraph* today, is "do not resuscitate" notices. I put that matter to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care at the Select Committee meeting today. What we are really talking about here is a culture—a culture in which the needs of those with learning difficulties or autistic people are sometimes treated as not important. As many hon. Members have said, these people are able to live fulfilled lives. They are human beings, with plenty to live for. It is hard to accept the idea that a "do not resuscitate" notice could be placed on the record of Sonia Deleon, who very sadly died. When they looked at why she would not be resuscitated, it simply said the words "learning disabilities". That is unacceptable.

Our pride in the NHS should not blind us to its failings. It has systematically failed people with learning difficulties and autistic people. Their trauma is real. The damage is lasting. I have confidence that we now have a Government who are going to take their commitments on social care seriously and, as many Members have said, that includes those in the working-age population and not just those who are old. This action must finally happen.

4.11 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I join other hon. Members in this Westminster Hall debate by thanking the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) for leading it. The note that I passed to you, Ms McVey, was to apologise and to hope that you had received notification beforehand that I was running from the main Chamber to speak here. I very much hope that that was the case, but I apologise both to you and to the hon. Lady.

I begin by paying tribute to our former friend and colleague, the late Dame Cheryl Gillan, who chaired the all-party parliamentary group on autism and was a long-standing advocate for the 700,000 autistic adults and children and their 3 million family members and carers. I now chair that all-party parliamentary group, but I very much wish that I was sitting here, as I would tend to be in these debates, watching Dame Cheryl and listening to her advocate so finely for all of that community. She will be remembered for her passion, drive and kindness.

For more than a decade, Dame Cheryl worked tirelessly to ensure that Government and Parliament took more account of autistic people and the need to improve the support for them. She began her campaign for an autism Act in England in 2008 to tackle the lack of support for autistic people and to improve the understanding of autism. That landmark law—I think it is quite remarkable that she got it delivered—remains the only legislation aimed at supporting one particular group of disabled people. I am deeply saddened that Dame Cheryl passed away before getting to see the new autism strategy, which is set to be published shortly—I hope imminently. I hope that she would have been very proud of what gets delivered.

Following the passing of the Autism Act 2009, Dame Cheryl campaigned hard on so many of the crucial issues. Even during her illness, she fought hard

to take on these issues, ranging from diagnosis to waiting times, teacher training, employment and, importantly, the subject that we are talking about today—health, mental health, and those who feel imprisoned by the system. It is a topic on which so much more needs to be done and, in Dame Cheryl's memory, I very much hope that it will be.

As other hon. Members have said, it is 10 years since the appalling abuse and neglect of some of the residents of the Winterbourne View home were exposed. There were shocking levels of violence, degrading treatment and taunting. It was a scandal that led to widespread acknowledgement that a significant number of people with autism and with learning disabilities, or with both, were stuck inappropriately in in-patient settings. However, the latest monthly data show that 2,040 autistic people and people with learning disabilities are still in in-patient mental health hospitals, of whom 1,150 are autistic.

That means that since 2015, the number and proportion of identified autistic people in in-patient facilities has actually increased, from 38% to 56%. A lack of appropriate community support and issues with legislation have meant that a growing number of autistic people are ending up in mental health hospitals against their will and that of their families. Once a person has been admitted to an in-patient unit, they will stay there for an average of 5.6 years, and they will be on average over 60 miles from their home.

The National Autistic Society, which provides the secretariat for the all-party parliamentary group on autism, has continued to hear of alarming cases of over-medication, seclusion and unnecessary restraint. That is completely unacceptable in 2021. Autism is not a mental health condition, and hospital is not the right place for the vast majority of autistic people. Hospital wards can be noisy, bright and unpredictable. Without reasonable adjustments to the environment, and without the support of professionals who understand autism and how to adapt these people's care, wards can be completely overwhelming for them.

For autistic people who are particularly sensitive to sound, light or touch, the experience of being in an in-patient setting can dramatically increase their level of distress and lead to further restrictions, making it even harder to be moved into the community. It becomes a perpetual cycle, unless something breaks that cycle. Even then, there is a challenge in finding the right type of mental health and social care services in the community for autistic people to move into. It is not right that thousands of autistic people are developing avoidable mental health conditions because they cannot access the support they need early on. To end the travesty, there must be commitment and significant investment in better social care and mental health services that work for autistic people.

I am the last Back-Bench speaker, so I will add my list, too, for the Minister for Care. I have worked with her over the years and know that she is absolutely dedicated to this cause. Without wishing to keep her at the ministerial level at which she is, we need consistency in ministerial position to follow this through. I understand that she is setting up a report group to ensure that all those responsible for delivering outcomes do act. I absolutely support the call from my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) that

milestones need to be set. I had written that down before he said it, but I had not written down that they should be published. He is right. They should be published not just for us as Members of Parliament to hold the Government to account, but for the Government to hold to account those in the report group who have to deliver, so that there is no hiding place when it comes to what should be done by when. If there is a failure to meet individual timescales, more pressure and perhaps more resource can be added. The Minister will have all our support in holding their feet to the fire.

When will mental health legislation be amended? It will need to be amended. Indeed, it is not just an issue of moving the community from inappropriate settings into appropriate settings. Do we actually have those appropriate settings? Do those milestones include not just the transition but the provision that must be there? I will end there, because we want to hear from the shadow Minister and the Minister, but I very much support all the calls made by Dame Cheryl's former colleagues that more must be done.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for acknowledging Dame Cheryl Gillan and all the work she did in the world of autism. I know we all share that view.

I will now call the Front-Bench speakers, mindful that we do want to hear from Barbara Keeley at the end to close the debate.

4.18 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) for securing this extremely important debate, marking the 10th anniversary of the Winterbourne View scandal. I want to say at the start that the repeated and abject failure to move people with learning disabilities and autism out of long-stay institutions and into the community, following what we saw at Winterbourne View, is the worst political and institutional failure I have seen in my 25-year experience of working in health and social care as a Member of Parliament and before I became an MP. It is essential that we understand the underlying reasons for this failure and what we will do differently so that we can put it right in future. That is what I really want to focus on.

Many hon. Members have spoken about the horrors that the BBC's "Panorama" programme exposed at Winterbourne View in May 2011, with patients repeatedly abused, pinned down, slapped, soaked with water, trapped under chairs, threatened and taunted by staff. The incidents included a member of staff slapping a resident across the cheek and—forgive me, Ms McVey—saying:

"Do you want a scrap? Do you want a fight? Go on and I will bite your bloody face off."

A member of staff claimed a resident "loved pain", and then said to the resident:

"Simone, come here and I'll punch your face."

Staff gave a patient cold showers as a punishment, leaving her outside in near-zero temperature, pouring mouthwash in her eyes. Patients were shown screaming and shaking, one trying to jump out of a second-floor window to escape the torment but just being mocked by members of staff.

[Liz Kendall]

Straight after the programme was aired, the then Minister commissioned an in-depth review into what happened, the results of which were published on 10 December 2012—a day I remember extremely clearly, as the Government statement to Parliament was the very first time I had spoken at the Dispatch Box as a Member of Parliament and a new shadow Minister. The new Minister of State promised that all patients, 3,400 in total, would have their placements reviewed by June 2013, and that everyone who was there inappropriately would be moved into the community no later than June 2014. This was followed by the Government's transforming care programme, which aimed to close up to half of in-patient beds by June 2014.

June 2014 arrived; the Government had failed to deliver. There were still 2,615 people in in-patient units, including 148 children. Sir Stephen Bubb was commissioned to do another review, which was published in November 2014. As a result, NHS England announced a three-year closure programme called building the right support. This had a slightly reduced target of reducing the number of in-patient beds by between 35% and 50% by March 2019. March 2019 arrived; the target was once again missed. The Government had missed even the more modest target of a 35% reduction. Instead of trying to really get to grips with the cause of the failure, the target was downgraded again, from between 35% and 50% to just 35%. Surprise, surprise: a year later and even the downgraded target was missed.

The grim reality is that there are still 2,040 people with learning disabilities and autism in in-patient units, including 215 children. The average length of stay is over five and a half years, and 355 people have been in these units for at least 10 years. Unbelievably, after everything that has happened, there has been little if any change in the number of people being admitted into in-patient units each month, when, as many hon. Members have said, one of the key priorities must be preventing people from going into hospital in the first place.

Far from closing large-scale units, the Government are opening new ones. Last year, a new 123-bed medium-secure unit, including 45 beds for people with learning disabilities and autism, was opened by Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust. Mersey Care also got planning permission to build an additional 40-bed unit, going against the Government's own recommendations. Report after report has shown continuing unacceptable treatment in these long-stay institutions. In one month this year—just one month—3,390 restrictive interventions were used, by which we mean physically restricting people or restricting them with chemicals—drugging or isolating them. In reality, that is a massive underestimate because, scandalously, we have data for only 31 of 56 NHS providers, and for one of 16 private providers. I have one question that I hope the Minister will answer: why is providing that data every month not a requirement for every provider in this country and will she consider making it available a requirement of Care Quality Commission registration?

The latest target set out in the NHS long-term plan is to deliver a 50% reduction in in-patient beds by March 2024, but unless we are clear about why the Government have failed to achieve anywhere near that over the past decade and what we are going to do differently, we cannot have confidence that things will change.

It is my view that the first reason for that failure is simply that this has not been a political priority. I am singling out not the current Minister but Ministers over a decade who have failed to grip the issue, failed to make it one of the repeated, unmissable priorities for the Department of Health and the NHS, and failed to secure the funding that the NHS and local authorities need to shift the focus of services fundamentally towards prevention and co-ordinate support not just between the NHS and local authorities but with housing and other community services. Will the Government consider the recommendation of the Joint Committee on Human Rights to set up

“a Number 10 unit, with cabinet level leadership... to ensure reform is driven forward”?

If we do not change that, we will not have that leadership in place.

Secondly, there are institutional failings. It is just too easy for services to keep doing the same thing—commissioning large-hospital services—rather than the difficult work of individual, personalised support in the community or at home. We do not have the financial incentives in place, or the accountability mechanisms, to do things differently. Mencap says that in my own region, the east midlands provider collaborative, which commissions these services, includes some of the very private providers that have been shown to have poor records of care. How is that allowed and who is responsible?

Thirdly, and I really believe this is the key to change, we have failed to put families at the heart of the process and not just to listen to their views but put them in the driving seat of change. There are many ways to do that, but I know, and I have seen, that one of the most powerful ways to get that change is personal care budgets given to families and developed in partnership with the services. The average cost of a weekly stay in an in-patient unit run by the NHS is £3,000. If we gave families greater control over that money, I bet they could find a better way to spend it on care for the people they love.

Last but by no means least, one reason why people with learning disabilities and autism and their families believe change never happens is that they feel they just do not matter, are not important enough, and are out of sight and out of mind. As Members here know, what has happened in those in-patient units is part of a much wider pattern of unacceptable inequalities in access to services and in health outcomes for people with learning disabilities and autism. For example, women die 18 years earlier than the average and there are much worse health outcomes in a range of areas.

I am afraid that with covid-19, and despite initial claims they were at no greater risk, people with learning disabilities and autism have death rates six times higher than those for the rest of the general population. Changing that requires concerted action across the board. We need to change how we train health and care professionals, and ensure absolute clarity at every level about who is responsible for change and how they will be held to account. The trouble is that this is everybody's and nobody's problem. That is why we cannot get change.

I say all that to be constructive. The Minister knows that I want to solve problems, not just criticise. I would be happy to meet with her and the families and providers, as well as her officials, to see whether we can put in place a more effective plan of action. I ask her one thing:

can she tell me what the Government and NHS England now propose that is different from the proposals of 10 years ago, five years ago or one year ago? From what I have read, there is no difference. The trouble with that is that we will get the same result. That is not good enough for people with learning disabilities and autism and their families.

4.28 pm

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) for securing this important debate, for opening the debate and for her committed campaigning for people with learning disabilities and for autistic people. I also thank all Members who have spoken powerfully today, both in the Chamber and virtually, and shown the strength of feeling on the issue among parliamentarians. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), as he has taken on the role of chair of the all-party parliamentary group on autism following, as he said, the very sad death of our right hon. Friend Dame Cheryl Gillan. She is missed so much by all of us, both as a colleague and for her work for autistic people, which has made such a huge difference over the years, although there is clearly much further to go.

The appalling abuse uncovered at Winterbourne View has no place in our society, and I share the shock and anger that hon. Members have expressed today. It was rightly described as heartbreaking and disgusting by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry), and it should never have happened, as my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) said. None of us accepts this kind of cruel and abusive treatment of people with learning disabilities and autistic people, and none of us wants people to be in-patients unnecessarily when they could be better off living in the community. I will use my time to talk about the work of Government, the NHS, the CQC, local authorities, and others we are working with to stop poor and—worse still—abusive care, and to improve care. As part of that, I will talk about what we are doing to reduce the number of people with learning disabilities and autistic people in in-patient units, which we know are rarely the best place for those people to be. As I do so, I will seek to respond to questions raised by right hon. and hon. Members.

First, I will talk about the approach we are taking to stopping abusive care. We are working with the NHS as care commissioners, with local authorities, and of course with the CQC, which plays a critical part. I fully support the much tougher approach that the CQC is rightly taking through its more robust inspection regime and updated methodology, which includes speaking more to patients and families and really digging into the culture of providers. It is in some of these closed cultures where there has been such concerning treatment of patients, and the CQC is taking a robust enforcement approach, including wasting no time in closing down services when it uncovers unsafe care. The sad truth is that this tougher approach by the CQC has exposed more cases of poor care, and I fully support the CQC in taking very robust action in those cases.

Turning to people with learning disabilities and autistic people in in-patient units, a significant number—about 59%—are autistic. As my hon. Friend the Member for

Bexhill and Battle said, an in-patient unit is rarely a good environment for someone who is autistic, and can often be a really inappropriate one. I am clear that no one should be in an in-patient unit if it is not to their benefit—if they are not receiving some form of therapeutic treatment that helps them. Even then, their time in an in-patient unit should be as short as possible, and that unit should be as close to home as possible. Our target is to achieve a 50% net reduction in in-patients by 2025, from a base starting in 2015. Back in 2015, there were 2,895 people with learning disabilities and autistic people in in-patient units; that figure has come down to 2,035, which is a 30% reduction. England is divided into 44 transforming care partnership areas, 17 of which are on track to achieve the target, but that means that 27 are not on track. I take that failure very seriously.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) asked whether our target of a 50% reduction is ambitious enough, and whether we should be aiming for zero in-patients. That is a question that I have asked myself, and I have also asked it of the NHS and of clinicians. It has been made clear to me that there are times when people with learning disabilities and autism may need to be in an in-patient unit, when they have a mental health condition that could benefit from in-patient treatment. As such, I do not think it would be right to say that it is never appropriate, but it should be rarely considered appropriate, and alternatives should be tried wherever possible. I must also mention to my right hon. Friend that just under 30% of the numbers I am talking about are individuals who are under Ministry of Justice restrictions, so that is another challenge to discharging them. Those are net figures, however, and in the period that we are talking about, there have been more than 10,000 discharges, so it is not a static population. Of course, given that reduction of 30% and more than 10,000 discharges, there have also been a large number of admissions.

When I became the Minister for Care, with this in my portfolio, I straightaway asked the question, right back at the beginning of the pandemic, why are we behind the target? Why have we not made the progress that we should be making? Why is it taking so long? What needs to be done to fix that and to get back on track? We need to have a plan that we can all be confident in—all of us in the Chamber and the families of in-patients.

Mr Harper: Before the Minister moves on, may I test her? She said that she asked whether the 50% target was right. After all those conversations and yes, accepting that there might be some need for in-patient units, is the Government's position that the 50% reduction is the right end state, or is there a different number? If it is 50%, will she publish the analysis that sets out why that is the right number?

Helen Whately: I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that achieving the 50% will be hard. I am all for being ambitious, but in fact, from everything I have seen, achieving it will be hard, partly because some are more easily discharged—I pause as I say that, because it has been difficult to discharge many because we have complex situations here. We have seen some people continuing to be in-patients with long lengths of stay, and it has become almost harder and harder to find a way to find the right support for them in the community. Achieving the 50% will not be easy. I will get to the other part of my right hon. Friend's question.

[Helen Whately]

When I saw the position we were in and that we were not on target, I asked why and how come. Clearly, however, this is a complex system—it involves the NHS and local authorities doing things, and there are questions about housing supply, community schools and in-patient services. I therefore set up the building the right support delivery board, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle referred—I thank him for his supportive words. That board's aim is to bring those involved together, because, much though we all like a clear line of accountability, to point a finger at somebody to say, "Solve this!", the reality is that solving this involves bringing different organisations and different parts of our system together.

The delivery board has identified six priorities that we need to focus on to overcome the barriers to achieving lower numbers of in-patients: first, identifying the best practice models of care in the community. What does good look like? That may sound obvious, but getting the right answers is not the easiest thing to do. What is the right care for people in the community? First we have to find out what we want to see in all our constituencies that is available for that group of people.

Secondly, we have to focus on improving the transition into adulthood, in particular for autistic young people, because that is a particular problem resulting in in-patient admission. Thirdly, we have to reduce the number of people in in-patient care with judicial restrictions who, as I mentioned, are a significant proportion. Fourthly, we have to address some of the issues with funding flows and potential financial disincentives in the system, which hon. Members have mentioned, including the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South. Fifthly, we have to address the lack of available suitable supported housing. Housing is often cited as the most frequent barrier to discharge. Finally, we have to ensure that we have the right workforce.

Those are the priorities. Yes, we are working on a delivery plan, which will include milestones, such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean rightly called for—we all need to be able to see those. Specifically on the NHS role, since the pandemic, I have asked each of the 44 areas in the NHS to review where they are on delivering against our target and to come to me with what their trajectory is. Where will they get to over the coming months and years and, to the extent that they may be below the ambition, what actions will they take to close that gap?

I hope that that addresses my right hon. Friend's question about my similar commitment to ensuring that we have clear milestones and targets, can see who is doing what, and have a grip on getting this delivered.

Mr Harper: Are the milestones in the plans going to be published?

Helen Whately: Yes, we plan to publish the delivery plan. We want to have time for the delivery board to feed into it, because we set that up earlier this year. It is complex and cross-Government, so it takes a bit of time to bring that together, but broadly yes.

I want to touch on funding, because it was mentioned a number of times as one of the barriers. As part of the NHS England long-term plan, we are investing £40 million this year in improving community support and preventing

avoidable admissions. There is an initial £31 million of funding for this issue as part of the NHS mental health covid recovery package. There is £11.35 million specifically to accelerate discharges from mental health hospitals, which includes funding to strengthen advocacy for people with a learning disability and autistic people, and £19.65 million to help prevent crises from occurring and to avoid admissions into in-patient care. There is also the £62 million community discharge grant, which is a fund over three years. The first tranche was issued last year, with a further £21 million to be distributed this year and next. That is particularly to cover some of the double running costs involved when a discharge happens. Someone may need care as an in-patient, but it also has to be set up in the community.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean also asked about the response to the CQC's "Out of sight" review, which was requested by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and which reported back in October last year. It was a review of the use of restraint, seclusion and segregation. My right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean asked when we would respond to it, and I can say that we will do so imminently. I hope he finds that reassuring, even if I cannot give a specific date.

I am mindful of the time, so I will wrap up. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. I know we are all deeply committed to ensuring that everybody with learning disabilities and autistic people get the care and support that they need. None of this is easy. Some of the individuals we are worried about have really complex needs, but I do not accept that as an excuse for poor or, worse still, abusive care. I will continue to work with the CQC, the NHS, local authorities and other Government Departments, and with the families and user representatives, who play a really important part and are part of the delivery board. I will work together with them to bring an end to this and make sure that autistic people and those with learning disabilities get the care and support that they need, and the support that their families need, to live their lives to the full.

4.43 pm

Barbara Keeley [V]: I thank the organisations and campaigners who supported the debate, including Mencap, Rightful Lives—particularly Julie Newcombe—Care England, Dimensions and the Equality and Human Rights Commission for their support and briefings, to which other Members have rightly referred.

There is not a lot of time left, but I have heard across the different contributions—I thank colleagues for them—a real desire for change. We do not agree on every last detail of that—not everybody agrees with my recommendation to have a commissioner—but there is a real hunger and desire for change. Across the contributions, a great deal was said about personalisation, changing cultures, having pride in the NHS and not binding us to its failings, to which the hon. Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) referred. My hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) rightly talked about putting families in the driving seat of change.

A decade after Winterbourne View, it simply is not acceptable that people are still detained, when they could and should be supported in the community. There is

real agreement about that. I hope the Minister will listen to what has been said and ensure that the necessary resources and political leadership are delivered, so that we can ensure that the horrors of Winterbourne View are finally a thing of the past.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the 10th anniversary of the investigation into the Winterbourne View Hospital and the Transforming Care Programme.

4.44 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 10 June 2021

EDUCATION

Student Loans: Interest Rates

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): On 9 June I announced a temporary reduction in the maximum student loan interest rate following the recent decline in the prevailing market rate for comparable unsecured personal loans.

In accordance with the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998, where the Government consider that the student loan interest rate is higher than the prevailing market rate for comparable unsecured loans, we will take steps to reduce the maximum student loan interest rate.

The Government regularly monitor the interest rates set on student loans against the interest rates prevailing on the market for comparable loans.

Following a decline in the prevailing market rate, on 9 June I laid legislation to cap the maximum post-2012 undergraduate income contingent repayment and the postgraduate income contingent repayment student loan interest rate in line with the prevailing market rate. The cap will come into effect from 1 July 2021 and last for a period of three months.

The reduction will be 0.3 percentage point on the maximum student loan interest rate to reflect the average market rates during the preceding monitoring period.

Student loan interest rates are updated each year to take account of changes in the retail prices index (RPI). The updates are applied annually at the start of each academic year, 1 September. To take into account this annual change in the ordinary student loan interest rates, two separate caps will be implemented, one for the period 1 July to 31 August and one for the period 1 to 30 September.

The maximum post-2012 undergraduate income contingent repayment student loan interest rate and the postgraduate income contingent repayment student loan interest rate will be 5.3% between 1 July and 31 August.

The maximum post-2012 undergraduate income contingent repayment student loan interest rate and the postgraduate income contingent repayment student loan interest rate will be 4.2% between 1 September and 30 September.

From 1 October 2021, the post-2012 undergraduate and postgraduate income contingent repayment student loan interest rates will revert to the standard rate +3%.

Further caps may be put in place should the prevailing market rate continue to be below student loan interest rates.

[HCWS82]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Annual Fisheries Negotiations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): The UK and EU have now reached an agreement on fishing opportunities for the current fishing year. This concludes all annual fisheries negotiations for 2021. This has been a landmark year with the UK negotiating as an independent coastal state for the first time in over 40 years.

Throughout the negotiations we have worked as a UK team with the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish Governments to take advantage of our new status as an independent coastal state. The outcomes secured by the UK team will enable us to improve the sustainable management of our fish stocks in support of the whole of the UK fishing industry in the short and long term.

Collectively, from all the negotiations, the UK has secured agreement on the total allowable catches (TACs) for 87 stocks.

UK-EU agreement

The agreement we have just reached with the EU, for 70 EU-UK TACs, results in a total value of fishing opportunities for the UK in 2021 of approximately 160,000 tonnes, worth approximately £333 million. This is around 26,000 tonnes more than in 2020, with an estimated value of £27 million.

On non-quota stocks, due to the late conclusion of negotiations this year and the need to provide our respective industries with clarity, the UK and EU agreed that, exceptionally, tonnage limits would not be applied in 2021.

The UK and EU have instead agreed to work together through the specialised committee on fisheries to develop multi-year strategies for managing non-quota stocks as a priority, as well as addressing challenges in mixed fisheries management, particularly in the Celtic sea, and on implementing a longer-term exchange system for quota.

Exchanges of quota with the EU, as part of annual negotiations, were not possible this year. However, the agreement includes a commitment to quickly develop an interim basis for exchanging fishing quota ahead of a longer-term exchange system to be decided by the specialised committee on fisheries. The UK expects that quota exchanges would be part of future annual negotiations, as provided for in the UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement.

We have also agreed changes for 2021 on seabass to reduce wasteful discarding, without increasing fishing mortality.

UK-EU-Norway agreement

The trilateral negotiations between the UK, EU and Norway concluded on 16 March 2021, and set TACs for the six North sea jointly-managed stocks. Three of these stocks were set consistent with independently assessed sustainability levels.

The agreed TACs resulted in catch reductions for North sea cod, plaice, saithe and herring compared with 2020, whilst there were increases for haddock and whiting.

The UK and Norway also committed to several priority work areas including a review of the management of North sea herring.

UK-Norway and UK-Faroes bilateral negotiations

Since the beginning of the negotiations, we have been very clear that the UK's overriding priority in all negotiations is to agree a balanced deal in the best interests of the entire UK fishing industry. We worked hard to find a way to reach an agreement between the UK and Norway and the UK and Faroes this year, and regret that we concluded that we were too far apart.

In these negotiations, the UK sought to secure fishing opportunities for the UK industry, whilst at the same time addressing the historic imbalance between fishing opportunities taken in UK waters by other coastal states compared to those the UK took in theirs. In 2019 Norway landed approximately eight times higher value of fish from UK waters than UK vessels landed from Norwegian waters.

Whilst negotiations were constructive, neither Norway nor the Faroes were willing to provide appropriate compensation for access to fish in UK waters, without which the relationships would have been left significantly weighted against the UK. Neither coastal state was willing to conclude an agreement with the UK solely on quota exchanges.

Other international negotiations

This year the UK also participated, and reached agreement, in a number of other international negotiations. This included multilateral negotiations on TACs not covered under the EU-UK and trilateral negotiations, such as mackerel, blue whiting, Atlanto-Scandian herring, and redfish. We also took part in negotiations in several regional fisheries management organisations.

[HCWS86]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Hong Kong: Six-monthly Report

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): The latest six-monthly report on the implementation of the Sino-British joint declaration on Hong Kong was published today. It covers the period from 1 July to 31 December 2020. The report has been placed in the Library of the House. A copy is available on the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office website at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-development-office>. I commend the report to the House.

[HCWS85]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Patient Safety

The Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health (Ms Nadine Dorries): I would like to inform the House of the launch of a public consultation on proposed legislative provisions governing the appointment and operation of the patient safety commissioner for England.

As my colleagues will be aware, on 14 December 2020, the Government tabled an amendment to the Medicine and Medical Devices Bill to establish an independent patient safety commissioner for England. The Medicines and Medical Devices Act 2021 (MMD Act) achieved Royal Assent on 11 February 2021 and on 11 April established the commissioner position and its main duties and powers.

The introduction of a patient safety commissioner also acts on the second recommendation of the independent medicines and medical devices safety review, "First Do No Harm", published in July 2020 by Baroness Cumberlege.

The patient safety commissioner will add to and enhance the existing work that has been done to improve patient safety by acting as a champion for patients. Listening to our patients is integral to our healthcare system and the commissioner will help to make sure patient voices are heard.

The core duties of the commissioner are to promote the safety of patients in the context of the use of medicines and medical devices and to promote the importance of the views of patients and other members of the public in relation to the safety of medicines and medical devices.

Under the MMD Act 2021, (paragraph 6 of schedule 1) the Secretary of State is able to make legislative provisions about the appointment and operation of the commissioner, for example, the terms of office, finances and other support for the commissioner. As is required by the MMD Act, the Department has launched a public consultation to gather views from interested persons on the detail on the appointment and operation of the commissioner. Consultation responses will be carefully considered and will feed into the required secondary legislation.

This consultation will help to ensure that the provisions governing the appointment and operation of the patient safety commissioner are as comprehensive as needed, so that the commissioner will be able to work for, with and in the best interests of patients.

I would like to take this opportunity to reassure the House that the Government continue to prioritise work on this initiative. The launch of this consultation represents good progress in setting up of the commissioner.

The consultation can be accessed using the following link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/the-appointment-and-operation-of-the-patient-safety-commissioner>.

[HCWS80]

Learning Disabilities Mortality Review Programme: Fifth Annual Report

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): I would like to acknowledge today the publication of the fifth annual report of the learning disability mortality review (LeDeR) programme, now known as "Learning from lives and deaths—People with a learning disability and autistic people" by the University of Bristol. A copy will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

Sadly, as set out in today's report, we know that some people with a learning disability have died from covid-19, and this report provides moving, personal stories of some of those who lost their lives. My deepest sympathies are with their families and loved ones.

This annual report recommends that the needs of people with a learning disability should be built into the national policy response by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in the case of future emergency health situations. This is absolutely essential, and throughout the covid-19 pandemic, we have taken action to protect people with a learning disability and used emerging evidence to inform our policy response. For example, in October, we added adults with Down's syndrome to the clinically extremely vulnerable list following the identification of an elevated risk of severe outcomes for this group of people. And the Joint Committee on Vaccines and Immunisation added people with severe and profound learning disabilities to group 6 for the vaccine, and people with Down's syndrome to group 4.

We value the insight that the LeDeR programme has brought us during the challenging time we have all faced over the past year. We have been able to use data from the LeDeR covid-19 report to inform our response to the pandemic. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the team at the University of Bristol for their invaluable work over the past years on the LeDeR programme. Past reports have prompted action across the health and care sector, including the trialling of the Oliver McGowan mandatory training in learning disability and autism.

Today's report makes several recommendations for Government and their system partners to help to improve the care of people with a learning disability. We remain absolutely committed that people with a learning disability should, and must, receive high quality care which will in turn reduce preventable deaths and health inequalities.

NHS England has published its "Action from Learning" report alongside the fifth LeDeR report, which sets out a range of work taking place to improve the safety and quality of care to reduce early deaths and health inequalities. We welcome the ongoing invaluable work by NHS England, including during the covid-19 pandemic, in this area.

The Government's focus in 2020 was on the covid-19 response, and our priority was to protect people's lives. We will publish a response to both the fourth and fifth reports in late summer/autumn of this year, to allow time for us to fully consider the recommendations for the Department, and agree actions, including those on covid-19 related issues and on mandating reporting to the LeDeR programme.

This report also highlights the disparities experienced by ethnic minority people with a learning disability. It is vital that we continue to work with our partners to tackle the poor outcomes experienced by ethnic minority people with a learning disability.

Based on the evidence from completed LeDeR reviews, the fifth annual report makes 10 recommendations for the health and care system, as follows:

Recommendation 1. LeDeR reviews to be undertaken through the lens of greater racial awareness. (Audience: NHS England and NHS Improvement)

Recommendation 2. Local Authorities to ensure that joint strategic needs assessments (JSNA) collect and publish local data on the health needs of children and adults with learning disabilities, capturing any characteristics that relate to specific ethnic groups. Integrated care systems (ICSs), and their commissioned primary care networks to take actions to reduce any disparities between people from different ethnic groups when planning local services for people with learning

disabilities and their families. Accountability for this to be monitored at regional level, and by NHS England. (Audience: Local authorities, NHS England and NHS Improvement, ICSs, NHS Race and Health Observatory)

Recommendation 3. A nationally endorsed standard resource is required, with local flexibility, that provides information for people with learning disabilities and their families about their legal rights and entitlements, national services available and how to access them, and local sources of support. Mechanisms must be in place for its effective distribution, particularly to people from minority ethnic groups. (Audience: NHS England and NHS Improvement)

Recommendation 4. Strategically planned, long-term, targeted, joint investment is needed to strengthen partnerships with local communities and provide support for peer-to-peer networks, to build on and future-proof existing contacts and structures within local communities and increase trusted word-of-mouth communication and information sharing. (Audience: Local authorities, ICSs, primary care networks)

Recommendation 5. Local systems, including commissioning, to be responsive and develop strategic plans that address the longstanding needs of people with learning disabilities and their families that the covid-19 pandemic has illuminated, including the availability of specialist learning disability teams in acute, primary and community care. (Audience: ICSs)

Recommendation 6. From the outset of any future public health emergency, the needs and circumstances of people with learning disabilities must be considered and built into national policy and guidance by the National Institute for Health Protection and the Department of Health and Social Care. A data collection tool should be established to capture emerging evidence relating to people with learning disabilities, which would trigger adjustments to policy, guidance, systems and processes as required. (Audience: National Institute for Health Protection, Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England and NHS Improvement)

Recommendation 7. Commissioning guidance for NHS 111 services to include a requirement for the provision of specifically tailored training to NHS 111 staff about how to respond appropriately to calls about people with a learning disability or from people with a learning disability and their families. (Audience: NHS England and NHS Improvement)

Recommendation 8. A LeDeR representative should routinely and as of right be involved with the child death review meeting/process for children with learning disabilities, in order to ensure that necessary information is collected and transferred into the wider LeDeR programme. (Audience: NHS England and NHS Improvement)

Recommendation 9. NHS England to collect and collate evidence about the needs and circumstances of people who have been subject to mental health or criminal justice restrictions and use this to inform appropriate, personalised service provision for this group of people. While waiting for this evidence, robust after-care support (as required by S117 of the Mental Health Act) must be provided. (Audience: NHS England and NHS Improvement, local authorities)

Recommendation 10. Progress on actions in response to previous recommendations about minimising the risk of aspiration pneumonia in people with learning disabilities needs to be published. (Audience: NICE, Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England and NHS Improvement)

While we have taken urgent action during the covid-19 pandemic to protect the lives of people with a learning disability, we know that there is more to be done as we begin to move out of the pandemic. We will continue to work with partners to ensure improvements are made, and to address the recommendations in the reports.

[HCWS81]

HOME DEPARTMENT

EEA citizens and Right to Work and Rent Schemes

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Chris Philp): The UK has left the European Union (EU), and the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Act 2020 ended free movement law in the UK on 31 December 2020. On 1 January 2021, a grace period of six-months began, during which time relevant aspects of free movement law have been saved to allow eligible EEA citizens and their family members resident in the UK by 31 December 2020 to apply to the EU settlement scheme. This period ends on 30 June 2021.

We have committed to providing parity between EEA and non-EEA citizens under the new immigration system. All migrants residing and coming to the UK will be required to obtain the correct immigration status, regardless of their nationality. From 1 July 2021, EEA citizens and their family members require UK immigration status to evidence their rights and entitlements in the UK, in the same way as other foreign nationals, such as their right to work or right to rent.

The right to work and right to rent schemes—the schemes—were introduced as part of a suite of measures designed to tackle and deter illegal immigration. They are intended to prevent individuals without lawful immigration status in the UK from taking up employment or accessing accommodation in the private rented sector; and to support efforts to tackle those who exploit vulnerable migrants, often in very poor conditions.

Employers and landlords are required to carry out simple checks, applicable to everyone, including British citizens, to ensure the individual has lawful status in the UK before they employ or let a property to an individual.

Today, I have laid before Parliament the Immigration (Restrictions on Employment and Residential Accommodation) (Prescribed Requirements and Codes of Practice) And Licensing Act 2003 (Personal and Premises Licences) (Forms) Order.

The order seeks to amend the schemes' lists of acceptable documents which demonstrate a right to work or a right to rent, by removing EEA passports and national identity cards. It provides the following additions to the lists: an Irish passport or passport card, frontier worker permit, service provider of Switzerland visa, and documents issued by the Crown dependencies EU settlement schemes.

From 1 July, employers and landlords will undertake right to work and right to rent checks on EEA citizens, who have been issued with digital evidence of their UK immigration status using the Home Office online services. We have already begun this journey, with employers being able to use the online right to work service since January 2019. Since the launch of the optional online right to work service, there have been over 1.3 million views by individuals and over 390,000 views by employers carrying out right to work checks digitally. The online right to rent checking service went live in November 2020, and since then there have been over 36,000 profile views by individuals, and over 6,500 views by landlords carrying out right to rent checks digitally.

The online services make it simpler for employers and landlords to carry out the checks, as they do not need to see or check documents. The checks can be carried out

by video call, as the individual's immigration status information is provided in real time directly from Home Office systems. The service is secure and free to use.

However, we recognise that some individuals are anxious about navigating a digital system. Therefore, users will be supported to adapt through clear guidance, with direct support available for those who are less digitally confident, ensuring they are not disadvantaged due to any inability to access or use digital services, including where they have no access to a device or the internet.

The order also enables employers and landlords to confirm via the Home Office employer or landlord checking service a certificate of application or document issued by the UK, Bailiwick of Jersey or Bailiwick of Guernsey EU settlement schemes, which confirms an outstanding application made by the 30 June deadline. This will ensure that EEA citizens can continue to evidence their eligibility to work and rent until the application is finally determined.

The order also amends the Immigration (Residential Accommodation) (Prescribed Requirements and Codes of Practice) Order 2014 by extending the list of those granted status as a visitor who can prove their right to rent using the combination of a national passport, plus proof of their arrival within the last six months, for example a physical or electronic air/sea/rail ticket or boarding pass, to EEA citizens.

Finally, the order amends and updates the existing statutory codes of practice to reflect these important changes which will improve the operation of the schemes. It also makes consequential amendments to the Licensing Act 2003 (Personal licences) Regulations 2005 and the Licensing Act 2003 (Premises licences and club premises certificates) Regulations 2005, and the Illegal Working Compliance Order Regulations 2016, to align with the changes in this order in relation to right to work check.

[HCWS83]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Liverpool City Council

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): On 24 March 2021, I announced to the House that I was minded to appoint commissioners to take over functions associated with highways, regeneration and property management, together with associated audit and governance arrangements at Liverpool City Council ("the Authority"). I also announced that I was minded to appoint commissioners to take over functions associated with the appointment and dismissal of statutory officers.

At the same time, I also announced proposals to introduce electoral changes, in particular:

to make an order using my powers in the Local Government Act 2000 to provide for whole council elections in 2023 and every fourth year thereafter; and

to direct the authority to consider and consult upon a new submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England as part of the current boundary review, which includes consideration of a proposal to reduce the number of councillors to those consistent with elections on a single member ward basis, and be approved by the commissioners.

These proposals followed the publication of the independent best value inspection report, led by Max Caller CBE, which concluded that the Authority had failed to comply with its best value duty over a number of years. The Report did not comment on the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, on Mayor Steve Rotheram, or on other councils in Merseyside.

The main finding of the Report, as set out in the inspector's covering letter, is that:

"Liverpool City Council itself, under the officer leadership of Tony Reeves, has started to make some of the improvements necessary. However, the burden of the police investigation, the pandemic, and the legacy of past actions by the Council has prevented speedy progress. At political level, the Council needs a reset, until that happens and the work that is currently being undertaken is continued at pace and embedded, I cannot be confident about continued progress."

As part of my announcement in March, I invited the Authority to make representations about my proposals on or before 24 May 2021. The Authority and two advocacy groups made representations, as did 13 members of the public. Most representations were supportive of the intervention and the proposal to appoint commissioners. However, a number expressed concern about aspects of the electoral reforms which I had proposed, specifically in relation to the proposal to introduce single member wards and to reduce the number of councillors for the City.

Best value intervention in Liverpool City Council

Following consideration of these representations, and further consideration of the inspector's report, I have decided to proceed with the proposals that I announced on 24 March, with the following modifications:

The commissioners' functions relating to the appointment and dismissal of statutory officers are expanded to include the role of assistant director governance, audit and assurance.

This modification is to reflect what was proposed in the inspection report and has been accepted by the Authority;

The direction to the council to consider and consult upon a new submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE), as part of the current boundary review, is clarified to include consideration of a proposal to reduce the number of councillors to those consistent with elections on the basis of predominantly single member wards, that is single member wards across the whole council area save where the LGBCE consider a multi member ward is essential to balance their statutory duties of delivering electoral equality, reflecting interests and identities of local communities, and of promoting effective and convenient local government. This modification is in response to the representations I received; and

As part of my intention to make an order using my powers in the Local Government Act 2000 to achieve the fresh start the Authority requires by providing full council elections from 2023, I am now setting out my intention that the order specifically provides for:

Liverpool City Council to hold all-out elections every four years from 2023 and to adjust retirement dates for existing councillors accordingly;

Postponement for one year of the May 2022 elections of one third of Liverpool City councillors and extend terms of office accordingly; and

The movement of the next election for Liverpool City's mayor to 2023 from 2024 and shorten the term of office accordingly.

I am mindful that the lessons from past interventions suggest that once commissioners are in post additional issues can arise. I have therefore asked commissioners to specifically have regard to:

the Council's LGBCE submission;

the Council's governance referendum;

the financial position of the Council; and

broader service delivery insofar as they raise concerns for the Council's wider improvement journey.

I will write to the lead commissioner asking him to provide assurance to me on these issues as well as to work with and support the council to minimise the risk of further intervention.

Rationale for whole council elections in Liverpool City Council

These modifications will help address the inspection report recommendation of ensuring as much stability as possible during a period of significant change. Going forward, the city mayoral and council elections will take place in the same year every four years. The order will be subject to the negative resolution procedure and will be made as soon as practicable and well in advance of the local government elections currently scheduled for 2022. Following the making of the order, the independent Local Government Boundary Commission for England will be able to undertake their electoral review, with its necessary legislation, subject to parliamentary approval.

My decision to make an order providing for Liverpool City Council to have whole council elections reflects not only the recommendations in the best value inspection report but also our past experience of the merits of whole council elections. The absence of such elections is often a consistent feature of underperforming councils and a common thread through many council interventions. I of course recognise that there are many excellent councillors up and down the country performing their duties effectively with elections by thirds or other patterns. But holding elections three years out of four, or every other year, risks creating a culture of perpetual electioneering in a council where there is little focus on the strategic, an inability to address longer-term challenges and leadership which can lack the stability needed for a high performing authority.

In contrast, holding whole council elections every fourth year can facilitate stable, strategic local leadership, delivering a clear programme for which it can be held to account by the electorate, and having the time to tackle some of the longer term issues its communities might face. Whole council elections can thus add a higher degree of accountability, and the stability they can bring can help effective partnership working and give greater confidence to the business community in their dealings with the council. Whole council elections are also more cost effective than holding elections say three years out of four, and hence I am clear they represent better value for money for local taxpayers.

Accordingly, for all these reasons I would like to take this opportunity strongly to urge all those councils still not holding whole council elections to consider using the powers which Parliament has given them to switch to such elections. I believe this could lead to councils providing stronger, more accountable local leadership better able to serve their communities, promote local economic growth, and drive forward the levelling up of opportunity and prosperity across the country. If councils which still elect by thirds or halves now take the opportunity to switch to whole council elections, this could significantly strengthen local government and its ability to serve local people. It is an opportunity I hope all other councils will take in due course.

Appointing commissioners for Liverpool City Council

I have decided to appoint four commissioners forming a team with a proven record in adherence to the rule of law, leadership and delivering cultural change, together with specific expertise relevant to their functions:

Mike Cunningham QPM (Lead Commissioner). Has been involved in policing for more than 30 years, most recently as Chief Executive of the College of Policing from 2018 to 2020, the standards setting body for policing in England and Wales. Formerly one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Constabulary, inspecting forces in the north of England and Northern Ireland, and the national lead inspector for the development and implementation of inspections into police efficiency, legitimacy and leadership, and Chief Constable of Staffordshire Police.

Joanna Killian (Local Government Improvement Commissioner). Has more than 30 years of experience in the public sector delivering transformational change and service improvement. Since March 2018 she has been Chief Executive of Surrey County Council. Prior to this Joanna worked at KPMG and was also Chief Executive of Essex County Council for 9 years.

Neil Gibson (Highways Commissioner). Former Executive Director of Transport Economy and Environment for Buckinghamshire County Council, where he also acted for a time as Interim Chief Executive. A Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Highways and Transportation and former President of the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport.

Deborah McLaughlin (Regeneration Commissioner). Extensive experience working in regeneration and housing for over 30 years across public and private sectors, including as Director of Housing at Manchester City Council, regional director for the North West at Homes England and Director of Capita's real estate business. Also worked at the Audit Commission as a best value inspector and auditor.

The Commissioners have been appointed for the period from 10 June 2021 to 9 June 2024 or such earlier or later time as I determine. I am clear that the directions should operate for as long, and only as long, and only in the form, as necessary.

I want to be clear that most decisions will continue to be made by the council; the intention being that commissioners will only use their powers as a last resort if they are dissatisfied with the council's improvement processes.

The Government will continue to work closely with the political, the business and the cultural leadership of the city and with the wider region, including with Steve Rotheram, the Mayor of the Liverpool City Region.

Conclusion

We will do all that we can to support Liverpool, as it recovers from the covid-19 pandemic, and to give confidence to those who want to invest in the city to contract with the council, and to do business in the city.

I have published the directions and explanatory memorandum associated with this announcement on <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/inspection-into-the-governance-of-liverpool-city-council>

[HCWS84]

TRANSPORT

Rescue Aviation Programme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): The Maritime and Coastguard Agency plays a vital role in saving lives, and the Government's second-generation search and rescue aviation programme called UKSAR2G has now reached a pivotal point. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency announces today the shortlisted companies that will be invited to tender for the provision of the next decade of coastguard aviation.

The UKSAR2G programme will procure services that will provide the next generation of coastguard search and rescue helicopters, planes and remotely piloted drones. New technology will enable the coastguard to find people who need help even more quickly.

Data has been used extensively to enable aviation operators and manufacturers to put forward innovative solutions that meet the complex demands of all the emergency services and the other Government Departments that benefit from coastguard aviation long into the future. The programme will build upon the success of the current contracts which provide search and rescue helicopters and reconnaissance planes.

Like the arrangements it replaces, UKSAR2G will be a pan-Government aviation service that supports not just Her Majesty's Coastguard, but UK policing in the search for lost and missing people as well as the health services in the transfer of critically ill people between NHS hospitals. This will also continue to support the work of our colleagues in other law enforcement bodies in an even more collaborative fashion than today. The scale of this collaboration is seldom seen in Government procurement. The MCA should be commended for thinking beyond requirements to maximise the value from its investment in aviation services.

The UKSAR2G invitation to tender will be issued today to shortlisted bidders to provide their responses by the end of August 2021. Following negotiation, the MCA expects to award the contract in mid-2022. This will allow time for the successful bidder or bidders to establish operations before commencing service from 2024 for at least 10 years.

Since 2013, the UK search and rescue helicopter service has been delivered by Bristow Helicopters Ltd, with planes being provided by 2Excel. All existing aviation services currently under contract to the MCA will be replaced once the new contract commences.

The transition out from the current contracts will start 30 September 2024 and runs through to 31 December 2026, to guarantee a smooth transition of aviation services.

[HCWS79]

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