

**Tuesday
15 June 2021**

**Volume 697
No. 17**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 15 June 2021

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr SPEAKER in the Chair]

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

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

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

DANIEL MORGAN INDEPENDENT PANEL REPORT

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of the Report, entitled The Report of the Daniel Morgan Independent Panel, dated 15 June 2021.—
(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Human Rights Violations against Uyghurs: Sanctions

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): What plans he has to extend Magnitsky-style sanctions to Chen Quanguo, Party Secretary of Xinjiang region in China, in response to his alleged involvement in human rights violations against the Uyghur. [901215]

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): On 22 March, the Foreign Secretary announced global human rights sanctions against four Chinese officials and one entity responsible for serious human rights violations in Xinjiang. We did so alongside the United States, Canada and the European Union, sending a powerful message to China about the strength of international concern. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will continue to keep all potential evidence and listings under close review.

James Murray: While we wait for the Government to take further action on sanctions against individuals, I would like to press the Minister on whether the UK Government will follow this House and the US and Canadian Governments in declaring the Chinese Government's persecution of the Uyghur people to be a genocide.

Nigel Adams: As the hon. Member probably knows, we do not shy from taking action. We have led international efforts to hold China to account. It is the long-standing policy of several Governments of the United Kingdom that the determination of genocide should be by a competent court.

Aid Budget Reduction: Humanitarian Impact

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the humanitarian impact of reducing the UK aid budget. [901216]

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of reductions in the UK aid budget on UK humanitarian work overseas. [901224]

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of reductions in the UK aid budget on UK humanitarian work overseas. [901226]

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of reductions in the UK aid budget on UK humanitarian work overseas. [901228]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): The UK will spend £10 billion in official development assistance in 2021, making us the third highest bilateral humanitarian donor country based on the OECD data.

Mr David Davis: Let me start by saying that I understand full well that this is a policy imposed by an unintelligent Treasury edict. Nevertheless, it has, potentially, the fatal consequences of a medium-sized war. The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa could not tell us whether the 60% cut to Yemen meant more or less than 260,000 deaths of women and children as a result. On Ethiopia, where the UN told us that 350,000 faced imminent starvation, the Minister for Africa—the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge)—yesterday could not tell the House the size of the cut in our aid. I understand from impeccable sources that we propose to cut that aid by £58 million—more than half. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm the size of that cut and tell the House what we intend to do to reduce the hundreds of thousands of deaths arising from our policy?

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I do not accept the proposition that he has put forward. As a global leader in ODA—and we continue to be a global leader in ODA—we stretch to put as much in as we possibly can. Of course, we have temporary financial exceptional circumstances, but we will get back to 0.7% as soon as we can. He raised, in particular, the issue of Yemen. We have committed at least £87 million in 2021—that is more than £1 billion since the conflict began. He asked about the firm statistics. They are sent out in the normal way through Development Tracker and the final returns that are made annually.

Steven Bonnar: Last week, the Prime Minister casually dismissed protests against billions of pounds' worth of aid cuts as "lefty propaganda". Analysis by Save the Children estimates that at least 3 million people in need of life-saving humanitarian assistance right now will not receive it because of this Government's decision. Can the Foreign Secretary not see that this is not about left or right? It is about right and wrong. Does he recognise that this is not propaganda? This is about life and death for the most vulnerable people, so will he now U-turn on this decision before it is too late for them?

Dominic Raab: What I recognise is that we remain the third largest donor in the G7, based on GNI. What I recognise is that we have made the biggest ever donation to the Global Partnership for Education, pursuing our goal of 40 million girls receiving 12 years of education. As a result of that, we raised at the G7 billions of pounds from other partners towards that goal. What I recognise is that we have doubled bilateral spending on international climate finance and we secured, through our donation of 100 million surplus vaccines, a contribution of a billion more by the middle of next year, which means that we will be able to vaccinate the world not at the end of 2024, which is the current trajectory, but by the mid-point of next year. That is what global Britain is about. That is what we achieved at the G7.

Martin Docherty-Hughes [V]: Two aspects of the recent integrated review that jumped out at me were the explicit wish to integrate diplomacy and development and the so-called Indo-Pacific tilt, which stated the desire to see the UK's ODA more effective in the region. As a member of the Defence Committee, I am always interested to know how one can make the so-called region that is home to three of the five largest states in the world, and which is named after the first and third largest oceans on the planet, any sort of effective domain for UK foreign policy, so can the Foreign Secretary, while his Government cut aid to many of the poorest in the world, advise the House which areas or countries of the Indo-Pacific they will be prioritising to maintain their investment with this new-style of integrated development and diplomacy?

Dominic Raab: As I mentioned to my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), the final figures, as has historically always been the case, come out not just through DevTracker, but in the international development statistics.

Let me give the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) the example that I think he is searching for. At the weekend, we made a £430 million contribution to the Global Partnership for Education—a 15% increase on last year that will affect many of the countries and regions that he describes. Above all, we used not just our aid spend, but our diplomatic convening power, to get others to make billions of pounds' worth of contributions. Not only will that encourage 40 million more girls back into education, but it will help to deliver our second goal of getting 20 million more girls literate by the age of 10.

Hannah Bardell [V]: The real question is: do this Tory Government even care? At a time when the poorest nations of the world need support, humanity and compassion, this UK Tory Government are turning their back. Even one of their own Back Benchers has admitted that these cuts will kill. The other G7 countries have stepped up their aid budget; the UK is the only one to cut it. It is utterly shameful. Do you know what I really want to know, Mr Speaker? I want to know how the Foreign Secretary and his Tory Government sleep at night, knowing that they have the blood on their hands of some of the poorest people in the world.

Dominic Raab: I think that that was pretty unsavoury from the hon. Lady, but I will tell her how we sleep at night. We sleep at night because we are the third biggest ODA budget contributor in the G7. We sleep at night

because we have just made the biggest global commitment on girls' education ever, of any Government ever in the UK. We sleep at night because we are doubling the average annual spend on international climate finance. We sleep at night because we led the way with the 100 million doses that we are providing from excess surplus because of the money that we spent on the AstraZeneca vaccine: of the doses that the poorest countries have so far received via COVAX, 95% have come from AZ. In relation to humanitarian spend, bilaterally, we are the third biggest as well. We continue to be a global leader, but I think that our constituents would be asking some pretty serious questions if, at a time when we face the biggest contraction in our economy for 300 years, we were not also making or finding savings from the international as well as the domestic budget.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): COVAX aimed to deliver 2 billion doses of vaccine to countries around the world in 2021. Six months in, less than 5% of that total has been shipped. To rapidly vaccinate health workers and older people in low-income countries, we must address global shortages with a global plan to increase production of vaccines and equitable access. Instead, what we got this weekend from a Prime Minister who has been in perennial retreat from the world stage was a commitment to 5 million doses by the end of September, and a vague commitment to more at some point over the next 12 months. Does the Secretary of State agree that cutting the aid budget while most of his counterparts were increasing theirs made it harder for the Prime Minister to play a leadership role at the G7, and that the cuts are a key reason for the Prime Minister's abject failure to deliver a comprehensive strategy that accelerates global vaccine access so that we can achieve at least 70% coverage in all countries and end the pandemic as quickly as possible?

Dominic Raab: I am afraid that the hon. Lady is just mistaken and clearly did not pay attention to what the G7 agreed. We agreed 100 million doses on the UK's part by the middle of next year. That was not some kind of loose commitment; it was a very clear one, and comes on top of the 1 billion doses that we secured through our financial commitment to COVAX. As a result of our commitment, we have now raised the ability, through the G7 and the other contributions, to secure 1 billion extra doses, so there are new doses. What that will mean in practice is that rather than the world being vaccinated by 2024, as in the current trajectory, it will happen by the middle of next year. I would have thought that if the hon. Lady really cared about the issue, she would recognise that that is a massive step forward.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP) [V]: It is apparent that no matter how many examples we give of why the aid cuts should be reversed, the Foreign Secretary is either unwilling or unable to answer, so let us try this another way.

It is estimated that these cuts will result in the deaths of over 1 million children throughout the world—1 million more than already die as a result of being the poorest and most vulnerable. Many of us have children of our own and would never neglect their fundamental needs, yet with no consent and with widespread opposition

both inside and outside this Parliament, this Government are determined to inflict death and suffering on those with no voice. Thinking of those children, will the Foreign Secretary finally commit to reversing the decision, or is he willing to let the ink dry on the death sentences on these innocent lives?

Dominic Raab: I have to say that using language like that reflects more on the hon. Gentleman than on the approach of the Government or any Ministers. Of course we take seriously the financial predicament we are in and the difficult choices we have made, but we remain the third biggest G7 donor, and I have given the House the positive effects that we will achieve with our £10 billion. Of course, if we were right at the bottom and donating only £1 billion a year, and we increased it by 20%, according to his moral paradigm we would be doing better than if we were giving £10 billion this year. That is a totally clueless approach to take.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I welcome the G7's call for unimpeded access for aid workers to the Tigray region of Ethiopia, as a potentially catastrophic man-made famine is unfolding. The UN estimates that more than 350,000 people are currently living in famine conditions and that 2 million are just one step away. There are reports of crops being destroyed, farmers being prevented from cultivating land and food aid being stolen. Endemic sexual violence means that women and girls are staying in hiding, unable to seek the little food that is available. How much humanitarian aid is the FCDO providing to support this response, and how much of it has already been distributed? What action is the FCDO taking to secure and safeguard the distribution of emergency food aid to communities in Tigray, and what steps is it taking to work with partners to prevent a catastrophic famine?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady, like me, cares passionately about that appalling situation. I can tell her that we have provided £22 million of badly needed support to the people in Tigray. At the G7, under the UK presidency, we issued a statement on 2 April and on 5 May expressing deep concern. Following my visit in January and my conversation with Prime Minister Abiy, humanitarian access went from consent to notification, but we know that humanitarian workers still cannot reach the places they need to reach. We need to work on that, and we need to get Eritrean forces to withdraw. In relation to accountability for some of the appalling human rights abuses we have seen, we certainly support the High Commissioner for Human Rights in her planned investigations in conjunction with the Ethiopian human rights commission.

Iran

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of Iran's compliance with the 2015 joint comprehensive plan of action nuclear agreement. [901217]

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): What discussions he has had with his Iranian counterpart in the last six months. [901222]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): Iran is systematically in non-compliance

with the joint comprehensive plan of action—the JCPOA—and, working with our European partners and with the United States, China and Russia, we expect and require a return to full compliance.

Greg Smith: The UN's nuclear watchdog has warned that Iran is now producing uranium at levels that "only countries making bombs" are reaching, after successfully enriching to 60% purity. Given that this knowledge cannot be unlearned, does my right hon. Friend share my concern that Iran's nuclear activities already extend far beyond the outdated JCPOA? What steps will he be taking to address not only Iran's nuclear belligerence but its support for terrorism and the ballistic missile programme?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is not just the stockpile of enriched uranium, which is 16 times the permitted limit, but the operation of the centrifuges and the production of uranium metal that are of deep concern. All sides agree that Iran must return to full compliance, and there has been some progress in the talks in Vienna, but a successful outcome is far from guaranteed. Those talks cannot continue to be open-ended; we need to see a return to full compliance. My hon. Friend is also right to refer to the need for "longer and stronger", as it is dubbed, to ensure not just that we have permanent guarantees in relation to the nuclear issue but that we address the destabilising activity that Iran sponsors. I have just got back from Iraq, where we can see at first hand the support for the Shi'a militias and what that means in practice.

Mr Ellwood: May I first pay tribute to the work of the HALO Trust, a British charity and the largest de-mining organisation working in Afghanistan? Tragically, 10 of its team were killed in an ISIS attack a week ago. James Cowan, the CEO, has vowed to continue their important work, and I hope that the Government will encourage the Afghan Government to improve local security so that the HALO Trust can continue that important work.

In the 1970s, we attempted to sell 100 Chieftain tanks to Iran. We took the money—£400 million—but following Iranian revolution, the tanks were of course never delivered. We need to repay that debt, because it is starting to interfere with other bilateral issues. I invite my right hon. Friend to speak to Tony Blinken, because this is to do with legacy sanctions and we need to resolve the issue.

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute not just to the work of the HALO Trust—I extend my condolences for the loss of life—but to all the non-governmental organisation workers on the frontline who take extraordinary risks to do incredible work.

On the International Military Services debt to which my right hon. Friend referred, we have always said that we are committed to resolving that issue. I shall not say more at this point because legal discussions are ongoing and I do not want to prejudice them.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab) [V]: I join the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) in sending our thoughts and best wishes to the victims of the terrible attack on the HALO Trust staff in

Afghanistan. Ten people were murdered and many more injured, and I am sure the whole House would want to send best wishes and sympathies.

The proposed plan to increase the UK's stockpile of nuclear warheads has made it abundantly clear that the Government have ditched multilateralism and embraced unilateralism. Such a reckless move is out of step with all our allies and will have a big impact on our ability to participate in nuclear non-proliferation agreements such as the JCPOA with Iran. What impact does the Foreign Secretary think the proposed increase in warheads will have on our international standing, given that we appear to have abandoned our obligations under article 6 of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty? Will he recommit to those obligations today?

Dominic Raab: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the maintenance of a minimum credible deterrence has zero impact on the JCPOA talks and is entirely consistent with our non-proliferation obligations.

Foreign Policy and Overseas Aid: Co-ordination

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of strengthening co-ordination between foreign policy and overseas aid. [901218]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Wendy Morton) [V]: The creation of the FCDO combines our diplomatic network with our development expertise and resource to maximise our interests, influence and impact as a global force for good. The Foreign Secretary's strategic oversight of ODA is bringing greater coherence and impact to UK aid, sharpening our focus where we can make the most difference and ensuring that every penny delivers results. The integrated review sets out the ambition for the UK to be a model for an integrated approach to tackling global challenges.

Alun Cairns: I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and the ministerial team on their part in securing the vaccination commitment to the developing nations at the G7 over the weekend. There are to be 100 million vaccines from the UK, 500 million doses from the US and 100 million from the EU bloc; although not necessarily proportionate, those commitments will have a major impact on the world's most vulnerable people. Does my hon. Friend agree that the impact of overseas aid is greater when it is integrated with our diplomatic aims?

Wendy Morton: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend and I am grateful to him for asking that question. As we saw just last weekend at the G7 summit in Carbis Bay, the UK really can achieve much more when diplomatic and political levers combine with our development objectives, be that on vaccines, as he illustrated, or on girls' education or climate change. We can also use aid commitments to leverage greater financial commitments from other G7 countries and multilaterals. The G7 development finance institutions and multilateral partners have committed to investing more than \$80 billion in the private sector in Africa over the next five years. This is the first time that those institutions have made a collective commitment on funding for Africa. That absolutely demonstrates how the UK's diplomatic network and development expertise can have a much greater impact when they work together.

Crimes against the Rohingya: Accountability

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What diplomatic steps he has taken to help ensure that the Myanmar military personnel responsible for crimes committed against the Rohingya are held to account. [901219]

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): Accountability is vital. The military has committed atrocities against the Rohingya and other minorities and must be held to account. We have sanctioned 16 individuals, including the commander-in-chief, for human rights violations against the Rohingya. We have sanctioned the two largest military economic entities, which are both a key source of revenue for the military. We have boosted our funding to the independent investigative mechanism, which preserves evidence for future prosecution, and we have been clear in our support for the International Court of Justice process and that we urge the military to comply with the provisional measures ruling.

Rushanara Ali [V]: May I first extend my solidarity with, and deepest condolences to, the HALO Trust staff who were killed in Afghanistan and to all those who were injured?

Myanmar's military has been allowed to act with impunity against the Rohingya, and its assault has now widened to the whole population following the military coup earlier this year. At the same time, our Government have unfortunately slashed the budget by nearly half for the refugee camps in Bangladesh, and humanitarian cuts are likely in Myanmar. While the Foreign Secretary is listening, may I ask the Minister once again to reverse those cuts, because they are literally costing lives? Will the Foreign Secretary and the Minister also please consider formally joining Gambia on the genocide prevention case at the ICJ? If they do not agree to do so now after all that has happened and after all that the Myanmar military has done, then when will we formally join, given that we are a leading country in relation to Myanmar?

Nigel Adams: I know how passionate the hon. Lady is about the situation in Myanmar, particularly on behalf of the Rohingya community. On the ICJ case, we have been absolutely clear in our support for the process. We have urged the military to comply with the provisional measures rulings, and we have provided funding to enable Rohingya refugees to attend those hearings in December 2019.

With regard to aid support, we remain a leading donor to the Rohingya response, providing more than £320 million to the Rohingya response in Bangladesh since 2017. That includes £27.6 million of new funding announced in May in Rakhine State. We have provided more than £44 million to all communities since 2017, including over £25 million for the Rohingya. The Government are providing education, nutrition, water, sanitation, health and livelihoods.

Education of Girls: Covid-19

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on the delivery of 12 years of quality education to girls throughout the world. [901220]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Wendy Morton) [V]: Covid-19 has raised the stakes for girls' education, deepening the crisis that they already face in basic skills, and too many children have missed crucial schooling since last year, which we know does long-term damage to their future and disproportionately affects girls. The UK is committed to standing up for the right of every girl around the world to 12 years of quality education. That is why the UK has put girls' education at the heart of our G7 presidency, and we are co-hosting the global education summit with Kenya in July.

Julie Marson [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for her response. Does she agree that the G7 announcement on girls' education represented a huge boost to our efforts to ensure that girls around the world get the education that they need and deserve?

Wendy Morton: Absolutely. We have put girls' education at the heart of our G7 presidency and made huge strides in achieving our ambition of standing up for the right of every girl to 12 years of quality education. At the G7 summit in Cornwall, the Prime Minister secured a landmark commitment from our G7 partners to pledge at least \$2.7 billion to the Global Partnership for Education ahead of the global education summit. That includes £430 million from the UK, which is an uplift of 15% on our current position as top bilateral donor, and our largest ever pledge to the GPE. That, along with our commitments to getting 40 million more girls into schools and 20 million more girls reading by the age of 10 in the next five years, demonstrates the commitment that this Government are putting into girls' education.

Sri Lanka: Human Rights

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps he is taking to address human rights violations in Sri Lanka. [901221]

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): At the UN Human Rights Council in March, we successfully led a new resolution which expresses deep concern about the situation in Sri Lanka and enhances the UN's monitoring role. For the first time, it requests that the UN collect evidence of human rights violations, for use in future accountability processes. We continue to engage with the Government of Sri Lanka on that process.

Elliot Colburn [V]: As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Tamils and on behalf of Tamils in Carshalton and Wallington, I thank the FCDO for its work in securing this new resolution at the UNHRC sessions. However, more can and should be done to provide accountability for the brutal war crimes committed during the Sri Lankan civil war. What actions can my hon. Friend take to ensure that evidence collected satisfies conditions for sanctions against current Sri Lankan officials who are credibly accused of overseeing the enforced disappearance and sexual assault of thousands of Sri Lankan civilians during the conflict?

Nigel Adams: As my hon. Friend will know, this Government have led international efforts over many years to promote accountability, reconciliation and human rights in Sri Lanka, including at the UN Human Rights

Council. The new UK-led resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council in March included, for the first time, a request for the UN

"to collect, consolidate, analyse and preserve information and evidence"

of human rights abuses and violations so that this can be used to support future accountability processes.

Aid Budget Reduction: Covid-19

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect of reductions in the UK aid budget on tackling the covid-19 pandemic. [901223]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Wendy Morton) [V]: [*Inaudible*]¹—is having on the world's poorest countries. The FCDO is committed to the global effort to tackle the pandemic. We have made new public commitments worth up to £1.3 billion of ODA to counter the health, humanitarian and socioeconomic impacts of covid-19 and to support the global effort to distribute vaccines equitably, as well as adopting our programmes in 2020 amounting to more than £700 million. As we have heard, the Prime Minister announced at the G7 that the UK will donate 100 million vaccine doses within the next five years, with 5 million of those by the end of September, to ensure global vaccination by the end of 2022.¹

Alex Cunningham: That is simply not good enough. With the failure of the Prime Minister to deliver a credible plan at the G7 for vaccinating the world compounding his savage cuts of 80% to clean water and sanitation programmes, which we all know are the best way of slowing the spread of covid-19, does the Minister agree that the scale and impact of these cuts on the lives and life chances of the poorest people in the world are devastating and that the pandemic will kill more people and actually last longer as a result?

Wendy Morton: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman was following entirely all the announcements at the G7 at the weekend, because we announced that we will donate 100 million vaccine doses within the next year, with 5 million by the end of September. Our Prime Minister led the G7 to help to commit to ensuring global vaccination by the end of 2022, and also announced his plan to share 1 billion vaccine doses, and to expand vaccine manufacturing as well. When it comes to our ODA commitments, the UK is one of the largest donors to the international response, committing up to £1.3 billion of ODA since the beginning of the crisis, and our overall ODA budget remains at £10 billion, helping the world's poorest.

North Korea

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): What recent assessment the Government have made of the political and humanitarian situation in North Korea. [901225]

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): The threat posed by North Korea continues to grow. Its nuclear and ballistic missiles programmes threaten to destabilise the region and pose a grave threat to international peace and security. The United Kingdom is deeply concerned that humanitarian needs in North Korea may be growing following the closure of its borders in January 2020. We

1. [Official Report, 28 June 2021, Vol. 698, c. 1MC.]

urge North Korea to facilitate access for international humanitarian organisations to carry out an independent assessment of needs and to allow aid to flow freely into that country.

Dr Mullan: Does my hon. Friend agree that the international community's complete failure to stop the ongoing brutal treatment and subjugation of the North Korean people is testament to the fact that we need new international structures to tackle the worst human rights abuses outside of the UN Security Council, which is not able to deliver on this and many other issues?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue, but he can be reassured that the UK is clear that there must be no impunity for the most serious international crimes. The international community has a responsibility to respond to human rights violations in North Korea. The United Kingdom remains committed to continuing to push for action at all levels to bring pressure to bear on the Government of North Korea.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I listened with great interest to the Minister's answer, and North Korea really should be higher up our agenda, because there is a looming humanitarian disaster coming in that country. The corn harvest is failing and food prices are now up 30-odd per cent., the border remains closed with China, so imports are not able to alleviate that, and we are also seeing electricity being diverted away from the provinces to Pyongyang—all the actions of a deeply unstable regime, but jeopardising the interests of 25 million people. We have heard great tell about the Indo-Pacific tilt and integrated foreign policy and development, but it really would be a lot more credible if we heard less about aircraft carriers and more about preparations for a pending humanitarian disaster.

Nigel Adams: The hon. Member is again right to raise this issue. We are extremely concerned about the humanitarian situation in North Korea. He will be aware that our ambassador to North Korea maintains diplomatic relations from London. He routinely discusses issues of concern. We will seek to re-establish our presence in Pyongyang as soon as the border reopens. The Foreign Secretary and other G7 Foreign and Development Ministers made clear on 5 May our deep concern for the welfare of vulnerable communities, particularly in terms of access to adequate water, nutrition and medical facilities. This humanitarian assistance should be delivered consistent with UN Security Council resolutions and humanitarian principles.

Global Poverty and Inequality

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that tackling global poverty and inequality remains a priority for his Department. [901227]

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that tackling global poverty and inequality remains a priority for his Department. [901241]

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to reduce global poverty. [901250]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Duddridge): The UK's overseas development assistance continues to serve the primary purpose of reducing poverty in developing countries. We are proud that we remain firmly committed to helping the world's poorest, and we will spend £10 billion on ODA this year—spending more on international aid in 2021 as a proportion of our gross national income than the majority of the G7.

Sally-Ann Hart: With Brexit, the UK has the freedom to be a truly global nation, not just in trade and diplomacy, but also in leading the world in tackling climate change, poverty and inequality. Does my hon. Friend agree that we have an opportunity to expand our presence abroad, particularly in developing nations, so that we have personnel on the ground who really understand the issues faced in these countries and who can advise on how aid can be specifically targeted to ensure real measurable help is given where it is needed most?

James Duddridge: I agree that we have an opportunity to expand our presence abroad, particularly in developing countries. As part of the UK's diplomatic and development expansion, we now have heads of mission in Lesotho, Vanuatu and Eswatini. We are also opening a new British embassy in Djibouti and upgrading our two existing offices in Chad and Niger to full embassy status.

Mr Speaker: Virginia Crosbie is not here, so I call Christina Rees.

Christina Rees [V]: As a Labour and Co-operative party MP, I am so proud that tackling poverty is at the heart of the co-operative movement. What assurances can the Minister give that the co-operative sectors, which do so much to alleviate poverty in developing countries, will not be impacted by cuts to the aid budget? Will he commit to reinstating the 0.7% aid budget target?

James Duddridge: I can certainly commit to going back to 0.7%—that is the Government's intention when the fiscal situation is right. I can agree to co-operate with co-operatives across the developing world—with a small C and a large C—including the Fairtrade movement.

Overseas Commercial Interests

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to advance the commercial interests of the UK overseas. [901229]

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): My hon. Friend asks a very timely question, as the Prime Minister has today announced a free trade agreement with Australia, which will bring fantastic opportunities for British businesses from all over the United Kingdom. The UK-Australia trade relationship was worth more than £13.9 billion last year, and we look forward to it growing even further under this deal. The FCDO has co-ordinated the transition of 150 key international agreements in which the UK previously participated as a member of the EU, including supporting the Department for International Trade to agree bilateral trade agreements with 67 non-EU countries, plus the European Union.

Andrew Griffith: Ahead of English Wine Week next week, would the Minister give me his personal assurance that he will do everything in his power to ensure that our embassies and our high commissions around the world do all they can to promote and showcase this growing and successful English product?

Nigel Adams: I could not agree more, and I know my hon. Friend and I do our best to support this fantastic industry. There is no better champion for the British wine industry, and he has some superb vineyards in Arundel and South Downs. The quality of our sparkling wines in particular are superb, not least those from North Yorkshire vineyards, including the Yorkshire Heart vineyard in Nun Monkton and the Dunesforde vineyard in Upper Dunsforth. I recommend a visit. He is totally right: there should be no excuse for our embassies, our high commissions and our consulates not stocking British projects, including our wines. I am sure all our ambassadors and high commissioners are watching, so I would ask them to make sure that their cellars are stocked up with British produce, including our fantastic British wines.

Mr Speaker: You should have told the Prime Minister to put it on last night.

Source of Covid-19 Outbreak: Discussions with China

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): Whether he has had discussions with his Chinese counterpart on the source of the covid-19 outbreak. [901232]

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): In their call last month, the Foreign Secretary raised the response to the pandemic and global health reform with Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi. The Health Secretary also discussed covid-19 with his Chinese counterpart at the UK-China health dialogue in December 2020. He underlined that a shared understanding of the virus's origins, grounded in robust science, is vital to global pandemic preparedness.

Antony Higginbotham: The covid-19 pandemic has had huge implications for the global economy, for our constituents across this House and for billions of people around the world, so it is vital that we learn the lessons and do not brush anything under the carpet for fear of reprisal. With President Biden having asked US intelligence agencies to investigate the origins of the pandemic, could the Minister reassure me and the House that we will be playing our full part in those efforts, and that we will be putting pressure on the Chinese Government to make sure that they behave in a much more transparent way than they have done to date?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this. As he will know, phase 1 of the WHO-convened covid-19 origins study was always meant to be the beginning of the process, not the end. We are working with our international partners to support the timely, transparent, evidence-based and expert-led phase 2 study, including, as recommended by the experts report, in China. World Health Organisation director general Tedros has said that "all hypotheses remain open", and further data and studies are required. As such, we expect all WHO member states to live up to their responsibilities and co-operate with phase 2.

Middle East: Two-state Solution

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the prospects for a two-state solution in the Middle East. [901234]

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): If he will support the creation of the International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace. [901240]

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to support peace between Israel and the Palestinians. [901244]

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): The UK remains fully committed to a two-state solution as the best way to permanently end the occupation, deliver Palestinian self-determination and ensure Israel's Jewish and democratic identity. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary visited Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories on 25 and 26 May for talks with senior leaders to reaffirm this commitment. We welcome the ceasefire in Israel and Gaza, and we are working with partners in the region to find a durable solution to the conflict. We also look forward to hearing more from the Alliance for Middle East Peace and the US Government about the international fund's objectives and the projects it will support. Once more information is available, we will consider options for UK involvement.

Hilary Benn [V]: As the Minister has said, for many years there has been widespread international support for a two-state solution, but he will know that a growing number of voices now say that the window on this is closing rapidly, and that if it does, Israel will have to accept full and equal civil rights for all Palestinians. In the light of this, what policy would he encourage the new Government formed this week to pursue?

James Cleverly: We congratulate the new Government on their formation and look forward to working with them in pursuit of the almost universally held goal in this House and across the international community of having a secure, sovereign, prosperous Palestinian state alongside a secure and stable and safe Israeli state. Ultimately it is for the Government of Israel to make decisions about these policies, but, as has been the long-standing position of the UK Government, we will work to support any and all actions which are complementary to or part of the process towards making that sustainable two-state solution through political negotiations a reality.

Dame Diana Johnson [V]: Despite hosting the G7 in Cornwall this weekend, the Government have yet again missed the opportunity to make global Britain a reality in the middle east by not seizing the initiative for UK leadership of the international fund for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Why did the Government pass over that opportunity, and is there any prospect of the UK stepping up and leading that exciting new project with the United States?

James Cleverly: I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady for her passion for finding a peaceful resolution to this situation; it is our shared goal. As I said in my answer, we will look at the detail of what this programme seeks to deliver, and as yet all the details are not available to

us. We have always looked favourably on programmes that bring about peace but we want to make sure that they are effective and, as I have said, once we have more details we will assess our contribution or collaboration.

Peter Gibson [V]: Over the last few weeks I have been contacted by many constituents who are distraught at the loss of civilian life on both sides. Will my right hon. Friend reassure them that the UK continues to work with both sides to avoid future conflict?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary travelled to both Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories shortly after the most recent scenes of violence. We enjoy good relations with both the Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel, and we will of course be working with the new members of the Israeli Government to pursue the long-standing UK policy of finding a sustainable, peaceful two-state solution. I have no doubt that I speak on behalf of my right hon. Friend when I say that our efforts in this area are undiminished.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): May I begin by expressing my sympathies to the families of the HALO Trust staff who lost their lives in Afghanistan? They were killed by an armed group while on a mission clearing land mines; they were extremely brave people and we pay tribute to them.

The British consul in Jerusalem recently visited his neighbours in Sheikh Jarrah. In support of the Palestinians he said that the threat to the community

“grows more acute by the day”.

He correctly stated that,

“Settlement activity & associated evictions & demolitions” in East Jerusalem

“are illegal and undermine prospects for peace.”

Those are powerful words but what is needed is action, so what do the Government propose to do to ensure that Palestinians in East Jerusalem can live in peace and security, and that the rule of law prevails in East Jerusalem?

James Cleverly: The UK Government’s position on demolitions, settlement expansion and annexation is clear and long-standing. As I have said, we enjoy good bilateral relations with the Government of Israel and are able to speak with them frankly and firmly when we believe that their actions are counterproductive to a peaceful two-state solution. We will continue to do so, but ultimately the resolution to this long-standing challenge will be through negotiations between the Government of Israel and the leadership of the Palestinian Authority, supported—perhaps even facilitated—by their friends in the international community, such as the United Kingdom.

Topical Questions

[901275] **Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): Since the last oral questions I have visited Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories to discuss how to reinforce the ceasefire. I also visited

Saudi Arabia and saw at first hand the changes under Saudi Vision 2030, including greater rights for women, which we have been very much supporting; visited Iraq to support free and fair elections in October; and, of course, joined the Prime Minister in Carbis Bay for the G7 summit, which under his presidency delivered groundbreaking pledges on international vaccines, decisive action on climate change and G7 commitments to get 40 million more girls into 12 years of quality education.

Mike Amesbury: Nepal is in a deep covid crisis, with thousands of people dying each week because of the lack of oxygen supply and ventilators, and the severe lack of vaccines. Without urgent help from the UK Government, more lives will be lost. Can the Secretary of State outline what additional support the UK Government are providing following the visit last month by medical advisers to Nepal?

Dominic Raab: I am very concerned about the situation in Nepal. The UK announced very recently an additional support package, and I will write to the hon. Gentleman to set out the full details, so that he has all of that to hand.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) [V]: I welcome my right hon. Friend’s comments about the workers serving so bravely in the HALO Trust in Afghanistan. He knows as well as I do that many other people are serving the Afghan community, and indeed the international community, by seeking to assist women and girls in education, to help farmers, and to fight the corruption in various institutions—and, indeed, the drugs business that has blighted so many lives.

Can the Secretary of State, today at the Dispatch Box, redouble his commitment to the Afghan National Defence and Security Force and to supporting all those institutions that made such a difference in protecting the Afghan population, and that really are the legacy of the British Army and many other armies’ continuous operations in Afghanistan over much of the last 20 years? Will he ensure that the sacrifice of all those who fought in Afghanistan, and all those who have given so much to rebuilding it, will not go to waste in aid cuts that are so unnecessary?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is right to point to the precarious situation in Afghanistan. We had long, detailed talks not just with the United States at Carbis Bay but with other allies. We had the NATO summit as well, which has been an opportunity to reinforce the need to stand by those who have stood by us in the way that my hon. Friend the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee described, and to ensure that we encourage a political dialogue to avoid the spectre, or the risk, of civil war and that we bank not just the security gains from all the blood, sweat and tears that have been spent in Afghanistan, but a more inclusive Government.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I associate myself with the tributes paid to the brave workers of the HALO Trust and put on record our unequivocal condemnation of the targeting of a BBC journalist outside Parliament yesterday. Press freedom is under attack around the world; we must defend it here.

Yesterday, NATO recognised China as a systemic challenge to our security and the values that underpin it for the first time. While we welcome the reference to forced labour in the G7 communiqué, the failure to agree concrete measures in relation to Xinjiang was a missed opportunity to send a clear message that the world stands against genocide and anyone who seeks to profit from it. Can the Secretary of State assure us that he and the Prime Minister supported the stronger language and tougher measures that President Biden made it clear were needed, and that, despite the failure of the G7 to agree them, he will continue to do so?

Dominic Raab: I agree with much of what the hon. Lady said. Of course, she will know that there are varied views at the G7, including among our European partners, about quite how robust to be with China on some of these issues. She will know, because of the stance that the United Kingdom has taken in the Human Rights Council, the UN General Assembly, the United Nations and other forums, and indeed from the statements that we have put out and the sanctions that we have imposed in relation to Xinjiang, how importantly we regard the issue, but the reality is that in relation to China, on this and many other issues, we need to be able to carry a broader group of like-minded countries with us. That is why the Prime Minister invited India, South Korea and Australia to join the G7 as guests, and why it is important to engage with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in the way that we have been doing.

Lisa Nandy: While I welcome that, if we want to carry a broader group of like-minded countries with us we need to lead by example. Does the Secretary of State regret whipping his MPs to support preferential trade deals with countries that commit genocide? Can he tell us why, last week, his Government turned down almost every single recommendation made by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee to get tough with China over forced labour in Xinjiang, and why the Minister for Exports, the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), told parliamentarians last week:

“China offers more opportunity for the UK economy than perhaps any other market”?

The sheer incoherence of that approach is what, time and again, causes the Government to come up short. It gives us the absurd spectacle of Ministers standing up for human rights in the morning and then defending trade deals with countries that commit genocide in the afternoon. Will he please get a grip on that across Government, because who in the world could rely on a Government who cannot even rely on themselves?

Dominic Raab: I think the hon. Lady is a bit confused. Can she name a single country with which the United Kingdom under this Government is engaged on FTA negotiations that has committed anything close to genocide? Of course it is unthinkable; of course we would not do it. *[Interruption.]* Incorrect. What we have done—*[Interruption.]* She is chuntering from a sedentary position because she knows what she is saying is bereft of substance. We have imposed—we led the way in imposing—sanctions on Xinjiang. We have raised it at the G7 level. It is absolutely inconceivable that the UK would do a trade deal with any country that has engaged in genocide. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady is chuntering again. It is absolute nonsense.

It is right, though, to say that we want a constructive and positive relationship, where that is possible, with China across the piece. In areas such as climate change, the hon. Lady talks a good game but does not seem to understand the elbow grease that needs to go into it. We need to have a conversation with China, because it is the biggest emitter and the biggest investor in renewable technologies, but we have demonstrated time and again that we never shrink from standing up for our values. She talks a good game; we do the business.

Mr Speaker: Can we have less chuntering, as well?

[901276] **Chris Grayling** (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows my concern about the impact of deforestation around the world. At the moment I am particularly concerned about what is happening in Brazil, where, far from giving greater protection to the Amazon rainforest, the Brazilian Government appear to be moving in a direction that will allow greater deforestation. Please will he take every step possible to put pressure on the Brazilian Government to ensure that that does not happen, and that protections for the Amazon are increased, not reduced?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. On the positive side, we welcome President Bolsonaro's commitment to reach zero illegal deforestation by 2030, and we are working with the Brazilian Government to address some of the underlying factors that fuel deforestation, including trying to get sustainable production of agricultural commodities—an issue not just in Brazil but around the world. Through international finance programmes, we have committed £259 million to help protect the Amazon, which has already enabled clearance of 430,000 acres to be avoided.

[901277] **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: The Government are fully aware that my constituent, Mr Anoosheh Ashoori, has been detained as hostage in Iran because of his British citizenship, with declining health and no contact with his family. Does the Secretary of State agree that Anoosheh should receive the benefit of every tool the Government have to secure his release, including diplomatic protection? If he does, will he update us on Anoosheh's diplomatic status, and confirm whether dual nationals being held in Iran were discussed at the G7 summit?

Dominic Raab: I have had long conversations with the families of Anoosheh Ashoori and all the other dual nationals who have been detained. Nothing is more moving or heartbreaking in this job than seeing the situation of dual nationals in Iran and, indeed, of nationals and dual nationals around the world, and I have been intensively engaged in trying to resolve this. With other issues, it was something I discussed with our US friends at Carbis Bay. I am doing absolutely everything I can to secure the release and return home of all our detained dual nationals in Iran and, indeed, around the world.

[901282] **Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate the Foreign Secretary and his whole team on delivering such a successful G7 summit in Carbis Bay. I welcome the generous contribution to the replenishment of the Global Partnership for Education. May I ask for an assurance that as our economy recovers,

we will revert to 0.7% of GNP for overseas development assistance, and that our contribution represents merely the foundation of our ambition to ensure that every child in the world gets 12 years of quality education?

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): I thank my hon. Friend for making those points. I can assure her that in all the conversations we have about our commitment to Africa and to the broader world, ensuring 12 years of quality education for girls remains the top priority. We recognise that, as the Prime Minister has said on many occasions, it is the Swiss Army knife for global problems, and it will remain a high priority for us, both in this part of the world and more broadly.

[901278] **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) [V]: While the Foreign Secretary was in Cornwall over the weekend, I was out knocking on doors in Chesham and Amersham. I spoke to lifelong Conservative voters, who told me that they were angry that the Government have broken their promises to them and the world's poorest by cutting the aid budget. They said that they were planning to stay at home or vote Lib Dem for the very first time. Does the Secretary of State agree with them that, if someone wants to send a message to the Government on cuts to the aid budget, they should vote Lib Dem?

Mr Speaker: I suspect he will not, but come on, Foreign Secretary.

Dominic Raab: I am glad that the folk of Chesham and Amersham managed to have a rare sighting of a

Lib Dem. I went to school in Amersham, and I can tell the hon. Lady that I do not think that they will be that daft come election day.

[901284] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on a successful G7 conference in Conservative Cornwall. During my time at the Royal College of Defence Studies, I led a seminar on the South China sea, and through my interest in fisheries I have gained knowledge on the UN convention on the law of the sea. Could he tell me what his Department is doing to encourage a code of conduct for the area that reflects UNCLOS?

Dominic Raab: I started life as a maritime lawyer, so I can geek on UNCLOS with the best of them. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's expertise in this area. We welcome the negotiations between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations on a code of conduct relating to UNCLOS. What is really important is that that reflects and is faithful to the international obligations in one of the world's most widely ratified international treaties that is widely regarded as reflective of custom in international law. A code of conduct should not be used by China to unpick the obligations under UNCLOS.

Mr Speaker: Can I just say that I am very disappointed that lots of Members have not got in? Those who asked questions and those who responded to them should consider others because, unfortunately, I am now ending questions and suspending the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business to be made.

12.31 pm

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

12.36 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I should like to make a short business statement. Hon. and right hon. Members will be aware of yesterday's announcement to extend covid restrictions until 19 July. As a consequence of that announcement, further regulations are needed. Therefore, tomorrow's business will now be:

WEDNESDAY 16 JUNE—Consideration of a business of the House motion, followed by a motion to approve the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Steps and Other Provisions) (England) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2021 (S.I., 2021, No. 705), and a further motion that will provide for the current arrangements for parliamentary proceedings during the pandemic to continue until the summer recess.

I shall make a further business statement as usual on Thursday. Mr Speaker, you have asked me to advise hon. and right hon. Members that they will have until 3 o'clock today to apply to speak in tomorrow's debate.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for an advance copy of his statement and for co-operation over the process.

In section 9 of the ministerial code, "Ministers and Parliament" general principle 9.1 states:

"When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of Government policy should be made in the first instance, in Parliament."

As you noted, Mr Speaker, and as I too noted yesterday in my point of order, that was not followed yesterday in relation to a major announcement by the Prime Minister.

The Leader of the House regularly and correctly says that Members of Parliament have been sent here to represent constituents and should be able to scrutinise Ministers of the Crown in order to stand up for said constituents, and he has always been known as a man of the House and our representative to Cabinet. Does he agree with that statement in the ministerial code?

Given the motion that is being brought forward tomorrow, linking back to yesterday's announcement, does the Leader of the House believe that the Prime Minister has abided by the letter and spirit of that statement, which is in bold at the top of section 9? If he does not, what will he do to make representations on our behalf to the Prime Minister? Does he understand that the Prime Minister's absence from this House to take questions about that important announcement affects our ability to represent our constituents? Will there, therefore, be some mention of this over the course of the next 24 hours from the Prime Minister?

In addition to the package of motions that the Leader of the House has announced for tomorrow, will there be a statement from the Chancellor on an economic package of support, and a statement from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy or the Department for Work and Pensions about extending support for businesses and individuals who will be affected by the extension? In particular, will the Government now acknowledge that it is essential to provide payment for people asked to isolate who cannot work from home but are on low wages or in insecure work?

Will the Leader of the House ask his colleagues, in addition to the motions tomorrow, to come forward urgently with packages of support? Businesses such as hospitality businesses, which have stocked up and taken on staff who cannot be furloughed, and others, now face a series of cliff edges. That is relevant to the motions tomorrow, because they will affect what happens to those businesses, and many are on the edge.

The motions will also cover extending the rules for this place until recess, which I welcome. Does the Leader of the House agree that we need to discuss fully those rules and what we can learn from the hybrid Parliament?

As we have this business statement, can I ask the Leader of the House this? He has not included in this statement parliamentary time to close the anomaly between the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme and the parliamentary Standards Committee in relation to recall, when an MP is subject to suspension on the recommendation of the ICGS. Will he cover that in his business statement on Thursday, given that it is an urgent piece of business? We have no idea when another case of sexual harassment or bullying may come forward.

Finally, on a related issue, you, Mr Speaker, may have seen the footage of a journalist with parliamentary credentials being harassed outside No. 10. Has the Leader of the House been in touch with the necessary authorities to ensure that that does not happen again?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is always important that statements are made to this House and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care was here yesterday to answer questions, but I understand, Mr Speaker, that you are seeing the Prime Minister later today to discuss that and to ensure that everything is done as it ought to be done. I am confident that the Prime Minister follows the ministerial code in all his doings and that has been shown over recent times to be the case.

The hon. Lady asked for further statements to be made. That is a perfectly reasonable request for her to make. I remind her that £407 billion of taxpayers' money has been spent so far, that the furlough scheme continues until September—so comfortably beyond the date that has been set, or will be set if the regulations are approved tomorrow—and that other packages, such as rate relief, also continue.

The question of statements is always a difficult one. There will be a debate tomorrow and Members will want to contribute to it—it will go until 7 o'clock. Any statements eat into time for that and these are all matters that could be raised in the course of the debate as well. So the House, essentially, has to work out for itself how it best wants to manage its time to ensure that these important issues are discussed fully in the time available tomorrow.

As regards the hybrid Parliament, Mr Speaker, you wisely advised yesterday that we should extend it until the recess, rather than until just a couple of days before. I am like the centurion's servant—say go and I goeth, say come and I cometh—and, therefore, those are the motions that we have brought forward. That is sensible and proportionate. It may be useful to the House to say that that will also apply to Select Committees, which will continue to be able to use hybrid proceedings until the parliamentary recess.

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

On the issue relating to recall, discussions are taking place. I had a meeting with one of the union representatives earlier this week. I know that the hon. Lady is having discussions. There may be an opportunity to discuss it at the Commission on Monday. So it is something under very active consideration, and I hope that we can come to a conclusion that is satisfactory to everybody.

As regards policing in the metropolis and security outside Downing Street, the hon. Lady's question is perfectly timed because the Home Secretary and the Minister for Policing are on the Front Bench at this very moment. I am sure that they will encourage the constabulary to attend to their duties.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I also thank the Leader of the House for advance sight of the statement.

I agree with the shadow Leader of the House that it is critical for us to get clarity on the extension of support schemes and mechanisms. Perhaps the Government could take this opportunity to close the gap for the excluded who have not had any support to date. As we continue to extend, perhaps something could be drawn forward in due course.

Although all of us want the restrictions to end at the earliest possible opportunity, yesterday's statement was welcome in recognising the reality that we face. Looking at that reality and the fluid situation, however, I ask the Leader of the House this. We are extending the virtual proceedings in this place only to the recess. Should something happen over the summer recess before we return in September, will we have no opportunity to consider what may be necessary at that stage because we had effectively ended the availability of the procedures in July, rather than even on the first day back? We could return on the first day back, in full attendance, simply

to have to move measures on such proceedings. I am not trying to be a killjoy; I am just looking at the practicalities: what if these situations present themselves?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support. He raises a fair point. I think the answer must be—as the Prime Minister and, I think, Professor Whitty, have said—that ultimately we are going to have to live with covid, and we cannot have this semi-functioning Parliament indefinitely. We ultimately have to get back to normal. We have to have the bustle and energy that Parliament requires to hold the Government to account. Dare I confess that it is much easier for the Minister at the Dispatch Box when there are about 20 people in the Chamber than when there are about 400? As somebody who believes in the benefits of parliamentary scrutiny, I actually think it is quite a good thing when Ministers face some fast bowling at the Dispatch Box, rather than my lumbering, slow balls which are the best that I can achieve on the cricket field.

On the extension of support, as I mentioned, a lot of support does continue. That gives me the opportunity to mention the wonderful support that the United Kingdom has been able to give: £14.5 billion of extra money has been spent in Scotland thanks to UK taxpayers across our whole country, supporting over 900,000 jobs in the furlough scheme and over 535,000 claims for the self-employment scheme. I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is beginning to see the virtues of a United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: I am not quite sure he agrees, but there we are.

I am now suspending the House for one minute to enable the necessary arrangements to be made for the next business.

12.46 pm

Sitting suspended.

Daniel Morgan Independent Panel Report

12.47 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the report of the Daniel Morgan independent panel.

Daniel Morgan was murdered in London in 1987. It is incredibly painful for his family and friends that five criminal investigations into his brutal death have brought no successful prosecutions. In 2013, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), who was then Home Secretary, announced the creation of the Daniel Morgan independent panel to review police handling of the murder investigations. The panel was asked to explore police involvement in Daniel Morgan's murder; whether anyone involved in the murder was protected by corrupt police officers; whether there was a subsequent failure to investigate corruption; and the incidence of connections between private investigators, police officers, the *News of the World* or other parts of the media. The independent panel has now completed its report. I am grateful to the panel and to Baroness Nuala O'Loan.

As Home Secretary, it was my responsibility to ensure that publishing the report was compatible with my statutory obligations in relation to human rights and national security. This was not about delay. I am pleased that no redactions were required. Daniel Morgan's family have waited eight years for this report. It is devastating that, 34 years after he was murdered, nobody has been brought to justice.

The report sets out findings from its review of the past three decades. It is more than 1,200 pages long and in three volumes. It is right that we carefully review its findings. The report is deeply alarming: it finds that examples of corrupt behaviour were not limited to the first investigation, that the Metropolitan police made a litany of mistakes, and that that irreparably damaged the chances of a successful prosecution for Daniel Morgan's murder. The report accuses the Metropolitan police of "a form of institutional corruption."

Police corruption is a betrayal of everything that policing stands for in this country. It erodes public confidence in our entire criminal justice system. It undermines democracy and civilised society. We look to the police to protect us, and so they are invested with great power. The overwhelming majority of officers use it honourably, but those who use their power for immoral ends do terrible harm, as do those who indulge, cover up or ignore police corruption. This is one of the most devastating episodes in the history of the Metropolitan police.

In recent years, several steps have been taken to combat police corruption. A new offence of police corruption, applicable solely to police officers, was introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead in 2015, to sit alongside the existing offence of misconduct in public office. The offence carries a maximum prison sentence of fourteen years. To prevent corrupt police officers from evading accountability by resigning or retiring, the Policing and Crime Act 2017 enabled the extension of disciplinary procedures to former officers. It also ensures that if an officer under investigation for gross misconduct resigns or retires,

misconduct proceedings can still take place and the officer can be barred from rejoining the police.

Last year, I overhauled the police complaints and discipline process. There is now a more efficient system for dealing with police misconduct. The investigation process is simpler and quicker, and an explanation is required if an investigation takes longer than 12 months. It is in the interests both of the police and of the public that corrupt police officers are exposed and innocent officers exonerated as swiftly as possible.

The Group of States against Corruption monitors countries' compliance with the Council of Europe's anti-corruption standards. This month, it published a report demonstrating good progress in the UK's law enforcement to prevent corruption. But we cannot ignore the findings of this report. Its recommendations are wide-ranging and far-reaching across aspects of policing, conduct, culture and transparency in public institutions. Today, I have written to Dame Cressida Dick to ask her to provide me with a detailed response to the panel's recommendations for the Metropolitan police and the wider issues outlined in the report. This afternoon, I will also ask Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services to consider how best it can look into the issues raised.

The police are operationally independent, and the Metropolitan police are held to account by the Mayor of London and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, but the police are accountable to Parliament through me. I intend to return to the House to update on progress made on this and other recommendations in the report once I have received responses from the Metropolitan police and others.

There can be no confidence in the integrity of policing without confidence in the police watchdog. The Independent Office for Police Conduct has made good progress since it was formed in 2018, but questions remain about its ability to hold the police to account. In particular, profound concerns exist about the handling of the IOPC's investigation into Operation Midland. The issues raised by the Daniel Morgan independent panel further reinforce the need for a strong police watchdog. I am therefore announcing today that I am bringing forward the next periodic review of the IOPC to start this summer. This will include an assessment of the IOPC's effectiveness and efficiency.

Daniel Morgan deserved far, far better than this, as did his family. To them, on what will be a very, very difficult day, I say that the whole House will have them and Daniel in our thoughts. I commend this statement to the House.

12.54 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement and for advance sight of it. I should say that a member of Daniel Morgan's family is a constituent of mine, and my thoughts are with them today.

The publication of the report should never have taken this long. It is 34 years since Daniel Morgan's horrific murder, with four major police investigations, a collapsed trial, an inquest. The independent panel was set up by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) in 2013, yet the family has had to wait a further eight years since then.

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

The findings in the report are damning and they go to the very heart of our policing, criminal justice system and media. The challenge to the Government today is what will now be done to ensure that something like this can never happen again. Paragraph 60 of the report is incredibly serious. It states:

“The family of Daniel Morgan suffered grievously as a consequence of the failure to bring his murderer(s) to justice, the unwarranted assurances which they were given, the misinformation which was put into the public domain, and the denial of the failings in investigation, including failing to acknowledge professional incompetence, individuals’ venal behaviour, and managerial and organisational failures. The Metropolitan Police also repeatedly failed to take a fresh, thorough and critical look at past failings. Concealing or denying failings, for the sake of the organisation’s public image, is dishonesty on the part of the organisation for reputational benefit and constitutes a form of institutional corruption.”

The report also states that:

“the Panel has proposed the creation of a statutory duty of candour, to be owed by all law enforcement agencies to those whom they serve”.

That is a vital reform and it is particularly urgent, as there will be another inquiry soon into the covid pandemic, so can the Home Secretary confirm that that recommendation will be implemented?

I stand here today as a Member of Parliament for a mining constituency and a supporter of Liverpool football club, looking, in addition to Orgreave and Hillsborough, at yet another terrible episode from the 1980s that raises profound questions about policing in that period. On the link between police and journalists, does the Home Secretary not accept that the Government, over the past 11 years, have had the opportunity not only to investigate that link, but to make reforms and they have failed to do so?

The Home Secretary will also be aware of the serious criticisms made by the panel about its ability to do its work over the past eight years and its difficulty in securing timely access to evidence. She will further be aware of the criticism of the Home Office, on page 1,138 of the report, that the point of contact for the panel was helpful, but that dealing with

“the Home Office as a department”

was “more challenging”. Can the Home Secretary set out how she proposes to address that within the Home Office?

The Home Secretary also mentioned bringing forward the next periodic review of the IOPC. It is right that strong powers for our police are matched by strong safeguards, so can she confirm when she expects that review to be completed? The Home Secretary also mentioned returning to the House once she has a response from the Metropolitan police. Does she expect this to be before the summer recess?

Finally, does the Home Secretary agree that we will be failing the family and, indeed, all victims if we do not do all that is required to prevent other families going through the three-decade nightmare that has been the experience of the Morgan family?

Priti Patel: Let me begin my remarks in response to the right hon. Gentleman by extending my continued sympathy to Daniel Morgan’s family at what is a difficult time and by really paying tribute to their own tenacity in seeking answers to their questions about Daniel’s tragic murder.

The right hon. Gentleman raises a number of valid points regarding police conduct and the report, in terms of the time that it has taken and the whole issue of duty of candour. He speaks about this point, around public servants, in particular, giving evidence in hearings, investigations and public inquiries, very much in terms of the honesty and the approach that they take to bring justice to families, in particular. On that point, it is important to recognise—the right hon. Gentleman has spoken about this in relation to the potential covid inquiry that has been announced—that work is taking place across Government on how those wider issues will be addressed, but, at the same time, there is absolutely no justification for delay. Eight years it has taken for this report—far too long—and there will be many reasons, but importantly, lessons have to be learned from that.

In response to the right hon. Gentleman’s specific points about policing, the Metropolitan police and the report, I have today written to the commissioner to seek her response to the findings of the actual report. Alongside that, I will maintain that I will return to the House. At this stage, I cannot tell him when that will be, but I will endeavour, post the discussions this afternoon—I have also mentioned the inspectorate and having a review, effectively—to bring the updates to this House so that he and all Members of this House are kept fully informed of the next stages and our collective response to the recommendations that the panel have made.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): Like, I am sure, all Members of the House, my thoughts are with Daniel Morgan’s family today.

At the heart of this damning, thorough report is yet another example of an organ of the state, the job of which was to protect the public, having prioritised the reputation of the institution over the delivery of justice. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the vast majority of police officers act with integrity and an overriding sense of public duty, but that where corruption does occur it must be rooted out with vigour, unlike what happened throughout this episode and the investigation to find the killer of Daniel Morgan? As the independent panel has said, every corrupt activity must be identified and dealt with on every occasion.

Priti Patel: I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments and her tribute to Daniel Morgan. I also pay tribute to her for her work with regard to policing and corruption in policing. I agree wholeheartedly that the majority of our frontline police officers are incredible public servants—they honour and respect their roles and absolutely serve the frontline with care and professionalism—but she is right to highlight and make the case strongly that where there is corruption there can be no hiding, institutionally or in respect of inquiries, panels or anything of that nature. It has to be right that as I have outlined this afternoon, our role, collectively as a Government and as the Home Office, is not just to follow up but to get the answers that are required and ensure that police conduct is held to account so that we can bring an end to the corruption of policing in the way we have seen.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. No family should have had to endure what Daniel Morgan’s family have had to endure—the

loss and distress compounded by institutional corruption, delay and injustice. As the Home Secretary says, we all have them in our thoughts. But we must also do more. We all hope that the devastating report from the independent panel—we are grateful for its work—helps to provide some answers and signposts as to what should happen next. Will the Home Secretary meet the family to discuss the findings of the report and the recommendations of the panel?

The Home Secretary has highlighted the fact that the findings and recommendations are wide-ranging, far-reaching and stretch over three volumes; my simple request, which I think is one of the most important, is that the Government make time to allow Parliament to debate the report and its implications in full. The offer of updates is good and welcome, but a report of this significance must surely have a full parliamentary debate.

I note that there is a whole chapter in the report on the challenges of securing co-operation. Does that provide the explanation for why it took eight years for the panel to complete its work? Was some of the delay caused by difficulties in persuading the Metropolitan police and others to provide the documents and files requested by the inquiry? If that is the case, is that not all the more reason for a judge-led inquiry along the lines of Leveson 2? To what extent was the panel able to seek evidence from media organisations? Given the panel's lack of powers in that respect, is that not also all the more reason for such a judge-led inquiry?

Nothing has yet been said this morning about the standards and conduct of media organisations and the implications of the report for that industry, so will the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport also make a statement about the implications for that industry of what the report says about this dreadful episode?

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and the way in which he has articulated them today. He has highlighted a number of important points, including the delay of eight years—eight years of painful work by the panel, but essential work, no question, on pulling together the component parts of the report. It is detailed, and I urge all hon. and right hon. Members with an interest to spend some time reading it.

On a future debate, the hon. Gentleman can make the usual approach through the House for a debate. As I have highlighted, there are a number of recommendations, and I am taking some immediate actions this afternoon not just to follow up but to pursue further lines of investigation and accountability to hold the Metropolitan police to account.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned Leveson. He will know well that significant reforms following part 1 of the Leveson inquiry put forward a number of recommendations concerning the police and the media. This included introducing strong rules to ensure accountability and transparency, and those changes led to the introduction of the code of ethics. The Government formally consulted Sir Brian on whether to proceed with part 2 and decided that it was no longer appropriate, proportionate or in the public interest to proceed, given the potential costs and the amount of time that had been spent on part 1. My final comment to the hon. Gentleman is to say that I would be happy to meet the family in the way that he outlined, should that be of some support to them.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: The overwhelming majority of serving police officers will be devastated by the publication of this report and by the besmirching of their conduct in carrying out the duties they fulfil. Obviously, our thoughts are with the family and friends of the victim, who have suffered over the years, and I welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to ensuring that the report and the recommendations are delivered in full. Will she undertake to come back to the House and give MPs the opportunity to question how closely the recommendations have been implemented by all the various institutions that will need to implement them, so that public trust can be restored?

Priti Patel: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. The majority of our police officers will be devastated by the report and the implications for policing. The report is devastating in many ways. Our frontline police officers whom we meet every single day are incredible public servants who put the safety of our citizens and our country front and centre of their conduct every day. It is worth reminding the House that these are men and women who often run into danger to keep us safe and to protect us. My hon. Friend is right to say that I will return to the House with an update after looking at the recommendations, but equally importantly, this is about how we hold institutions of the state to account in order to stamp out some of the corrosive practices that have been outlined in the three volumes of this independent panel's report. That is something that we are determined to do.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: This is a deeply damning and disturbing report, and all of us will need to consider its findings and recommendations. I welcome the Home Secretary's commitment to come back with a further response and proposals. The corruption has led in this case to a lack of justice for Daniel Morgan and his family, and it undermines the valued work of so many police officers with integrity across the country. However, this has come to light only because of the determination of the family and the persistence of the independent panel. Most troubling of all is the failure of senior police leadership and of policing institutions to uncover what happened and the scale of the problem over so many years. Can the Home Secretary tell the House why she thinks there has been this failure to uncover that over so many years, and whether she will come forward with specific proposals on the duty of candour that has been recommended by the independent panel?

Priti Patel: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. It is important that we spend some time considering the full report and its recommendations. Given that it has taken eight years to be published, we need to spend a great deal of time understanding the processes and why there was such slowness in sharing information, papers and evidence bases. That is why it is important that I hold the commissioner to account and ask the right questions, as I will do this afternoon. As I have said, it is important that, first of all, we seek answers to many outstanding questions, and that we question and find out what has happened in policing conduct over three decades.

On the right hon. Lady's point about duty of candour, there is absolutely more to do here. When we look at accountability, institutions of the state and public conduct,

[Priti Patel]

we cannot shy away from asking some difficult questions, and reforming how we work and how our institutions are publicly held to account.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Like other hon. Members, my thoughts are with the Morgan family on this most difficult of days. As a former police officer, I am saddened, but sadly not surprised, by the findings of the report in relation to police corruption; the minority behaviours tarnish the work of so many brave serving police officers. I note the Home Secretary's intended actions in relation to the Metropolitan police and Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary, but I reiterate the shadow Home Secretary's call for clarity on the expected timescales for this work, and also on the expectations on the Metropolitan police in relation to active ongoing complaints linked to the Morgan case. The Morgan family have waited 34 years. How long must they wait to see real meaningful change?

Priti Patel: I respect and acknowledge the hon. Lady's points. She is right to highlight timeframes, bearing in mind the painful period of time that the Morgan family have had to wait for the publication of this report. I can, at this stage, reiterate the comment that I made earlier, which is that I will come back to the House at the earliest opportunity with the information. That is absolutely right, and it is also important for the family that that information is shared with them, and that we learn the lessons associated with this independent report.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): Daniel Morgan junior, Daniel Morgan's son, lives in my constituency. The Morgan family have been waiting 34 years since Daniel Morgan's death to see any kind of justice. Will the Home Secretary acknowledge the criticism of the Home Office in this report? I have been in touch with the family since they have had a chance to look at the report following its publication, and they are looking to the Home Secretary to implement its the key findings, particularly on the statutory duty of candour. If the Home Secretary is unable to support that today, is she at least able to guarantee that she will come back before the summer recess with a response?

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and her comments. I recognise that Daniel Morgan junior lives in her constituency and understand what a difficult time this is for the Morgan family.

First of all, there is criticism of the Home Office in this report, and it is important to acknowledge that, as the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) highlighted earlier. For the record, I was not privy to discussions that took place prior to publication between officials in the Home Office and the panel itself. My responsibility was very much to ensure the publication of this report and that, in doing so, my statutory duties were met.

Like many right hon. and hon. Members in the House, the hon. Lady asked me about the duty of candour. I state again that we will look at this across

Government, because this is relevant not just to this particular inquiry but to future inquiries, for example on covid, and to how the state and the institutions of the state are held to account.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab) [V]: I was six years old, and remember it well, when Daniel Morgan was murdered round the corner from where I lived in Sydenham—the area that I now represent in Parliament. His brutal murder shocked the local community, and the fact that no one has ever been brought to justice has only intensified that. Today, all our thoughts are with Daniel's family, but they have suffered unimaginable and unnecessary delay. Will the Secretary of State commit today to implementing the panel's recommendation that, in future, any panel has timely access to the material required to do its work so that this delay never happens again?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady makes one of the most important points about delay and access to information in terms of bringing the report together. It is absolutely right that we spend time looking at the recommendations. As I have already said to all colleagues, I will come back to the House and provide updates on the work that has been commissioned and on the recommendations as well.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Home Secretary might not know, but my long-term interest in this case comes from a campaigning Welsh lawyer, Glyn Maddocks, who brought it to my attention, and I have followed it actively for many years. Indeed, the case eventually led to the formation of the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice. But the Home Secretary will know that this is not just a one-off. There was systemic corruption in part of the Metropolitan police at the time. Had it not been for Alastair, the brother of the deceased, and their mum, who sadly passed away before this report could be delivered, continuing to campaign over these many years, we would not have got the report at all. Does the Home Secretary agree that this was systemic and the answer has to be system change? I am encouraged by some of her remarks when she addressed this issue. In particular—let us be fair—there were deficiencies in Home Office ministerial teams of both parties.

Priti Patel: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his work with the all-party parliamentary group. He is absolutely right to recognise and acknowledge that this is a tragedy in every sense. We all pay tribute to the tenacity of the Morgan family. In terms of institutional issues—the systemic issues that he referred to—we have to prevent these from occurring again. That is why some of the long-term changes that I have touched on still require further investigation in terms of the accountability of institutions of the state. Because that of work, which is absolutely essential and required, including a full review of the recommendations in these three volumes, I am committed to coming back to the House to update it on all actions taken.

Point of Order

1.17 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would appreciate your guidance. A report by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact has found that there were value-for-money risks with the way that the Government cut the aid budget last year. As you are aware, Mr Speaker, the Government have cut the aid budget but have steadfastly refused to allow this House to properly scrutinise the cuts. They have also refused to answer questions about bilateral official development assistance to different countries, claiming that the aid budget has been allocated in accordance with the UK's strategic priorities. We have seen today that they continue to refuse to give detail about where these cuts will fall. Many of them are already falling on the world's poorest and most vulnerable people, with cuts to the Rohingya of 40%, and to Yemen. But the Government have admitted that no impact assessments have been undertaken.

To improve policy making and ensure that the Government deliver for the British public, Parliament performs a vital role in our democracy by examining and challenging the work of the Government. Can you assist, Mr Speaker, in ensuring that Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Ministers detail which cuts to country budgets and programmes have already happened, where they think future cuts for this year are planned, and what is the projected impact on the world's poorest people?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for giving me notice of the point of order. The issue was raised at FCDO questions earlier. I do not want to prolong those questions now, and the hon. Member has quite rightly put the point on the record. I am sure that the Table Office will be able to advise if she wishes to pursue these issues; I am sure that she will do so and not let the matter end here.

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

1.19 pm

Sitting suspended.

Opposition Day

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

Catch-up Premium

1.23 pm

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That the following papers be provided by HM Treasury to the Public Accounts Committee: all papers, correspondence and advice including emails and text messages, from 3 February 2021 up to and including 2 June 2021, to and between Treasury Ministers, senior officials and Special Advisers relating to consideration of the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of the proposals made by the then Education Recovery Commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins, in particular such correspondence relating to the evaluation of the draft report which he produced and submitted to Government on the investment and services needed to ensure children's education recovers from the impact of the covid-19 outbreak on their learning and development, a copy of that report, and all copies of minutes and papers relating to decisions taken by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and other Treasury Ministers, in respect of that report.

The last 15 months has been a period unlike any other in our recent history, but for our children it has been more than that. Before I go any further, however, I want to place on record the thanks of all Labour Members to all school staff, who have themselves had a harrowing, difficult and stressful year. As well as their resilience, I have admired again and again their continuing focus on the children with whom they work.

Those children have seen not merely a disruption and interruption to their lives, but a disruption of their education and development that risks setting back a generation, damaging their lives and life chances and our economy as a whole. No child should be left behind as a result of the pandemic; I hope every Member of the House agrees on that—in fact, the Prime Minister himself has said as much.

The creation of the post of education recovery commissioner in February was therefore welcome, as was the appointment of Sir Kevan Collins. Sir Kevan is a prominent figure in education and widely respected across this House. He is someone whose expertise and recommendations deserve to be taken immensely seriously, yet less than a fortnight ago Sir Kevan resigned. Why? Because the Government cut the scale of his proposed plan by 90%. In Sir Kevan's own words:

"A half-hearted approach risks failing hundreds of thousands of pupils. The support announced so far does not come close to meeting the scale of the challenge and is why I have no option but to resign."

By any standards, that is an extraordinary turn of events. How did it happen? How did we get here? How could the Government handle this so extraordinarily badly? The answer, as so often, is that it would appear to lie with the real decision maker in the Government. It is a pleasure to see the Minister in his place today, but it is the Cabinet's answer to Macavity—the Chancellor of the Exchequer—who has questions to answer in the Chamber. It is the Treasury that took the shameful decision to block a proper plan for our children's future. The Minister knows it; we all know it. Comprehensive plans for the recovery of our children's education were developed and circulated in government, but they were stopped in their tracks by the Treasury.

[Bridget Phillipson]

Perhaps that is not right; perhaps the Government will feel able to disclose the correspondence that we are seeking today to have published, but the sheer gravity of the issue—the lives of a generation and the strength of our future economy—means that it is crucial that we understand the Treasury's position. That is what today's motion seeks to enable all Members of the House to do.

Labour fully recognises that it is the responsibility of the Treasury to cast an eye—sometimes a sceptical eye—over all spending plans, securing value for money for public spending, ensuring that money is spent both effectively and efficiently. It will be at the heart of spending decisions under a Labour Government. Reasoned decisions about how to spend money must, however, mean, as schoolchildren are often told, that the Chancellor shows us his working-out. An unthinking aversion to using public money to achieve public good is not a virtue—it is a misguided dogma from which this country has spent a decade suffering the consequences and which today puts at risk the education of a generation.

Sometimes only Government can achieve the change that we need and fix the problems that we face. Failure to invest in those circumstances is a false economy on a national scale. The House does not need take my word for it. Earlier this year, the Institute for Fiscal Studies suggested that pupils who have lost six months of normal schooling could lose approximately £40,000 in income over their lifetime. That adds up to £350 billion in lost lifetime earnings across the 8.7 million schoolchildren in the UK. Lost earnings of £350 billion means about £100 billion less tax revenue to invest in building a strong and resilient economy and society of the future; £100 billion simply dwarves the costings that Sir Kevan prepared for his full programme.

The recovery of learning after the pandemic is a vast challenge, but it is undoubtedly in the interests of both our children and our country. We all know that the value and importance of education are not simply about lessons. School is not merely where we learn about Henry VIII and the solutions to quadratic equations; it is where, in every year, we learn the skills that set us up for life: questioning, leading, communicating; the value of friendship and discussion, and of criticism and disagreement without rancour. When children first go to school they are learning how to play, how to make friends, how to make their way in the world, and how to develop as independent individuals. Missing that opportunity has repercussions throughout their rest of their lives.

Nursery closures mean that children are falling behind. Their transition to primary school will be harder and their long-term success lesser. During the pandemic, children of primary age should have been learning the building blocks of maths, reading and writing that will set them up for life, yet by the end of the pandemic tens of thousands of primary school children were estimated by the Government to be behind on basic literacy and unable to read or write when starting secondary school. By the end of the second national lockdown, pupils were estimated to have lost two to five months of learning, with particularly severe effects on maths skills. Secondary school children are young people choosing the course of their lives: the college they will attend; the apprenticeship they will begin; the skills they will develop; the university they might go to.

I want to mention briefly the impact that the necessary restrictions of the pandemic and school closures have had on children in my city of Sunderland. Children have paid a price: a price on their health, with exercise and activity less common and obesity a greater threat; a price on their development of speech and language, as they have been less able to learn from each other and are slipping behind; a price on their reading, with the ability to learn through phonics understandably impaired by the constraints of distance learning; a price on their family relationships, with the confinement of families exacerbating tensions and leading to rising referrals to children's social care; and a price on the hope and optimism about their future that should fill young people, with exams cancelled and uncertainty about their qualifications and job prospects.

The price that children have paid is not unique to my city. Each one of us has seen the damage—social, emotional and academic—to children in every one of our constituencies. But we know that the disruption has hit some children much harder, particularly those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and those living in areas with the longest lockdowns. Unless we address that issue, those effects will ripple through the lives of individuals and through wider society. They will exacerbate inequalities among families and generations, weakening us as individuals and as a society.

A generation who missed out on their education and who were not given the support they needed to catch up would be a generation betrayed. That would have consequences—not just for them, but for us all. It would mean fewer people with skills entering our workforce over that next generation. It would mean the workforce as a whole deskilling over time, and that would mean a drop in the output and productivity of our economy.

Skills and education are at the heart of Labour's vision for the economy and society of the future. The society that we want to see is one where people never stop learning and developing their skills, talents and abilities, and where reskilling for working-age people is as natural as sending our children to school. For us, ensuring the recovery of children's learning from the pandemic today is crucial to assuring Britain's success tomorrow—success for individuals, but also success for every community and every corner of our country.

The argument that we make to the Treasury and to the Minister is that Government action at scale can—and must—be effective. If we get it right, we will pay a smaller price now than a much greater price over the many decades ahead, and that price could be huge. Estimates of the total cost of the disruption to education based on individual impacts have ranged from £80 billion to £160 billion. Estimates based on the systemic effect on our economy, looking at the relationship between schooling and growth, suggest figures of more than £1 trillion.

What we do know from the limited past examples of disastrous interruptions to children's education is that the damage can be real, but it can be fixed. We know it is real, because chronic industrial unrest in Argentina's education system over many years caused repeated school closures. Women affected by those closures who were at school at the time have seen their lifetime earnings fall by 1.7% as a result. For men, the amount is nearly double that.

We also know that the damage can be fixed—that the price our children have paid is not one they need to pay all their lives long. In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans. Most children were out of school for one to three months, yet subsequent intervention was not merely swift and sustained; it was effective. Four years after that disaster, affected children had caught up on lost learning by about two months. Not only that, but the gains were concentrated in the children whose initial performance after the disaster was worst. The lesson we draw from that example is that intervention is not only an option, it is the right option.

The motion before us seeks to understand why the Treasury has been so opposed to the sort of intervention we need and the sort of future our children deserve. What we need, and what Sir Kevan's work rightly lays out, is a long-term, funded plan that is evidence-based, scalable and practical, making best use of the tremendous human and physical resources that we have in this country. It must have at its heart increasing opportunities in school, increasing the value of that time, and targeted tutoring for those who need it most. Tutoring means better engagement. Improving teaching helps us to get more out of every extra hour. More time together helps children to catch up on the social and emotional aspects of their development.

I want to pick up two aspects of the plan that Sir Kevan developed for our nation's children, which the Treasury blocked. They are about the urgency and the duration of the plan we need. The Government, and the Treasury in particular, seem to be caught on the hop again and again. To Treasury Ministers, urgency in dealing with the challenges of public policy is too often for other people—for self-employed workers and small businesses who need to submit claims on time or get nothing, or for businesses which need to remodel their operations overnight as restrictions change with just hours to go.

The Chancellor must never be allowed to forget that his refusal last autumn to set out clear and workable plans until businesses had only hours before deadlines meant thousands of workers either losing their jobs or living in fear of doing so. He has shown again and again that he will not get ahead of the problem—that he prefers to wait and hope it goes away. Our children's future is not an issue that is going away, and it is high time that the Government faced up to that.

It has been apparent since the day that schools were first closed to most children that they would not reopen for many weeks at least and that one day action would be needed to address the consequences. Each week without action is another step towards lasting damage to the opportunities of hundreds of thousands of children. Waiting until the spending review means that more than 300,000 more children and young adults will have left the school system altogether before a proper plan and proper steps are in place.

The second major point is that schools need to start making decisions now about resources and staffing to deliver over not just a few months, but many years. Long-term outcomes are better delivered when they can be planned on a longer-term basis—more than one financial year at a time. That is, after all, the reason the Government have multi-year spending reviews in the first place. Sharply increased spend should come with proper accountability, which is why Labour has set out

clear proposals for increased and improved mechanisms to get the best value out of every pound of public money spent.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), the shadow Secretary of State for Education, has set out Labour's comprehensive alternative to what the Government have proposed, because, like Sir Kevan, Labour grasps the scale of the problem and the need for the Government to rise to the challenge. Our plan would see breakfast clubs, new activities for every child and a fully funded expanded range of extracurricular clubs and activities. Our plan would see quality mental health support in every school, giving every child the support they need. Our plan would see small group tutoring for all who need it, not just 1%, by reforming the Government's failing tutoring programme to ensure that no child falls behind because of pandemic disruption.

Our plan would see continued development for teachers, who have had one of the toughest years of their careers. Our plan would see an education recovery premium supporting every child by investing in children who have faced the greatest disruption during the pandemic, from early years to further education, delivering vital additional support for children who need it the most. Our plan would ensure that no child goes hungry by extending free school meals over the holidays.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. Given that she has been talking about the plans of Kevan Collins, and given that a core part of his proposal was to have a formal longer school day, which the shadow Education Secretary said in the media last week was not something she agreed with, does the hon. Lady agree that there should be a longer school day as part of Sir Kevan Collins' plans?

Bridget Phillipson: I am always keen to hear from the Chair of the Select Committee, who I know cares very deeply and passionately about these issues. What I would say in response is that, rather than disagreeing over the nature of that additional time, why do we not focus on trying to get the right outcome for all our children in this country? The block to that rests with the Treasury. It feels at times that we are arguing at cross-purposes. That was not the position that my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) set out. I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman's assessment of the situation.

We all want to make sure that children have the time they need in school to catch up on that lost time, but in addition to that, we want to make sure there are fully funded extracurricular activities as part of an extended day within the school premises, so that all children—not just those who can afford extra clubs, music, activities or book clubs; whatever it would happen to be—have access to that kind of provision. The block right now and the reason we have not got to that point, I am afraid, lies on the right hon. Gentleman's Benches.

Last week, the Government could bring themselves neither to support nor to oppose our alternative. Perhaps today they will tell the House why the Treasury blocked the plans that the Prime Minister's chosen adviser sought to develop, comparable in scope and scale to those of the Opposition.

Children do not vote, and their voices are rarely heard in this place, but we have a moral duty to them none the less: a duty to their future, both theirs and

[Bridget Phillipson]

ours. Labour has set out, at length and in detail, the sort of plan that we believe our country needs. The Government's own education recovery commissioner set out, at length and in detail, the sort of plan that he believes our country needs. Today, our request is simple: that the Treasury explain to parents and families why it believes that our country does not need its own commissioner's plan.

It is not too late for the Government to change course. What we want, what Sir Kevan wanted, what the people of this country want and what the children of our country need is a properly funded long-term plan for educational recovery. We have set one out. There is still time for the Government, even now, to rise to the challenge and deliver that brighter future that we all want to see.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): As Members can see, the screens say that there is a three-minute limit, but for Alison McGovern and Robert Halfon the limit will be four minutes. It will then revert to three for the duration of the debate.

Robert Halfon: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I can see how popular that was: Robert Halfon is now having to add to his speech.

1.41 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Well, here we are again. As I said last week, once again we have heard nothing from Opposition Front Benchers but

“warm words and hot indignation”,
with no serious plan, while

“the Government are getting on with the challenging job of tackling the pandemic, keeping our economy alive, supporting people's incomes, supporting the NHS and our doctors and nurses, vaccinating the nation, and providing education and support to 8 million children and young people.”—[*Official Report*, 9 June 2021; Vol. 696, c. 967.]

However, once again I welcome the debate and the opportunity that it provides to set out clearly our commitment and action to ensure that no child will suffer damage to their long-term prospects because of the pandemic.

The motion's title on the Order Paper is “Allocation of funding for the catch-up premium”. The catch-up premium—£650 million of additional funding for schools—was announced by the Prime Minister in June 2020. It provided £80 per pupil in mainstream schools, both primary and secondary, and three times that rate—£240—for each place in special schools, special units and alternative provision. Even in the early days of the pandemic, the Government knew that closing schools to most pupils would have an impact on children's education, so alongside the action that we took to secure jobs, support the economy and back the NHS, the catch-up premium ensured that schools could respond to the challenges that children and young people faced.

At the same time, in June last year, we also announced the £350 million national tutoring programme and, with the support of the Education Endowment Foundation, evaluated and procured 33 tutoring organisations to provide one-to-one and small group tuition to disadvantaged

and other children who were in need of the kind of support that we know from the evidence is highly effective in helping children to catch up. Establishing the national tutoring programme was a major undertaking and is on track to have helped 250,000 pupils by the end of this academic year. The plans that we announced two weeks ago will extend that to up to 6 million courses of 15 hours of tutoring over the next three years.

I turn to the motion itself, which calls for “all papers, correspondence and advice”

given to Ministers to be disclosed to the Public Accounts Committee. The Government recognise and respect the fact that this House has rights regarding the publication of any papers, but effective government also relies on some key principles, such as the need for confidential and frank discussions among Ministers, Cabinet Committees and any advisers that the Government appoint to help to improve the quality of policy making.

This is not a partisan issue. It has been the long-standing position of previous Governments, including Labour Governments, that any papers or analyses created for the Cabinet or for Ministers are, rightly, confidential. The motion fundamentally undermines that principle. Tony Blair, in his autobiography “A Journey”, in the section on the Freedom of Information Act, sets out in clear terms that

“governments, like any other organisations, need to be able to debate, discuss and decide issues with a reasonable level of confidentiality. This is not mildly important. It is of the essence. Without the confidentiality, people are inhibited and the consideration of options is limited in a way that isn't conducive to good decision-making.”

To repeat:

“This is not mildly important. It is of the essence.”

That is why we oppose the motion tabled by the Opposition today. We believe in good government and good decision making.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I am grateful for the plug for the former Prime Minister, who made “education, education, education” a mantra. I was and remain very proud of the difference it made to kids in Bristol South. I accept the Minister's point about confidentiality, but will he address the key questions in the motion? What do the Government think is not good about Sir Kevan's recommendations, why do the Government not think they need to be funded, and what would be the impact of that decision? If the Government do not want to disclose the documents, we would be happy if we understood what they think about not taking that action.

Nick Gibb: We did take the advice of Sir Kevan Collins, who supported our introduction of more funding for the national tutoring programme and the £400 million to improve the continuing professional development and training of teachers. We set up a review into the time element of the advice that Sir Kevan gave Ministers, which will report later this year in time to inform the spending review.

The House has a number of opportunities to scrutinise the work of the Treasury in oral questions, and the annual supply and appropriation legislation will be debated before the summer recess. There are also regular appearances by Treasury Ministers and officials before the Public Accounts Committee and the Treasury Committee.

Since the Government came into office in 2010, we have been focused on our mission of raising school standards for all pupils. Successive Prime Ministers and Education Secretaries have put in place ambitious plans to make sure that, no matter where you are born or where in the country you live, you will receive a world-class education. That is not a programme for a single term of Government; nor is it an initiative to get headlines. It is generational reform—long, steady, painstaking and difficult. We have much still to achieve, but we are making progress.

Before we came into Government in 2010, the correlation between parental wealth and pupil achievement was stubbornly entrenched. Children from poorer homes, who were already behind in their development when they started school, were falling further behind their peers. Rather than being an engine of social mobility, our school system was calcifying inequality. For Conservatives, for whom education is the gateway to opportunity, this was unacceptable.

We took bold, decisive action that was opposed all the way by the Opposition, but which has led to better schools and better life chances for young people. We overhauled Labour's national curriculum, which was unnecessarily bureaucratic and too focused on a range of generic skills rather than rich, subject-based content, and replaced it with a new national curriculum, which provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge they need to be educated citizens, immersing them in the best that has been thought and said. We took action to make sure that teachers got better training, and we introduced the pupil premium to give schools the funding they need to support disadvantaged pupils.

Our reforms are turning the tide, rebuffing the fatalistic assumptions of too many who seemed to accept that the gap between rich and poor is inevitable—the soft bigotry of low expectations, which for years was writing off pupil's lives rather than striving to give them the education needed to influence their own destiny. Academic standards have been rising and the attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils has been closing. Thanks to our reforms, more pupils are taking core academic GCSEs, more children are reading fluently and more children are attending good and outstanding schools.

We have taken action throughout this pandemic to ensure that children are supported, but our commitment to provide a good education for every child pre-dates covid-19 reaching our shores. We produced the best schools budget settlement for many years at the 2019 spending review. Totalling £14.4 billion, that is the largest cash boost for schools in a decade.

Core school funding increased by £2.6 billion in 2020-21, and is increasing by £4.8 billion and £7.1 billion in 2021-22 and 2022-23 respectively compared with 2019-20, including significant additional funding for children with special educational needs and disabilities. That unrelenting drive to give children and young people the best start in life meant that we were in a better place to handle the unprecedented challenges that the pandemic posed.

We know that the pandemic, as the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) said, has disproportionately affected children, with most missing at least 115 days of school. That is precisely why we took immediate action to provide education

remotely, delivering more than 1.3 million laptops or tablets alongside wireless routers and access to free mobile data for disadvantaged families.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the best place for a child has always been in school, and when Opposition Members, and indeed their councils and councillors, were calling for schools not to reopen last year that did a disservice to not only the country but our children, who matter the most, and does he agree that they should apologise for that?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is no substitute for pupils being in the classroom with their teachers and friends.

This month, we published a report from Renaissance Learning and the Education Policy Institute, which presented a sobering reminder of the ongoing scale of the recovery challenge. Clearly, there is much work to do and we do not shy away from it, because the Government will always do whatever it takes to support children. That is why schools were the last to close and the first to open in tackling the spread of covid, because we know that getting children back in the classroom is vital to supporting catch up.

That it is why schools have access to both a catch-up and a recovery premium to enable them to assess what will help their pupils to catch up their missed education and to make provision available to ensure that they do so. It comes on top of our £200 million investment in summer schools, which is creating the opportunity for up to 600,000 pupils to take part in educational and enrichment activities. Over 80% of eligible mainstream schools have already signed up and a £220 million investment in the expansion of the holiday activities and food programme, which will operate across England over the summer and Christmas holidays, will provide eligible children with enriching activities and nutritious food.

Owing to the swift action that we took last June, children are already benefiting from the newly established national tutoring programme, with the £1 billion announcement in June last year, a further £700 million announced in February and, two weeks ago, a further recovery package of £1.4 billion. That brings our total recovery package to more than £3 billion. The next stage of our recovery plan will include a review of time spent in school and 16-to-19 education, and the impact that that could have on helping children and young people to catch up. Schools already have the power to set the length of the school day, but there is a certain amount of disparity in approach across the sector. The findings of the review will be set out later in the year to inform the spending review.

We all know what a superb job our teachers and support staff are doing and have done throughout the crisis, supporting and continuing to educate children and young people despite all the challenges that the pandemic has caused. We owe them our gratitude. Our teachers are the single most significant in-school driver of pupil attainment, which is why we have taken steps to give them more support and access to the very best training and professional development. We are investing £400 million to help to provide 500,000 teacher training and development opportunities across the country, alongside the support for those working in early years.

[Nick Gibb]

Some £153 million will provide professional development for early years staff, including through new programmes that focus on key areas such as speech and language development for very young children, and £253 million will expand our new teacher development reforms to give school teachers the opportunity to access world-leading training tailored to whatever point they are at in their careers, from new teachers to leaders of school trusts. That is a significant overhaul of teacher development in this country, giving teachers and school leaders the knowledge and skills that they need to help every child to fulfil their potential.

We are determined to ensure that children and young people catch up on the education they missed as a result of the pandemic. We have announced more than £3 billion to date, and the Prime Minister has been clear that there will be more coming down the track. We will do what it takes. While the Opposition are chasing papers, we are getting on with the job of reforming England's education system, empowering teachers to transform lives through a knowledge-rich and rigorous curriculum in calm, disciplined and supportive schools. We want every child to attend a great school. It is a bold, audacious ambition. We have begun the journey. We have made great progress. We have further to go. We will not give up.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The limit is four minutes for Alison McGovern and Robert Halfon, and three minutes from then on. May I ask those who are participating remotely please to have a timing device if you cannot see the one on your screens? We cannot extend it beyond the three minutes because a lot of people want to participate in this debate. Everybody else physically here of course has the timers in the Chamber.

1.55 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I am very pleased to participate in this debate, which is extraordinarily important. I listened carefully to what the Minister said, and I did not recognise his characterisation of schools at all. In fact, I rise to disagree with almost entirely everything he said, except for the point he made at the end in paying tribute to our teachers, the children in our schools and all those who have worked hard for the future of our kids, because they have done an absolutely brilliant job over the pandemic. If I agree with him about nothing else, I agree with him about that.

I want to raise three crucial points in response to what the Minister has said, all of which are very important to those I represent in the Wirral. I am afraid that the Minister's contribution avoided the central point and question of this debate: if everything is fine and the Government have set out a plan for our kids and their future, why did the Government's own adviser resign? Why? Would anyone like to intervene on me, because I am at a loss to understand? Why did the Government's own adviser resign in protest? Answer comes there none, and I think that says it all really.

The first point I want to raise is about sport. I make no apologies for doing so, because whatever the Minister says about the way the curriculum has changed, the levels of dissatisfaction about school sport in my community in Wirral and right across the country wherever I go is very high. We do not know whether the primary PE and sport premium grant will be renewed for next year. It is

only £400 million, which is about £18,000 per primary, and my understanding is that it is still being considered. Yet again, we have this dance around whether the money is going to be there for school sport, and people are hanging on to know whether or not they should set up schemes to help support young people's physical activity. I just wish the Minister would say whether or not it is going to be renewed, so that people can get on and do that work to make sure that young people can have access to sport. In any case, there is significant scepticism about whether all of that money does get spent on sport. I would say to the Minister that he has to understand that people in this country want our kids to have a rounded experience at school, and they want them playing. I never thought I would have to tell the Tory party about the importance of competitive sport in schools. It is absolutely vital. On that, as well as on creative activities, arts and culture, there is such frustration that this is going to be run out of our schools, and it has got to change.

The second point is about employment. When our kids do not get the kind of education they need and the kind of skills they need, they then face a really tough labour market. We know that the labour force survey shows that the unemployment rate for young people is three times that of adults. Meanwhile, the Government have said that they will create 200,000 kickstart jobs by December, and if they are to do that, they need to be creating about 20,000 a month, and they are only on 7,000.

Finally, on mental health—this is the most important point—Labour's plan includes support for mental health, and I beg the Minister to look at it. The Office for National Statistics is already telling us that depression is up, anxiety is up and young people's feeling of belonging and comfort in society is falling rapidly. We need that mental health support in schools to make sure that this generation do not suffer forever from what they have been through, because you do not forget what happens to you when you are young. Let us stand up for our kids.

1.59 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I welcome the debate, although I find it a bit mystifying that we are debating the same subject two weeks in a row. I wonder whether the decision is more about politics than policy.

As I said in the Opposition day debate last week, I firmly believe that the Government investment is a hefty starter in terms of catch-up funding. To recap, there is the £3 billion in total for extra tuition, the £220 million for the holiday activities and food programme, the £63 million for local councils to help with meals—everyone knows my views on free school meals—and supplies for struggling families, and the £79 million for young people's mental health, and the pupil premium has increased to £2.5 billion.

We should be fair and recognise that we are investing a sizeable sum of taxpayers' money in education, even though I will continue, obviously, to campaign for more in terms of a long-term schools plan. The Schools Minister made it very clear that recovery funding was just the beginning and not the end of the road for catch-up, and that more would be coming down the track. Anyone looking at my record will have no doubt that I look forward to further funding, greater resources

for catch-up and a longer school day, on which, as I have said, the Labour party's position is very confusing.

I want to mention a couple of things before I conclude. First, at present, disadvantaged pupils are 18 months behind their better-off peers by the time they sit their GCSEs. We know that poorer children are less likely to attend schools with an "outstanding" Ofsted rating, and that even in schools where there are good results, the gap between free school meals students and their peers is as wide as elsewhere.

I have been working closely with Professor Lee Elliot Major, who is an adviser to the Government. In a joint article in the *Telegraph*, we wrote that in order to reduce that attainment gap, measures should be taken to ensure that Ofsted awards "outstanding" ratings to schools only if they can show that they are

"making efforts to attract the poorest children in their neighbourhoods"

and working to narrow the attainment gap between those disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers. We wrote that schools should work with neighbouring schools to raise standards, and that teams of inspectors "should include at least one headteacher who has led a school with high numbers of poorer pupils."

Secondly, I believe that the Government must look to reform the pupil premium. It is not ring-fenced, and the Sutton Trust has reported that a third of schools use it for other things, such as fixing a leaky roof. It is not just about ring-fencing; there should be much more micro-targeting of disadvantaged groups, particularly those who suffer from long-term disadvantage.

I mentioned last week that although I am fully supportive of the catch-up fund, I am worried that it is not reaching the most disadvantaged. Figures suggest that 44% of students receiving pupil premium funding were missed. The Government must ensure that the money is targeted at the most disadvantaged, because they are the ones who have learned the least during the pandemic.

Nevertheless, I give credit where it is due: the Government have given well over £3 billion, and they have said that more is yet to come. I would rather that, instead of just having these political debates, Members on both sides of the House worked with the Government to ensure that the long-term plan for education is deep-rooted and repairs the damage from covid-19 while also addressing social injustices in education, particularly the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and the better-off.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): There is now a three-minute limit. I call Barry Sheerman.

2.3 pm

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Thank you for calling me, Mr Deputy Speaker. At least I have a claim to fame in that not only did I teach for a living for some part of my dim and distant past, but I taught you at university.

I am participating in this debate because I was absolutely furious when I saw that Sir Kevan's recommendations had been so watered down. He had every reason to resign. I was also very angry because Yorkshire did so badly out of even the measly amount of money that the Government are putting in. We face a national education emergency following a national health emergency, but the Government are not bringing resources forward for

this emergency; they are not doing the job properly. Those resources, and the sense of this being an emergency and fixing it for kids who will never get another chance at education, seem to be utterly lacking from the Government's determinations.

Secondly, there is a lack of leadership. Where is the Secretary of State when we want him? Why isn't he, in the Cabinet, really doing the job for education? Dare I say it, we need a big beast in education. I would have been happier with Ed Balls; I would even have been happier with his successor on the Conservative side, because they were both big beasts. We have not got a big beast in education. We have a run down, truncated, demoralised Department for Education, and we have education departments in local authorities that have also been run down and sidelined. The fact of the matter is that we have not got the leadership; we have not got the imagination. I am sorry, but even though the Minister was a member of the Education Committee when I chaired it, he is part of the problem: he has been there too long. He is a time-server and has lost the imagination to understand what it was like.

There is real opportunity here with the right leadership. We could co-operate across the Benches. What about having a national volunteer scheme that volunteers retired teachers and retired sportspeople? The people who care about our education would come out of the woodwork like never before and do something for kids who need that help, support and backing at this very moment.

We are lacking the essentials because this Prime Minister and this Government do not care about the education of our children in the state sector.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Thank you, Barry, and yes, you did teach me at Swansea University—and what an incredible job you did.

I call Christian Wakeford.

2.6 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): Thank you for calling me, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I do not really know how to follow your former teacher, the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), other than by saying that I disagree fundamentally with everything he just said.

May I put on the record my thanks to the hard-working teachers, headteachers and, more importantly, support staff in Bury South for their tireless efforts in keeping going during what has been the most difficult year they will ever have faced? One of the greatest tragedies of this pandemic is its impact on our children. Millions of young people lost months of face-to-face schooling, missing out on their education and the social interaction that is so crucial to their development. Unlike the Labour party, throughout the pandemic this Conservative Government made it our ambition to see the safe return of students to the classroom, where they belong.

I have said time and again that for me, levelling up is about education and improving the social mobility of our young people, ensuring that every child has access to good-quality education as we recover from this pandemic. That will be essential if we are to deliver on our commitment to level up Britain. That is why, as part of our long-term

[*Christian Wakeford*]

education recovery plan, we have so far invested over £3 billion, focusing on high-quality tutoring and great teaching.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that tutoring must be targeted at the most disadvantaged children—the children who have suffered the most during this pandemic?

Christian Wakeford: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention; it is almost as if he has read my speech already.

I also want to pay tribute to the fantastic work that the Tutor Trust has been doing—especially considering that it is based in my constituency—in getting graduates out there and teaching the subjects they specialise in. That is what we need to focus on, and may I make a subtle plug to the Minister and ask him to meet me and the Tutor Trust to see what more we can do in future years? On the topic of tutoring, education is at the heart of our ambition to level up and make sure that all children, whatever their background, have a world-class education that sets them up for a happy and successful life.

I know from speaking to headteachers at St Monica's and Parrenthorn in Prestwich and my work on the Select Committee on Education that more needs to be done to help disadvantaged students, who have been hit hardest by this pandemic, so I welcome the fact that the Government have listened and are taking action to make up for lost time in the classroom by committing £1 billion to the national tutoring programme. That will deliver 6 million 15-hour tutoring courses for disadvantaged students, targeting key subjects, including maths and English.

When Labour was last trusted with education, we fell down the international league table for school performance, which meant that pupils were not receiving the education they deserved. Between 2000 and 2009, England fell from seventh to 25th in reading and from eighth to 28th in maths. We will take no lectures from Labour Members who have spent the past year equivocating on whether students should even be back in the classroom—not forgetting the decline in school performance when they were most recently trusted with children's education.

Furthermore, Labour has been proven to care about education when it is politically expedient, with the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), having had to apologise for describing the pandemic as a “good crisis” out of which Labour could create a political opportunity. Such behaviour by Labour is opportunism of the worst kind. When we had a real chance to debate education spending in last year's estimates day debate, not a single Labour Member other than the shadow Secretary of State spoke.

Lastly, as we deliver on our promise to level up education, we are investing record amounts in schools, including by giving every pupil a funding boost through our £14.4 billion investment. Will the Minister assure me that the money we are investing will provide schools in my constituency with the funding they need to support the students who are most in need?

2.10 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to our teachers and children for the sacrifices that they have made during the pandemic.

I am proud that Labour has set out proposals for a children's recovery plan to invest in opportunities for every child to play, learn and develop. Young people have lost out on education, sport, friendship and simply being young. They have missed more than half a year of in-person schooling. I struggle to see how the Government can even begin to imagine how less than half an hour of tutoring a fortnight can make up for such a loss of education.

The Collins report calls for an investment of £15 billion—or £700 per pupil—over three years to support children's recovery, so why have the Government announced only a 10th of what the widely respected Sir Kevan said is needed? Breakfast clubs, new activities for every child, quality mental health support, small-group tutoring for all who need it and continued development for teachers, along with making sure that no child goes hungry—all elements of Labour's plan—are needed throughout the country.

The impact on children is being much more widely felt, with grassroots football clubs such as Bedfont Eagles telling me how their coaches are picking up the pieces, supporting children who come back to play football and other activities for the first time, having lost confidence. Last week, I heard of a 15-year-old girl who has not been downstairs and hardly left her bedroom for almost a year because of fear and anxiety resulting from mental health conditions exacerbated during the pandemic. She, her friends and others need a plan for their personal and educational recovery, so that they are not affected for the long term.

Sport is vital to our young people's wellbeing and health. The Schools Active Movement has conducted research, with the participation of more than 10% of schools throughout the country. The movement is concerned that there is still no plan from the DFE for a primary sports premium next year, as raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern). I understand that the Government have not confirmed funding for school games organisers beyond October. The data from the research is horrific: 84% of PE teachers say that physical fitness is worse—indeed, in Feltham and Heston the proportion is 97%.

We must continue to tackle the digital divide. In Hounslow, months before a single laptop from the Government appeared, we came together as a community to help to donate laptops for the children who needed them but did not have a device at home on which to study. There is still no proper long-term, affordable schools connectivity plan to give pupils and teachers the ability to address the issue. Children need a Government who are on their side now and for their future. We need to go beyond mere words. With just a few short weeks till the end of school term, decisions need to be taken now and plans put into action. Schools need clarity on funding, and they need it now.

2.13 pm

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con) [V]: I pay tribute to the headteachers, teachers, support staff and, indeed, all the students in Hertford and Stortford

who have worked so hard to ensure that they miss out on as little education as they possibly can. They have all done a sterling job.

In many ways, my whole life has been defined by an awareness of the impacts of lost education. My parents are both clever people. They were working-class people brought up in the east end of London. They lost out on their education due to an even bigger catastrophe than covid—war, evacuation and the blitz. Their experience and knowledge of what they had lost out on, and the impact of that on their lives, made them absolutely believe in the power of education and absolutely determined that my brother and I would engage in our education to the very best of our abilities.

So am I concerned about how we react to the impact of the pandemic on children? Yes. Do I welcome the actions of the Government? Yes. I welcome the investment of £3 billion so far, on top of a record boost in education funding of £14.4 billion. I also welcome the focus on quality teaching and tutoring, which the Minister set out. I also absolutely welcome the fact that it is evidence-led.

The Labour party might not be concerned about the economy and taxpayers' money, but I know our Government, our Treasury and our Chancellor are. The evidence that the Government have marshalled, that just one course of high-quality tutoring can boost attainment by three to five months, is enormous and fact-based. Targeting that hugely valuable resource at disadvantaged students is also highly pragmatic and fact-based.

Extending the school day could have a huge impact on heads, teachers and teaching assistants, and on children and their families. The options around those things should definitely be looked at, with proper evaluation of the implications and costs, so it is right for the Government to approach that with a thorough review. That is the intelligent, pragmatic and sensible approach.

A long time ago, my parents turned away from a party, the Labour party, which did not understand the aspirations of working people, their desires and the importance of education, and they are not likely to go back any time soon.

2.16 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab) [V]: The pandemic has only exacerbated the inequalities in the education system. Huge praise goes to the teaching profession and everyone else who has worked their socks off during these very dark times—absolutely outstanding.

The catch-up funding plans proposed by Sir Kevan Collins suggest that a £15 billion package was required. The Government offer is 10% of that—that is an insult, man. Make no mistake about it, the students, especially the most disadvantaged, are set to suffer again. Crumbs from the table does not adequately describe the situation that we face.

The revealing, alarming regional education disparities highlight the effect of the pandemic. Reportedly, learning losses are huge. Again, they are much higher for disadvantaged pupils from poorer backgrounds. That is why adequate funding is essential. The Government have already robbed millions from schools in the north-east, with their changes to the pupil premium funding. It is estimated that schools could lose up to £7.26 million as a result of the Department's fiddling of the dates.

In my constituency, 19% of pupils received at least two As and a B at A-level. That is compared with 14% as an average across England. Despite that, only 28% of the pupils attended secondary schools rated good or outstanding, compared with a huge 80% across England as a whole; and 26% attended secondary schools deemed inadequate, compared with only 6% across the country.

I am really proud of the pupils here. They are incredibly smart and talented, yet the schools lack the required funding. I wonder: does the Prime Minister think that the parents in my constituency should work harder to pay for private tuition to fill the gaps, as he suggested only the other day?

We need breakfast clubs and extracurricular activities. The students need quality mental health support to transition back into school life. We need manageable class sizes. We need to ensure that no child is going hungry throughout the school day. Those are all things that only the Labour party has to offer.

We have to ask: what have the Government got against our children? Why did the education recovery commissioner feel the need to abandon the educational ship? Maybe he saw the system heading for the rocks.

Let's get on with it.

2.20 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): There are a few curious things about this motion. One is that we debated the same subject just last week; we have had the G7 and the delay to step 4 of lockdown, but we are talking about the same thing. However, it is important, so I do not mind. The other curious thing about it is that we have been told for quite a long time now that Labour Members support Sir Kevan Collins's plan, except in the motion they ask for a copy of the plan, which shows that they do not know the detail of the plan but are telling us that they support it anyway.

It is tempting, because it is the same subject area, to give the same speech that I gave last week, but I will not do that. Instead, I will just summarise it. I paid tribute to teachers nationwide for the role they have played during covid. I said that I supported the Government's £3 billion investment so far in catch up. I said that I am a supporter of the extended school day—actually, probably for longer than half an hour a day—but I would like to see the evidence on that and it will cost money. I also reminded the House that, although Labour Members are very noisy when it comes to calling for more money, they are silent when their allies at the National Education Union put obstacle after obstacle in the way of children returning during the pandemic.

I have read Labour's so-called plan and what is striking is how much of it the Government are already doing: more money into mental health—the Government are doing that; more money into tutoring—the Government are doing that; more money into teacher training—the Government are doing that. There are differences, but there are also omissions, such as where the money would come from and how Labour would evaluate its success.

Today's motion says that the Opposition would like to see “emails and text messages”, and correspondence between Ministers, their officials and their advisers. It is hard to know how many children would catch up as a

[David Johnston]

result of that release. I happen to believe that people should be able to give candid advice privately and that it should stay private.

If I did not believe that, though, I would like to see some correspondence between shadow Ministers and their advisers, because I would like to understand: why it took them so long to say that schools were safe; why they can never criticise their friends at the NEU; why they said we should go against the advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation and not vaccinate by age, but pick just teachers—no other professions, such as retail workers or anybody else—to vaccinate because the unions said that we should do so; and why they still cannot say whether they support a permanent extension to the school day. I would like to understand whether the party that 18 months ago told the country that we should abolish Ofsted, abolish SATs and abolish academies, when we know how much they have helped disadvantaged children, will stand with us in defending exams, league tables and inspections for the role that they play. But because I believe that private advice should stay private on both sides, Labour will be spared that embarrassment.

2.23 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): It is impossible not to be angry in this debate. The resignation of Sir Kevan Collins is a damning indictment of the Government's so-called catch-up plan. Let us be absolutely clear: the measly crumbs of support on offer will let down an entire generation of young people and, on this Government's watch, the pandemic's impact on their education will be lifelong.

While the Government kick the catch-up can down the road, the impact is being felt right now. More than 200,000 pupils will move from primary to secondary school this autumn without being able to read properly—a monumental increase on previous years and a problem that a sticking plaster would not even begin to solve. We already know that, if pupils start secondary behind, they stay behind. Does the Minister understand why parents and teachers across the country are so furious that their children are getting less than 10% of the investment that the Government's own education recovery commissioner called for? The temerity of the Treasury in challenging Sir Kevan's ideas undermines a lifetime spent improving outcomes for children.

Meanwhile, one conservative estimate puts the long-term economic cost of lost learning in England at £100 billion. Last week, the Prime Minister labelled one-to-one tutoring as a catch-up tool for hard-working parents. I wonder whether the Minister can tell him about 10-year-old Abi in my constituency. In lockdown, she secured entry to Tiffin Girls' School, one of the most prestigious grammar schools in the country, working in a cramped homeless hostel, with only a refurbished phone donated by Tesco Mobile to get connected. Social mobility, levelling up, call it whatever you want: the impact will be lifelong.

There are legions of hard-working parents who cannot afford tuition, but who can see their child slipping behind. A lady came to see me because the bailiffs were coming. Instead of paying her council tax, she paid for a tutor so that her son would catch up and achieve the 11-plus. Of course, I do not support her council tax

decision, but I absolutely recognise that she is desperately trying to plug the support gap that the Government are failing to fill.

We need a catch-up plan for every child who has fallen behind—extending the school day for education curricular activities; breakfast clubs; small group and one-to-one tutoring—and to close the digital divide. It is absolutely no time to delay.

2.26 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in today's groundhog debate and to draw the House's attention to the phenomenal work being done across Darlington to help students to catch up after a year of significant disruption. I thank all the schools in Darlington, the teachers, the headteachers and other school staff for their amazing work throughout the past year, supporting their pupils' education both in the classroom and online.

Despite the constraints of the pandemic, good things have been achieved. I commend Skerne Park Academy, under the excellent leadership of Kate Chisholm, whose school was recently recognised in the levelling-up awards. This is also my first opportunity to congratulate Dame Maura Regan of the Bishop Hogarth Education Trust, who was recognised by Her Majesty in the Birthday Honours.

Last Friday, I spent the afternoon at Corporation Road Community Primary School, which is ably led by Ann Pringleton. I look forward to joining them for their build of their new adventure play park next month. Kate, Ann and Dame Maura are incredible leaders who have done much in their organisations to meet the challenges of the pandemic.

Sadly, evidence suggests that disadvantaged children in the north-east have been among the hardest hit. Although Government, business, community and charity-funded laptops and devices have done much to bridge the digital divide, it is not enough, but the Government recognise that and are prioritising our children's education.

We all know the long-term consequences for children's learning, development, attainment and mental health. We cannot undo the last 15 months, but we can back the steps being taken to reduce their impact, which is why I welcome the package of support and investment from the Government. The £3 billion education catch-up programme will fund high-quality tutoring specifically targeted at the most disadvantaged students. That is exactly the sort of support that will reach those in most need in Darlington.

In addition to the education recovery plan, the Government have announced the biggest funding increase for schools in a decade, raising core funding to £52.2 billion by 2022-23. In my constituency, per pupil funding in secondary schools will rise, on average, to £5,726 and in primary schools to £4,454. The Government's 10-year plan will transform our schools.

While the Labour party continues to play political games with education, this Government are showing that they are prioritising our educational recovery, delivering billions of pounds to schools across the country. I know that this investment will have a lasting impact in Darlington.

2.29 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): I share my colleagues' frustration at this Government's haphazard approach to helping children to catch up on their education. In recent days, many of my constituents in Coventry North West have come forward to suggest how best we can help those left behind by lockdown, remote learning and self-isolation.

From extracurricular activities to small groups for tutoring, one clear theme emerges: a belief that we must do everything we can to help children to catch up and get their education back on track. Contrast this with the feeble response proposed by this Government. The measly sums they have put forward are barely a 10th of what we know is needed. We are facing a social and economic emergency. Education is the greatest leveller of all. The gap left by this inadequate plan will only further harm social mobility and allow the attainment gap in our schools to widen further.

Why should our children put up with less than the best mental health support after 18 months of plummeting wellbeing and record levels of stress and anxiety? Why should our children put up with anything less than focused tutoring for all who need extra help, while the Government proposed a scheme that would reach only 1% of pupils? Why should our children put up with anything less than healthy and nutritious meals every day, with the Government once again refusing to fund free school meals throughout the holidays?

Ministers are now left with one big question to answer. Why are they so happy to put forward a third-rate catch-up plan? Was the Secretary of State for Education simply too weak to stand up for the nation's children at Cabinet and too weak to secure funding from Treasury, even when his own experts said how much was needed? If he was unable to do the job properly, I would politely suggest that he finds another job. Or was it the Chancellor of the Exchequer who chose to ignore the needs of the economy by skimping on catch-up funding? Stunted growth and shrunken wages will be the result of his inability to grasp the importance of investing in the next generation. His shaky grasp on the numbers indicates that he, too, could do with some extra tuition.

It is not too late for Ministers to do the right thing. They could call time on their half-baked plan and bring forward an improved set of proposals. They could introduce a bold, brave children's recovery plan that means breakfast clubs, sports and after-school activities for pupils, fully funded free school meals for those in need, mental health support to fix dangerously low levels of wellbeing, extra training for staff, and small group tutoring for all those who are falling further behind.

This Government will not be the one who pay the price for their craven failures to listen to the experts and stump up cash. It will be those who cannot speak for themselves. It will be the youngest and most disadvantaged pupils in my city of Coventry who will now struggle to catch up.

2.32 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I would like to start by thanking and congratulating all the fantastic teachers, support staff, parents and pupils across Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, and

by giving a special shout-out to Lisa Ackley, who was a *The Times Educational Supplement* awards finalist for classroom support assistant of the year for her work at Ormiston Horizon Academy. I would also like to thank the fantastic year 10 students I met last Friday at the Excel Academy in Sneyd Green, who are fully supportive of an extended school day. I look forward to going around and rallying that cry from all the students across my constituency to pass that on to the Minister.

But we are back here again. On Twitter, the Labour party clearly did not get the likes and retweets it wanted, so decided to try to repeat this debate all over again. The "Not Education Union" seems to own the Labour party when it comes to education policy. Let us not forget that Labour was silent when the NEU said in March last year that teachers should not be teaching a full timetable or routinely marking. Labour was silent on the 180-point checklist of things that the "Not Education Union" wanted to see before schools could open, and it was silent about the scaremongering that was being done by the "Not Education Union" over school safety, ignoring the JCVI's advice, wanting to vaccinate teachers instead of those who are most vulnerable to coronavirus, which means our top nine categories.

Also, let us not forget that the "Not Education Union" spent over £500,000 from its general funds to basically play party politics. It was accused of breaking the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992. So let us be quite clear: Kevin Courtney and Dr Mary Bousted are a shambles. They should do the honourable thing and resign with immediate effect. I will happily go and pack up their stuff and send it to their home addresses, because I am sick and tired of boring socialist trade unionists who are focused on their own political agenda rather than on educating children and looking after their teachers properly—that is why so few people pay into the party political fund—yet they shower their money on the Labour party to try to get it in their grasp.

Let us have a look at what this Government have done over the last 12 months: an increase to core school funding of £2.6 billion for 2020-21 and a further increase of £2.2 billion for 2021-22; raising the pupil premium to over £2.5 billion; £1 billion of investment to improve the school estate; increased high needs funding, with £780 million more for 2020-21 and £730 million extra next year; £520 million for free school meals national voucher scheme; £410 million to provide more than 1.3 million digital devices; £220 million for the expansion of the holiday activities and food programme; £63 million to local authorities to help with food; exceptional funding to cover specific, unavoidable costs incurred by schools due to coronavirus worth £102 million in total—over £14 billion, with a £3 billion catch-up. This is a Government who care about our families and young people.

2.35 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab) [V]: The north-east has a higher proportion of long-term disadvantaged children than other parts of the country, and that simply has to be tackled if levelling up is ever to become more than a slogan. We know, and the Government acknowledge, that the least well-off children have been at the highest risk of falling behind their classmates over the past 15 months, both in the school classroom and elsewhere, yet the Government's

[Catherine McKinnell]

education recovery proposals do not seem serious about meeting the challenge. The £1.4 billion package amounts to less than 10% of the £15 billion that Sir Kevan Collins, the Government's own education recovery chief, who recently resigned, called for. The Government's caveat that more money may come, with no suggestion of when or what it might look like, provides little comfort. It increasingly looks as if the Government plan to bundle together various pots of funding on an ad hoc basis and call it an education recovery package, but that is not good enough. We need a bold vision for truly transforming the lives of our children and young people. Warm words need to be backed up with action and funding.

It is vital that Government trust headteachers to tailor what little support is available to the needs of their schools and pupils so that it can be used most effectively. The Government's proposals focus heavily on tutoring, but academic research shows that small groups and individual work can be effective for pupils who are struggling—it does not have to be external tutoring. If schools want their staff, who know the pupils, to provide support, as many schools in the north-east have chosen to do, they should have the flexibility to access the funding that works best for them.

While we all want to see academic progress, the past 15 months have been a frightening time for our children, with disrupted routines, reduced contact with friends and relatives, and fear of the virus, so it is disappointing that there is not any funding to support the crucial social enrichment on which many children have missed out, including sports clubs and music lessons. Funding plans must recognise the need for mental health support. Given that the long-term impact of the past 15 months has still to unfold, we will not be able to sustain the academic progress that we all want to see without additional support for the wellbeing of our children and young people. The two go hand in hand.

The Government have failed to show the ambition needed to meet the scale of the education challenge. They must change course and invest in our children now. Failure to do so is not only wrong but a false economy, as future generations will pay the price in lost earnings and lost opportunities, and our country will be the poorer for it.

2.38 pm

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con) [V]: Well, here we are again, with another Opposition day debate and another attempt to grab negative headlines. It did not work last time, and did not gain the publicity or the traction on social media that the Opposition wanted, so they are back for a second bite of the cherry on the same issue. Perhaps they stayed up late watching "Groundhog Day", rather than doing their homework, or simply resorted to copying instead.

Efforts to facilitate online learning must be applauded, but we know that there are many children who have missed face-to-face teaching, with the added advantages that that brings. As a former teacher, I know the value of delivering lessons in person. The academic part of the job is important, but teachers play a vital pastoral role in maintaining the social and emotional wellbeing of their pupils. Most adults realise the isolation felt by

many when they are unable to see their colleagues, friends and family members, and that is why I am pleased that we are finally returning to something resembling normality.

So far, we have committed over £3 billion to deliver targeted interventions. That is only one part of our long-term education recovery plan. The next stage of that plan includes investing £1.4 billion, with about £1 billion for tutoring courses to recover lost teaching hours, and £400 million in training and development for teachers and staff. We have made an unprecedented investment in education, and have seen the biggest increase in funding for schools in a decade. That includes additional special educational needs funding, with £730 million for high needs this year, building on the £780 million that we have made available for 2020-21.

Let us not pay too much attention to the Opposition's criticisms of investment either, when they are not even using like-for-like comparisons with other countries and have failed to take into account the entire package being offered.

So what exactly are we looking at from the Opposition: changes to the structure of school holidays, or extended school days? No—they provide no serious plans whatsoever other than simply saying that whatever figure is presented, it is not enough. When I grew up, I remember the old commercials with the Man from Del Monte. At least he occasionally said yes to things, whereas the response from Labour and the unions is simply to say no. It more closely resembles a broken record from the '90s band 2 Unlimited. Labour has shown time and again that it cannot be trusted with our children's education. Our academy and free school programmes have given children in some of the most deprived areas of the country the chance to attend outstanding schools. Labour did not even want our children back in the classrooms, and, along with teaching unions, wanted closures almost right away. We wanted our children back at school and we are now taking action to help them to catch up.

I commend the work of this Government and once again thank our teachers, support staff, parents and pupils for their hard work and dedication throughout this pandemic and beyond.

2.41 pm

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): This Government's litany of let-downs for our children started last March by locking schools down late. That delay by Ministers has cost lives, as we have the highest death toll in Europe, and cost jobs, as we have the worst damage to any major economy. The litany of damage continued with June with the first U-turn on free school meals and the Prime Minister only giving in after Marcus Rashford's brilliant campaign and support from the Labour party.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Neil Coyle: No.

Then we had the exam grades controversy, with Ministers carping about the SNP in Scotland before being forced to abandon their own algorithm after it caused damage for young people in our country. In September, we saw the launch of the kickstart scheme with much fanfare and the claim that it would create 200,000 jobs for

young people. Well, nine months later the figure is about 8% of that. Of the 1,240 unemployed young people in my constituency, kickstart has helped 11, or 1%, using the Department for Work and Pensions' figure, which is inflated to include schoolchildren on work placements.

In October, the Prime Minister humiliated his own MPs when he forced them to vote against free school meal provision and then changed his mind and gave in, again, just a few days later. In January, we saw the utter farce of schools returning for one day after Ministers again ignored advice, causing chaos for schools that have done so much to try to ensure that our children had a quality education throughout this crisis. It goes on. In January, we had Chartwells, the Government's contractors, going viral with pictures showing how poor the quality and quantity of the food parcels being provided was, causing ridicule for the Government. Then, in February, we had the devious cut to the pupil premium, leaving 1,000 children in Southwark actually facing a loss this year. The total loss to Southwark schools is over £1.2 million—a cut.

Now we have Ministers rejecting their own commissioner's recovery plans and offering less than 10% of what he claimed was required to equip our children for the future. Instead they offered a derisory package of £50 per child, compared with £1,600 per child in the United States or £2,500 per child in the Netherlands. That pitiful offer says a lot about how poorly this Government value our children, our young people, and the future of this country.

2.43 pm

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con) [V]: It is a privilege to speak in this debate. The debate does seem somewhat familiar, but despite that, it gives me the opportunity to thank those who work in teaching across my constituency—we owe them all a debt of gratitude for their dedication, their passion, and all their hard work—and of course the pupils who just got on with it.

I also thank Labour Members for the opportunity to reiterate that children's education is this Government's priority. Providing over £3 billion in catch-up support is just one part of a long-term plan for education recovery. At the start of the pandemic, there was a £1 billion commitment to ensure that pupils were able to catch up and £650 million for the catch-up premium. Nor should we forget that there has been money for mental health, summer schools and summer activities. Over £450 million has been spent through the food voucher scheme. There has been £400 million to provide laptops, tablets and internet access, with over 1.3 million computers built to order, imported, configured and delivered to schools. There has also been £139 million provided to help schools to cope with the exceptional costs they faced during the first lockdown.

Compare and contrast that with Labour Members, who have spent the past year equivocating over whether schools should open, damaging public confidence and confusing the message. Their mooted £14.7 billion education plan, which proposes spending more than 10 times as much as the Government are suggesting, would be fantastic if it were realistic and if we knew specifically how it would be funded, but we do not. Nor should we forget that when Labour was trusted with education, we fell down the international league table for school

performance. Even now, we are having an Opposition day debate about a paper trail instead of focusing on what really matters.

What really matters is this: children are resilient if we allow them to be. My concern is that confusing messages and debates from Opposition Members do nothing but undermine that and provide uncertainty when kids need certainty. Across my constituency, supported by the Government, everything has been done to keep children in the classroom and prioritise the safe reopening of schools. From the onset of the pandemic, safeguarding education has been the top priority of a Government focused on saving lives and accelerating the vaccination programme—a Government who have acted.

All of us in this great place had a childhood and an education that was not marred by a pandemic. Let us not let this pandemic mar our children's or grandchildren's futures with misleading messages or debates, but focus collectively on ensuring that no child is left behind and that every child has the same opportunity and future as all of us.

2.46 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I pay tribute to all the school leaders in colleges and schools across south Bristol, and particularly to the parents and young people, for getting through this difficult year. They all had high hopes of the education recovery commissioner, whom the Government had asked to come up with a plan to ensure that schoolchildren could catch up on what they had missed out on. However, the Government ignored the evidence-based plan, awarding just a 10th of the necessary funding and then forcing him to resign because their behaviour, in his words, “betrays an undervaluation of the importance of education”.

I recently met the Minister to discuss the pupil premium and educational outcomes in Bristol South. I am grateful for his time and attention; he is a Minister who usually does his homework, unlike many others. However, I also recently met school leaders in Bristol South, as I do every year. I meet primary and secondary headteachers as a group, because I want to understand their shared issues and ambitions and help to improve outcomes across south Bristol.

Such a meeting now happens rarely across south Bristol because of the evolution of the multi-academy trust system. There are six secondary schools in Bristol South, covered by six multi-academy trusts; in all, the nearly 40 state-funded schools in Bristol South are run by 12 different organisations. I do think that some MATs act well as a family of schools, but I do not think that they serve the families of south Bristol as well as they should or could.

Families live in the communities of south Bristol, not in the community of the MAT. In some cases, vertical support through the MAT seems to be working well, but while headteachers are accountable upwards within the MAT, south Bristol families live in local communities. Parents expect each child to be supported and educated well in their community through early years, primary, secondary, post-16 and higher education, but children are experiencing too many different organisations as part of that journey. Crucially, there is no accountability across south Bristol for the outcome of that journey, which is the destination of those young people—their chance in life.

[Karin Smyth]

In my six years as MP for Bristol South, my focus has been on further education and apprenticeships post 16 to help young people fulfil their potential, but I have realised that the lack of ownership and accountability for destination, success and outcomes is a major problem that no number of well-meaning piecemeal initiatives will solve. I now see that the pandemic and the loss of learning must be the catalyst for taking this seriously.

We will not solve the problem of poor education outcomes for these children without focus on the context of their lives. That focus has to be local and at the transition between all levels. For me, supporting further education is the only approach that can capture those children and, with the right professional support and stability of funding, help them to reach their true potential. Covid-19 has exacerbated the disproportionate impact of poor education on young people. We absolutely need to use this opportunity to make things better for the future.

2.49 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The point I would like to make in this debate is that we should not fall into the trap of thinking this is all about money. There are factors behind success and achievement other than money, and it is debilitating to think that is the only thing that counts.

Before I go on to illustrate what I am talking about, I would just pick up on the comment the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) made that the UK has the worst death rate in Europe. There is no doubt that the UK has been hit pretty hard, but there are actually 16 countries with a worse rate than the UK in the world, including six across Europe—Poland, Croatia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Belgium and Italy. It is important that we do look at the actual facts. He is a far more friendly chap outside the Chamber, particularly in Strangers Bar, than he is in here.

Neil Coyle: It is unfair of the hon. Member to reveal that I am nicer outside the Chamber.

The hon. Member is actually using a different figure. He is using a per capita model, not the raw death toll. We have the highest death toll in Europe by number of population overall.

Kevin Hollinrake: That is what the hon. Member said, and I apologise, but I think it is important to look at the context, and I think the per capita figure is very relevant.

The other point I would like to make is about the motion, and my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) made this point very well. It does endanger candid advice if the Opposition are simply going to request all the information and all the debate behind the scenes. Actually, I do not agree with him on one aspect—we would still get candid advice; it just would not be written down, and I do not really think that is very useful. I know it has been some time—I do not mean this rudely—since the Opposition have been in government, but the reality is that there is bound to be frank and open discussion behind the scenes about different policies on different things. I do not think it is right that simply getting at all the debate behind the scenes will be useful on this particular issue.

The Government have put a package together. As has been said, they may well need more money to address this issue fully. Nevertheless, 6 million packages of 15 hours of tuition is quite a significant investment, and no doubt there will be other things coming along as well. A number of Members have asked why we did not simply follow Sir Kevan Collins's recommendation to commit £15 billion. That is obviously a matter for the Government, but I have heard the Opposition say on a number of occasions that there would be a £100 billion payback from that £15 billion. I do not know whether the shadow Education Secretary, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), has used that figure, but I have heard the Leader of the Opposition use it. Having been in business quite a long time, I have had various department heads come through my door on lots of occasions and say, "I've got this great idea to spend x amount of money, and it will result in this kind of payback." People can make anything look good on a spreadsheet. The Opposition cannot guarantee that the £15 billion would have a £100 billion effect.

The reality is that we have to choose. In government, we have to choose, and of course if we do not choose—I have heard this in so many debates over the last few years—we have the Opposition calling again and again for more spending. I think somebody should really add up all those numbers, because I am sure it would amount to trillions of pounds of spending. We simply cannot go on like that. We have at some point to try to balance the books. I do not think that is something either party has done that well in government, on the basis that very rarely—I think in only five years out of the last 40—have any Government balanced the books, and we have to make difficult choices to do that.

My final point, in the 30 seconds I have left, is to look at what happened in North Yorkshire. I said that it is not all about money, and it was disappointing that our county council took a number of weeks to facilitate online learning in many of the schools across North Yorkshire. It was simply wrong to take eight weeks to develop a policy on online learning using Zoom and the like. However, schools such as Malton School—a very good local authority maintained school—had already put in place a package of support using iPads. It had done that years before, so it was able to do this. Excellent teachers can find solutions without simply having lots of Government money thrown at a problem.

2.53 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab) [V]: Just four months ago, we heard the Government make promises that every young person would be supported to catch up on their education and gain the skills and knowledge they need to be able to seize opportunities in future. After the catalogue of errors in dealing with the pandemic, with schools going back for just one day in January after the Prime Minister could not decide whether they were safe while hospitals were filling up with covid patients, it was encouraging to hear that the Prime Minister had hired the highly respected Sir Kevan Collins to step in and oversee the recovery from the biggest crisis our schools have ever faced.

Sir Kevan, knighted for his services to education, did exactly what was asked of him and led a comprehensive programme of catch-up aimed at young people who had lost out on learning during the pandemic. He

estimated, with a strong evidence base, that £15 billion was needed to ensure that the nation's children were not blighted by the huge hit to their education. Teachers agreed, parents agreed, but unfortunately the Prime Minister and the Chancellor did not. They gave away millions to friends and Tory donors for contracts that did not deliver, and they wasted billions on a test, trace and isolation programme that was a total failure when we needed it most, but when it comes to our children's education, the purse strings are pulled tight, with just £50 per pupil per year to make up for the last 18 months.

Even today, because the Prime Minister failed to protect our borders, children are being sent home to isolate because of the delta variant. They are still being affected. The Government have offered just £1.4 billion, a pitiful offer to our children, who have had so much of their lives impacted. Their mental health and wellbeing have been severely challenged. Sir Kevan's resignation letter to the Prime Minister says it all, really. He made it perfectly clear:

"I do not believe it will be possible to deliver a successful recovery without significantly greater support than the government has to date indicated it intends to provide."

Certainly the teachers I have spoken to in Bedford and Kempston have told me that the funding announced by the Government will not scratch the surface in helping children to catch up. A primary school headteacher I spoke to yesterday told me that he is already trying to provide a quality, broad and balanced curriculum and to make up for the children's time away from school on reduced funding. That was hard already, but the challenges posed in trying to provide what each child and family needs following the pandemic are monumental. That headteacher is ready, willing and able to offer interventions to give our children the best chance in life—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Sorry, Mohammad, you have run out of time.

2.57 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): We see yet again, don't we, that Labour will always push for a debate that focuses solely on money and not on real outcomes? That is quite ironic from the party that left a note saying

"I'm afraid there is no money"

when it was in charge. In their media appearances, Labour Members show a total inability to set out how they would finance their grand plans for education, let alone to relate any of the spending to outcomes.

I was a school governor for several years. I have seen the financial inner workings of schools, and I have seen what good investment and bad investment can do to the quality of education. My schools in Dudley North were left underfunded and unsupported by Labour, so I welcome this Government's plans and their promise to deliver on levelling up our education system as we build back better. That will be achieved through targeted investment to improve school buildings in the worst conditions and to increase funding for children with special educational needs. A good education for every child will give them the best start in life.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) once described the pandemic as a "good crisis" for Labour to make a political opportunity out of. That

says it all. Is there any substance behind her calling this debate, or is it yet another opportunity for her to provide selective soundbites for her social media channels to make it look like Labour cares about our children getting an adequate education? Labour could not seem to decide what its policies were over the past 15 months. Did it want schools to open or to remain closed? Does it want teachers to teach more, or does it want them to spend time being glorified babysitters over the summer, so that children can relax and enjoy life? Unlike the Opposition, throughout this pandemic this Conservative Government have consistently tried to get children back into the classroom where they belong and where they are at their happiest. The Opposition have more flip-flops than a Havaianas shop. They cannot seem to decide, even with the benefit of hindsight.

2.59 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I am grateful to the shadow Treasury and Education teams for bringing this important debate to the House. Undoubtedly, one of the biggest challenges that our nation faces is supporting the millions of children and young adults studying across the country following the devastating impact of the past year, so I am hugely disappointed that once again the Government have ignored the experts and offered less than 10% of what the Government's own education recovery commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins, called for.

Frankly, it is insulting to the teachers, parents, school staff and early years providers, who have ensured that children in Slough and beyond could access education throughout one of the most disruptive periods that they have ever seen. Without their tenacity, determination and commitment in wanting the very best for future generations, our children would not have received the care, support and education that they needed over the past year. They achieved that all after a decade of Government neglect, which delivered the largest cuts to school funding in 40 years.

Just last year, Slough headteachers wrote to me to say that they had

"become increasingly disillusioned by a persistent lack of effective and credible leadership emanating from the Department for Education."

Sadly, with the so-called catch-up plan the DFE has continued that trend, with funding that covers less than £1 per day that children were out of school and a tutoring programme that reaches just 1% of pupils. It seems that the Prime Minister and Chancellor have blocked the much needed funds that were initially asked for, letting down an entire generation. Do they think that it makes economic sense to not invest in our children?

Labour's fully costed plan would deliver exactly what parents and teachers have been calling for: a well-rounded catch-up plan including mental health support, drama, sports, book clubs, continued development for teachers and an extension of free school meals over the holidays. That provision would be targeted with an education recovery premium to ensure that those who faced the greatest disruption are given additional support.

What is worse is that this Tory Government know the consequences of the inadequate support that they have offered. As Sir Kevan Collins noted in his resignation letter,

[Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi]

“the settlement provided will define the international standing of England’s education system for years to come.”

That is consolidated by reports from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, showing that if students had lost an average of six months of schooling they could see a reduction in their lifetime income of 4%, so why will Ministers not stop treating children as an afterthought in our recovery and prioritise their wellbeing, education and life chances? Inaction now will fail generations for decades to come.

3.2 pm

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): I have not yet had an opportunity to pay full tribute to the teachers in schools in South Ribble, who did such a stunning job during the pandemic, including inspirational educational leaders such as the guys at the multi-academy Endeavour Learning Trust—my thanks to them.

In her opening remarks, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), questioned the decisions made about massive sums of money, national changes and big-ticket items. Was the idea that such big decisions would be made quickly, with no evidence on what works? Personally, I support the idea of a longer school day, which I think has huge advantages, but I would not like to see it implemented nationally without evidence of its effectiveness. Without such evidence, Government Members do not support commitments to spending billions.

In her opening remarks, the shadow Minister described wanting to ensure that vast sums of money are spent effectively as misguided dogma. No, not really. She asked to see the working-out. Let me step back a little in history to show what Labour’s version of working-out looks like in the education space. As a snotty young IT coder, I was in the Department for Education and Skills back in the early noughties, working on the independent learning accounts recovery programme. The first programme had been put out to achieve a headline—get Mr Tony Blair’s grid.

What happened? Millions of pounds went out the door in fraud. The National Audit Office report from the time is on the record. I assure Members that having seen the data, my snotty little IT coders and I reckon that about 10 times that money went out the door. It went out the door because Labour was chasing a headline. It was throwing millions at an idea without having a plan, without having thought it through and without having evaluated it. That is not what we are doing here. We all care about children; it is hugely important. The Opposition are proud of “Education, education, education”, but that should not be at any cost, not at unlimited and uncontrolled cost and not producing ineffective outcomes that have not been evaluated.

There is no knee-jerk headline chasing on these Benches, because what we want is the effective use of Government money, in the best way to target and help children. I see a game-playing motion here today, and I will not support it.

3.5 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): For many children, especially in my constituency of Easington, home learning has been very difficult. I point out that 36.9% of children

in my constituency were classed as living in poverty in 2019-20. The effects of the pandemic have not been felt evenly, with disadvantaged children in the poorest areas hit hardest.

Despite the existing inequalities and challenges, and our schools in many areas being at breaking point, Ministers seem to have found new ways to cut school funding, and that is something I take the opportunity to highlight. The north-east could lose up to £7 million due to administrative changes in how pupil premium funding is calculated and allocated, with the Government switching from using the January schools census to using the October census. What that means is that schools with children who became eligible for funding during the pandemic will not receive any additional funding for another year.

Using the October census date rather than the January date is significant, because many children were not at school then, so it was not such a priority for parents to register. In my constituency of Easington, 20 out of 28 primary schools will be affected. The average loss will be about £9,400. When we are talking about the additional sums—I heard the Minister’s opening statement—I believe it is about £6,000 for the average primary school. The average loss will be £9,400 in my constituency, but the worst-affected schools will lose nearly £30,000. The total loss to schools in my constituency is £180,000.

It is absolutely reprehensible to remove resources from schools at any time, but to do so after the biggest public health crisis for a generation, when more funding is urgently required, is unconscionable. Funding education is an investment in our children, and society will reap dividends today and in the future. The Government have had an opportunity to make a statement of intent by implementing the recommendations that Sir Kevan Collins, the Government-appointed education tsar, made. He gave them the evidence. That would have helped every child. I hope parents will reflect on the decision and think about the loss of funding for schools in areas such as mine when they hear Government Members talk about levelling up.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The reason I did not interrupt you, Grahame, is because we have had a few withdrawals and we are able to put the time limit to four minutes for every contribution at the moment.

Grahame Morris: Ah!

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Well, I didn’t stop you, Grahame. I call Ben Everitt.

3.8 pm

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) is welcome to intervene if he wants his extra minute. It is a definite pleasure to follow him, because he ended with the phrase “levelling up”. Education is about levelling up, so today’s debate is really important, despite the déjà vu from debating the same thing as last week. Why, oh why, are the Opposition using these debates to say the same thing? It is good news for us, though, because education is at the heart of levelling up.

Even prior to the pandemic, we introduced our new 10-year plan to transform schools across England, with 500 new projects over the next decade and spending

prioritised to the schools with buildings in the worst condition. We are cracking on with it, and we were before the pandemic. Work started this year on the first 50 projects, backed by £1 billion of Government funding. Before the pandemic, we had already delivered the biggest funding for schools increase in a decade—£14.4 billion over three years, with the core schools budget up last year to £47.6 billion, rising in 2023 to £52.2 billion.

Of course there are those on the Opposition Benches who will always call for more and say, “It’s not enough,” but even before the pandemic we had been working on levelling up educational opportunities—giving every child in England a funding boost, with a minimum £5,150 per pupil in secondary and £4,000 per pupil in primaries. Now, faced with the damage to children’s learning that the pandemic has caused, we are taking even more action, targeting funding at children who need it the most. So far, we have committed a total of £3 billion to fund targeted interventions for students who need it now, focusing on those who have found learning tough during the pandemic.

Too often in this place, we are guilty of using the word “investment” when what we actually mean is “spending”, but in this area, there is a business case for saying that we are investing in our children; we are investing in our future. Britain—the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—is the greatest country on planet Earth, and its citizens are the best people on planet Earth. We owe it to future generations to provide a quality education to children. That is why there are elements of the support package that are rolled in to the impacts that it will have on future generations—training and development for teachers, language skills, resource investment, giving children the digital skills needed to compete on the global stage and to be the pioneers for global Britain. We are delivering the right targeted interventions to those who need them the most. We will have a generation of brilliant young minds. Building back better means nurturing those minds to be leaders—the leaders of global Britain in future years.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Barbara, I don’t know if the good news has reached you, but we have put the time limit up to four minutes.

3.12 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: It has—thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Today’s debate cuts to a central issue with this Government. Although there is much talk of levelling up, the reality is that the Chancellor holding the purse strings has no interest in investing in vital public services. It is telling that there is no Treasury Minister here today to defend his decisions. Trying to do recovery on the cheap simply will not work after the damaging year that our children and young people have had during the pandemic. The Government’s announcement means just one hour-long session of tutoring every fortnight; funding for this is only £1 per child a week. There is nothing for children’s mental health, wellbeing or socialisation. Importantly, there will be no dedicated support for disabled children.

Those are financial decisions with a real human impact. The Disabled Children’s Partnership makes it clear that the difference between current and pre-pandemic

levels of support for disabled children is vast: 70% of disabled children have been unable to access services such as occupational therapy or speech and language therapy, and 60% of their families are still experiencing delays and challenges in accessing the health appointments they need. The lack of access to multiple education and health services has been detrimental to the health of parent carers, with their disabled children and wider families also persistently isolated. All that, sadly, now brings the threat of children developing additional long-term health problems.

In response to that, the Government have offered nothing. They have offered nothing to provide children with social activities to make up for a year spent isolated from their friends. They have offered no funding to help crucial services, such as speech and language therapy, to step up their delivery to make up for lost time. They have offered no funding to allow unpaid carers to take the respite breaks they need after the extra caring workload they have shouldered during the pandemic. Those are specific, targeted interventions, which the Treasury has decided are not worth the cost.

The education recovery fiasco shows that the Prime Minister does not care enough to stand up to the Chancellor over the challenges facing our country. How else can the Government explain Ministers telling Sir Kevan Collins that money is no object and then signing off on only a tenth of what is needed? If the Chancellor can simply say no to the Prime Minister’s own education tsar, what does that mean for other areas of investment? If the Chancellor will not support our children, how can we be sure that he will give the NHS the support it needs to address historic waiting lists? Will he provide the change that our social care system needs so that older and disabled people can live independently in their own homes, rather than being forced to sell their home to pay for care? Will levelling up turn out to be just another unfunded soundbite that does nothing for areas that desperately need change?

Our public services need a Government who are fully behind them, not a Chancellor who is more interested in his own profile and a Prime Minister who seems happy to take a back seat. Otherwise, the next few years will look much like the last decade: cuts for our crucial public services just when we can least afford them.

3.15 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley).

The Government’s proposed recovery plan is woefully inadequate, completely underestimates the scale of the recovery required and provides nothing to boost children’s mental health, wellbeing or social development through the creative arts, sports or simply play, despite parents saying that that is their top concern after the isolation of lockdown. The Prime Minister’s own education recovery commissioner, Kevan Collins, called for an investment of £15 billion—the equivalent of £700 per pupil over three years—to support children’s recovery, yet the Government’s package is 10 times less, offering only £50 extra per student per year.

What Kevan Collins has described as a “half-hearted approach” that

“risks failing hundreds of thousands of pupils”,

[Rachel Hopkins]

I would describe as shameful and an insult to the hardworking pupils, parents, teachers and school staff in Luton South, who have gone above and beyond over the past 15 months. If Conservative Members truly believe that the level of ambition in the Government's plan is sufficient, it means that they are happy to neglect the future of the children in our country. Kevan Collins's resignation is a damning indictment of the Government's meagre proposals, and it demonstrates that the Government will fail to deliver the bold action that our children deserve.

The public deserve answers: why are Ministers and the Chancellor acting as obstacles to our young people's recovery? The Government must come clean and explain why the substantial recovery plan proposed by the Prime Minister's own education recovery commissioner was blocked. If the Government will not provide an adequate explanation as to why they rejected Kevan Collins's proposals, they should publish all Treasury correspondence, and the official evaluations and impact assessments of the proposals, so that the public can make their own assessment. I hope that the Minister, in her closing remarks, will explain what urgent steps will be taken to address Kevan Collins's concerns by increasing the investment in the recovery package.

The Labour party's children's recovery plan will match young people's ambition for their own futures, give schools the resources to transform the extracurricular and enrichment opportunities available to every child, and invest in targeted learning for the children who need it most. Our comprehensive plan would deliver breakfast clubs for every child, quality mental health support in every school, additional investment for children who have struggled the most and support to help teachers develop, and it would guarantee that eligible children receive free school meals every day this summer. Will the Minister explain which part of that plan she opposes?

The long-term costs of not pursuing such a plan will be much higher than the upfront investment that is required. The Education Policy Institute has said that doing nothing would cost our economy £142 billion in the long term. That is almost 30 times more than the cost of our package. We must pursue a bold, ambitious strategy. Our young people's futures and the future of our country depend on it.

3.19 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I start by again thanking the teachers who work in my constituency; the people who work in and around schools and early years; those who work at our university, Royal Holloway; and everyone who is involved in supporting, looking after and educating our children. It has been a very difficult year for everyone, in particular for our young people and everyone who works in the education sector. I just want to say thanks to them again.

I really enjoyed last week's debate, so I was absolutely delighted and surprised that the Opposition seemed to enjoy my contribution so much that they wanted to hear it again. Here we go:

"Education is one of the best opportunities"—[*Official Report*, 9 June 2021; Vol. 696, c. 981.]—

but if Members wish to see my speech, they may go to *Hansard* or to my website, where it is up and subtitled; the very daring may subscribe to my newsletter for regular updates.

This groundhog day debate gives me the chance to say something that did not make the cut of my education debate speech version 1.0, so I will try a different ending. We have talked a lot about education, and it is said that irony is a very difficult concept to teach, perhaps best taught through example. This past year, we have moved heaven and earth to keep schools open. We tried to reopen them as soon as possible, but the Opposition and the unions pushed back. Now, they complain that the support is not enough. The irony, a lesson to us all!

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I think we now go to Paul Howell.

3.21 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thought there were a few more Members to speak before me.

Mr Deputy Speaker: So did I.

Paul Howell: That is probably why I have a couple of minutes more.

The £1.4 billion is the next instalment. That is on top of the previous sums poured into education, including £400 million into remote education. They total more than £3 billion. Given the large figures that have been flying around for the past year in the wake of the crisis, we need to remember that £3 billion is a lot of money. It is a huge amount of money that will fund huge improvements, and I am sure that the Treasury will find more funding, should it be convinced that the plans are fully understood and costed.

The proposals from Sir Kevan included huge sums to increase the school day. Sir Kevan's job was to advise what would help children to catch up, and he did, by suggesting that they literally make up the hours lost. Having met brilliant local schools, such as Ferryhill, Woodham, Bishopton and Wellfield, I absolutely confirm that schools have been working full throttle in the past year.

In fact, to go back to Wellfield School for a second, I had the pleasure of going there last week. It is a school that has turned around over the past 10 years, from completely failing with no intake—an intake of 78, instead of 180—to now being oversubscribed. That is just a shout out to an incredible school that has done some incredible work over the past few years.

The school bell ringing at 3 pm does not equate to a teacher's day, or the school day, finishing. Teachers take home marking, lesson plans and extra tutoring. The rest of the school staff are dealing with the many complications of a covid world throughout this pandemic. They have regularly needed to enable teaching and learning simultaneously in the classroom and online. Schools and teachers need our thanks and engagement, not the imposition of more work under a misguided assumption that they have anything left in their tank. At the very least, if we are to consider extending the school day, surely a consultation is imperative.

With a little more time than I anticipated, I also make a shout out for some certainty, please, on the school sport premium funding, which I saw at first hand at

Walworth and Sedgefield primary schools recently. We also need to ensure that teachers are working more effectively, rather than longer and harder. We simply cannot afford teacher burnout. That is largely where the Government's plan focuses.

Teacher training with £153 million will provide the opportunity for evidence-based professional development for early years practitioners, while a further £253 million will expand existing teacher training and development and give 500,000 schoolteachers the opportunity to access world-leading training. Having access to such training, teachers will be able to ensure that their teaching time is even more effective and efficient, and strikes the balance between providing excellent education and not overstretching our teachers.

We need to trust that, having been given that training, teachers are the most qualified and best placed experts to teach children and to get their education back on track. That is the job that they have spent years of their life readying themselves for.

Getting funding approved for those methods that are widely agreed to be most effective, such as teacher training, while looking to consult on the effectiveness of less conventional areas, such as extending the day, reflect on a Government whose own methodology is to get on with it and not to sit on the fence. At times like this, we need to deliver the obvious and not let perfection frustrate progress. Should robust evidence be presented in favour of less-obvious educational methods, I have no doubt that the Treasury will take another look at them.

To conclude, I reiterate my thanks for the school and all the staff who have worked tirelessly and selflessly this past year. I will continue to support the Government's initiative to have them working smarter, not harder, and I hope that they manage to have a break over what I hope will be a lovely, covid-free summer.

3.24 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab) [V]: I simply cannot believe that after spending last year debating whether the Government should feed hungry children during the pandemic we are now, for the second time in a week, debating just how much children's futures are worth as part of the recovery. Have we ever seen a Government who cared so little about the people they were meant to be serving?

During the pandemic, pupils' education has been displaced and disrupted, moved between classroom and Zoom. School staff have gone above and beyond to ensure that pupils have still received an education—parents were instrumental, too—and they have my total admiration. Although we desperately need a comprehensive recovery plan to make up for lost development, it is testament to the graft of school staff that the situation is not as dire as it could have been, so it is shameful that all we hear from Government Members is the scapegoating of burnt-out staff and calls to pile more work on their shoulders.

Fortunately, the Labour party has proposed a catch-up plan that prioritises the interests of students and staff. While the Government's plan is based on penny pinching, Labour's is based on expert advice and investment. Our plan calls for breakfast clubs and extracurricular activities. It would make small-group tutoring available to all who need it and provide the quality mental health support necessary to meet the challenges ahead. Our

recovery plan matches young people's ambition for their futures and gives schools the resources that they need.

We in the Labour party are often accused of being too ambitious—of offering too much—but when it comes to delivering the brightest future possible for children throughout society, can we ever be ambitious enough? Pupils have been deprived of a full education at a critical stage in their development and socialisation. It has been a hugely difficult year for young people and we cannot avoid the fact that it will take serious investment to correct it. As we know, when Sir Kevan Collins delivered his recommendations for a catch-up plan, the Government offered 10 times less than the funding he recommended. It really is not the time to be bargain hunting. We have one shot at this recovery and the Government simply must get it right, because the futures of millions of young people are at stake.

Throughout this pandemic, when the Government have attacked education unions for standing up for the interests of staff, pupils and parents, they have insisted that their priority is having children in the classroom and supporting their education; well, children are now back in the classroom, so it is time for the Government to decide whether they are going to invest in them or abandon them.

3.28 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con) [V]: Over the past year I have been lucky enough to visit many of the schools here in Broadland, including, last Friday, Buxton Primary School, where year 4 students gave me a hard time about single-use plastics and the Government's plan for the environment. The overwhelming impression given by all my visits has been one of determination and energy, with schools having risen to the challenges thrown up by covid-19.

Unlike Labour, the Government have been clear from the start that schools should be the last organisations to close under lockdown and the first to reopen. As we look at the past year, it is clear that that decision was right—and it was taken in the teeth of opposition from Labour. When school closures became unavoidable, teaching moved online and the Department for Education became the world's largest purchaser of laptops, buying an astonishing 1.3 million devices to make sure that as many people as possible were able to take part in online learning, irrespective of their family circumstances.

Schools have adapted too. Any school visitor will recognise the huge difference in the quality and quantity of educational offering between the first lockdown and the second. Our teachers have learned a vast amount about how to teach well within the restrictions they have faced, but there have been enormous costs. A few weeks ago, I visited a secondary school where the atmosphere was positive and encouraging, and it was quite clear that the vast majority of students had bounced back. Yet that school now calls an ambulance to site several times a week to assist with pupils who have symptoms of extreme anxiety. The school has now recruited an additional two welfare staff to help smooth the path back to educational normality. I spoke to them, and they are extremely busy.

The point is that covid has not affected every student in the same way, so our response to recovery should recognise that and be targeted at the students who have

[Jerome Mayhew]

really suffered the most. As we emerge from the pandemic, the Government are right to focus on areas where the evidence shows results, with support for great teaching and high-quality tutoring for those who need it. The national tutoring programme to provide 6 million 15-hour tutoring courses for struggling schoolchildren comes at enormous cost—£1 billion—but it is an intervention that can be focused by teachers where it can do most good. Those teachers' own catch-up skills will be enhanced by a further £400 million of training support. That programme fits the real needs that I have seen in schools when I have visited them, and it is the right first step in the plan for educational recovery.

3.31 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: We expect a competent Government to step up and give the nation's children the support they need. I think we all need to know why this Government are ignoring their own commissioner.

Children in deprived and disadvantaged circumstances need the Government to care about them and their future. During the pandemic, those of us on the Opposition Benches have had to fight to ensure that schoolchildren are not left without food. We have seen poorer families lose out on digital learning, and we have seen school heads struggle to manage a depleted budget and ever-changing situations with little guidance. And now, instead of investing in each child to give them a bright future, the Chancellor has decided that they will receive less than £1 a day to make up for the days they missed from school.

Education attainment gaps are only getting wider. That will have implications for many children; children with disabilities, refugees and asylum seekers, and children from poor and diverse backgrounds will be affected for decades to come if the Government do not do the right thing. In my constituency, black Caribbean boys are some of those who need the greatest therapeutic and educational support. We should not have to put a price on the gift of education for all children, but £1 is certainly not enough.

The Government had a chance to show that they care about these young lives by just listening and learning from their own education recovery commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins, but they did not like the reality he showed them. What is the point in hiring an education recovery commissioner and then refusing to enact their recommendations to support the recovery? It is shocking and disgraceful.

In my constituency, around 34% of children live in poverty, with their parents or carers struggling to cover the cost of uniforms, food, new school shoes—and, with growing feet, new school shoes again—not to mention energy bills and rent; the list goes on. In February, all parents, carers and grandparents were told that every child would be supported to catch up on their education. Now, we find out from the Government that that is just not true.

Finally, I thank all school staff, including teachers, admin staff, caretakers and so on, for all the work they have done and will continue to do to educate our children during the pandemic and in times—hopefully much better times—to come.

3.34 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I want to start by paying tribute to all the education establishments in Liverpool Riverside and all the amazing staff who have done a great job over the last 15 months.

I have listened with incredulity over the past couple of hours to Government Members, who I think must have selective amnesia about the 11 years of austerity we have experienced and the hollowing out of funding to our schools—clearly not levelling up. The Government's pitiful proposal of a mere £50 per pupil for catch-up funding is utterly indefensible and a stain on our country; it is less than one tenth of the requirement laid down by their own education recovery commissioner, who just last week resigned over the refusal of the Minister to rise to the scale of the challenge, revealing just how little the Government value and prioritise the lives of working-class children growing up in this country.

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have suffered most from the learning lost due to covid, with the attainment gap expected to widen by between 10% and 24% and estimates by the Education Endowment Foundation showing this could reverse a decade of progress in closing the attainment gap between rich and poor pupils. My constituency of Liverpool Riverside has one of the highest poverty rates in the country, with one in three children growing up in poverty. Liverpool has among the worst education attainment rates for persistently disadvantaged children in England, the most vulnerable being often two whole years of learning behind other students by the time they take their GCSEs. This is particularly acute for black children growing up in my constituency and across the country, who are more likely to be growing up in poverty. Half of all black children are growing up beneath the poverty line, and they are more than three times more likely to be excluded from school than their white peers and four times more likely to fail to gain any qualifications at age 16 than those who are not excluded.

The Government must wake up now to this crisis of child poverty and rampant inequalities that they are presiding over and commit to significant funding if they are to avoid creating a lost generation. The Government talk big about prioritising education catch-up while in reality cutting pupil premiums by stealth by £133 million, with nearly £1.5 million set to be cut from funds to support the most disadvantaged children in Liverpool.

Can the Minister look me in the eye and tell me how he sleeps at night when his Government have just cut funding for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children at this time of acute crisis? The Government show a complete lack of understanding about—or maybe a lack of willingness to see—the essential foundation that education sets for our country's economic recovery. Lost attainment will translate into lower productivity, and if not tackled now, threatens to cost the economy upwards of £100 billion, with the impact greatest in disadvantaged areas.

To do justice to the next generation will the Minister agree here today to disclose all Treasury correspondence and evaluation of the proposals by the education recovery commissioner, and will he take up calls to appeal to his Government to put their money where their mouth is? That means having higher funding commitments per pupil, closing the digital divide, introducing smaller

class sizes, reversing the cuts to pupil premiums, providing free school meals during the holidays so no child goes hungry, and, most importantly, reversing the soaring levels of child poverty that have risen so drastically under a decade of Tory austerity cuts even before the pandemic.

Education is the key to pulling the next generation out of this poverty and providing them with better life chances. The Government have a duty to make education a priority coming out of covid; anything less threatens to create a lost generation.

3.38 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con) [V]: One of the things that pleased me most about the Government's response to the global pandemic was the fact that schools were the last institutions to close and the first to reopen, because the classroom is the best environment for children to learn in. The vast majority of teachers and their support staff in Peterborough agree about that and were champing at the bit to return. But of course, on social media and in newspaper columns, the Labour councillors in Peterborough scared parents, peddled conspiracy theories about the effects of covid on children and said that children should not return, which undoubtedly led to some parents keeping their children away unnecessarily, impacting on their future. I make no apologies for holding those councillors to account for that, and they undoubtedly took their lead from the national leadership of the Labour party, who repeatedly refused to say that schools were safe.

Today we are repeating a debate from the last week and there are just three points I wish to re-emphasise. The first is that Peterborough schools have coped well. We did come together in Peterborough to support one another during the pandemic. Schools played their part, but they will, as we recover, need support. That is why more money into targeted tutoring is welcome. That is why more money into teacher training support is welcome, and that is why more money into mental health is welcome.

Secondly, let us remember what the Labour party said about schools at the last election and what its priority would be if it were now in Government. Its priorities would be to abolish academies, abolish Ofsted, and abolish league tables. While we build back, Labour would tear down.

That brings me to my final point, and a point that I made last week. If Labour were serious about recovery, it would embrace with an open mind the idea about extending the school day. This would be welcomed by parents. It would improve physical fitness. It would improve the social skills of young people, and, of course, it would improve academic attainment. The buildings are there; they are open. Let us use them properly to catch up. I speak all the time to headteachers in my constituency who would back this and embrace it 100%. If it is good for them to embrace, then we should embrace it, too.

3.42 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Like parents across the country, I have been more involved in the education of my two children—one at primary and one at secondary—than at any other time. I saw how the

schools did their best making the transition to home learning. Teachers' workload increased. They had to teach face-to-face and support children learning from home. Schools were given woeful provision for those who did not have equipment for home learning. I could see how big the gap was, even for children like mine who had everything at home. Parents with deficiencies like me had to recall how to do quadratic equations or to explain what an adverbial is—do not ask because I still do not know. Our children falling behind, and falling behind in an interconnected world where knowledge and skills are the key to the future, is just not acceptable.

When the Government announced just £1.4 billion in catch-up funding, I was appalled, not just as an MP, but as a parent. As a parent and an MP, I want to know what reason the Government had for blocking Sir Kevan Collins' proposal for our children's education, and what assessment the Chancellor made of those proposals. I want to know why the Government are not delivering what is needed, and also why we are not delivering a world-class catch-up programme. Instead, the Government's measly tutoring offering amounts to less than £1 for every day that the children were out of school over the pandemic.

Meanwhile, Ministers are throwing more taxpayers' money at a failed tutoring programme that is reaching just 1% of pupils and that schools have said to me is difficult to use. In Leeds, we are already seeing a huge educational gap appear. As Councillor Pryor, our executive member for education in Leeds, said:

"Even before COVID there was a huge gap between disadvantaged pupils and those who were better off. Some of that is kids who have educational, care and health needs plans and some is kids in poor quality housing, have parents working two jobs and don't have the same opportunities to help them all the time."

I want to ask the Government today: where are the breakfast clubs and new enrichment activities for every child; where is the quality mental health support in every school; where is the funding for small group tutoring for all those who need it and not just for 1% of pupils; where is the continuity development for teachers who have had the most difficult year in the living memory of schools; and what about an education recovery premium supporting every child to reach their potential?

The Government also need to fulfil the promise that the Prime Minister made to Marcus Rashford to ensure that no child goes hungry. Under a Labour Government, no child went hungry. By extending free school meals over the holidays, including the summer break, they would not go hungry again. Our early years staff worked all the way through and without protection. Where is the package of support for early years, which has been starved of funding for years?

The Government must now commit to funding a proper programme with the measures that we are putting forward today and not fail a whole generation of our country's children.

3.44 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am very grateful to all colleagues who have contributed to today's debate. Sadly, however, they did not include the Chancellor of the Exchequer or a single Treasury Minister. It is always a pleasure to hear from the schools improvement Minister, but Labour did not call this debate for a repeat of what he said last week. I do not doubt the

[Kate Green]

importance that he attaches to children's educational recovery, but he and, more importantly, the nation's children and young people have been let down by a Prime Minister who, despite claiming that children's education was his priority, has not lifted a finger to help them as they recover from the pandemic, while a parsimonious Treasury and a Chancellor of the Exchequer so economically illiterate that he cannot make the connection between children's education and our country's success and prosperity have refused to invest in their future. My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) asked where was the Secretary of State for Education, but the question to which we ought to have an answer this afternoon is, "Where is the Chancellor of the Exchequer?"

The contributions made by my Opposition colleagues are a reminder of what the Leader of the Opposition has said—that education is the Labour party's No. 1 priority. It has never been more important. The disruption of the past year has seen pupils miss half a year of face-to-face schooling; they have had half a year of time away from friends and teachers. That is of concern to every Member in the House. Every Member recognises that if we do not do anything to address the impact, the consequences will be huge for our society and economy, but most of all for our children. That is why Labour proposed a bold, multi-year, £15 billion plan to give children time to socialise, learn and develop, and so that we can invest in the children who need it most and support a world-class teaching profession.

Katherine Fletcher Given that the hon. Lady has a multi-year plan, and that we need to give children more time in school, would she be willing to support an extension to the school day if properly costed and evaluated for effectiveness?

Kate Green: I do not think that there is an argument between us about the extended school day. We all agree about extra time; we all agree about the importance of a range of activities to boost social and emotional development, as well as learning. We all understand that those activities could include art, music, sport, homework clubs, reading groups, cooking and coding; some of those things were suggested by the hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) in last week's debate. The Chair of the Select Committee on Education said last week that we needed to use the time for a combination of catch-up and extracurricular activities to improve mental health and wellbeing. The problem is that we do not have that plan or those activities from the Government. All that we have, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) pointed out, is, despite all the noise, a promise of a review.

All that the hon. Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher) is suggesting is that we review whether an extended school day would be a good idea and how we should deliver it. It is hardly surprising that Sir Kevan Collins himself complained that the Government were acting too slowly. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, pointed out, they were acting so slowly that more than 300,000 children will have left school altogether before they have the chance to benefit from any proposals.

I am appalled by the complacency of the Government's claims, beginning with those made by the Minister for School Standards, for whom I have the utmost respect. His complacency on the attainment gap was profoundly shocking. There has been no progress on narrowing that gap in the past five years; indeed, as we heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) and for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), the pandemic has exacerbated it. There is utter complacency about regional disparities in school attainment, as my hon. Friends the Members for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) and for Easington (Grahame Morris) pointed out. My hon. Friend the Member for Easington also rightly pointed out the loss that schools have suffered as a result of the Government's pupil premium stealth cut.

On free school meals, for all the boasts of the Conservative party, it was only when Marcus Rashford stepped in—as my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) pointed out—that we saw action from a Government and a party that had previously suggested that supporting families with free school meals during the holidays would simply lead to mums going down the crack den. That was utterly disgraceful. Even now, the Government's plans will cover only 16 of the 30 weekdays this summer.

We heard from Conservative Members that the Government had supplied digital resources, yet we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) that families were having to study on mobile phones, so slow was the roll-out of laptops. As for the claims of a significant increase in school funding, with the £14 billion that we have heard about—following a decade of austerity that means that schools are now 9% worse off in real terms, the abandonment of the Building Schools for the Future programme, and a situation in which schools have been required to meet covid security costs out of teaching budgets, the Conservative party frankly has a nerve to suggest that schools are now doing fine financially. That is certainly not what headteachers are telling us.

The national tutoring programme, another boast from the Conservative party, is reaching fewer than 2% of children. As the Chair of the Education Committee, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), pointed out this afternoon, it misses a substantial proportion of the most disadvantaged children.

In the Government's plans there is nothing at all for disabled children, as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) pointed out. There is little—other than something in the teacher development package—for the early years, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) pointed out. My hon. Friends the Members for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) and for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) and the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) also drew attention to the failure to invest in the school sports premium.

It is therefore hardly surprising that so many of my hon. Friends had to complain this afternoon that what we have seen from the Government, far from being generous funding for schools and for a recovery package, amounts—shockingly—to only 10% of what not only Labour, but the Government's own education recovery tsar, Sir Kevan Collins, said was needed. My hon. Friends the Members for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins),

for Slough (Mr Dhesi), for Feltham and Heston, for Newcastle upon Tyne North, for Coventry North West, for Leeds North West, for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), for Bermondsey and Old Southwark and for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) all pointed out the massive shortfall in what is needed. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), perfectly correctly, asked why, if the funding that the Government are bringing forward is sufficient, Sir Kevan Collins felt the need to resign. He, at least, was extremely unhappy.

By contrast, Labour has a plan to invest in children's recovery and life chances, in their mental health and wellbeing, in their education and in the teaching profession. We have proposed billions of pounds of investment in breakfast clubs and in creating new opportunities and more dedicated time for children to play and learn at the end of the school day.

Children are optimistic and ambitious about their future and excited to be back with their friends and teachers. Their recovery from the pandemic deserves to be supported by the Government. That will be the defining challenge for Ministers, but tragically, from what we have seen so far, they are unwilling and unable to rise to it. After a year of unprecedented disruption, the Government's response, as Sir Kevan said,

"is too narrow, too small and will be delivered too slowly."

The Conservative party ought to be ashamed of the paucity of its ambition for our children, but today we are not even asking for a change in its policy or a U-turn on its inadequate plans; we are simply asking for transparency. We are asking the Chancellor, who has not seen fit to attend today's debate, to come clean with Parliament and the public about why he blocked a plan for significant investment in children's recovery. That is all that today's motion does. I commend it to the House.

3.54 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): It is great to have the chance to stand up once again and summarise this debate on how we are putting children and young people at the heart of our recovery. My hon. Friends the Members for Darlington (Peter Gibson), for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) and for Milton Keynes North (Ben Everitt) described this as a groundhog day debate, but I thought we only got groundhog day once a year. However, we can never say thank you too many times to all those who have supported our children and young people, and to children and young people themselves, during this incredibly difficult time.

A number of Members spoke about experiences in their constituencies. Some named particular schools. My hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) gave particular praise to Wellfield School in Wingate, for reasons including its academy proposals. My hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) spoke of Buxton Primary School and its interest in the environment. I am sure that every single one of us would like to say good luck to Lisa Ackley from Ormiston Horizon Academy and send our very best wishes for her place as a finalist for the TES award for the best classroom support assistant of the year. I would like to add my thanks to the year 8s from The Boswells School in my constituency, who put me through a right quizzing

on Friday. How come it is so much more intimidating when we are quizzed by our young people then when we are on "Question Time"? It is because they value that education and interest.

To address the specific motion before the House, I believe in transparency. The Government recognise and respect that this House has rights in relation to the publication of any papers, but the Government need to balance a commitment to transparency with the long-standing principle that civil servants and advisers can give candid advice, as well as the collective responsibility of Government. With respect to education and educational recovery, I want to be clear that this Government will do whatever it takes to give children from all backgrounds a first-class education and to overcome the impact of the pandemic. Far from what has been alleged by those on the Opposition Front Bench, that includes substantial investment from our Treasury.

Neil Coyle: The Minister says that the Government will do whatever it takes. Will the Government do what the commissioner asked for?

Vicky Ford: Let me tell the hon. Gentleman exactly what we are doing. The commissioner himself has praised the Government for the work that we have done, especially on the tutoring and teaching elements of his work. He also advised on extra time in education, on which we have announced a consultation.

Mr Dhesi: Perhaps the Minister would like to correct the record. Did she actually mean that the Government will do whatever it takes, or did she mean that they will do 10% of whatever it takes?

Vicky Ford: It is really important that we understand what Sir Kevan, who is a hugely respected man, was asked to do. He was engaged to provide advice and make recommendations, not to give a formal report. That is what he said to the Education Committee. We have worked on his advice, we have made those recommendations, and we are doing this deeper review.

Many Members have spoken of the record funding that is going into our schools, and before this virus hit, we committed to the biggest school funding boost in over a decade. That means that the whole schools budget will be over £52 billion this year.¹ The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) just intervened on me and made a suggestion that school funding is dropping. May I suggest that he checks his maths, as the cash funding and core schools budget in his constituency this year is going up by 4.7%, well ahead of the rate of inflation? The high needs budget is now over £8 billion. The pupil premium will be over an estimated £2.5 billion this year. That funding is targeted to support those eligible for free school meals. The £1.4 billion that we recently announced takes the investment in educational—
[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. It is getting a bit noisy on both sides of the House. We do need to listen to the Minister.

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi), who served for nearly a decade as a school governor, spoke about the importance of targeting funding where it is most needed and has most

1.[*Official Report*, 6 July 2021, Vol. 698, c. 10MC.]

[Vicky Ford]

impact. The recovery funding is targeted at top-class tutoring and teaching because the evidence shows that it has a significant impact.

The Chair of the Education Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who is not in his seat, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) gave many numbers, most of which were right, but it is not actually £67 million that we put into local authority welfare assistance—it is £269 million, including ring-fenced funding for families to help with food and schooling.

The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) suggested that funding is not going into special schools or speech and language therapy, but I have visited special schools and seen first-hand how they are using the education recovery money to support children with complex needs, including through extra speech and language therapy.

Mental health is really important. Our wellbeing for education return scheme has provided free expert training for staff to help children who face trauma, anxiety and grief. We have just announced another £17 million of mental health and wellbeing support for schools, as well as the £79 million through the Department of Health and Social Care.

Over the past year, we have put in place mental health support for every school, extended free school meals to more groups of children than any other Government in the past half century, and put extra money into breakfast clubs and extra-curricular activities. Let me remind the House of Labour's plan: it calls for mental health support for every school, extending free school meals, and putting more money into breakfast clubs and extra-curricular activities. I am glad that the Opposition are catching up, but in our schools our teachers tell our students that plagiarism is not okay. While the Opposition have been copying our homework, we have got on with the hard work of keeping children's education on track.

The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) sounded a bit low. Can I recommend that he pops down to his local holiday activities and food scheme this year? It is being expanded all across the country. It enables children of lower-income families to take part in free holiday clubs and enjoy enriching activities. I have seen first-hand how these programmes lift the spirits of children and young people. I think it would really cheer him up. It leads to real, tangible benefits for our kids. The evidence shows that, by taking part, the wellbeing and mental health of young people has improved. We will be saying more about these exciting plans tomorrow, so I encourage Members to stay tuned.

Many Members have spoken about the benefits of tutoring, including the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson), the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes North and for Bury South (Christian Wakeford), and many others on both sides of the House. I know that they will welcome the £17 million investment we have put into the Nuffield early language intervention, which is focused on children at reception age and in which 40% of schools are already taking part. It has identified a quarter of a million children for screening

and is providing one-on-one or small-group tutoring to over 60,000 four and five-year-olds. The most recent package of recovery funding also includes £153 million for early years practitioners.

We make these smart investments because we know from research that early intervention works. Early education is critical. Last year, we invested around £3.6 billion in early years entitlements, following record investment in early years before the pandemic. Over the past decade, we have improved the early years curriculum so that by the time children reach school they have the building blocks needed to learn quickly and effectively, as well as to foster a love of learning. I am enormously proud that the most recent time we assessed five-year-olds, nearly three out of four of our country's youngest children had reached a good level of development. Back in 2013, the year for which the first comparable data is available, only one in two of our children achieved that good level. The House should remember that those are the children born in the last years of the Labour Government. To put it another way, back then one in every two of our children was falling behind; now, three out of four are achieving ahead. I therefore say again what I said last week and will repeat week after week: when it comes to supporting our children and young people, I will take no lessons from Labour.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 224, Noes 355.

Division No. 25]

[4.5 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Cooper, rh Yvette
Abrahams, Debbie	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Ali, Rushanara	Coyle, Neil
Ali, Tahir	Creasy, Stella
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Cruddas, Jon
Amesbury, Mike	Cryer, John
Anderson, Fleur	Cummins, Judith
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Cunningham, Alex
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Daby, Janet
Barker, Paula	Davey, rh Ed
Beckett, rh Margaret	David, Wayne
Begum, Apsana	Davies, Geraint
Benn, rh Hilary	Davies-Jones, Alex
Betts, Mr Clive	De Cordova, Marsha
Blake, Olivia	Debbonaire, Thangam
Blomfield, Paul	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Dodds, Anneliese
Brennan, Kevin	Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Brown, Ms Lyn	Doughty, Stephen
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Dowd, Peter
Bryant, Chris	Dromey, Jack
Buck, Ms Karen	Duffield, Rosie
Burgon, Richard	Eagle, Dame Angela
Butler, Dawn	Eagle, Maria
Byrne, Ian	Eastwood, Colum
Byrne, rh Liam	Edwards, Jonathan
Cadbury, Ruth	Efford, Clive
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Elliott, Julie
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Elmore, Chris
Carden, Dan	Eshalomi, Florence
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Esterson, Bill
Chamberlain, Wendy	Evans, Chris
Champion, Sarah	Farron, Tim
Charalambous, Bambos	Farry, Stephen
Clark, Feryal	Fletcher, Colleen
Cooper, Daisy	Fovargue, Yvonne
Cooper, Rosie	Foxcroft, Vicky

Foy, Mary Kelly
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Girvan, Paul
 Glindon, Mary
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lloyd, Tony
 Lockhart, Carla
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward

Mishra, Navendu
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paisley, Ian
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robinson, Gavin
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tarry, Sam
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh
 Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitley, Mick

Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Winter, Beth

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Ahmad Khan, Imran
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Amess, Sir David
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo

Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Lilian Greenwood and
Mark Tami

NOES

Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat

Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Kate
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David

Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David

Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben

Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Maggie Throup and
James Morris

Question accordingly negated.

The list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy, is published at the end of today's debates.

Covid-Secure Borders

4.15 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House believes that there must be a clear, simply understood and proper hotel quarantine scheme in operation at the UK border to minimise the risk of introduction of new variants into the UK; calls on the Government to immediately scrap the Amber List category of the Government's Traffic Light System for travel and place all of those countries currently on the Amber List onto the Red List, whilst maintaining a tightly managed Green List, so as not to risk undermining the UK's successful NHS Covid-19 vaccination programme; further calls on the Government to work with international partners to introduce an international vaccine passport allowing for the safe resumption of travel, to publish all data on international travel arrivals, and to provide details of the decision-making process on the Traffic Light System; and reiterates the need for a sector-specific support deal for aviation.

I rise to speak to the motion in my name and those of my right hon. and hon. Friends. However, it gives me no pleasure whatsoever to be standing here yet again calling for this Government to act to secure our borders against the threat of new variants of covid. The news that the Prime Minister has announced a delay in the reopening on 21 June was a hammer blow to people across the country. Freedoms that have been denied us for so long seemed within our grasp, yet they have been snatched away. Let us be absolutely clear: the impact of what the Prime Minister announced last night is devastating, but it was not inevitable. That delay is happening because of the delta variant first identified in India, and the delta variant is here in such force because of lax Conservative border policy.

The fallout from that chain of events is enormous for pubs and restaurants that were desperate to open up properly again; for friends planning group holidays that have been ruined; for our towns and city centres hoping to have been bustling with workers again; for concerts, sports stadiums, theatres and festivals that were supposed to be filling up; and for families looking forward to great big get-togethers, celebrating milestones, birthdays, children being born and marriages. I want my thoughts today to be with all those who have seen their wedding plans turned upside down. I realise of course that weddings are legally allowed, but with singing and dancing banned, I do not think they will look like the parties that many of us know weddings to be.

This will be a desperate blow for so many people, and the cost of this delay will not just be felt in people's disappointment and ruined plans. UK Hospitality says that a delay of a month will cost its sector £3 billion in sales, with warnings that 200,000 jobs in the sector could go. Some 5,000 gigs are set to be cancelled at a cost of £500 million. Let us be absolutely clear: the responsibility for breaking the promise of freedom day lies squarely with this Conservative Government. The Prime Minister apparently says that his political hero is the mayor from "Jaws", keeping the beaches open while swimmers were getting attacked. The truth is that he has let the shark take a huge chunk out of the British economy this week. People across the country have every right to be angry about being let down so badly.

Madam Deputy Speaker, through you perhaps I can echo the strong words of Mr Speaker yesterday in condemning the shoddy way in which the Government have treated this House on an announcement of national

importance. Our role is to represent our constituents, and the Prime Minister failing to make the statement to this House or to offer himself for questioning was, frankly, an insult.

Everyone knows that managing the pandemic is a huge challenge for Governments across the world, and of course the British public can forgive mistakes, but what is unforgivable is making the same mistakes time and time again, putting the health and prosperity of the British people at risk. As an island, our border protections should have been one of our strengths. Instead, they have been an Achilles heel. Time and again, I have stood here and warned that the UK Government's border measures are far too weak, yet from the very outset of the pandemic, Government actions at the border have been too little, too late.

At the outset of the pandemic, just 273 people out of the 18 million that arrived here by air were formally quarantined between 1 January and 23 March last year—just 273 people from four flights. In fact, on 13 March last year, even the voluntary guidance that was in place on self-isolation when coming from parts of China and South Korea and from Iran and Italy was lifted. We have never had a credible explanation for that. All this came at a time when we saw the terrible scenes in northern Italy of hospitals being overwhelmed, when our constituents were contacting us and questioning why there were not better and more effective controls at airports, and when the Government's own chief scientific adviser said that

"a lot of the cases in the UK didn't come from China...they came from European imports and the high level of travel into the UK at that time."

There is no point in the Government claiming that they have the toughest border protections in the world. In that same month, March 2020, Singapore, Hong Kong, Canada and New Zealand restricted entry to residents and citizens and introduced a 14-day quarantine for all arrivals. It could be done, and it was done; it just was not done by this Government. I wrote to the Home Secretary in April 2020 to ask her to learn the lessons from that, but still the UK remained an international outlier. In May 2020, the UK stood with only Iran, Luxembourg and the US Virgin Islands in having no border protection measures in place, and that, I am afraid, has been the story of the pandemic at the borders.

This Conservative Government have been late to formal quarantining. It was not introduced until June 2020, and even then only 3% of the people meant to be quarantining were successfully checked. The Government have been late to mandatory border testing, which was not introduced until January 2021, and late to start hotel quarantining, which started in February 2021 and even then covered only 1% of arrivals. They have been late and lacking in strategy, with no proper plan, just lurching from one position to another. It is no wonder that the border policy of this Government has been a tale of systematic failure. The Government did not so much leave the back door open to covid and its variants as leave the front door open the whole time.

Let me pay tribute to Border Force, the police and our wider law enforcement community. They have worked heroically. The gaps in our defences that have existed and do exist are not their fault, but the fault of Ministers. That chronic failure has been crystallised in the utter

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

mess over hotel quarantining. On 1 February, we on the Opposition Benches forced a debate and a vote on covid security at the borders. I said that day:

“Labour is calling for decisive action today through a comprehensive hotel quarantine policy, and that would mean a policy of enforced quarantine restrictions on arrivals...Failing to adopt that policy risks undermining the huge gains that have been made by the vaccine roll-out, threatening life and hope.”—[*Official Report*, 1 February 2021; Vol. 688, c. 753.]

I then asked:

“How on earth can the Government be assured that the measures will prevent emerging strains from countries outside those on the red list? The truth is that the Government cannot answer that question. As a result, the policy is fatally flawed. A comprehensive quarantine policy would give us the best possible chance of preventing a new strain from undermining the astonishing collective sacrifice of the British people.”—[*Official Report*, 1 February 2021; Vol. 688, c. 755.]

It gives me no pleasure to say it, but that new strain is exactly what came to pass.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): How long does the right hon. Gentleman think his policy of scrapping the amber list and moving everything to red, hotel quarantine, would last? He says it is to deal with the risk of new variants being introduced into the UK. That risk could last indefinitely, so does that mean that his border closure would, by its very nature, also be indefinite?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Absolutely not. I have said, and it says in the motion, that there should be a growing green list now. The reason we are unable to grow the green list to the extent that we want to is the danger being created by the ambiguous amber list, by people mixing at airports, and by the mixed messaging from the Government about whether people can actually travel. It is not the fault of the people who are travelling. It is the fault of this Government with their mixed messaging.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition asked the Prime Minister to take action. The Prime Minister promised some of the toughest border measures in the world—but we had another example of what defines this Government: overpromising and underdelivering. Instead, they have let people down and delivered a complete mess. It was the Government's short-termism and refusal to take tough decisions in time that has led to us ending up in this situation. When we called in February for comprehensive hotel quarantine measures in February, the Government Members did not even turn up for the vote—not one of them is shown as having voted in the Lobby.

Let me be clear. We want to get back to safe international travel as soon as possible, but we have to protect the gains of the past 14 months, which have been secured by the sacrifices of the British people. Yes, the comprehensive quarantine policy is tough politically; it is a message a lot of people did not want to hear, but it was necessary to keep variants out. Advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies was that it was the only measure that would work, and the Government's chief scientific adviser said:

“You've got to go hard, early and broader if you're going to get on top of this. Waiting and watching simply doesn't work.” Yet the Government ignored the warnings, time and again.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman talks about a tougher border policy to keep out variants. Can he explain why the delta variant is present in Australia?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Because nobody can provide 100% protection against anything—[HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] Conservative Members jeer, but it is about time they took a bit of responsibility for the failure of their Government. They argue with me about comprehensive hotel quarantine, but not one of them had the courage to vote against it in the Lobby in February. They have completely failed to put in place every possible measure that they should have implemented. That is a comprehensive failure.

Between 6 January, when the third national lockdown in England began, and the end of April, 1.59 million people flew into the UK. Only a tiny percentage underwent hotel quarantine. Most damaging of all was the abject failure to add India to the red list in time. Even if the Government had refused to introduce hotel quarantine, which they should have done, it was clear that more countries needed to be added to the red list. Pakistan and Bangladesh were added on 9 April, yet the Prime Minister waited 14 more days before adding India. Civil Aviation Authority figures suggest that at least 20,000 passengers who might have been infected with the delta variant arrived from India between 2 and 23 April—a staggering number. It is unbelievably reckless that on his list of priorities, the Prime Minister put having his photograph taken with Prime Minister Modi ahead of protecting jobs and the safety of this country. Nobody is blaming people who travelled when they were permitted to do so. The blame lies with the UK Government for their unjustifiable delay.

Last night at the Dispatch Box, the Health Secretary claimed that he took a decision based on the evidence available to him at the time. On 1 April—the day before he says he took the decision—India recorded the highest one-day spike in 2021. It was hardly a secret; it was on newspaper front pages. Cases were surging, and there it was—publicly available—but it seems it did not prompt him to act. It has also been reported that on the same day, Ministers knew about the delta variant being discovered in the UK, but that did not prompt him to act either. The Government must now publish the risk assessments that were done on India by the Joint Biosecurity Centre, so that we may have maximum transparency on exactly how that disastrous decision to delay was made.

Last night, I heard the Health Secretary claim that we on the Labour Benches called for India to be added to the red list with the benefit of hindsight. What nonsense! If the Conservatives had listened to us on the Labour Benches and voted with us, protections would have been in place from February. I have the *Hansard*, and the Health Secretary can check the facts in *Hansard*, if he wants to. Let us hear no more about hindsight. We want Ministers to show some judgment and foresight.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman talks about the Government listening to the Labour party and taking your advice, but had we done that, last year we would have listened to the shadow Transport Secretary, the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), when the Labour party was calling for the

Government's quarantine measures to be lessened. Had we listened to you, we would have had fewer restrictions at the border than we have at the minute.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman must not use the word "you".

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman raised that, because he is talking about the Government's own failure. Last summer, the shadow Transport Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), and I were speaking about the fact that 14-day quarantining was unnecessary if we had testing up and running. We could have had a test and release system with release after 10 days. We were highlighting the complete failure of the Government on testing, so I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman gave me the chance to make that point.

I give Ministers another warning. As we speak, countries with large numbers of delta variant cases are on the amber list, which has been proven clearly not to work in stopping infections reaching the UK. Thailand and Vietnam are on the amber list, despite having rocketing cases and, potentially, yet another new variant that has already entered the country. Thousands more are on flights coming and going from holiday destinations across the world. Again, we put the Government on notice: put in place proper covid protection at the border to end the culture of failure that has been their record so far.

That is why, today, we are forcing a vote again on securing our borders. The Government must take clear steps to avoid the disastrous mistakes of the past: scrap the amber list and move it on to the red list with the proper hotel quarantine system; continue to have the green list, which can grow safely over time; work with our international partners to introduce a universal, worldwide, standardised international vaccine passport; and introduce the long-awaited sector support deal for the aviation sector, called for many times by my hon. Friend the shadow Transport Secretary, saving jobs and ensuring environmental protection.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Stobart Air, which has connectivity between Belfast City and many cities across the UK mainland, is on the edge of collapse—indeed, that will happen. Does the right hon. Gentleman feel that it is important to give the aviation sector the help that it needs to ensure, when we come back, that there will be something that we can build upon?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We need to see a proper ambitious support package, with the money properly targeted to meet its aims.

Appalling hire-and-rehire tactics should be outlawed—that practice has no place in our country—and we need staff salaries protected, with a clear commitment to workers' right. Let us also see a commitment to cleaner fuels, UK-based suppliers, tax paid here in the UK and compliance with consumer rights regulations. Inaction—continuing inaction—is not the answer. Those are steps that could be taken right now. They would reduce the risk of yet more variants reaching the UK.

When people are working so hard to contain the delta variant at home, this Government run the risk of bringing in yet more from abroad. The irresponsibility has to stop. Up and down the country, people have done their bit. They have given up their freedoms, queued up for the vaccine, given up precious time with loved ones, abandoned planned family events and sacrificed attendance at funerals. They have done all they can to protect the country; the least they can expect in return is that Members of Parliament will do the same by supporting our motion to ensure that we can secure our borders from covid variants, allowing lives to return to normal in the near future.

4.34 pm

The Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment (Nadhim Zahawi): I welcome today's debate on a matter that is, rightly, of significant public interest. It is slightly disappointing to hear the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) being found out by my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) for really not understanding how viruses spread. If we are going to live with this virus, there will be variants. He has been asked over and over again, "What would you do?", and unfortunately he has been found failing. Throughout the pandemic this Government have taken all the steps necessary to protect the public and help prevent the spread of the virus.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Absolute nonsense.

Nadhim Zahawi: Well, we shall see. As of today, 30 million-plus people have had two doses. We are at 72 million doses in the United Kingdom, and we aim in the next four weeks to offer the double dose to two thirds of all adults. That is delivery, my friend.

Sometimes taking all the steps necessary means making difficult decisions—not that the Labour party understands these things—such as the Prime Minister's announcement yesterday of the decision, informed by the data, to pause the move to step 4 of the road map. We are clear that the public expect a clear message that these decisions are based on the science. Public health has always been our No. 1 priority and we will not risk throwing away our hard-won achievements through the vaccination programme that have only been possible through the work of the British people.

Being led by the data and the science has also informed our approach at the border. The Government have put in place some of the most stringent covid border measures in the world. Each of the measures that we have put in place—informed by the latest scientific advice—adds layers of protection against importing the virus, including through reducing the risk of importing new variants.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): May I just praise the work that my hon. Friend is doing? It has been an incredible journey to vaccinate this nation. With his leadership, the team that he has put together have done a massive job. We all know that the way to get out of this dilemma is to vaccinate, so I pay tribute to him for what he has done.

We have spoken much about the Indian variant. Would my hon. Friend take a second or two to talk about a new variant that is coming on the horizon—the echo variant—which has been seen in Nepal?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his comments. He is absolutely right that we have to remain vigilant. Part of the reason why the decision was made to place countries such as Portugal on the red list, unfortunately, was because we are seeing further mutations from the Indian variant to the variant that has first been spotted in Nepal. That is why we have invested so heavily in our genome sequencing capability and capacity in the United Kingdom. In many instances, we are able to identify variants in travellers from those countries before those countries actually identify them.

The really important point to land is that no single measure can remove the risk entirely; I think it is on this point where the real division lies between the two sides of the House. However, each layer of protection that we have introduced helps to reduce the risk and protect the hard-won progress that we have seen, including for our world-leading vaccine programme. Let me set out for the House some of those measures, which include our clear assessment of the risk posed from overseas, as set out in the traffic light system; our approach upstream at the border, including the vital work carried out by Border Force staff; our robust in-country measures around enforcement and managed quarantine; and the world-leading scientific expertise informing our entire approach.

The traffic light system essentially categorises countries based on risk, in order to protect public health and the vaccine rollout from variants of covid. The Joint Biosecurity Centre produces risk assessments of countries and territories. Decisions on red, amber or green list assignment and associated border measures are taken by Ministers, who take into account the JBC risk assessment alongside wider public health factors.

The JBC's risk assessment includes a number of critical factors, including the general epidemiological situation in a country, and the presence and prevalence of known variants of concern, or new variants, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) has just pointed out. Genomic surveillance capability is critical to the second issue, and the reality is that many countries cannot match the UK's world-leading capability in that field. We have been open about this approach, and indeed a summary of the JBC's methodology has been published on gov.uk, alongside the key data that supports Ministers' decisions.

The rules are firm but fair for passengers arriving in the UK. Red country arrivals must quarantine in a managed quarantine facility for 10 days and take tests on day 2 and day 8. Amber country arrivals must self-isolate in their own accommodation and have a test booked for day 2 and day 8. For green country arrivals, no quarantine is required, but they must have a test on or before day 2 after arrival. All passengers from red, amber and green countries must have a negative pre-departure test. In the interest of continuing to protect public health, the public are advised against leisure travel to countries categorised as amber and red.

Upstream, the success of our travel system relies on everyone playing their part. Carriers have a key role here and are under a legal obligation to check that each passenger has proof of a negative test. They are liable for a fine of up to £2,000 for not complying. The Civil Aviation Authority has issued 630 fines since 1 February to airlines carrying passengers without the right documentation. International arrivals from red countries are required to arrive at designated ports.

Border Force works tirelessly to check all passengers coming into the country. It is continuing to ensure that it has the right level of resources to carry out its duties, maintaining border security and public health, while trying to minimise wait times at the borders at all times. To put that in context, we currently have the highest level of staffing since the 2012 Olympics.

We have been taking steps to significantly improve and speed up processes at the border by digitising a number of checks, including the passenger locator form so that it can be used at e-gates. Those automated checks happen behind the scenes, meaning that people may not be asked to show their passenger locator form to a Border Force officer, but that does not mean that the checks are not happening. However, we have been clear with the public and industry that queues and wait times will be longer if passengers have not completed the necessary requirements to enter the United Kingdom.

Our border measures are backed by a robust enforcement regime. As of 8 June this year, there had been 328,860 amber quarantine compliance visits by a service run by the Home Office, as well as over 600 fines for breach of home isolation. The Home Office runs a service to check that amber arrivals are in fact quarantining at home or other appropriate locations.

We have also taken strong steps where travel from certain countries poses a particularly acute risk to the United Kingdom. On 15 February, we introduced a managed quarantine facility for those arriving from red list countries. That list is under regular review, and we have taken the decision to add countries to the red list to help prevent the spread of variants of concern to the United Kingdom.

All international arrivals from red list countries are expected to quarantine in a Government-approved hotel for 10 days. Before flying, they need to pre-book their hotel, and their testing package for day 2 and day 8 tests, on a Government booking system. They are not allowed to use the test-to-release scheme for early release from quarantine. Those measures are kept under constant review, including the important impact on individuals with family ties in other countries.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): The Minister has outlined the protections that are taken, and the work that has taken place has been very impressive. Will he just explain a little more some of the separation arrangements in airports themselves—those points of transit where people come together?

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: as of 1 June, Heathrow has introduced a red list country terminal. Of course, all airports and ports have a responsibility to ensure that passengers arrive and are separated safely when entering.

I am proud that we are also protected by our world-leading genomic sequencing capability, including testing those positives that are discovered on entry. That allows us to analyse the test results of arrivals to identify any new variants of concern as quickly as possible. It not only helps us at home to protect ourselves, but helps the rest of the world, too. It is this world-renowned sequencing capability that informs the traffic light system, allowing us to take swift informed decisions to protect public health. That is something we have not shied away from doing, even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Recognising the strong strategic rationale and success of the vaccine programme, we have commenced work to consider the role of vaccinations in shaping a different set of health and testing measures for inbound travel. Individuals in England who have had a full vaccine course will be able to demonstrate their vaccine status through the covid-19 vaccine certification for outbound international travel, while border health measures at destination countries will be set by the receiving country. Those requirements will be set out for the public to check entry requirements before travelling.

In closing, this Government understand the importance of international travel to the UK public and the success of the United Kingdom itself. We are determined to ensure that the United Kingdom restarts international travel in a safe and considered way, when the science tells us the time is right to do so.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The Minister talks about international travel going forward, and it is obviously important for the Government to be as open as possible. Will he give a commitment from the Dispatch Box that the risk assessments on India that were done by the Joint Biosecurity Centre will now be published by the Government?

Nadhim Zahawi: The right hon. Gentleman continues to hark back. Let me give him some details: on 23 April, India was added to the red list; on 29 April—that is, seven days later—that variant became a variant of interest, not a variant of concern, and at that very point, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care insisted that we take further measures because of his concern; and it was on 7 May that that particular variant became a variant of concern. This Government will not take any lectures from those on the Opposition Benches.

This Government understand the importance of international travel to the UK public and the success of the UK itself. We are determined to ensure that the UK restarts international travel in a safe and considered way when the science tells us that the time is right to do so, and I repeat that message because it is an important one to land. The global travel taskforce, led by the Department for Transport and reporting to the Prime Minister, is working across Government and industry to do just that.

We have made enormous progress this year in tackling the pandemic across our country. That progress has been hard-won in Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England, and it is vital that we do not risk undermining it now. This Government will continue to work tirelessly to ensure that our response, including on international travel, continues to meet the challenges that covid brings us.

4.48 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I start by commending the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), the shadow Home Secretary, and his colleagues for bringing this important debate to the House. His motion makes some important, very solid points with which we agree. We need clear, simple to understand and proper hotel quarantine restrictions to minimise as far as possible the introduction of new strains. Secondly, measures introduced at the UK border have not worked as we all

would have wanted, and the Government need to improve how the scheme is operating. There needs to be transparency on decision making and the data used.

There has to be international co-operation and discussion of how vaccine passports might support the return of safe travel, and there is absolutely a need for a sector-specific support deal. On the suggestion that we move immediately from a full traffic light system to a red and green system, it is fair to say that we could be persuaded. That is something that could be looked at, but we would first need to see the expert advice on that issue, including the view of the JBC.

Before I expand on two or three of those points, let me pay tribute to and thank all the staff—Border Force and others—who are working as hard as possible to try to keep us safe at the border in what are incredibly difficult circumstances. Along with other members of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, last week I had a chance to visit Heathrow airport, where we spoke to airport and border staff. They are doing their best in difficult circumstances, and we thank them.

Turning to the motion, of course we need strong border measures, which should include clear, simple and robust systems for self-quarantine as required. Almost every country in the world has used border measures to help to control the virus. As the Minister rightly pointed out, that is only one part of a wider and larger strategy for disease control but, nevertheless, it remains a crucial part of the overall effort to combat covid.

The second key element of the Opposition motion deals with the fact that the UK's border measures have, on several occasions, fallen short, and the covid pandemic has been worse in the UK as a result. That was, for example, true last year when, as countries around the world were tightening restrictions at the border, the UK went from 13 March to June with essentially no additional requirements for restrictions on arrivals beyond what was imposed on the population as a whole. The Home Affairs Committee has reported that the 10 days prior to lockdown were a particularly disastrous period, during which huge numbers arrived in the country bringing huge numbers of cases with them.

Similar mistakes were made earlier this year. When the strong advice was to put a comprehensive health quarantine system in place, that is what the Scottish Government did. The UK Government took the wrong approach—a different approach—and have deservedly been pilloried for their delay in putting India on the red list of countries for which hotel quarantine is required. The consequences are there for all to see, with the Delta strain dominant, increased infectiousness and increased resistance to a single vaccine dose knocking weeks off our recovery.

Linked to those mistakes and, indeed, perhaps a key cause of them, is a lack of transparency about decision-making processes and the data that have driven them. When the Home Affairs Committee repeatedly asked to see the advice that justified the UK lifting measures for travellers 10 days before lockdown last March, what followed was months of obfuscation and stonewalling. Similarly, it has been hard to see the scientific justification for delaying hotel quarantine for arrivals from India—certainly, in terms of published figures, there seems to be absolutely none. In both cases, we are left to conclude that the basis was shaky and, in the latter case, more

[Stuart C. McDonald]

likely driven by the Prime Minister's planned visit to India and trade ambitions there, rather than health implications.

The serious consequences of the failure to add India timeously mean that full disclosure and transparency are merited, but we are a long way from seeing that. Indeed, the Minister's response to an intervention from the right hon. Member for Torfaen illustrated that perfectly. Going forward, further requirements, including quarantine, will continue to have a crucial role. Again, we need full disclosure and transparency about decisions that have been made so that we can understand them, interrogate them and hold Government to account. At the moment, the impression is of constant battles between the Department for Transport and the Department of Health and Social Care in which scientific advice and public health are not always the deciding factor.

Turning to the suggestion that we move immediately from what is a full traffic-light system to a red and green system, as I said at the outset, it is fair to say that we could be persuaded of that case, but we are not persuaded yet. Our position simply is that Government should make decisions based on data and expert scientific advice. Those in government must not hesitate to challenge pushback and interrogate recommendations, but decisions must follow the outcome of such discussions, not prejudge them. If the data show, and the advice from the experts is, that a red-green system is the right way to go, we are open to that. All that we are saying is that such changes need to go through a proper system of scrutiny and development first.

There clearly have been significant challenges to the use of home quarantine. During our visit to Heathrow, it was clear that border officials were fully stretched checking passenger locator forms and other requirements, even with a comparatively low number of arrivals. The capacity to cope with any increase in traffic must be seriously questioned, and we need to hear much more from the Home Office about how it is going to respond to that challenge.

There are limits to what checks and forms can realistically be completed at the airport. Few phone numbers or addresses have been checked, which creates difficulties for any in-country enforcement. Surely, there must be ways to check phone numbers and addresses, even before someone steps on to a plane to come here. There is no reason why that cannot be looked at away from the border, and anything that can help frontline staff and make the amber list work better must be considered. Challenges in airport mixing have rightly been raised, and were still present when we visited Heathrow last week. Terminal 4, the dedicated terminal for arrivals from red list countries, is absolutely welcome, but it does not completely fix the problem, because of the related problem of indirect arrivals from red list countries, which highlights another problem: passengers from red list countries who have been mixing on indirect flights with passengers from amber and green list countries. The challenges remain.

As we look to the future, and hopefully to recover, we could, and probably should, have a full debate on the role of so-called vaccine passports and their implications, but their use and requirement for international travel is

simply a fact of life. It is important that the Governments of all the UK nations remain involved in discussions with international partners on how they should work, to set standards and to address ethical challenges that arise.

The motion also rightly points to steps that need to be taken to protect the aviation industry and to support its gradual rejuvenation. That is why, for example, the Scottish Government decided to extend the 100% non-domestic rates relief for the aviation sector for yet another year. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) has repeatedly made the case for further targeted support from the UK Government in terms of furlough, taxation and direct support, but the response has been underwhelming to say the least.

The UK Government have been weak on restrictions at key points, weak on transparency—and still are today—and indeed weak on sector support. It is essential for public health and to protect jobs that they up their game very quickly.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. There is a five-minute time limit in place. A few colleagues have withdrawn from the debate, so I will try to keep it at five minutes for as long as possible. Obviously, the clock displays the time count, and for virtual contributions it is on the screen. I call the Chair of the Transport Committee, Huw Merriman.

4.56 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to talk about the issues that the international travel and, indeed, the health regimes face. I do so in a somewhat perplexed state, because normally I am very critical of my Government's approach for being too cautious, but here I find that the Opposition motion is even more cautious and, in my view, would finish off the international travel industry, which is already on its knees.

What I find perhaps most galling about the motion is that all the measures that would compromise business, having no regard for those who have worked so hard and lost their job in the sector, can just be swept up in the last line, which refers to

"the need for a sector-specific support deal for aviation."

The international travel industry does not want to be bailed out; it wants to be able to get on and do its job. It is all well and good for the Opposition to put that line in at the end as the catch-all, but it is effectively saying, "We will make you bankrupt, but don't worry—we'll appoint a receiver for you." Frankly, I find it very disappointing indeed.

I am sorry that the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), has moved away, because I was hoping that he might intervene to clarify something. When I asked him about the effectively perpetual state of the red list, with the amber list being scrapped, he stated that, under the motion, the green list would be grown. In fact, the language is that the Opposition would maintain

"a tightly managed Green List,"

so it does not seem to indicate that at all. I ask the shadow Transport Secretary, the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), if he is listening, to clarify

whether the countries currently on the amber list, such as Malta and the Balearic and Greek islands, would move to the green list or move to the red list, resulting in quarantine.

It is simplistic in the extreme to constantly cite Australia and New Zealand as an example that this country should follow. We are an island trading nation. It is extraordinary listening to the Opposition, whose contributions in this debate I compare with those over the past couple of years in all the debates on Europe, when they said that we could not divorce mainland UK from our European Union partners because of trade and our close links. Yet all of a sudden we can throw a ring of steel around ourselves and have everyone—I assume that means the 10,000 heavy goods vehicle movements that come into this country delivering our trade—put into a red quarantine list and therefore into a hotel.

If everyone is not to be put into a hotel, we have just punctured the ring of steel, in which case what is the point in bringing the international travel industry down? Why not have the halfway house of an amber list, as the Government do? Then we have testing and mitigations in place, but at least allow travel to occur. As soon as we puncture the ring of steel there is no point in having it at all. That would be my point to the shadow Transport Secretary.

If we reduce flights virtually to zero, because no one will travel on them if they are all going in to hotel quarantine, that ignores the fact that 40% of our trade comes in the belly of passenger planes, so trade will not come through either. That then results in more trade coming through on more lorries, which of course increases the risk, so there seems to be no logic to that at all.

Jim McMahon *indicated dissent.*

Huw Merriman: The hon. Gentleman shakes his head; I look forward to his responses. I hope he pays some regard to my comments, as I am very critical of my own side too. I am accusing him of trying to have it both ways—of trying to show some support to the international travel industry while closing it down, and of suggesting that we can close our borders down, Australia-style, while ignoring how our country interacts and works with Europe. I do not buy it for one minute, and I am afraid to say that it strikes me that the Opposition are showing a bit of red meat to try to appeal to the lowest common denominator, rather than trying genuinely to help the international travel sector recover while balancing health concerns.

That leads me to my last point. This motion seems to ignore the fact that we have a world-class vaccine that has been rolled out. In Sussex, 85% of those in cohorts 1 to 9, the over-50s, have been given both doses. We should be talking about the future and giving optimism and positivity and some signs of milestones to unlock people from the threat of job losses in the international aviation and maritime sectors, giving people hope that they will be able to see their loved ones. I ask the Opposition please to focus less on baseline politics and instead to focus on the industry—to stop thinking that they can throw a blank cheque at an industry that wants to get back to work.

5.1 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) [V]: We are in this situation now because of the delta variant: there are over 40,000 cases across the country, up from just a couple of hundred two months ago. Without it, the covid rate would by now be very low and pubs, cafés and clubs would be back to normal, but because of the delta variant the Government are having to be careful and we are having to take more time. This was not inevitable and it was predictable. Ministers could have slowed things down and given more time for the NHS to get the vaccine rolled out by putting India on the red list earlier—weeks earlier. They could and should have taken a precautionary approach. They did not do so, however, and in those few weeks in April hundreds of people with covid arrived from India with, it is estimated, hundreds of separate cases of the delta variant.

Ministers are saying that they acted as soon as they had the information to do so, but they did not. Even when they finally announced that India was going on the red list, they inexplicably delayed for a further four days—but why? They allowed dozens more packed flights to return and people to go home to family and friends, accelerating the spread of the delta variant.

More importantly, there were serious signs way before then. Covid cases in India were already accelerating in March, up from 11,000 a day at the beginning of the month to 80,000 a day by the end, and doubling again by 9 April. That alone should have set alarm bells ringing. Canada was warning about high rates of covid cases on flights from India by 20 March. We are told, too, that the delta variant was first identified in the UK on 1 April; I hope the Minister will confirm in replying whether that is true.

The Government have said that they were acting slowly because they did not have the full case-positivity data on people arriving from India for several more weeks afterwards, but that is a nonsense argument, because we know that that data does not tell us what is happening now; it tells us only what was happening several weeks ago. We could not afford to wait for several weeks when we already had the evidence that the India cases were accelerating fast. We know that the Government were reluctant; we know that they wanted to wait until the last possible minute so that the Prime Minister could make his planned trip to India, but the lesson of covid is that we cannot wait until the last possible minute; we have to act early.

If the Government are confident that they took the right decisions, why are they still not publishing the advice and risk assessments from the Joint Biosecurity Centre, which the Home Affairs Committee called to be published back in August last year? Why the secrecy? The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies papers are all published, so why not publish the Joint Biosecurity Centre analysis? They should publish it on Portugal, publish it on other countries—publish it on all countries across the world so that we can have proper, transparent debate about the risks and challenges and what action needs to be taken. It would be far better to do that.

Why will the Government also not recognise some of the weak points in the current amber home quarantine system that the delta variant has exposed? People with the delta variant travelled home under the amber system

[Yvette Cooper]

and the variant still spread, in part because people can travel home by public transport from the airport without any test on arrival and can go home to their friends and family, who do not have to self-isolate or even get tested. By the time the asymptomatic traveller tests positive, their flatmates or friends could have been in work or in shops, which means that new variants can spread.

Time and again I have called on the Government to learn from the South Korean model of home quarantine, which has tighter rules. I still believe that they should learn those lessons in order to look forward with a sustainable approach as international travel opens up. The real tragedy is that, time and again, they have not listened and learned. In the first wave, we had no covid border measures in place for months; as a result, an estimated 10,000 people arrived and accelerated the pandemic at an earlier stage. It is reported that, during the summer, people returning from summer holidays in August and September contributed to the second wave, because we did not have a proper testing system in place at the border.

We now face a new challenge because of the new variants and the failure to put India on the red list. The Government need to learn these lessons: first, we need much greater transparency so we can have a proper and open debate about where the risks are; secondly, we need a better surveillance system so that we have up-to-date data rather than waiting for any lags; and thirdly, we need to strengthen the quarantine system so that we can prevent new variants from spreading. People have done their bit across the country to support the vaccine programme. Now the Government need to do their bit and not let people down at the borders.

5.6 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Let us cast our mind back to January 2020, when we were first learning about the new virus. I remember the approach taken at the time to people coming in from parts of the world with a higher number of cases, because many of them were quarantined just down the road from me at Arrowe Park Hospital. No chances were taken then, but all that stopped very shortly afterwards: we carried on as normal, welcoming people—and the virus—from all over the world. We saw images from Spain of cases rising, yet Atlético Madrid fans were still allowed to enter the country for a champions league game in early March, contributing to an increase in cases and—according to one study—to an additional 41 deaths.

Perhaps some latitude can be given because at the time we were dealing with a new virus, but I find it hard to reconcile the actions that were taken with arrivals from Wuhan, where we knew that there was an outbreak, and from Madrid, where we also knew that there was an outbreak. Hardest to reconcile is the fact that, while the country was in lockdown from March last year onwards, thousands of people were still entering the country every day.

Turning to more recent events, there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that the reason that the full unlocking of the country is not going ahead is the decision to

delay putting India on the red list, which has led to the delta variant rapidly pushing up case numbers. All that good work and all the benefits of the vaccine were blown because the Prime Minister was once again too slow, just as he was too slow with the first lockdown, the second and the third. His incompetence has cost this country dear.

I know that the Government will say that they acted as soon as they could on the information that they had, but I do not accept that. The only data that they have released on the Indian variant shows that they should have acted sooner. Indeed, the explanation for why they did not act sooner has shifted in the past few days, as we have heard again today, from the data not supporting action to the variant not having been identified as one of interest or concern. That is not the explanation that was advanced originally; nor does it explain why Pakistan and Bangladesh were treated differently.

The Health Secretary told the House on 19 May that when the Government decided to put Pakistan and Bangladesh on the red list two weeks before India, it was because positivity rates were higher. He said:

“The positivity rates...were 1.6% in India and 4.6% in Pakistan”.—[*Official Report*, 19 May 2021; Vol. 695, c. 732.]

That seems a fair enough reason—except that I cannot find those figures anywhere. Indeed, the Government’s own figures on the variant show that in the period from 25 March to 7 April—the closest period to when the decision was made—the positivity rate was 3.7% for Bangladesh, 5.1% for India, and 6.2% for Pakistan. Those are nowhere near the figures cited by the Secretary of State.

That is not the only data that contradicts the Government’s claims. Their own data on the number of variants that they detected from those countries in the period from 25 March to 7 April shows that they detected four from Pakistan, 12 from Bangladesh and 50 from India. Actually, we did not even need data to know what was going on—we could just turn on the TV to see what was happening in India.

The only credible explanation that I can find for treating India differently is that the Prime Minister did not want to scupper his trade visit and photo opportunity with the Indian Prime Minister. It is no wonder that he does not want to come here in person and explain to the House why his road map has been put on ice, because it is his own vanity and his own incompetence that has led us to where we are today.

Does the new traffic light system give us confidence that the Government finally have a system in place that manages risk? Well, not really, as we have had Ministers contradicting themselves on that as well, particularly on travel advice. This is what happened in just one day following the announcement on international travel reopening: the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said that people could fly to amber list countries if they wanted to visit family and friends; the Health Minister in the other place said that nobody should travel outside Britain at all this year; and the Welsh Secretary said that some people might consider holidays abroad as essential. The following day, the Prime Minister set another definition. He said that people should travel only in extreme circumstances. That is four definitions in 24 hours, which is the nub of the problem. Everyone can have their own view on what

is essential, which means that there is an ambivalence at the heart of Government policy that this virus can exploit.

For the past year, we have painstakingly legislated for every facet of our lives: when we can leave home; what time we have to leave the pub; and how many people can attend a funeral. On international travel, though, we seem to have a free-for-all.

Finally, I just want to say a few words about the absolute shambles that the Government have made of the day 2 and day 8 testing for those quarantining at home, with hundreds of people who book covid tests from firms that are listed under the Department's own website complaining that they have either not received those tests, or that they have not received the results on time. These private companies, some of which did not exist at all last year and have zero experience in this area, are benefiting from an open-door policy from Government, because it seems that they can request to be added to the list of approved suppliers on the Government website simply by self-declaring that they meet the minimum standards required.

I find it absolutely astonishing that we are operating one of the most critical parts of our defence in such a reckless way. Fewer than 10% of those companies actually turned out to be accredited, so the Government really do need to do something to tighten that up as well.

5.11 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): During the covid pandemic, it is vital that we have ways to manage our borders to allow for travel where it is safe, as well as protecting our population at home. However, this motion talks about the UK's borders, but we know that the position is not that straightforward.

International travel has sadly been yet another example of a failure of our four-nations approach to tackling the pandemic across the UK. Until very recent weeks, different rules were in place across the four nations, with travellers from some countries arriving in England and being able to quarantine at home, while those arriving in Scotland, for example, needed to quarantine in a hotel. Even now, when we are seeing an alignment in the traffic light system, confusing as it is, there are differences with Scotland. For example, it does not have a test to release scheme. Just because Scotland has done it differently does not mean that it has always done it better. The Scottish Government, like the UK Government, acted too slowly last summer, failing to protect against new variants entering the country or to set up a test, trace and isolate infrastructure effectively to prevent a second wave. During that time, the quarantined travellers' spot-check target was missed for four months in a row, which was highlighted by my colleague and friend the MSP for North-East Fife.

What we have seen across the UK is no clarity or certainty, which is exactly what is required to enable public confidence. There is no clarity or certainty for the tourism industry or for those wanting to reunite with family members abroad who see a narrative of desperate holidaymakers and watch others here with their loved ones. There is insufficient support for those who need to isolate and still not enough funding available for tourism businesses that have no customers. This is not just about vaccine success in the UK. UK-inbound

tourism is vital to North-East Fife, particularly in relation to golf, which I have highlighted several times in this House. This lack of clarity and certainty devastates the industry, with cancellations in 2020 and now in 2021.

Most of all, a lack of a meaningful four-nations approach leads to confusion. If people do not understand the rules, or do not understand why the rules are different across the UK, despite best intentions, they end up not following them. I was contacted by one constituent, a seafarer, who was subject to different rules and quarantine, depending on where he returned to in the UK. He was reaching out to my office in the hope that I could provide clarity, but there are simply inconsistencies. We see the risks of that confusion now as the delta variant, which many have already spoken about, has quickly become the most prevalent variant across the UK in recent weeks.

If the UK Government had worked properly with the Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and taken a more joined-up approach, clear rules could have been agreed and adhered to consistently. This problem will not be solved until the covid-19 pandemic has been tackled globally, and although I welcome the UK Government and G7 pledges on vaccinations, they are simply not enough. Until the pandemic is tackled globally, we need to find a way for safe travel, proper border checks, clear rules and support for those who need it, and to do that in the UK, we need the four nations working together.

5.14 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): There almost comes a time in these debates at which points are repeated. I shall approach the debate from an internationalist and security perspective.

I intervened on the Minister and mentioned the echo variant. It is absolutely worth stressing the incredible capabilities that we in the UK have in genome sequencing, which mean that we can identify how this virus is changing, but the new variant illustrates how versatile it is in adapting and mutating again and again. We talk of imposing border controls, but we still know so little about this virus, which is why we had five-week increments for easing the restrictions. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) mentioned in another intervention, even the toughest of border measures in Australia cannot contain its movement.

From a biosecurity perspective we need to learn more about the virus. I take this opportunity to stress the importance of asking China to open up its doors. We still do not know who patient zero was or where ground zero was. The World Health Organisation team was denied access for more than a year. It could not interview the original patients and certainly was not allowed properly to visit the Wuhan Institute of Virology, about which so many questions have now been raised.

The pandemic has shone a light on how frail our world order currently is, with countries retreating from global exposure and becoming more independent, international organisations almost paralysed in their ability to help, and the two most powerful nations—the biggest superpowers—clashing in a war of words rather than collaborating and working together. I therefore congratulate the Government on their G7 summit. The west has been distracted and there has been a lack of

[Mr Tobias Ellwood]

unity, but it is starting to regroup, as reflected in the G7 communiqué, which prioritised the need to end the pandemic and prepare for the future. It recognised how OECD countries must help by driving an intensified international effort to vaccinate the world by getting as many safe vaccines to as many people as possible, as fast as possible. The UK is leading that approach through the COVAX initiative, which is absolutely to be welcomed.

At the same time, the G7 will create the appropriate frameworks to strengthen our collective defences against threats to global health by increasing and co-ordinating global manufacturing capability on all continents, improving the warning systems and supporting science to shorten the cycle for the development of safe and effective vaccines. If we do not do that, it will not be the echo, golf or hotel variants but something further down the line that affects us and prevents us from finally turning our back on this pandemic.

The Prime Minister was right to extend the road map, which was created back in February and was always going to be subject to conditions. It was written well before the Indian variant emerged but with new hurdles in mind. In announcing any road map, there is always the risk of disappointment if we have to deviate from it. That is the toughest of calls for any Government to make, with the nation so understandably exhausted and eager to return to normal. The incredible vaccination programme has given us a sense of security and perhaps optimism that we can move forward, but the impact of the Indian variant must be taken seriously, as should the echo variant, about which we still do not know much.

I stress to the Minister and the Government that it is the vaccinations that will get us out of here. I absolutely applaud the work that we are doing internationally, but can we start to move, in September, to vaccinate teenagers as well? Finally, so many people want to travel abroad, so can we co-ordinate efforts and join a travel system with our European partners so that if someone has had two vaccines, they can travel unimpeded and holiday abroad?

5.19 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The delta variant, commonly known as the Indian variant, did not just miraculously appear on our shores via an act of God. It arrived because our borders were open to hundreds of people infected with it. That is a fact. We only had to switch on the TV to see the horrendous tragedy unfolding in India for all the world to see, yet despite the scientific advice—and, indeed, the call from those on our Front Bench way back in February—the closure of that border and those restrictions were not introduced until 23 April. Curiously, as has been mentioned in this Chamber over and over again today, both Pakistan and Bangladesh were put on the red list some two weeks earlier. That timeframe counts and that decision counts.

The Indian variant is now our variant, accounting for over 90% of cases. A strain identified in an outbreak in the Northwich part of my constituency is now spreading at an alarming rate throughout Cheshire, the north-west and our nation. Hospitalisations have now started to creep up, and we are in a race against time to jab to save lives, while local leaders in Cheshire, Merseyside, Halton

and Warrington are pleading for more vaccine supplies. The right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) referred to teenagers now being a priority, and I concur with that plea.

This did not, of course, have to be the case, and the finger should be pointed firmly at the door of No. 10 and the Prime Minister. It was his desperation to secure a trade deal on his planned trip to India that meant this followed the photo opportunity, not the data. Not only has this incompetence thrown us off track, but it could cost even more lives and livelihoods. The hospitality sector in my constituency is clinging on by its fingertips, with pubs, restaurants and the night-time economy having that hope upon the horizon shattered by the gross incompetence of this Prime Minister and Government. To add insult to injury, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor are now refusing to extend targeted support to the sector. These callous decisions are putting people out of business and out of jobs.

In conclusion, from Northwich to Runcorn and from Frodsham to Helsby, people in my constituency will remember, and the judgment day will come. No more benefit of the doubt—the truth will truly set us free about this absolute shower of a Government.

5.22 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to the debate this afternoon. I rise to speak not because I do not accept that coronavirus has created acute and challenging issues on the border, not because there are not difficulties and constraints for many people around the UK who either need or want to travel abroad and not because there are not real challenges for the aviation and transport sectors caught up in a maelstrom created by one of the most unprecedented times in our lives—there are and I absolutely accept those challenges and those difficulties, which I do not think anyone in this House would question. However, the question for this place today is not about that; it is about what the Government could do and what it was reasonable and proportionate for them to do.

In a year of difficult decisions, border policy is a particularly difficult one to get right. Too prescriptive and the United Kingdom runs the risk of withdrawing unnecessarily from the world and of leaving its key role as a member of the international community, all for limited to no economic, societal or health benefit and, compounding that—which then creates an effective Catch-22—the UK's approach would in effect be determined by things that it does not have primary responsibility over. On the other hand, too laissez-faire, and we run the risk of squandering the great advantages we have built with vaccinations.

Given that tremendously nuanced and sensitive situation, one would hope that border policy could be determined and discussed with a similar level of nuance and sensitivity, but this is of course an Opposition day debate, and as has been the case for the four years I have been in this Chamber, such hopes are dashed each time. Frankly, the illogical arguments we have heard so far from the other side of the Chamber—so eloquently outlined by the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), who is no longer in his place—are more a reflection of how this is just another political stunt than a serious

attempt to scrutinise the Government, hold them to account or provide constructive attempts to improve the policy.

In the coming weeks, we are going to be one of the first large countries in the world to be pretty much as vaccinated as we can be. In time, that should, and hopefully will, open up new opportunities so that in the coming period, when we are going to need to work meaningfully to properly restart parts of life such as international travel, we should be looking at broadening the tools at our disposal, recognising nuance and accepting that we have a set of balanced judgments to make.

Knowing full well that this is the situation, what does the Labour party propose? Not nuance, sensitivity or thought, but instead, exactly the opposite: the removal of one of the tools—one of the lights of the traffic light—that allows us to take different approaches for different countries, dependent on different situations. We can debate which countries go into which traffic light colour, but surely it is reasonable that there can be more than two options for international travel in the coming months as we try to get it going again.

Secondly, if the Labour party does want a completely binary proposition for international travel, which, by default, can be only no travel or travel, perhaps it could articulate how that is sustainable over the long term and what criteria it would apply to flick the switch from “Don’t travel” to “Do travel” with nothing in between. For countries where the risk is reducing, do we keep them on the red list longer than is necessary for no advantage to our country, or do we move them to the green list in advance of us being totally comfortable with them being there?

If the amber list is going to be abolished, how do the Opposition propose to resource that? Hotel quarantine is a difficult policy and one that appears sustainable at only a relatively small scale. As places such as Australia have shown, there is challenge and unintended consequences within that—people who cannot get home, important family or medical trips that are difficult to go on, and so on. Will Labour stop British citizens coming to the UK, and could Labour Members explain how they are seeking practically to make a policy work that is already strained for a country of 20 million people with 20 million visits and which they now apparently seek to try to apply to a population of 70 million, with 145 million visits?

There has also been a liberal sprinkling of references to the arrival of the Indian variant in the UK, starting with the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), and then the hon. Member for Weaver Vale. There have been nebulous suggestions that this could have been prevented with greater border control. That is just not correct. The Labour party appears to be arguing with science. The Indian variant was here on 22 February, a full month before even the Indian Government highlighted to the international community that there was a variant. Borders were closed 22 days before the World Health Organisation declared the strain a variant of concern. Right now, according to GISAID, on a small sampling, the variant is dominant in Russia, Canada, Indonesia, Pakistan and Malaysia, and is on its way to being dominant in the USA, Japan, Thailand, Portugal, Luxembourg, Bangladesh, South Korea, Qatar, Finland and most likely many other countries. If the Labour party has a

viable proposition for international travel, I would like to hear it, because it has not been articulated yet.

5.27 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab) [V]: Time and time again, the Government have shown catastrophic failings during the pandemic. The pandemic was not inevitable, and no one could predict such things, but when the rest of the world was closing its borders and placing their nations in lockdown, our Prime Minister was boasting about shaking the hands of covid patients. This was not inevitable.

It was the Labour plan to have a comprehensive quarantine policy to protect our nation’s efforts and the vaccine roll-out from variants entering from across the world, but this Government failed to listen and implement the policies that we needed. As early as 16 March, I was aware that cases were rising in countries such as Pakistan and, therefore, I submitted a written question to the Department of Health and Social Care asking for the latest data, the Government’s criteria in placing countries on the red list and whether countries such as Pakistan would be placed on such lists. I received no response to that question. On the same day, I put out a statement to my constituents who had questions about travelling to countries such as Pakistan. I made it clear that cases were rising, and that I presumed that Pakistan could be placed on the red list. I reiterated the advice to travel only if absolutely necessary. As a constituency MP, I was able to provide this advice to my constituents on 16 March.

Again, on 30 March, days before countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh were placed on the red list, I wrote to the Foreign Secretary, asking him to provide the scientific data before such countries were placed on the red list. In the letter, after listing the rates of infection in countries including France and India, I said:

“Given the data, it would be fair...to conclude the following: the Government doesn’t have a coherent strategy in dealing with the red list, and the Government isn’t serious about protecting the British public, as it is applying decisions led by politics, not data.”

Days later, on 2 April, the Government placed Pakistan and Bangladesh on the red list, and not India. It then took the Government a further 14 days, after media pressure, to add India to the red list. Figures suggest that at least 20,000 people who could have been infected with the delta variant arrived from India between 2 and 23 April.

This is not an “I told you so” moment, because whether it is the delta variant or the “Johnson variant”, as was trending on Twitter last night, the reason for the delay in reopening is not that the British public have not played their part, not that the NHS staff have not worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic and have not done enough, not that the key workers have not risked their lives to keep our economy going, and not that my constituents or those of other Members across this House have not made huge sacrifices: the reason we are here today is simply because our Prime Minister was more interested in following the politics of—[Inaudible]—that would protect our nation’s efforts throughout the pandemic. Now this nation is paying the price in freedom because of our Prime Minister’s self-interest and utter failure. The real tragedy is that we have a Prime Minister whereby failure and callous decisions are inevitable time and time again.

[Naz Shah]

The Minister gave some dates—India being placed on the red list on 23 April and then the Indian variant not being a concern until the week after the 27th. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), I would argue that that argument is complete and utter nonsense. We are either being led by the data or we are being led by it only when a variant becomes of concern. The truth is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) outlined very eloquently, that the numbers in India and Bangladesh were lower when they were both placed on the red list.

What is the science? What is the data? What have the Government got to hide? Why cannot they just publish the data from the Joint Biosecurity Centre analysis, because that is all we are asking for? We have a right to know—the public have a right to know—for how long this Government are going to take us for mugs and give us an argument that just does not stack up. The public are not stupid; people are not stupid. We see through this. The Government can give their spiel, as they often do in this Chamber, but the truth is that it was either about the science or it was about the politics. There is no other conclusion that anybody can draw but that the science was supporting the closure of India and putting it on to the red list, and our Prime Minister failed because he put politics before the security of the people.

I urge the Minister at least to publish the data, and not to hide behind arguments that simply do not wash.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We have a withdrawal at No. 14 on the speakers list. I will try to put the limit up to six minutes for a while and see if we can manage. It might have to go down, but we can do that for a bit.

5.32 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The calamity that we have witnessed in recent days is because of the Government's botched handling of the delta variant. This was not inevitable, but a failure of this Government to act swiftly and without dither or delay against the variant. Indeed, this whole sorry saga is a culmination of blunder after blunder in the Government's protection of our borders during the pandemic. My right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) was right to point to the repeated making of mistakes. This should not have happened. As an island nation, we should be better than this. Instead we have seen a Government too slow on quarantine at international arrivals, too slow on border testing, and too slow to put India on the red list. It took 22 days between the Government knowing that the delta variant had entered the UK and India being placed on the red list. All the while, the delta variant has spread throughout the country.

The consequences for public health are serious, but so are the consequences for British businesses, not least those in the hospitality industry in Birmingham. The managing director of one events company said that this is "having a huge impact on my business".

Another said:

"We understand the need to ban events but the uncertainty and short-term plans from the Government have really hampered any recovery".

And another said that extra support from the Treasury would be vital because without it

"further job losses are inevitable and ultimately an entire industry will collapse."

This is the key reason why the Government's failures will be so costly to British business and British workers.

Thus far, the Chancellor refuses to support those businesses whose suffering will be prolonged because of the Government's blunders on protecting our borders. Just how can the Government expect those struggling events businesses in Birmingham that have been closed for the past 15 months to be able to pay, for example, 10% of their employees' wages when they are still unable to operate as normal? UK Hospitality has been particularly critical, saying that a failure to act could see the industry suffering a loss of £3 billion and put up to 200,000 jobs at risk. That problem is particularly acute in the constituency that I am proud to represent, because the unemployment figures out today show that we have twice the national average unemployment. I always say that my constituency is rich in talent but one of the poorest in Britain. It will be hit hard with job losses as a consequence of this.

It beggars belief that, after the trauma of the past 15 months, good businesses and good jobs face going to the wall because the Government have thus far refused to support them for the final weeks of restrictions. I say "thus far" because one of the key reasons behind the motion is that we eminently hope that the Government will act in terms of financial support at the next stages. We hope that the House will vote for the motion, because it is about the interests of the British people and their health, welfare and safety, and about protecting British jobs. Without the proper protections at our borders, we run the risk of future variants threatening the road map for relaxing restrictions further, and the devastating impact that that will needlessly inflict on businesses and workers.

In conclusion, our focus is twofold. It is on the interests of British business—of that there is absolutely no doubt, because it matters—but it is also on the health, wellbeing and safety of the British people, because the first duty of any Government is the safety and security of their citizens. I fear that unless the Government get a serious grip of this situation, they will put their responsibility to the British people in jeopardy.

5.37 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I am pleased to speak in this debate about secure borders during the pandemic. Measures to limit international travel are obviously vital in reducing the risk of importing cases to the UK from countries where covid-19 remains high. It is right that we take a cautious approach, and the traffic light system is the right one. It is relatively simple to understand as we look towards some international travel returning, although it is clearly beyond the understanding of the Opposition. It remains vital that we continue to take a data-led approach that is regularly reviewed, with restrictions on those countries where the risks are higher, to ensure that we can protect the UK from further outbreaks and variants as we continue to benefit from the incredible efforts being made by those delivering the vaccination programme. I would like to thank each and every one of those who have been involved in the vaccination programme, particularly the Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment, my hon. Friend

the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), who has made a huge effort to ensure that we vaccinate people as quickly as possible.

Strict measures are in place to protect our borders, with significant fines for those who do not follow requirements for testing, isolating and completing passenger locator forms. I know that efforts are being made to further streamline and integrate checks with existing border security measures. Some have asked why India was not put on the red list sooner, and although I have some sympathy for that view, the reality is that the virus often evolves faster than many countries are able to detect it. It has already been pointed out that the genome-detecting capability in this country represents almost half of the global capability in genome detecting. As has also been said by a number of hon. Members, India was on the red list before the delta variant even became what is known as a variant under investigation, let alone a variant of concern.

Like all Members across the House, I have many constituents who have had travel plans put on hold or cancelled altogether due to the restrictions on international travel. A number have struggled to get refunds from operators and turned to me for help. Clearly, travel companies are under huge pressure, but it is only right, as the Government have made clear, that people should be refunded when their plans have been disrupted due to covid. The Government have provided £7 billion of support to the aviation sector during the pandemic, and they have also suspended the requirements around slots.

The Government have advised against travel to amber list countries except for essential reasons. It is clear that people should not be travelling to amber or red list countries for a holiday. Of course, many will be impacted by that, but it is right that the amber category remains, to allow some limited travel to continue to those countries at medium risk, recognising that people do not only need to travel for holidays but may have more pressing reasons to make journeys outside the UK.

That has presented a challenge for some when operators continue to run services and make it difficult for people to change their plans or get refunds. I am helping a number of my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent South in that situation at the moment, and I will continue to do so. I have also had a number of constituents struggling to return from Pakistan after visiting friends and family. The requirement to isolate for 10 days, while totally necessary, has been particularly challenging for some with ill health or some medical conditions. While I applaud the efforts to rapidly deploy and set up a system for those needing to quarantine, I am sure it will continue to improve. I particularly hope that the process for approving those who need exemptions will be further improved to ensure quicker response times, especially for those needing medical treatment back here in the UK.

I want to finish by mentioning an issue that is of particular concern to my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent South: the breaches of our border security in the English channel by illegal migrants. In attempting to cross the channel, they risk not only their own lives but those of others by potentially bringing the virus and new variants with them. I thank the Home Secretary for the robust action she has been taking to address the appalling criminal people traffickers who enable those dangerous journeys, and I fully support the Government's new plan for immigration to address this issue.

We must deter those who think that they can come here illegally with no consequence, and reduce the pressure being put on places such as Stoke-on-Trent. We have resettled more than most other parts of the country, while many have not taken in a single refugee. As I set out recently in a Westminster Hall debate on this issue, it is time for Opposition Members to stop grandstanding and actually do something. Just as they attempt to score political points on the issue of asylum, they have tried to play exactly the same game over international travel, repeatedly changing positions on borders throughout the pandemic and shamefully exploiting the benefits of hindsight.

5.42 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The coronavirus pandemic has thrown up unprecedented challenges for us all, from adapting to home working and home schooling to the new restrictions that we have all had to live with and, of course, missing time with our loved ones. That is not to mention the hard work of key workers who have faced this pandemic and seen the very worst of this deadly virus. But as more and more of us get vaccinated every day and the end of the pandemic is in sight, we have to proceed with more caution than ever.

It seems to me that undoubtedly the biggest threat to our recovery from the pandemic is the emergence of new variants that not only are able to spread faster but, it is feared, may be resistant to the vaccines at some point. The vaccination programme is our way out of this pandemic, and to jeopardise that is nothing short of reckless.

A report published by Public Health England outlined that more than 90% of new coronavirus cases across the UK originate from the delta variant. The report stated that the delta variant is able to spread quicker, with cases of the virus doubling between every 4.5 and 11.5 days. Additionally, the delta variant has been found to increase the risk of household transmission by 60% compared with the alpha variant. To prevent any further variants, which may be even more threatening, it is vital that the British Government put in place clear testing and isolating rules for international travel. Fundamentally, that means stricter border control.

Time after time, the British Government have been slow to respond and late to act. Whether it was the countless flights landing in the UK from Italy in March 2020, the laissez-faire approach to the P.1 variant ravaging Brazil, or the delta variant, which has caused so much devastation in India and right across the world, each and every time, the UK failed to secure the border.

The fact is that the UK has continually made mistakes over travelling during the pandemic. In December last year, the UK Government announced their business traveller exemption, whereby business travellers did not need to self-isolate when returning from a country not in the travel corridor. That decision was utterly irresponsible and further highlights the UK Government's ad hoc guidance throughout the pandemic. Only days later did the Prime Minister announce that people across the UK should not travel for the Christmas holidays, and the plans originally set out were revised and reversed due to rising cases. On top of all the obvious public health consequences, this policy underlines how the British Government have put forward one rule for their "high net worth" business mates and another for the rest of

[David Linden]

the public. The policy perpetuates the cronyism and inequality that have become symbolic of this Conservative Government.

In Scotland, we have put in place clear rules on international travel, employing a traffic light system which is informed by risk assessments prepared by the Joint Biosecurity Centre. The assessments take into account the state of the pandemic in each country across the world and give consideration to variants of concern. The Scottish Government will continue to take decisions that they consider right for Scotland and will not sign up to decisions that might put that progress at risk.

This haphazard Vicky Pollard-like approach to border control has highlighted one of the major deficiencies in the current constitutional settlement in these islands. An independent Scotland would have full control of its borders and not be subject to the whim of the British Government's ad hoc decisions. The end of the pandemic is almost in sight. After an incredibly difficult year for so many of us, we need to tread carefully as we recover from this virus. We in Scotland are clear that, when we have recovered from coronavirus, it is vital that the ability to choose Scotland's own future in every aspect of policy, including border control, be in the hands of the people of Scotland. Westminster is not working for Scotland. This latest farce perhaps highlights that better than any SNP leaflet ever could.

5.45 pm

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in today's debate. I will start by paying tribute to UK Border Force, NHS Test and Trace, ministerial colleagues and officials in the Departments for Health and Social Care and for Transport, and the Civil Aviation Authority, and by saying a huge thank you to airline and airport workers, many of whom live in my constituency of Guildford and work at the nearby Heathrow and Gatwick Airports. They have all worked incredibly hard in their roles to keep our borders secure while, crucially, making sure that the importation of vital food and medicines, important to our citizens, was not disrupted.

It is also important that we thank all our constituents who have followed all the measures laid down by the Government when they needed to travel. They are not all going on a jolly or on holiday; a lot of them, including colleagues of ours, have had to travel to deal with serious issues in their personal and family lives, such as bereavements, and on their return they have done a great job of complying with every measure the Government have set out.

The enormous success of our vaccine roll-out is the route out of lockdown, and I welcome the short delay in moving to step 4, as that will give us the opportunity to double jab those in their 40s and to give every adult at least one jab. I encourage everyone to take up the offer of a jab when it is made, even if their age group has already been called and they have not got round to it, because so far the vaccines are proving to be highly effective against each of the variants, including the most prevalent delta variant, and hopefully will be against emerging variants, such as the echo variant mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood).

The motion before the House starts:

"That this House believes that there must be a clear, simply understood and proper hotel quarantine scheme in operation at the UK border to minimise the risk of introduction of new variants into the UK".

It is clear. My constituents understand it. My daughter, who has been working abroad this year—I know I do not look old enough to have an adult daughter, Madam Deputy Speaker—understands it as well. She is to return in three weeks, and this morning I was talking to her about all the tests that she has to undergo if she is to return here and then reintegrate into society, and to ensure that she does not put anyone else at risk. This is something the vast majority of our constituents do.

Having spent the first 24 years of my life in New Zealand and Australia, I have been watching closely to see what they have been doing because I have family and friends there. I care deeply about this country and my constituents, and about my friends. I have seen that, even with the tightest security on the borders, the virus still gets in—it just takes one case and the virus spreads. We ought to be careful about making international comparisons because not everywhere has been able to deal with the virus very effectively and we do have secure borders.

Protecting public health is our priority as we reopen international travel safely. We will maintain 100% of health checks at the border to protect our constituents. We have some of the most stringent border measures in the world. Border Force will check every passenger who arrives at the border to ensure that they have complied with the health measures, take the mandatory 10-day quarantine for those arriving from amber countries and have a managed facility for those from red countries. Our red, amber and green travel list is reviewed every three weeks. If we take out the amber, it is not really a traffic light any more, is it? But we will not hesitate to act sooner if the data suggests that that is necessary. At each stage where we have had the emergence of variants and have had to act quickly, we have taken decisive action to update the list.

Today, Labour is playing political games again. Last year, Labour was flip-flopping all over the place. When we decided to shut our borders, the shadow Transport Secretary, the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), called it a "knee-jerk action" and referred to

"the introduction of a 14-day, blunt-tool quarantine with almost no notice".—[*Official Report*, 10 September 2020; Vol. 679, c. 850.]

I do not think anything we do would please Labour, but what are we doing? We are securing our borders, vaccinating our citizens, gifting vaccines to the world and recovering our economy so that we can build back better from the pandemic. We have a plan for jobs; Labour's motion today would cost aviation jobs. While Labour is playing political games, this Government are getting on with the job of ensuring that we recover from the virus.

5.52 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab) [V]: This Government talk a lot about control of our borders, but their actions on covid-19 tell a different story. We would almost certainly be in a better place, looking forward to the planned removal of further lockdown measures next week, if the much more transmissible delta variant had not become dominant so quickly. It did so because

the Government did not act swiftly enough to place India on the red list and I think they know that.

A month ago, I asked the Health Secretary whether the decision to delay putting India on the red list—despite Pakistan and Bangladesh being added with lower daily infection rates—was influenced by the Prime Minister's imminent visit to India and his desire to secure a trade deal. At that time, the Health Secretary told me that it was because more testing was being done in India, so the case rate per 100,000 in Pakistan and Bangladesh was likely to be inaccurate. Yesterday, he changed tack, telling the shadow Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), that it was because the delta variant had not been designated a variant of concern or investigation at the time. Today, the Vaccine Minister added new reasons. Perhaps it would be better if the Government just admit they got it wrong, as Members across the House know. In doing so, let us learn lessons and apply them to some of the issues coming up over the next period.

In that context, as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international students, I would like to make a genuinely helpful proposal, which enjoys cross-party support and to which I hope the Minister will respond in winding up. Because of the excellence of UK universities and the success of the Government's global education strategy, which I am pleased embraces many of the recommendations that the APPG made, we can anticipate substantial numbers of international students arriving in the UK for the new academic year in September.

We cannot know exact numbers at this stage, because places have not yet been confirmed, but in the last academic year more than 500,000 international students were enrolled at UK universities. Of those, more than 100,000 were from what we would now designate as red list countries. Recruitment is strong for the coming year, so we can anticipate that there will be many new students coming from those countries in September. There will also be many who are continuing their studies—those who have been learning remotely and want to return to the UK.

On Friday, the Home Office updated guidance for student sponsors, confirming an extension to the date by which international students must be in the UK to qualify for the graduate route and a temporary removal of the 28-day rule for students applying for an additional course. It is now advising both previous and new cohort students to be in the UK by 27 September in order to be eligible for the graduate visa route. This threatens quarantine chaos.

The Government have not confirmed the current capacity for red list quarantine facilities, but when the list was introduced in February capacity was reported to be about 4,600 rooms across 16 hotels. Even if on a conservative estimate—I think it is conservative—just one in five of the cohort similar to the last academic year arrived this September, we would be looking at more than 20,000 students from red list countries arriving here and overwhelming quarantine capacity by a ratio of four to one; that is if we are still in the same position in September, although let us hope we are not.

Ministers should be working with universities to build partnerships with local hotels to offer quarantine and extend capacity, but there is also an urgent need to avoid the surge of students coming to the UK at one time in September. This would easily be achieved by

further extending the tier 4 visa flexibility; allowing international students, particularly the 2021-22 cohort, to study via distance and blended learning; and offering a further extension to the date required to qualify for the graduate route, preferably until Christmas 2021.

That is all that is needed, but Ministers must make a decision now because universities are already issuing CAS—confirmation of acceptance for studies—numbers for visa sponsorship, and students will be applying for visas, booking flights and arranging accommodation. There is not the space to make decisions in the days before arrival in a way we have seen in the past. Failure to make those decisions now will not only destroy the hopes of students whom we want to welcome to the UK; it will also sabotage covid-19 border security.

I hope that the Minister will recognise the importance of making the decision urgently and respond to the comments that I have made, and that we will see a further update to the guidance as a matter of urgency.

5.58 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I am grateful to be called in this debate and it is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield).

Time and again throughout the coronavirus crisis, we have seen delays, mistakes and U-turns from the Government. The shambolic last-minute approach to the border policy has fundamentally put people across the UK at risk. The Government were too late to start formal quarantine, too late to start testing at the borders and too late to add India to the red list, even when all the evidence suggested that they needed to act swiftly. More than a year down the line, we continue to feel the impact of the delays and the Government's utter incompetence.

The delta variant is now the dominant strain in the UK, with 29,000 cases reported in one week alone. Ministers simply cannot say that this has taken them by surprise or that they did not have time to act. The Government knew that the delta variant had entered the UK on 1 April, yet it took them 22 full days—more than three weeks—to move India to the red list. They also cannot say that they were not warned. Time and again, my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) and many other Opposition Members urged the Government to act swiftly, and time and again they were ignored. During this delay, at least 20,000 people, many of whom could have had the delta variant, arrived into the UK from India.

I am very pleased to see reports today that two doses of both the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines provide more than 90% protection from hospitalisation with the delta variant. It would be remiss of me not to put on the record my sincere gratitude to all the incredible staff and volunteers, who have worked extremely hard, especially in Wales, to vaccinate our population. In Wales we have a world-leading vaccination programme, and every adult has been offered at least one dose of the vaccine. However, the Government's ongoing failure to get a grip of border policy opens us up to the very real and very dangerous possibility of vaccine-resistant covid strains.

The amber list causes chaos and confusion for my constituents. The last-minute change in Portugal's status left people paying huge amounts of money for flights

[Alex Davies-Jones]

with little notice, and many were left panicking about invalid insurance and insufficient protection from the UK Government. Even once back in the UK, the situation is no better. We have all heard the horror stories and the all-too-frequent cases where the quarantine system has failed our citizens. I have heard in depth from one of my constituents, who has recently returned from the United Arab Emirates. He outlined the many steps that he has taken to keep himself and others safe, which include following local guidelines, having two vaccinations as well as a vaccination booster, weekly PCR tests and antibody test results—the list goes on.

However, all my constituent's efforts seem to have gone to waste, as there was no control system of social distancing in place while he was in transit to Amsterdam. Despite travelling from a red list country, upon his arrival at Birmingham airport he was free to mix and collect his luggage with all other passengers. Surely more thought needs to be put into those logistics. The Government simply must see the error of their ways and immediately bring an end to their haphazard, last-minute, catch-up approach to border policy.

I feel a great deal of sympathy for those with family living abroad. Many will have gone more than a year without seeing their loved ones, and I can only imagine how hard that must be, but we must be cautious. We cannot risk further lockdowns and further deaths, especially when we consider the huge sacrifices that people have made in the last year to follow the rules and to bring down cases.

As we wait for travel to be safe again, let me once again plead with the Minister to work with his colleagues to introduce proper sector-specific support for the aviation industry. GE and British Airways in my constituency of Pontypridd have already had to make significant staffing cuts, but staff are worried that there are more to come. While trade unions such as my own, Unite, are doing their best to support workers in the industry, their warnings to the UK Government have been dismissed and ignored.

We really are at a crossroads. While I am grateful for the positive work on the vaccine roll-out, and the work of our fantastic NHS across the devolved nations, enough is enough. I urge the Minister to hear our pleas and work with colleagues across Government Departments and across the House to act now to bring an end to this utter chaos.

6.2 pm

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in today's debate, and a particular pleasure to follow my friend the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), although I do not think that she will be surprised to know that I did not agree with all her points. However, I was particularly struck by her tribute to the roll-out of the Welsh vaccine. I share her praise for all those who have been involved in the vaccine roll-out, which I think is a success of this brilliant British Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson) started her eloquent speech with a wonderful tribute to various professions that have helped to keep our borders safe and our travel industry going in the form in which it has needed to operate in covid times. I fully endorse the list that she gave in her wonderful speech.

The borders policy that we have implemented as a Government is proportionate to the risks that we face at the moment. It is a sensible policy. As time has gone on, we have implemented a clear quarantining policy. We have a traffic light system that, if we took out amber, would not be a traffic light system. We have a passenger locator form system in place, and I was very pleased to see recently that we have increased the number of checks on those who come into the country to ensure that they are where they say they are. Of course, we also have the testing regime. Those of us in the House who were involved in that in April last year will remember when the number of tests that we were doing was minute. The way in which we have grown the testing system in this country is phenomenal. It has been a huge success for all the scientists, Government Departments and businesses involved.

I am a little reluctant to stray into this “toughest border policy ever” argument and to play political ping-pong on who can sound the toughest on borders. I appreciate, after all that happened from 2016 onwards, that the Labour party would like to gain some credibility on that front.

We are in danger of not acknowledging that the world in which we operate is based on risk. The reason why we call what was previously known as the Indian variant the delta variant is that it is the fourth variant to become particularly significant. I have concerns about the proposals outlined by the Opposition, because we will face other variants in future. We will face situations that shift, and over time we will have to learn to live with covid, in whatever form it takes, as we have learned many times in the past to live with different diseases. If we go down the route of making our border policy the toughest ever, that will have a huge impact on various industries, whether aviation, tourism or the travel sector.

Many of my constituents work in those sectors. I think of the pilots who have come to me and said, “Please let us fly out.” I think of all my constituents who want to go on holiday, but cannot do so at the moment—and quite rightly. I worry that, over the next few months and even years, if we play the game of “We can sound toughest on borders”, we will not act in proportion to the risks that we face. That is particularly significant in relation to yesterday's announcement, because we are well ahead in vaccine policy and roll-out in this country. We will be in a position where we can live with covid, and we will have to learn to do so. Everyone will have to make decisions about the risks that we face.

I am also concerned about the “toughest border policy ever” approach, because this is complicated, and we need to acknowledge that the side-effects of just sounding tough make things difficult for other industries. Are we really suggesting that we should reach a point where we cannot import vaccines or food supplies? If we go down the route of playing the game of who can sound toughest, is that the kind of side-effect that we want to have? I have had constituents who have been stuck abroad in the past year or so, all of them in incredibly legitimate circumstances. Many of them were in incredibly vulnerable states, and we were able to return them. Travel is not necessarily, as many of my colleagues have said, about going abroad for a jolly. There are reasons why people need to travel, and we need to be really careful about nuance and the unintended effects of the proposal that we are debating.

I shall conclude with the proposal at the end of the Opposition motion on vaccine passports for international travel, which has some merit. I am concerned that it will be discriminatory for young people. We are looking at a policy that favours certain demographics over others, and will have a particular effect on certain countries. I suggest that, again, further consideration and thought need to be put into what the Opposition are asking for today, which is why I do not support the motion.

6.8 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con) [V]: We have a number of weapons with which to fight covid. The key one is the vaccine programme, on which even Labour is struggling to criticise the Government's performance. There is an additional weapon, which is the control of our borders, to minimise the importation of additional infection and new variants from elsewhere.

What is the right policy to apply to international travel in the midst of a pandemic? A knee-jerk reaction would be to close our borders, and to sound tough on covid. Labour now talks of a ring of steel, but sensible Government need to recognise that no modern trading country can totally prevent new covid variants from crossing borders. Even a country as geographically remote as Australia, which does not rely on thousands of border crossings every day for the supply of food, has not been able to keep the delta variant out.

As for the United Kingdom, 38% of all of our food is imported every day—much of it in the bellies of passenger airliners, let us not forget—and that is just a single example of our absolute need to continue international travel. What we can do is slow down the arrival of new variants and the spread from countries with higher infection rates by prohibiting all travel to the highest risk countries, by limiting international travel to high-priority activities for the medium-risk countries, by quarantining new arrivals from at-risk countries and by aggressive test and trace, including surge testing when new outbreaks emerge. I break off to take this opportunity specifically to pay tribute to NHS Test and Trace. This is an organisation that is habitually traduced as an article of faith by Labour, but which is in fact a highly effective operation that has saved many lives.

All these actions by the Government have bought us time—time that allows our vaccination programme to get to a level that provides us all with an effective defence so that we can truly live with covid. As we were reminded just yesterday, we are tantalisingly close to achieving this milestone, but not quite yet. There is a criticism of the Government implicit in this motion that they were late in imposing travel restrictions to India in response to the emergence of the delta variant, but despite the protestations of the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), this really is just another shameless example of Labour hindsight hard at work.

As the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) admitted in her speech, it was the emergence of the delta variant, not India's pre-variant infection rates, that changed the risk profile of travel, yet the Government placed India on the red list two weeks before the delta variant was identified as a variant of concern. In fact, it was six days before it was even deemed a variant of interest. The Labour fox is truly shot on that very important issue.

The UK does have a strong policy of restrictions at the border and remains vigilant to new variants, but it is a complicated, nuanced issue. We cannot just sound tougher on borders—it will have huge complicating and unintended consequences. I fail to understand Labour's call for the removal of the amber list, other than that it is some kind of attempt to politicise public health messages. The traffic light system is a sensible approach, and amber covers countries where the risk of some travel with caution can be accepted if the benefit of that travel is high. It is a classic risk analysis—the risk of an event happening and its severity, and mitigation to reduce that risk to an acceptable level. In business, we do it all the time.

To remove this classification would be to prohibit important business and humanitarian travel to amber list countries without supporting data, putting at risk even more aviation and travel jobs. I suppose it would be called collateral damage. This should not be an issue for party manoeuvres. We should not be trying to out-tough each other in areas such as this. Labour should be working with the Government in the national interest to drive home simple travel messages. I am surprised and very disappointed that it is not.

6.13 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): We are an island nation, and we rely on our connections with the world for trade. I am sure that many Members would, like me, celebrate and congratulate the Government on the historic trade deal that was agreed today. We rely on our connections to get freight and to meet our friends and family. Many businesses and jobs rely on international travel. In my constituency of Runnymede and Weybridge, it is our lifeblood. We depend on our connections, both domestic and international, for jobs and to support businesses.

I therefore reject the premise of the motion that the Opposition have put forward today. They would have us isolate from the world as if we were some sort of zombie island—or maybe a zombie world, depending on how one views the analogy. For all the reasons that I have put forward, we cannot do so, because we are so dependent on our connections.

Our approach must be proportionate. It must be based on science, not on the false “no risk/high risk” dichotomy that has been presented. Covid is here to stay, and with new variants continuing to evolve, we need a system that is immune to them and that can adapt and evolve as the virus does. The Minister and I have had many discussions about the need for international safety standards and the fact that we can, should and must lead the world in supporting international travel—through whatever means, but fundamentally through the use of science and new technologies.

The Opposition's proposal is backward. It is built on a world where there are no vaccines and where there is no testing. Our plans have moved on. We have the science behind us, and our border plans are the foundation for safely bringing back international travel as things develop.

6.15 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge

[Jo Gideon]

(Dr Spencer). It is remarkable to hear how extrapolations are presented as facts in this debate. The Opposition, the party of the crystal ball, would have us believe that in their hands the pandemic would have been brought under control more quickly and more lives would have been saved. However, there is no evidence that even the Labour party could stop mutations of the virus reaching these shores, nor that it could ever overcome its ideological contempt for private sector involvement in the health service, whether in delivering world-class research and development or in supporting NHS testing, track and trace, and the vaccination roll-out.

Without the Government bringing together all sectors, we would not have had the incredible progress in vaccinating our nation that we have had. It is difficult to disprove hypotheticals, and if we look to other countries that have tried different approaches, we must recognise that their geography, population density and underlying health issues make effective comparisons impossible. No country found an easy answer to beating the pandemic. The strategy of reducing the spread until a mass vaccination can beat the virus has been adopted globally.

The Government's investment in the research that delivered the AstraZeneca vaccine, the early purchase of more than 100 million doses while they were still under development, the speedy licensing of vaccines and the phenomenally successful roll-out have saved many, many thousands of lives. That is a fact, yet the Opposition fail to credit the Government for it, preferring to focus on the negatives. If we had imposed earlier lockdowns, they claim, we would have saved thousands of lives; if we had banned travel to and from India earlier, they claim, we could have stopped the delta variant reaching our shores.

We know that the challenge is far more complicated when it comes to closing UK borders. Should we have prevented British nationals who were returning from India from entering the country before the delta variant had been identified as a variant of concern? They were already required to quarantine at home for 10 days. As the Health Secretary told the Select Committee on Science and Technology last week:

"It is harder in a democracy to take some of the steps that some of the authoritarian countries took. Geography matters. Britain is an island...but we are a highly interconnected island...and a huge amount of our freight comes accompanied."

This Government have always sought to keep the public informed about any decisions relating to the pandemic. In our democracy, we strive to impose any restrictions on people's freedoms by consent rather than force, which is how we have seen such a high level of compliance, with exceptionally high levels of vaccine uptake among many age groups. Our decisions have been informed throughout by the advice of our scientific and medical experts, and as the advice has changed in line with the epidemiology, so have the guidelines.

We have a tough approach to our borders. The Opposition criticise the Government for moving Portugal's categorisation from green to amber, and now seek to turn travel into a binary decision by removing the amber category, but life is not binary. Decisions about the road map as we emerge from the worst of the pandemic need to be more nuanced. We have moved on from the phase when choice was a simple one of lives versus livelihoods, to a plan to build back people's

confidence—a plan to re-engage cautiously with normal activities while the vaccination programme powers on to provide the ultimate protection against the virus.

As a global trading nation with an amazing, diverse population, we have to consider travel not just as a holiday activity, but as one that is hugely important to our economy and our mental health. Many people, including me, have family abroad and are desperate to reconnect in person after 16 months of Zoom calls. Many have urgent family business, including, sadly, attending funerals. With the removal of the amber category, the cost of hotel quarantine might preclude many from such urgent travel and would also mean that families travelling to green destinations this summer could find themselves facing bills of thousands of pounds if the status of the country they visit changes before their return. That will hit those who can least afford it, because they will either have to decide not to risk travel or face a debt crisis as a result. I do not believe we should be penalising those who can least afford it.

The Opposition are consistent in their inconsistencies on the issue, guided, I imagine, by focus groups rather than the science: demanding certainty where there can be none as we tackle a completely novel virus; calling for more financial support for businesses while demanding greater lockdown measures, which would hit the economy hard; calling for extensions to furlough schemes and measures to keep workers at home rather than backing our plan for jobs and the gradual reopening of the country; and calling for the Government to introduce quarantine and then criticising its introduction and then calling for it to be expanded. We are looking to a cautious and irreversible route out of the pandemic, building back the confidence of the nation as we emerge from the restrictions; they are looking to scaremonger.

The Government's approach is the right one, and I urge the Opposition to back it.

6.20 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I must start by thanking the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for his contribution. We almost got through an entire debate without mentioning the constitution and I was quite worried as to what I might say, but, thankfully, the hon. Member stood up and talked about Scottish independence—and suggested, if I am not wrong, that if Scotland had gotten independence from the United Kingdom, Scotland could be a covid-free country by now. That is incredible; it could be the only country in the world, it would seem, that has no covid. He may wish to correct me by intervening, but that is what I got from his contribution.

The hon. Gentleman suggested, too, that had Scotland been independent it might have taken different decisions from those of the UK Government, and I dare say that that might have been the case, but given the huge swathes of powers the Scottish Government already have over public health, transport, education, tourism and culture, it is incredible that just about every single decision has, with some exceptions, mirrored the decisions made by the UK Government, with some changes in terms of the timeline. I dare say we will find out when the promised public inquiry into covid in Scotland ever happens exactly what those decisions may have been that would have been so different from those taken by the UK Government.

I would also like to thank the Opposition for securing this debate today, because while I do not agree with their motion for reasons I shall expand on shortly, this is an incredibly serious issue that deserves to be debated in the House.

Before I go on, I should express or declare somewhat of an interest: my wife, being a Swedish national, has now not been able to see her family for a year and a half, so the restrictions on international travel are being felt very keenly indeed. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) just mentioned, when we debate this topic we should remember that in talking about travel abroad we are not talking about people going off on holiday to lie in the sun; we are talking about families and friends being separated now for an incredibly long period of time. When the Government announced that loved ones were able to hug once again in their homes in the United Kingdom, for those people with family overseas those hugs felt a very long way off indeed.

Before I go on, I would also like to echo the passionate words of my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman)—who, sadly, is no longer in his place—in support of the aviation sector. Thousands and thousands of jobs across the country depend directly on or in support of a thriving aviation sector; those people do not want to be on furlough, and their employers—the airlines, the airport operators, the support services—do not want to be bailed out. They want to get on and do their job; to borrow from British Airways, they want to fly and to serve.

Before coming to the Chamber today, I looked up the passenger numbers for my local airport, Aberdeen International Airport, and as a regular user I would like to put on record my thanks to all the staff there from the very top to the very bottom, who have worked tirelessly over the last year and a half to keep the airport open, operating and indeed safe—and I can say with certainty that that would be the case in every airport across the United Kingdom over the past while. But it has been a torrid year. In the first three months of this year, 62,000 passengers passed through Aberdeen airport, but in the first three months of 2020 that figure was 398,000, so that is a decline of 84.5%. This is completely unsustainable. We need to get people flying again, but we need to do it safely, and that is why protecting public health is and will remain this Government's No. 1 priority.

I was almost struck dumb with incredulity at Labour Members talking about a clear strategy. When Labour Members come to this place and talk about a clear strategy, we know that they are on manoeuvres. They have never been able to come up with a coherent policy for international travel. Having called for a quarantine, they then criticised the Government for introducing one. Then they changed their line again to making hotel quarantines mandatory for all of those arriving in the United Kingdom. They have called for it to be less and they have called for it to be increased. They have called for it to be expanded and they have called for the amber list to go. It is incredibly hard to keep up.

The motion today would fail to simplify the current arrangements, and instead would create further problems and cause much greater confusion. In removing any middle ground by removing the amber list, which is what they propose today—for which, may I add, there

still exists a strictly overseen, mandatory 10-day quarantine period—how do we decide where the cut-off point is between the green and the red, and what about those countries that are placed on the red list yet have far fewer cases than any other countries on that same list? It makes no sense. Such a two-tier system would no doubt cause further disruption to the aviation sector—an aviation sector the Labour party claims enthusiastically to support. The current traffic light system strikes the right balance, I believe, between caution and pragmatism, mitigating the risks of new variants while also allowing travel for essential reasons, and that is why I oppose the Opposition's motion.

6.26 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank all Members who have taken part in today's Opposition day debate. I also repeat the thanks that have been offered to our vital NHS staff, to the military who are supporting its efforts and to all those in our airports, our airlines and, of course, our Border Force, who are working hard to make sure that our country can keep on moving, even in these very difficult times.

As with all Opposition day debates, of course, the Tory Whips Office has been busy sending out the top attack lines. They were distributed with gusto, and congratulations on that. What did not happen, unfortunately, was a genuine exchange about how we can navigate what is—this was said in the debate—a nuanced and very difficult period. How do we land in a way that supports a very key industry, but keeps our borders safe?

Yesterday, at 6 o'clock, the nation was watching, the Prime Minister's press conference. After gearing up for freedom day, as people were promised, over the intervening months and weeks, they were looking forward to getting back to a sense of normality. After so many sacrifices—people losing their jobs, people losing loved ones—and the nation rallying together to try to get us all through this together, naturally people want to know that the end is in sight, that the light is at the end of the tunnel and that their sacrifices have made a material difference.

People also want to know that the Government can be true to their word, and I am afraid that, again, the Government have been found wanting. Not for the first time—we have heard it before—the words do not match the reality. They said we will do “whatever it takes”, but that was not the reality for the self-employed and many parts of our economy. They said we will have a “world-beating” track and trace system, but that was not the experience of local authorities that had to deal with Serco call centres. They said, cruelly, that we will have a “protective ring” around our care homes, but we all know the human price that was paid when the words did not match the reality.

The Government will argue and they have argued—and they have sent out their Back Benchers to make this case—that these restrictions are required because we do not want to undermine the vaccination programme and that, as we are so close, let us just prolong the restrictions a bit longer and get through this together. That is true, which is why we recognise that the restrictions have to go on that bit longer, but the situation in which we find ourselves was entirely avoidable. That is where this debate leads us: it is about holding the Government to account for the decisions they make and their impact.

[*Jim McMahon*]

At the same time as Pakistan and Bangladesh were added to the red list there were calls for India to be added. With the delay in adding India to the red list, some 20,000 passengers flew into the UK, potentially carrying the delta variant that is now so prominent throughout our country. Some 20,000 passengers arrived in that time. The Government have not been clear about the data they are relying on and that informed that decision. They flip-flop between pointing to one piece of evidence and another, but every single time the evidence is tested, it does not hold up to scrutiny. The public want to know whether the sacrifices they are expected to make will make a difference at all. The Government need to be careful, because the more they send the public to the top of the hill only to let them down again, the more we will see public confidence diminish. We cannot afford that: we need the public of this country on our side.

We all know the real reason and why the Government will not release the data: if they were to release it, the data would show that India absolutely should have been put on the red list at the same time as Pakistan and Bangladesh were. That is what the data would show, but that did not sit comfortably with the Prime Minister, who was planning his trade visit. That was the real reason why the change was delayed. That one trade visit—that photocall and bit of publicity—was worth more than jobs in hospitality, in our wedding industry and in tourism and aviation. The photo shoot, the propaganda—it just was not. The Government say that it has to be about following the data and we absolutely believe that—we have been saying that from day one—but when tested, I am afraid they just do not pass the test.

We have heard some fantastic comments today, and I again thank all Members for taking part in an important debate. As the House would expect, I have a great deal of respect for the Chair of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), who unfortunately is not in his place as we wrap up the conversation. He has done a good job of holding the Government to account and scrutinising the data, but I found his current position, expressed in this Opposition day debate, frankly quite baffling. To suggest that aviation is not asking for a bail-out completely contradicts every conversation I have had with airline operators, airport operators and people in the wider supply chain. They are crying out for financial support.

Our airports have kept supplies, including of the vaccine, coming into this country. Their operating costs cannot be reduced any more than they have been. By the way, the Government take a third of many airports' operating costs in taxes and levies; that has not reduced but has continued. While airports have continued to keep the show on the road, they have had to deal with incoming passengers from high-risk countries—the red list countries. They have had to get additional staff and put in additional measures, and the additional costs that have come with that have been significant. That has combined with the lack of consumer confidence.

The Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), laid out the case succinctly. The delta variant accounts for 40,000 cases in this country. The Government knew on 1 April that the

strain was in this country, so there was plenty of time to respond proportionately to make sure that it did not spread disproportionately in the way that, unfortunately, we have seen.

Some have pointed out a world of difference between red list countries and amber list countries, but they can actually be very close in respect of the risks they present. Why is someone who arrives from a red list country escorted on to a coach and put into a 10-day quarantine in a secure hotel, but someone who arrives from an amber list country can just go on the tube? They go home and the people they go home to do not have to self-isolate in the same way as the person who has arrived does, despite the fact that they could well be carrying the virus.

All we are asking for is a simplified system: it is either safe to go or it is not safe to go. If it is safe to go, we should give people the confidence to get back to flying and to take the holiday they deserve with absolute confidence; if it is not, it should be absolutely clear. We have heard Members on the Back Benches say that, in some cases, travel to amber list countries is safe. At the same time, Ministers are telling members of the public not to travel to amber list countries. Even the Government cannot make up their mind about the status of the amber list, let alone the public. The list also does not talk about what it means for the host country. It is all very well saying that we have a green list of countries that are safe to fly to, but they could have incoming restrictions that means it is impossible for British travellers to go there in a way that makes a break meaningful.

There have been plenty of misinterpretations of Labour's position. We have been absolutely clear from the outset that any intervention taken in isolation will not keep this country safe. There should be a number of interventions, which, taken together, provide the protection that this country needs and that the public of this country deserve.

When we intervened on the 14-day quarantine, our criticism was twofold. First, we were late coming to that decision. We saw millions of passengers enter our country with no restrictions at all—one of the last countries in the world where they could do so. The 14-day quarantine did not take into account the risk that different countries pose. On that we are clear, countries and nations do not carry the virus; individuals carry the virus. It could well be that the virus is more widespread in certain countries—that follows a logic—which means that we must have a system that, first, accounts for higher-risk countries, and that, secondly, deals with the individuals who are coming into the country to make sure that they are tested, traced and, if they are a risk, quarantined.

Interestingly, we said, "Let's get a system in place that deals with pre-testing, testing on arrival and then a further test a number of days afterwards to reduce the need to quarantine." Call it hindsight, but the Government soon followed suit, and that is exactly what the Government have put in place. We have plenty of other ideas if the Government want to listen. We are happy to offer them, too. Providing that the evidence base is there and it is followed in the right way, then we on the Labour Benches will always support the Government effort, because the truth is that we need the Government to succeed. If the Government of the day do not succeed, we will not defeat the virus and none of us will succeed in beating the virus.

We had fantastic contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), and for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones). All really homed in on the data. What do we know that points to why India was not on the red list of countries that has led to the restrictions being extended and livelihoods potentially being affected? I am afraid that the Government have not come up with a compelling answer at all. It is all well and good for them to say that any ideas and suggestions that are put forward are not worth the paper they are written on, and then to dismiss them out of hand, which is exactly what has happened from day one. With the Government found wanting, we may raise the issue again, but they will come out with the usual spiel—that it is all about hindsight. However, on borders, on keeping the country safe, on quarantine, on pre-testing, and on having a clear system with our international partners, we have been absolutely consistent and have led from the front from day one.

The Government need to focus now on what Labour is saying today, because we have been leading from the front on this issue. We have the support of the aviation industry on this, and we have the support of many scientists as well. They do not want to be dragged into politics. They want their advice to be taken at face value; they do not want it to be dismissed out of hand and not published because it does not suit the Government's agenda.

Our suggestions today are clear. First, the Government should take leadership on an international agreement on vaccine passports to give confidence to people that, when it is safe to do so, they can enjoy all that aviation and tourism have to offer. That will support that vital industry that provides 1.5 million jobs directly and through the supply chain. They should scrap the amber list, but then, within the red and the green lists, they should publish a direction of travel, so, if a country is on the green list today, is it going in the right direction or the wrong direction? There will be a number of people who booked a holiday in Portugal who will be wishing that they had not.

We are also asking for a robust hotel quarantine system. The Government need to do far more to ensure that the demand can be satisfied. We need to learn to live with covid—that has been stated a number of times—so what on earth are the Government doing to ensure that the supply of hotel accommodation can meet what could be increasing demand?

Finally, we need an aviation sector deal to ensure that that critical industry can build back from a point of strength, not weakness. We must ensure that we are a world leader in aviation and, critically, that we meet our climate change objectives by supporting it to grow from a point of strength, leading the world in clean aviation technology and supporting new jobs and new industry. That is what we are offering. Rather than looking back in six months' time with hindsight, I suggest that the Government listen today.

6.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): It is a great honour to conclude this important debate. We have heard so many wide-ranging and constructive contributions from both sides of the

House. I know that everyone in the House is determined to keep this horrendous virus under control, and the Government's priority is to protect the public and the gains that we have made through the roll-out of our world-leading vaccine programme. I know that I speak for everyone in the House when I pay tribute, as many hon. and right hon. Members have, to all those involved in that roll-out.

We have some of the toughest border measures in the world to protect our country. We are taking a cautious, robust, sustainable approach to opening up international travel at a time when the vaccine roll-out is ongoing and infection rates are low. Everyone in this House wants to see international travel reopen fully as soon as it is safe for it to do so, as was said so eloquently by a number of Members, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer). That is for all the reasons we have heard: to support the travel businesses that are so important to our constituencies and our country, and to enable people to see the friends and family that they have been separated from for so long.

That was put hugely eloquently by my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) and for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), who quite rightly pointed out that families have been kept apart. This is about far more than holidays, important though the travel business of course is. It is important, too, for people to do business and, yes, for people to go abroad and see the wonders of the world. That is something that, when it is safe, we all want to do.

However, there are those urging us to take tougher measures. They include the Opposition, of course, as well as the hon. Members for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), for Glasgow East (David Linden) and for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones). It is essential that any steps we take around international travel are safe, sustainable and proportionate. There are difficult decisions to be taken in government. We heard them explained so brilliantly by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley). Those difficult decisions are what being in government is all about.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): This is not just about taking difficult decisions; it is about taking them quickly, in a timely manner, so that they are effective. Why did it take 22 days for the Government to put India on the red list after the delta variant was first identified?

Robert Courts: The hon. Member is quite right: of course it is essential to make the difficult decisions, to make them quickly and to get them right. I will explain in just a moment how we have done that.

Before I do so, on quarantine measures, the Opposition have called for

“a clear, simply understood and proper hotel quarantine scheme in operation at the UK border to minimise the risk of introduction of new variants into the UK”.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) among many others, that is exactly what we have in place. Currently, every passenger is checked by Border Force and the brilliant Test and

[Robert Courts]

Trace scheme, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) quite rightly paid tribute and which has been running for so many months now.

As of 15 February 2021, British and Irish nationals and those with residency rights in the UK who have passed through a red list country within 10 days of their arrival in the UK are required to quarantine for 10 days in a managed quarantine hotel. Passengers arriving from red list countries may enter the UK only at certain designated ports. Individuals who fail to book travel to the appropriate port will be denied boarding by the carrier.

On arrival in the UK, passengers required to enter managed quarantine will be met at passport control and guided through baggage reclaim and customs to the dedicated hotel transport, where they will be transported to their hotel. Direct flights from red list countries are only able to arrive into dedicated facilities at airports, including entire terminals, so long as passengers are segregated from other arrivals. At present, Birmingham and Heathrow airports are both operating dedicated facilities, and that may expand to include other airports in the future.

New variants present a worldwide challenge, as we have heard today. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) told us how many countries have experienced the challenges of variants, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood). The Government continue to monitor new variants closely, and it is worth remembering that approximately 40% of the world's sequencing capability is found in the UK. We have also put in place enhanced contact tracing for individuals identified as having a new variant, in order to minimise onward transmission. The new measures build on the tough action that the Government have already taken to increase security against the new variants from abroad.

We will keep all our measures under constant review to ensure that they remain necessary and proportionate. There are checkpoints in June, July and October. The measures are not set in stone; what we have designed is intended to be adaptable to the evolving epidemiological picture, and the UK Government are prepared to take action at any time to protect public health.

I notice that today the Opposition are trying to produce some sort of dodgy dossier, with a timeline of dates relating to our borders policy. The first date in that document is 6 January 2021, when they claim they urged us to get a grip on our borders. I am not entirely sure what they think that achieves, other than to illustrate how hopelessly behind the curve they are and how desperately they hope that hindsight will find them a way through. By the time Labour had woken up to this issue in January, the Government had already introduced self-isolation for all arrivals into the UK—a full six months earlier, on 8 June 2020.

Let me give the House some more dates that the Opposition might find interesting. On 8 June 2020, the Leader of the Opposition criticised our quarantine measures. On 29 June 2020, the shadow Transport Secretary called for quarantine to be replaced. On 3 July 2020, the Labour party called for

“the government's quarantine measures to be lessened.”

Jim McMahon: I thought that, by intervening, I would allow the Minister a few seconds to sit down and bring himself back together. As he knows, in the original quarantine, where people were asked to self-isolate at home, only 1% of those who were asked to do so were contacted.

Robert Courts: That does not answer the point remotely; I am disappointed. If the hon. Gentleman is not satisfied with that, let us fast-forward to this year for a real fiesta of inconsistency.

On 2 February, the shadow Home Secretary called for mandatory hotel quarantine for all arrivals. On 23 March, the shadow Chancellor was saying it should just be done on a case-by-case basis. On 20 May—less than a month ago—the shadow International Trade Secretary said that the borders had to be opened because the international economy needed us to get going again. As usual, the Labour party is all over the place on this, trusting in hindsight and ignoring the facts.

Let us look at what actually happened. The delta variant did not become a variant of concern until 7 May 2021. By that point, India had already been on the red list for a full two weeks, and let us not forget that, even before it was added to the red list, passengers arriving had to take a pre-departure test and complete a passenger locator form, then self-isolate for 10 days on arrival—always the toughest measure—taking a test on day 2 and another on day 8. That is not a weak system, but one of the toughest border arrival systems in the world.

This morning the shadow Home Secretary—the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), who I am delighted to see back this place—was unable to say when he would have acted on the delta variant. What he seems to be suggesting, as most of the Opposition seem to be suggesting today, is that they would red-list any country any time they saw a mutation. The right hon. Gentleman should be aware that at any given time there are hundreds of mutations. Are hon. Members seriously saying that we should stop all travel from wherever, whenever there is a mutation?

Sarah Owen: If, as the Minister says, the border policy was such a success, why is the delta variant now the dominant variant in this country, and why are we seeing an extension to the lockdown rules?

Robert Courts: The hon. Member clearly was not listening to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire when he listed all the countries in the world where the delta variant is now becoming dominant.

Let us look at another aspect of the Opposition's policy, in which the right hon. Member for Torfaen championed Australia and New Zealand and said we should emulate them to keep out variants of concern. Given that Melbourne now has the delta variant, I am somewhat confused as to how he thinks that would have helped. He ought to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Angela Richardson). Another factor he ought to remember is the many citizens from those two countries who are currently unable to get back to their own country. Is Labour going to choose who gets to come back and who does not? Is that what is really proposed?

Exactly what is the right hon. Gentleman proposing? The Opposition cannot tell us how long they would keep the borders closed, they cannot say when they would have red-listed India, and they cannot say how freight would keep flowing. We have heard that 40% of our freight comes in and out in the bellies of passenger aircraft. Opposition Members do not even realise that there is a problem there, let alone try to address it.

The right hon. Member for Torfaen said, in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), that he wanted to see a growing green list, but in the motion he says he wants to maintain a “tightly managed Green List”. They are proposing closing down and opening up simultaneously. That is the level of policy we have from the Opposition. They play politics, but they do not have policies. They are drifting, desperate, and wise only after the event. They do not have a plan. It is this Government who are working to keep people safe and get our country through the pandemic, with strong border measures, providing testing and rolling out vaccines, and with a plan and a purpose. That is why people put their trust in us.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 256, Noes 363.

Division No. 26]

[6.52 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Champion, Sarah
Abrahams, Debbie	Chapman, Douglas
Ali, Rushanara	Charalambous, Bambos
Ali, Tahir	Cherry, Joanna
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Clark, Feryal
Amesbury, Mike	Cooper, Daisy
Anderson, Fleur	Cooper, Rosie
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Cooper, rh Yvette
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Bardell, Hannah	Cowan, Ronnie
Barker, Paula	Coyle, Neil
Beckett, rh Margaret	Crawley, Angela
Begum, Apsana	Creasy, Stella
Benn, rh Hilary	Cruddas, Jon
Betts, Mr Clive	Cryer, John
Black, Mhairi	Cummins, Judith
Blackford, rh Ian	Cunningham, Alex
Blackman, Kirsty	Daby, Janet
Blake, Olivia	Davey, rh Ed
Blomfield, Paul	David, Wayne
Bonnar, Steven	Davies, Geraint
Brennan, Kevin	Davies-Jones, Alex
Brock, Deidre	Day, Martyn
Brown, Alan	De Cordova, Marsha
Brown, Ms Lyn	Debbonaire, Thangam
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Bryant, Chris	Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Buck, Ms Karen	Dodds, Anneliese
Burton, Richard	Doogan, Dave
Butler, Dawn	Dorans, Allan
Byrne, Ian	Doughty, Stephen
Byrne, rh Liam	Dowd, Peter
Cadbury, Ruth	Dromey, Jack
Callaghan, Amy	Duffield, Rosie
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Eagle, Dame Angela
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Eagle, Maria
Carden, Dan	Edwards, Jonathan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Efford, Clive
Chamberlain, Wendy	Elliott, Julie
	Elmore, Chris

Eshalomi, Florence	Madders, Justin
Esterson, Bill	Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Evans, Chris	Mahmood, Shabana
Farron, Tim	Malhotra, Seema
Farry, Stephen	Maskell, Rachael
Fellows, Marion	Matheson, Christian
Ferrier, Margaret	Mc Nally, John
Fletcher, Colleen	McCabe, Steve
Flynn, Stephen	McCarthy, Kerry
Fovargue, Yvonne	McDonagh, Siobhain
Foxcroft, Vicky	McDonald, Andy
Foy, Mary Kelly	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Furniss, Gill	McDonald, Stuart C.
Gardiner, Barry	McDonnell, rh John
Gibson, Patricia	McFadden, rh Mr Pat
Gill, Preet Kaur	McGinn, Conor
Glendon, Mary	McGovern, Alison
Grady, Patrick	McKinnell, Catherine
Grant, Peter	McLaughlin, Anne
Green, Kate	McMahon, Jim
Greenwood, Margaret	McMorris, Anna
Griffith, Nia	Mearns, Ian
Haigh, Louise	Miliband, rh Edward
Hamilton, Fabian	Mishra, Navendu
Hanvey, Neale	Monaghan, Carol
Hardy, Emma	Moran, Layla
Harman, rh Ms Harriet	Morden, Jessica
Harris, Carolyn	Morgan, Stephen
Hayes, Helen	Morris, Grahame
Healey, rh John	Murray, Ian
Hendrick, Sir Mark	Murray, James
Hendry, Drew	Nandy, Lisa
Hillier, Meg	Newlands, Gavin
Hobhouse, Wera	Nichols, Charlotte
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret	Nicolson, John
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Norris, Alex
Hollern, Kate	O'Hara, Brendan
Hopkins, Rachel	Olney, Sarah
Hosie, rh Stewart	Onwurah, Chi
Howarth, rh Sir George	Oppong-Asare, Abena
Huq, Dr Rupa	Osamor, Kate
Hussain, Imran	Osborne, Kate
Jardine, Christine	Oswald, Kirsten
Jarvis, Dan	Owatemi, Taiwo
Johnson, rh Dame Diana	Owen, Sarah
Johnson, Kim	Peacock, Stephanie
Jones, Darren	Pennycook, Matthew
Jones, Gerald	Perkins, Mr Toby
Jones, rh Mr Kevan	Phillips, Jess
Jones, Ruth	Phillipson, Bridget
Jones, Sarah	Pollard, Luke
Kane, Mike	Powell, Lucy
Keeley, Barbara	Qaisar-Javed, Anum
Kendall, Liz	Qureshi, Yasmin
Khan, Afzal	Rayner, rh Angela
Kinnock, Stephen	Reed, Steve
Kyle, Peter	Rees, Christina
Lake, Ben	Reeves, Ellie
Lammy, rh Mr David	Reeves, Rachel
Lavery, Ian	Reynolds, Jonathan
Law, Chris	Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Lewis, Clive	Rodda, Matt
Linden, David	Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Lloyd, Tony	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Long Bailey, Rebecca	Shah, Naz
Lucas, Caroline	Sharma, Mr Virendra
Lynch, Holly	Sheerman, Mr Barry
MacAskill, Kenny	Sheppard, Tommy
MacNeil, Angus Brendan	Siddiq, Tulip
	Slaughter, Andy
	Smith, Cat

Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Sultana, Sarah
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon

Turner, Karl
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Wishart, Pete
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Lilian Greenwood and
Mark Tami

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Ahmad Khan, Imran
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Amess, Sir David
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Badenoch, Kemi
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity

Buckland, rh Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishty, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinanage, Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, rh Oliver

Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Kate
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon

Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cheryllyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark

Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant

Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Maggie Throup and
James Morris

Question accordingly negated.

The list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy, is published at the end of today's debates.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

CLIMATE CHANGE

That the draft Climate Change Act 2008 (Credit Limit) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 13 May, be approved.—
(David T. C. Davies.)

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 16 June (Standing Order No. 41A).

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (AGRICULTURE)

That the draft Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products (Fruit and Vegetable Producer Organisations, Tariff Quotas and Wine) (Amendment etc.) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 13 May, be approved.—
(David T. C. Davies.)

Question agreed to.

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

PUBLIC HEALTH

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Steps and Other Provisions) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (S.I., 2021, No. 585), dated 14 May 2021, a copy of which was laid before this House on 17 May, be approved.—
(David T. C. Davies.)

Question agreed to.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Ordered,

That Fiona Bruce and Pauline Latham be discharged from the Joint Committee on Human Rights and David Simmonds and Angela Richardson be added.—
(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

PETITION

McVitie's Tollcross factory proposed closure

7.5 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Since the news broke that Pladis, the global company that owns the McVitie's brand, plans to close its factory in the east end of Glasgow, local people have certainly not been shy in expressing their opposition, and there is a groundswell of support for saving the 470 jobs at the Tollcross site, which is heartening. The petition organised by workers at the factory currently has over 52,000 signatures, which is a staggering number in such a short space of time.

In presenting the petition to Parliament in support of the McVitie's workers, I hope to catch the attention of Pladis, to show it that the public are not happy with its proposed withdrawal from Scotland. The Glasgow East factory has stood on that site for almost a century, and it would devastate the local area and economy if it ceased operations. Generations of families, often simultaneously, have worked at the factory, and the loyalty of the workforce cannot be questioned, as many people have been employed there for decades.

[David Linden]

Generations of families in the east end of Glasgow have helped to propel the McVitie's brand to contemporary dominance over the domestic biscuit market, outselling the next seven biggest brands combined. You would agree, Madam Deputy Speaker, that McVitie's stands on the shoulders of its dedicated workforce, past and present, and the strength of feeling among the general public about that is apparent.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to engage with Pladis and advise them to reverse the proposal to close the Tollcross site.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Notes that the Tollcross McVitie's employs 468 people from across Glasgow East; declares that as such the proposed closure of the factory would be equivalent to economic Armageddon to what is already a fragile local economy; notes throughout the pandemic, Pladis Global's employees worked at the Tollcross factory as key workers whilst much of the country safely worked from home; notes the workforce has been loyal and committed for many years, with some employees working at the Tollcross factory for decades; notes that many employees also have a family history of working at the factory and in some cases, several generations of the same family currently work at the factory simultaneously; notes that the McVitie's company has had a continuous presence in Scotland since 1839 and that the brand has become synonymous with Scotland; declares that Pladis should honour the history of the McVitie's brand in Scotland and the loyal workforce in the Tollcross factory and fully engage with local and national government, and ultimately reverse the proposal to close the Tollcross site.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to engage with Pladis and advise them to reverse the proposal to close the Tollcross site.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002669]

Kenly Wind Farm

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

7.6 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The University of St Andrews is the oldest university in Scotland. It is notable not only for being where the Earl and Countess of Strathearn met and recently celebrated their 10th wedding anniversary, but for being a world leader in education, as a university ranked first in Scotland and third in the UK last year. It is a hub of groundbreaking research and innovation, and the largest employer in my constituency of North East Fife.

As part of that innovation, St Andrews has championed sustainability for over two decades, long before it was the dominant issue that it is today. Always leading the charge, the university has pledged to reach net zero by 2035, which is a significant commitment, given not just the date, but the approach that the university is taking. The university, led by its environmental sustainability board, chaired by Professor Sir Ian Boyd FRS, chief scientific adviser to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs from 2012 to 2019, and now professor of biology at the university, is taking on the net zero challenge, alongside local community organisations and businesses. Indeed, I attended the first meeting of the outreach group only last month. Under complementary environmental sustainability and carbon management plans, the scope of its approach encompasses procurement activities and the travel of international students coming to the university to study. I am sure that the Minister will want to join me in congratulating it on its progress to date.

Reaching that goal involves a number of practical elements, including a biomass plant on the university's Eden campus, which was supported via the joint working of the UK and Scottish Governments on the Tay cities deal; increasing the use of solar technology; and harnessing the wind power that my hair is often subject to in North East Fife by building a small wind farm at Kenly on land owned by the university.

Planning permission for that project was initially granted in 2013—eight years ago, in a time before referendums. At that time, the Ministry of Defence seemed to be happy to work with St Andrews, supporting the university and its application. The MOD is a statutory consultee in the UK planning system for developments that could impact MOD sites, which includes wind farms. That is a critical issue, because also located in my constituency is the former RAF, now Army, base at Leuchars and its airfield. The MOD rightly has to consider issues such as the potential for wind turbines to interfere with radar systems. While the MOD raised an objection in the formal planning process, the application was granted on condition that an agreement could be reached on mitigating any interference. It was at that point, for reasons that remain unclear, that the MOD's willingness to engage seemed to break down.

In the past eight years, St Andrews has put forward multiple proposals and made numerous, repeated and high-level attempts to explore a solution with the MOD. Indeed, I myself have already attempted, prior to this evening, to facilitate some movement, but the MOD has refused to provide any real meaningful engagement to

date. It says that the proposals to mitigate interference with the radar are not good enough, but fails to articulate what would be enough.

This is not just an isolated local issue. There are 782 onshore wind farms around the UK, amounting to over 11,000 turbines and up to 66 MW of energy each year—enough to power 18.4 million homes—and this trend is not slowing down. The trade group RenewableUK is predicting that onshore wind will continue to be a preferred alternative energy source as we work towards meeting net zero goals. Organisations are being encouraged by this Government to make the switch. Last year, the net zero business champion, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), was appointed. Organisations are encouraged to join the United Nations' Race to Zero campaign and are celebrated when they do. Part of these commitments will inevitably involve switching to clean energies such as wind. Simply put, there will be more applications for wind farms such as Kenly.

Kenly is not alone in being proposed near a military base. There are 33 RAF bases around the UK, of which at least 13 could be classed as coastal. Coastal areas have some of the best weather conditions for turbines. The Plymouth coastline, south Wales, north Norfolk, Liverpool, Belfast and the East Riding of Yorkshire are all areas where there are both wind farms and an RAF base. The question of how to safely build wind farms near to RAF and other military bases is not unique to Kenly, and this has implications. First, it highlights the lack of transparency in the system, whereby some projects have been allowed to go ahead with mitigations agreed, while others such as Kenly have failed to progress. Just up the road from Kenly, at the now former Michelin factory site in Dundee, two wind turbines were erected. The MOD also objected to this application when it was first made on the ground that it would interfere with the radar at Leuchars, but none the less an agreement was made. Without transparency on how these agreements were reached, St Andrews does not know why or how that project was allowed to go ahead while Kenly was not.

The fact that more onshore wind farms are likely to seek permissions and the likelihood that a proportion will be near RAF bases shows that it is vital for the MOD to put in place a comprehensive plan to work with developers to find meaningful solutions. If the MOD is not working to support wind farms such as Kenly, I wonder what it is doing. On 30 March this year, the MOD published its own climate change and sustainability strategic approach with a foreword by the Minister himself. This includes a commitment to working sustainably, to encouraging the development of low or zero carbon solutions, and to being a partner in the UK's green transition. In fact, it includes an action plan, which includes a pledge to:

“Grow awareness inside and outside of Defence with a communications plan on commitments and work on climate change and sustainability, inspiring understanding among our people, the wider public, industry and international partners.”

To me, that sounds like the sort of commitment that would involve engaging with projects such as Kenly wind farm and constructively engaging with initiatives to tackle the climate emergency.

The MOD, it is true, is looking at mitigation solutions and novel technologies for use at offshore wind farms. I am sure the Minister will point out that there is an

ongoing competition for proposals which closes this week. However, this is not relevant to the 782 onshore wind farms such as Kenly around the UK, as different mitigation solutions—different ways of using technology—are understandably used on land compared with offshore. Even if the solutions were relevant to onshore windfarms, this is a very slow process. It began when the MOD last directly engaged with St Andrews in 2015, and some six years later the competition is only just entering its second phase. Proceeding at this rate, it will be 2033 before the process finishes—too late for St Andrews and its goal to achieve net zero by 2035, and frankly too late for all of us. We all know that to limit global warming to 1.5° C we need to make significant changes now. We cannot afford to wait to finish this process to get started. Organisations that take on this responsibility—that are putting themselves forwards to tackle this challenge—should be supported and not stopped.

It is now two years since this House declared a climate crisis, and the situation has only worsened since that time, with the UK's contribution to global carbon dioxide emissions continuing to outstrip its share of the global population. This is an issue that my constituents in North East Fife care about deeply. As a prospective parliamentary candidate in September 2019, I took part with other candidates and the then MP for North East Fife in the Line in the Sand climate strike ably led by young people from local high schools. During the subsequent election, students supportive of the Kenly development attended the main hustings in the constituency and made their voices heard. Yes, there were local objections during the planning process, but the rapid development of wind technologies will result in a more efficient and less obtrusive development.

The Government state that they are putting a green recovery at the front and centre of their plans, and we know that a shift to clean renewable energy has to be a key part of that process. Just this week, the Prime Minister was in Devon for the G7 summit, where commitments were made to tackle the climate crisis at home and globally, including a commitment to green energy. Later this year, the UK—Glasgow—will be hosting COP26, where I am sure pledges will again be made on green energy. We are told that it is a priority for the Government, and that may be true for some parts of it.

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has published a 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution, and the Scotland Office has signed up to the previously mentioned Tay cities deal, which supports sustainable initiatives. So, I hope that this is a case of the MOD just needing to catch up. However, if, as the Minister himself wrote in his foreword to the MOD strategic approach, it is determined to play its full part in helping the Government to address climate change head-on, that needs to happen now.

St Andrews has been trying to work with the MOD on the conditions needed to build Kenly wind farm for eight years. The wind farm would save 7,500 tonnes of carbon per year. It would secure energy pricing into the future, freeing up funding for world-class teaching and research for a sector already hard-hit by the covid pandemic. The Government should support that as part of their aspirations for the UK to become a global innovation hub. Ultimately, it would allow St Andrews to become self-sufficient in electrical energy.

[Wendy Chamberlain]

St Andrews accepts the need to work with the MOD. It was for that reason that it engaged with the MOD so early in the planning process. Its frustrations at a lack of ongoing meaningful discussions are entirely understandable. It needs to know what the MOD wants, so that it can try to provide it. If there are no ways to mitigate the risks to RAF radar, that needs to be communicated with full reasoning.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister to indicate in his response whether he will agree to meet representatives from the university, the MOD's wind farm team, me and other stakeholders so that finally a constructive way forward can be agreed.

7.16 pm

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin):

Let me begin by thanking the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for raising this important issue. I know from correspondence how keen she is to support the interests of her constituency, and it is a pleasure to respond.

I recognise that the status of the planning application for a wind farm at Kenly is matter of concern for her, the University of St Andrews and her constituents. We certainly share her desire for a swift and amicable resolution to an issue that, as the hon. Lady said, has become far too protracted. She paid tribute to the staunch work of the University of St Andrews and its ambitious plans to achieve net zero emissions by 2035. I would very much like to echo those remarks.

The impressive measures that the university has already taken to do that include using modern technology to drive energy efficiency and its Eden campus project. Since 2018, as I understand it, a 20% reduction in the university's carbon footprint has already been delivered through solar energy and biomass heat. The Government share St Andrews' enthusiasm to reduce carbon emissions, introducing our legally binding target of net zero by 2050 and working towards what we all—including the hon. Lady—hope will be a successful conclusion to COP26 in Glasgow later this year.

In the integrated review, the Government set out how climate change was our No. 1 international priority. We in Defence are determined to play our part in achieving the UK's ambitions. In our climate change and sustainability strategic approach, which the hon. Lady was kind enough to refer to and which we published in March, we set out how our approach to sustainable procurement, carbon reduction and better utilisation of our estate can help to deliver results even as we learn to adapt and operate in increasingly unforgiving theatres. At President Biden's recently inaugurated discussions on climate change, at which the Secretary of State spoke, the US Defence Secretary, Lloyd Austin, commented that UK defence had "raised the bar" on climate change as an issue. We certainly hope to continue to do so.

We recognise the vital importance of renewable energy in helping us to meet our goals. Within the defence estate, we recently announced a £120 million project to deliver four solar farms over the next five to seven years, resulting in £1 billion in energy efficiency savings and reducing emissions by 2,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide

equivalent. The use of wind energy on the estate is very much an option to which Defence is open, where it is viable and consistent with training.

The Government are delighted to have seen the increase in the use of wind and solar energy, which now account for such a substantial proportion of total UK electricity generation. However, the very welcome expansion in wind farms has had to be monitored, and continues to be, for the impact on radar and, in particular, on civil and military air traffic control. We have a duty to protect the security and wellbeing of the people of the United Kingdom. That requires us to be able to use radar effectively to monitor our airspace where required. There is in particular a vital task of ensuring, as I say, that air traffic control has clear line of sight to help air traffic, its passengers and crew to land safely.

Many wind farms have been able to proceed, after consideration, without issue; however, we have also been keen to support the sector to find solutions that can enable further projects to go ahead. The Royal Air Force, in partnership with the Offshore Wind Industry Council, has formed a joint taskforce to develop radar mitigations. The hon. Lady is right that it focuses particularly on offshore wind and air defence radar, because that is where the greatest capacity can be released to achieve our important renewable energy targets. We also expect the lessons that we learn to be applicable, and more useful, in a wider context, including onshore.

Last year, the RAF, the UK Defence and Security Accelerator and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy ran a competition to seek new technological solutions to mitigate the impact of offshore wind turbines on air defence systems. That included ways to reduce radar clutter caused by wind farms, improvements to the probability of intruder detection, the capability to fill or remove gaps in radar coverage, alternatives to radar and alterations to the design of the wind turbines.

In the first phase, DASA awarded contracts to Thales, QinetiQ, Saab, TWI and Plextek DTS to fast-track their ideas for technologies that can mitigate the impact of wind farms on the UK's air defence radar system. Phase 2 of the competition has just closed and the winners will be announced on 8 August. I therefore assure the hon. Lady that the Ministry of Defence is keen to see the opportunities presented by wind farms expanded and, what is more, is working creatively and with the active participation of the sector, which I would like to acknowledge, to find mitigations that work and that will allow further expansion.

Having laid out the context, I turn to the specifics of Kenly, and St Andrews' plan to build six wind turbines, capable of generating 12.3 MW of electricity and saving over 9,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide per year. The unfortunate reality, as the hon. Lady recognises, is that the project is just eight miles from the air traffic control radar at Leuchars Station. That is why, back in 2011, the MOD was involved in the initial planning process and undertook a thorough technical and operational assessment. The findings were clear: the turbines, as the proposals stood, would cause an unacceptable impact upon the air traffic control radar. Not only could they be mistaken for aircraft, but they could cause confusing radar clutter.

We cannot afford to take a risk that could put lives at risk, but to be clear, we did not rule out the proposal. Instead, we agreed with the developer that the project could go ahead as long as they provided an appropriate radar mitigation scheme before the turbines were erected. To assist developers we have a clear approach to such schemes based on a three-phase model: the identification of potential technical solutions, the trialling of preferred technical solutions, and the implementation of the technical solution.

I appreciate that the developer has made a number of attempts to proffer mitigation for the wind farm. Two such attempts involved an infill radar solution based on Edinburgh airport air traffic control radar. Those attempts were unsuccessful for various reasons, including that the proposal would have resulted in the loss of radar for an important area in the approach to the station below 900 feet, which would have presented a significant safety risk. There were also concerns about the ability to achieve seamless integration between the Edinburgh and Leuchars radars.

I do not think that it is fair to say that the MOD is not responsive. We have continued to engage. I recall that a proposal was made for a holographic radar, which I believe was the basis for the original 2013 planning application and to which the MOD did not raise objections. However, it was a higher-cost mitigation and required further evidencing. I do not believe that it was progressed by the developer but, to be clear, if a way forward that will provide mitigation can be found by the developer, through that hologram radar or other routes, we would be very keen to look at the proposal afresh and see if we can make it work.

The good news is that since 2011 significant work across the sector has been undertaken, and that continues. The hon. Lady mentioned Dundee. I do not know the details of that off the top of my head, but it is in all our interests that technology and solutions are shared. Provided that there is not a commercial or other confidentiality reason, I see no reason why that information could not be shared. I undertake to look at that for her and see if anything can be shared. I apologise in advance if there are commercial reasons that prevent it, but it is a fair and reasonable request, and I will take it under advisement and return to her.

Further to the hon. Lady's request, if she would be kind enough to work with me I would be pleased to facilitate a meeting between St Andrews and my colleagues in the Defence Equipment and Support wind farm team. I appreciate that they have met before, indeed as recently as September 2020—again, I think at her prompting—but the MOD remains open to considering any radar mitigation scheme proposed in future. If such a meeting would be helpful, I will certainly ensure that it is facilitated.

A solution that benefits the environment, cuts carbon and maintains our radar safety net is surely the best solution for all concerned. If my team are able to guide St Andrews on our views on the most recent technological developments and wider MOD thinking, which may help it to produce a solution that is acceptable, that is something that we should all certainly welcome.

Question put and agreed to.

7.25 pm

House adjourned.

Members Eligible for a Proxy Vote

The following is the list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy:

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab)	Zarah Sultana
Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab)	Zarah Sultana
Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudon) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab)	Zarah Sultana
Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab)	Zarah Sultana
Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab)	Zarah Sultana
Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Sir Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Con)	Chris Elmore
Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP)	Jim Shannon
Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con)	Mr William Wragg
Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind)	Zarah Sultana
Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Courts (Witney) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Sir Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
James Daly (Bury North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mims Davies (Mid Sussex) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con)	Ben Everitt
Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Marsha De Cordova (Battersea)	Zarah Sultana
Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP)	Jim Shannon
Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP)	Liz Saville Roberts
Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind)	Stuart Andrew
Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance)	Wendy Chamberlain
Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind)	Stuart Andrew
Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab)	Zarah Sultana
Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP)	Jim Shannon
John Glen (Salisbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Damian Green (Ashford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Grundy (Leigh) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Hancock (West Suffolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP)	Liz Saville Roberts
Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba)	Kenny MacAskill

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
James Heappey (Wells) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Howell (Henley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab)	Zarah Sultana
Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
David Johnston (Wantage) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC)	Liz Saville Roberts
Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robert Langan (High Peak) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab)	Zarah Sultana
Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP)	Owen Thompson

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Levy (Blyth Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP)	Jim Shannon
Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab)	Zarah Sultana
Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)	Zarah Sultana
Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab)	Zarah Sultana
Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alan Mak (Havant) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab)	Zarah Sultana
Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West)	Owen Thompson
Damien Moore (Southport) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Penny Mordaunt (Portsmouth North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Jill Mortimer (Hartlepool) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op)	Zarah Sultana
Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab)	Zarah Sultana
Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP)	Jim Shannon
Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Priti Patel (Witham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con)	Peter Aldous
Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Anum Qaisar-Javed (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Will Quince (Colchester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jonathan Reynolds (Salford and Hyde) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab)	Zarah Sultana
Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP)	Jim Shannon
Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dean Russell (Watford) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Grant Shapps (Welwyn Hatfield) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore
Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Spellar (Warley) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op)	Chris Elmore

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab)	Zarah Sultana
Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Elizabeth Truss (South West Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Ben Wallace (Wyre and Preston North)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
David Warburton (Somerset and Frome) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind)	Zarah Sultana
Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson
Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
John Whittingdale (Malden) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Hywel Williams (Arfon) PC	Liz Saville Roberts
Gavin Williamson (Montgomeryshire) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD)	Wendy Chamberlain
Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP)	Jim Shannon
Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab)	Zarah Sultana
Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP)	Owen Thompson

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab)	Chris Elmore
Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con)	Stuart Andrew
Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab)	Chris Elmore

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 15 June 2021

[MRS MARIA MILLER *in the Chair*]

Levelling-up Agenda

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 25 February).

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

2.30 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to the normal practice, in order to support the new hybrid arrangements. The timing of debates has been amended to allow technical arrangements to be made for the next debate. There will also be a suspension between each debate.

I remind Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive at the start of the debate and are expected to remain for the entire debate. I also remind those people participating virtually that they are on screen at all times. 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 at all times, except when speaking.

Members attending physically who are in the later stages of the call list should use the seats in the Public Gallery; I can see some Members there now. Once Members have spoken, I would be grateful if they vacated their seats—Members can speak only from the horseshoe, where the microphones are.

2.31 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the levelling up agenda.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Miller. I am delighted to see the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), and I thank other hon. Members for being part of this debate. I am happy to forgo my summing-up at the end to get as many folks in for as long as possible, but I would like to talk for 10 to 12 minutes now to outline some arguments.

I have two key points to make to the Minister and I will come straight to them. On the immediate issue, the Isle of Wight Council and I, working together, are putting in what we believe is a very strong bid for a development in East Cowes. I am keen that it reaches receptive ears in Government and among Ministers.

Secondly, I would like to talk more broadly about the levelling-up agenda for the Island and ask the Government to work with us—and even to use the Island as a model, a mini region, to see what a strategic cross-Government agenda could look like. I am most concerned to talk to the Minister about the extent to which the Treasury is leading cross-Government work, rather than the Cabinet Office, and how we are developing cross-Government, coherent, integrated policy making.

However, if there is one critical element that I want to leave with the Minister today, it is that the levelling-up agenda for the Isle of Wight implies many things. That includes not only economic development, important as that is, but training and skills, education, which is critical, health outcomes, greater environmental protection, housing and planning. Effectively, we want a strategic road map for the next 50 years that has more to offer the Island than we have had in the past 50 years.

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

“Levelling up” seems a fancy phrase for regional policy—for taking wealth or economic development out of the south-east and trying to spread it around the country as much as possible. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, ours is one of the most unequal countries in the G7 developed nations, which is pretty scandalous.

Specifically on the Island, for nearly two decades we have been making the case for a more assertive regional assistance programme. In 2002, our GDP, our local economy, was 60% of that in the south-east. Things have improved in the past two decades and it is now 66%, but we are poorer than elsewhere in the south-east. Our educational achievements are lower, and our health outcomes worse.

The Island has a unique identity, which those of us who live there are incredibly proud of—frankly, we love it—but there is a downside: the economic impact of dislocation and diseconomies of scale specific to an island. In other areas of the UK, people can be physical islands, cut off, as we have seen with folks in Hartlepool and other places. That is why the attractiveness of the hopeful levelling-up agenda post Brexit rightly has such a hold on many people. What we must do is deliver on that agenda.

The levelling-up agenda, done right, is one of great hope and potential prosperity for this country. If it is done wrong, we will be letting down millions of people throughout the United Kingdom.

I want to make another point. According to all our statistics, the Isle of Wight should be in tier 1—frankly, we should be two constituencies in tier 1. My electorate is double the size of that of the average constituency in the United Kingdom and we are going to be two constituencies in three years’ time anyway, after the Boundary Commission changes. I am slightly concerned that we are one constituency in tier 2 at the moment. I think our case merits a higher priority.

I come to our bid. The bid going in this week is in relation to a series of buildings in East Cowes that we wish to transform. The purpose is to grow the number of high-paid jobs in marine, but also in the tidal, wind and offshore renewable sectors. Our bid will enable us to develop that cluster of excellence further and ensure that East Cowes continues to grow as a shipbuilding composite and green tech hub for the United Kingdom as a whole.

I would welcome a ministerial visit to East Cowes. My right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) visited during the campaign before he became Prime Minister; many people remember the picture that he had taken in front of the world’s largest Union Jack—on the Isle of Wight: where else? We would equally welcome another ministerial visit to see the excellent work being done there.

[Bob Seely]

This is part of a wider agenda, which I want to turn to. The council is new and we are going to work together. It is not Conservative any longer, which is a shame, but we will work closely together and I know we will have a successful relationship. The council and I are not thinking about the next two to five years, but the next five to 25 years, because we want to see a different future for the Island. That has to be primarily around the regeneration of our town centres using the levelling-up and shared prosperity fund bids.

Our regeneration approach, especially after covid, will be focused primarily on Newport. The town centre has a lot of empty shops and Newport harbour is ripe for development as a regeneration hub. As part of that, we want high-quality new house building for Islanders in sensitive numbers to drive regeneration. We need to bring back young people and housing into the town centre to drive economic growth and to provide employment, for start-up companies, for leisure and for higher education facilities, which I will come to. We need space for start-ups and, potentially, a new railway station, depending on how the rejuvenation of the branch-line project goes. If there was a single long-term item that I would interest the Minister in after the East Cowes project, it would be the regeneration of Newport to drive the Island's economy.

This is linked to many other things, as I am sure the Minister can imagine. We need to continue to develop higher education on the Island. The education revolution that transformed Bournemouth, Brighton, Portsmouth and Southampton has, scandalously, completely passed us by. Only 23% of Islanders go into higher education, compared with nearly 40% of Londoners. That is unacceptable.

Millions have been pledged by the Department for Education—I thank the Ministers for this—to help rebuild the Isle of Wight College. Under the excellent leadership of Debbie Lavin, the college is doing great work aligning with mainland colleges to be able to offer richer and better vocational courses, as well as degree courses. We are getting there in higher education, but more needs to be done.

Regenerating our towns also means that we can protect our landscape much more. We need our landscape—not only for our quality of life, but because it is a critical part of our visitor economy. Our landscape has specific economic as well as emotional and psychological value over and above a competitive price for low-density greenfield housing.

For 50 years, we have not built for Islanders. That situation needs to stop. As part of any levelling-up plan for the Island, we need greater landscape protection and a policy of building for Islanders. That means exceptional circumstance and, preferably, opting out of national targets. We think that the best way to give long-term protection to the Island, depending on what happens with the Government's landscape review, is for it to have a new designation—a new template to work with Government: to become an “island park”. That could involve marine protection and landscape protection, maybe up to the level of being an area of outstanding natural beauty, perhaps with some opt-out for economic development.

We should work on a new template, and it can be a template for the UK. We can start in England with the Scilly Isles and the Isle of Wight; in Wales, there is Anglesey; and many Scottish islands could benefit from a similar shared model, although I note that Scotland has the special islands needs allowance. I wish we had that in England.

More can be done, but I am trying to show that economic development and educational aspiration need to go hand in hand with other things to ensure that when we regenerate, we do so in an intelligent, sensitive, long-term way that develops our people and gives them greater aspiration, greater hope for the future, and greater education and greater work opportunities, while also protecting our landscape for us and our nation in perpetuity, but also as a critical part of our visitor economy.

I am aware of the time; I will begin to wind up so that others can come in. I will be seeking separate debates on the progress of the island deal. We have made some progress on that, but we need to do more. I stress that there are additional costs to providing public services on an island, and those are not in dispute. I am delighted that the fair funding formula—championed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), now Chancellor, whom I thank for his excellent work—contains an admission that additional costs are involved in providing local government services.

That same argument is still being played out in the field of health, specifically for the 12 universally small hospitals in England—and St Mary's on the Isle of Wight is the most unique universally small hospital, because it is on an island; by definition, it cannot grow in any conceivable way. The population is about half of what a district general hospital normally requires for the tariff regime that currently operates within the NHS. I will also have a separate debate on ferries, which is far too big a topic just for here; likewise for agriculture.

Finally, I leave a single idea in the mind of the Minister: regeneration—levelling up, the shared prosperity regional agenda—is, for us, about a lot of things. Fundamentally, it is about making sure that our future is better than our past. It is about focusing on development, education, wellbeing and health, but doing so sensitively and intelligently while preserving our environment. As I say, done right, levelling up can be transformative. I very much hope that I can work with the Minister on a coherent, cross-Government approach for the Island in a way that can help us all nationally as well.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. We have 13 Back-Bench speakers. If there is to be any chance of everybody getting in, we will have to have a tight time limit. I will set it at three and a half minutes at the moment, but that may have to come down to three minutes. I would be grateful if speeches were kept below three minutes.

2.43 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing a really important debate.

When we talk about levelling up, there is one fundamental point that the Government would rather we all forgot: we cannot level up the country without properly resourcing local government. Councils up and down the country should be at the forefront of investment and regeneration. Councils, combined authorities and Mayors will be delivering the infrastructure and regeneration projects that will level up our cities, towns and villages, but more than a decade of devastating austerity has undermined them, and damaged our communities. It has hit the poorest areas hardest. The areas that need regeneration the most have been left with the least to deliver it. High streets that need investment to change for the economy of tomorrow have been left behind in yesterday, while local budgets have been decimated.

Barnsley Council has faced some of the worst Government cuts in the country, and has lost 40% of its income since 2010. For the services that have been decimated and the opportunities for investment that have been lost to austerity, the concept of levelling up could be a very welcome one, but one-off pots of money will not change a broken system that leaves behind so many people and so many parts of the country.

There is something wrong with the system when the Chancellor's constituency of Richmond (Yorks) is prioritised over Barnsley in the Budget, even though, on almost every indicator, Barnsley is more deserving of funding. That leaves "levelling up" as no more than a slogan. We need to look more fundamentally at the kind of country we are and how and who our economy has been working for. The people of this country have been promised better, and deserve better. Our councils and communities deserve the resources that they need to thrive, not just get by.

If the Government want to level up for Barnsley, they should implement the recommendations of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee report on the mineworkers' pension scheme, which had unanimous cross-party backing—not just because it is morally the right thing to do and because the Government should not be in the business of profiting from miners' pensions, but because the policy would change the lives of thousands of ex-miners, giving them an immediate financial uplift that would boost local businesses and economies when they spend.

If the Government want to level up for Barnsley, they should invest in our young people and their futures by delivering a children's recovery plan that meets the scale of the challenge. Whereas the Labour party would meet that challenge with an ambitious £15 billion programme, this Government could not even muster 10% of what their own education recovery commissioner said was needed before he resigned in opposition to their failure.

If the Government want to level up Barnsley, they should make sure we receive the investment that towns such as ours deserve for regeneration and new, decent jobs, making sure that hard work gets a fair wage. Under this Government, in-work poverty has increased, long-term unemployment is rising at its fastest rate for more than a decade, and the Kickstart scheme has provided opportunities for just one in 25 young people. One-off pots of money for selected areas will not fundamentally rebalance our country or reverse a decade of austerity. We need good jobs, opportunities and properly funded services for every town. If levelling up

truly means anything, it must mean delivering for towns such as Barnsley and investing in communities like mine.

2.46 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this debate. Levelling up, as it has become known, is the biggest challenge that this country currently faces. It is about giving hope to communities that have been ignored for too long, tackling deep pockets of deprivation, giving people the opportunity to realise their full potential and bridging the stubbornly wide productivity gap that has held back the UK economy for far too long.

Levelling up must not be piecemeal, fragmented and short-term interventions. Instead, it must be a set of coherent, sustained and properly funded policy initiatives fully co-ordinated across Government.

One of the pockets of deprivation is in Lowestoft, but I welcome the investment that the Government and councils are making in the Gull Wing bridge, the flood defence scheme and the towns deal, which equates to almost £220 million of public sector funding in the heart of Lowestoft over the next five years. Our tasks locally are to ensure that those schemes are built on time and unleash a tide of private sector job-creating investment.

I also welcome the proposed freeport at Felixstowe, 50 miles down off the Suffolk coast. However, I emphasise the importance of not jumping from one intervention to the next, but instead continuing to see through proven strategies that are already up and running. The Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth enterprise zone, set up in 2012, like other enterprise zones around the country, has been very successful. It has an energy focus that is aligned with the Government's clean growth strategy. By reallocating the existing footprint of the enterprise zone around Lowestoft port, more than 300 jobs can be created, 40 new businesses can be supported, and between £1 million and £3 million of retained rates can be generated.

Sir Edward, it is great to be here with you and other colleagues, but when it comes to levelling up, today we are a sideshow. The important business is taking place in the other place with the Second Reading of the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill. Putting skills and lifelong learning at the heart of the Government's policy agenda is absolutely critical, and we must ensure that the ambitions of the reforms are fully realised. Linked to the Bill are local skills improvement plan trailblazers, and the chambers of commerce and colleges across Suffolk and Norfolk have come together and submitted a compelling application. The bid has a focus on the net zero agenda and rebuilding coastal communities. It highlights the workforce requirements across the region in offshore wind, in Sizewell C, in the emerging hydrogen economy and in the freeport.

I urge the Government to give this compelling proposal favourable consideration. We need to step up to the plate, so that local people have the skills needed to take up these exciting opportunities.

2.50 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward.

[Alan Brown]

Clearly, this debate is about a con trick—a gimmick. It is actually the Tories admitting that they have continually let down communities, regions and nations for decades. However, they are now saying, “We’ll give some money back and everything will be better.”

Clearly, additional strategic investment is always welcome, but this investment is not strategic and it also bypasses the devolution settlement. We have heard from other contributors that this investment is far too piecemeal.

When we consider Westminster failures, this levelling-up fund does not even come close to making amends. If we go back to Maggie Thatcher’s flagship policy of right to buy council houses, the fact that initially all receipts went into Westminster coffers meant the erosion of council and social housing stock, with no funds available for new builds. In Scotland, it has taken the Scottish National party Government to try to turn this situation round, with record numbers of new build houses for rent. Unfortunately, England still has an incoherent housing policy that will cause further inequality.

Oil and gas produced £350 billion of revenue for the Exchequer and yet there was no consideration about setting up an oil fund to allow legacy considerations rather than the squandering of those revenues in tax cuts. Yet now we are supposed to be grateful for money coming back.

Look at the devastation of coalmining communities. Where is the coherent strategy for levelling them up? When opencast coalmining companies in my constituency went into liquidation in 2013, they left millions of pounds’ worth of outstanding restoration works and again the UK Government were nowhere to be seen. They did not contribute a penny and even refused to support a coal tax scheme that would have funded that restoration work.

We know that the levelling-up fund is labelled as money that might otherwise have gone to the EU, but the reality is that the likes of Scotland had to make use of EU structural funds to offset Westminster letting us down. Indeed, the fact that the highlands became an EU objective 1 category area under Westminster rule says everything. However, that did allow the highlands to access funding for roads and bridges, including the upgrading of the last remaining single-track trunk road in the UK. That money funded harbour upgrades as well, which was real, strategic levelling up.

Now, conversely, we have Scottish Tories demanding road upgrades for schemes that Westminster failed to deliver on, and we know that it was the Tories who labelled Scottish fishermen as “expendable”. It is those same fishermen who have now been given a poor Brexit deal, and we know that our farmers will be the next to suffer because of the trade deals that have been negotiated by Westminster.

Even when we consider the electricity grid charging scheme, we see that Scotland faces the highest grid charges in Europe, so the system prejudices development in Scotland in areas that would actually benefit from levelling up. Real levelling up would also have seen the contract for difference procurement process amended to include local content.

To be clear, I will support bids by my local authority if they bring additional strategic investment, and I will also support community groups to try to access funding.

But the process is a farce. Like the stronger towns fund, it is likely to be politically managed rather than having a proper needs-based assessment. The fact that the first bids have to be submitted by 18 June and be shovel-ready to be delivered in a year confirms a lack of strategic thinking and oversight. There is a real risk that hurried bids will be accepted, leading to cost and programme overruns later on.

Pitting MPs and local authorities against each other is not the way to tackle structural inequalities. My constituency needs additional support, but this is not the way that it should be managed.

2.54 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), my neighbour, on securing this important debate on levelling up. It is a really great opportunity to explore the scope of this call to action. The timing of the debate really could not be better, as it immediately follows the G7 and the joint communiqué published by the Group of Seven developed country leaders, indicating the shared agenda that we have and the central role that the Government’s agenda of levelling up has across those other nations, which are key trading partners and, indeed, key allies.

The issue of levelling up resonates across the nation, and we saw that in the general election. I believe that we need to look not just at regional levelling up, which we heard about so eloquently from my hon. Friend, but at the broader scope and vision that we saw in the communiqué that was published following this weekend’s conference. The G7 leaders agreed unanimously that in reinvigorating our economies we should be levelling up as nations, so that no place or person, irrespective of their age, ethnicity or gender, is left behind. The full power of the applicability of our vision was seen not just at home but in the wider world.

It was important to see gender equality so clearly and explicitly embedded in the G7 communiqué for levelling up. Gender equality has to be embedded into the strategy of the Government’s levelling-up White Paper when it is published later this year. We need to be talking about left-behind people, as well as left-behind areas, particularly when we look at economic underperformance, which is something we are still having to tackle in this country. It demonstrates itself through low pay and low employment levels in some areas of the country, leading to lower living standards and poor productivity. These issues are still particular challenges for women in work. We may see increased numbers of women in Parliament or in high-profile jobs, but despite that, more women, who achieve higher qualifications than men, will still end up underperforming economically through their working life.

Across all age groups men make up the majority of high and middle-income earners in the UK. Women are only over-represented in the category of low-paid work. Although there are record numbers of women in work under this Government, there is a persistent gender pay gap in the over 40s and an unemployment gap of more than 6% between men and women. The Government have to make levelling up as an agenda work hard for everybody throughout the United Kingdom, wherever they live.

The Government would do well to ensure that their policy focuses particularly on the experiences of women and how we can make sure we level up for women across the United Kingdom. It is important that every single part of our country is performing as it should in economic terms. If we do not give women the support they need, particularly through employment policies supporting maternity leave, we will continue to see an under-representation of women in the workplace.

2.57 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. My warmest congratulations to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing the debate. We in the highlands were disappointed to be put in level 3; the leader of the Highland Council, Margaret Davidson, and I said as much. However, we are where we are.

One of the best ways to level up in the highlands and the islands—the remotest parts of Britain—is through tourism, so I want to speak in support of a bid that will be put to the Treasury in the next couple of days by the Highland Council. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight briefly touched on harbours, and I will as well. Wick harbour was once the herring capital of the UK. When the swell or the wind is in the wrong direction, it can make the harbour unsafe, so the bid is to build a new sea gate to increase the marina potential of the area.

I have often talked about a string of pearls. If we can take rich people who own boats—we call them yachties—up the east coast from the south-east, all the way up to the top of Scotland, and then get them to turn left, go along the top and go down again, not only will they have a great journey but we in the highlands, being canny Scots, would aim to lighten their wallets and their bank accounts on the way round. Doing up Wick would be a major step in that direction. It would accompany improvements to the town centre and to the industrial units next to the harbour.

The second part of the bid that the Highland Council is putting in is related to this. We have a very successful tourism enterprise, of which some hon. Members will have heard, called the North Coast 500. It is a brilliant idea supported by His Royal Highness Prince Charles, or the Duke of Rothesay as we call him in Scotland, and various local businesses. In the last few years it has been a tremendous success and an enormous number of visitors have come north. They have really enjoyed this truly scenic and amazing way around the top of Scotland. However, this has brought infrastructure challenges. One thinks of not enough car parking facilities, the structure of bridges that are starting to fall apart or congestion. If an ambulance in north-west Sutherland has to get in a hurry to the hospital at Wick, it can end up behind a lot of camper vans.

The bid is “Please, help us to finance improvements that are much needed”. I say again, that sort of enterprise will take money from the south-east and the richer parts of the UK to the poorer parts. That is levelling up without the Government having to do much more than putting their hands in their pockets to help finance the initial capital expenditure. That will include electrical charging points and other improvements.

An example of the success of the North Coast 500, the former Member for South Ribble, who was in her time the parliamentary private secretary to the Prime Minister, and her partner are going to come and stay with me in August. I warmly encourage the Minister and his colleagues at the Treasury; they would have the most enjoyable time coming up north to see where their money would be wisely spent. Of course, I would offer them bed and breakfast—what is more, it would be free bed and breakfast, which for a Scot is pretty astonishing.

3.1 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak on this subject today. I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this very important debate. Much like his patch, Somerset has suffered from a historical fiscal concentration on London and the south-east. A major part of addressing that is for those outside the metropolitan bubble to be given the kind of investment in connectivity and infrastructure that will allow us to properly compete.

As Somerset’s representative on the Heart of the South West local enterprise partnership, I see first-hand the need for investment and the marvellous potential that even quite modest investment can unlock. If we are to rebalance our economy and properly level up, investment in connectivity is key. That means digital and physical connectivity, such as the dualling of the A303—the major arterial road for the entire south-west—which I have been talking about endlessly for many years. I am sure that 4,000 years ago, when the ancient Britons hauled the stones to Stonehenge, they got stuck in queues on the A303. If the A303 was in a decent state, President Biden would have driven to Cornwall, purely to take in the glorious view of Somerton and Frome on the way. The real issue is that so many of my constituents rely on that road to get to work, to get to school and to visit family and friends, and not all of them have a helicopter lying around.

Connectivity also means public transport. I am delighted that, with the Langport Transport Group, we secured the funding for a feasibility study for a new railway station for Langport and Somerton from the Restoring Your Railway fund. At the moment, the splendid people of Somerton and Langport drive miles to Taunton, Bridgwater, Yeovil or Castle Cary just to catch a train, which is faintly ridiculous.

In the 21st century, digital connectivity is as important as physical connectivity. Last week I met Wessex Internet, a local internet service provider—a family business supported by Government investment that is building full-fibre networks across south Somerset. That really is a great example of public and private sector synergy. But much more needs to be done; in my constituency, more than 90% of households do not have access to superfast broadband. There are pockets, such as Isle Brewers, Compton Dundon and many more—too many to mention—where getting a 1 megabit connection is about the best a man or a woman can get.

One of the greatest threats to the levelling-up agenda and so much more is the continuation of the covid restrictions, which will continue to harm lives and livelihoods across Somerton and Frome, costing jobs, harming the economy and depriving ordinary people of the opportunities they have worked hard to create. Levelling

[David Warburton]

up is an essential component of the country's agenda, and vitally important for Somerset. Let us get properly connected, up to speed and able to compete with the rest of the country on a level footing.

3.4 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on bringing forward this debate.

There is no doubt that the negative effects of covid have been felt in the most deprived areas of our country, in education, in work and in health outcomes. That has made the task of creating a society where a person's life chances do not depend on where they were born more challenging, and all the more urgent. There are opportunities to be grasped, but only if the Government has the wit to recognise them, the will to act on them and the courage to provide investment.

Lockdowns have brought changes to the way many of us work and some will be permanent. Businesses have had to take the plunge into homeworking and found productivity held up or even improved. They have found themselves looking at the cost of large, permanent office space as an unnecessary burden. Employees found themselves relieved from long and expensive commutes and, for those who can move, an exodus is under way from the big cities.

That movement has seen rents in city centres such as London, Manchester and Leeds fall, while they are on the rise in areas such as Wigan, Keighley and Durham. It is bringing more disposable income to parts of the country that have been largely neglected for more than a decade and has obvious benefits for local economies, but there is a greater prize to be had.

Residents of those areas need to see more than a rise in rents and a few more jobs in upmarket shops and restaurants. They now have the opportunity to do the same well-paid jobs—jobs that were previously unavailable in that area. There are reasons beyond the financial for people wishing to remain local, such as family ties, caring responsibilities, a sense of community and belonging to a place. That is certainly the case in Hull, where there is a strong local identity. The desire to remain in their community means many instinctively look at what is available and adjust their aspirations to fit. The new possibilities contained in remote working are a way of broadening horizons and opportunity, while maintaining social cohesion and community, but that can only happen with action.

Fast, reliable broadband needs to be universally available. Schools and colleges need to be properly funded and pupils need to be made aware of new career opportunities. Not everyone has the space at home to work comfortably and successfully, so digital hubs and hybrid workspaces will be necessary to support this new way of working.

I am proud to say that Hull is well placed for all these changes. It is blessed with the best fibre-optic coverage and upload speeds in the country, provided by KCOM. As a result, we have also seen the opening of the kind of digital hub I have described in the Midland Bank in Whitefriargate. What is available in Hull should be available to all other areas that have been on the wrong end of de-industrialisation and ruinous Conservative austerity.

The Irish Government have already set about redistributing jobs and opportunity and are aiming for 20% of Ireland's 300,000 civil servants to have moved to remote working by the end of the year. To ensure jobs are distributed across the country, they are creating a network of more than 400 remote working hubs and introducing tax breaks for individuals and companies that support homeworking. This Government could and should embark on the same path. Will they? It will require foresight, intelligent planning and a determination to invest in the future of all of this country's people—qualities that have been in short supply so far.

3.8 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing the debate.

I am delighted to say I see no conflict between levelling up in Stoke-on-Trent and improving quality of life across the whole country, including the Isle of Wight. There is a clear win-win in relieving housing pressures by levelling up development opportunities in places such as Stoke-on-Trent, which I have discussed previously with my hon. Friend. We have multiple hectares of brownfield land and an eagerness to build, but the clean-up costs for former heavily industrial land are considerable and often unviable in lower priced housing markets. We have a proven track record in Stoke-on-Trent of delivering. Last year, Stoke-on-Trent built more than the average London borough, with 99% on brownfield land. We are one of the busiest housing markets nationally.

I welcome the investment we have seen through the housing infrastructure fund in the north of the city, but we also need similar sites in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent South. Will the Minister help us to deliver even more and ensure that we get a good slice of the £100 million brownfield fund?

Of course, people need more than just a good house. They need skilled, well-paid jobs, better transport and an improved quality of life. Levelling up is about all those things. If anywhere in the country reflects the need to level up, it is Stoke-on-Trent. It is 12th highest in proportion of deprived neighbourhoods and, after decades of neglect and decline, it has huge potential just waiting to be unleashed.

We are unparalleled in our friendliness, right at the heart of the UK and now with the best fibre gigabit-connected city in the whole country. I slightly disagree with the previous speaker, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who said Hull was the best connected. Stoke-on-Trent is now the best connected in terms of fibre broadband connectivity.

We submit our fantastic levelling-up fund bids at the end of this week. We have been working closely with the city council. I hope the Minister will support our plans. It will be particularly important to capitalise on our authentic industrial heritage in the Potteries to create a modern, dynamic and prosperous city. In Longton especially, we must build on the PSICA—partnership schemes in conservation areas—and heritage action zone schemes we secured in partnership with the city council and Historic England, attracting new residential, leisure and employment uses.

Stoke-on-Trent is on the up. It is one of the fastest-growing city economies nationally and is a centre for world-class advanced manufacturing and the digital revolution. We recently launched our Silicon Stoke prospectus, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), which is about building on the fast-growing cluster of digital firms taking advantage of our investment in gigabit broadband and strengthening what we are seeing at Staffordshire University in games design and e-sports. Attracting these sorts of industries is key to raising aspirations and boosting opportunities locally, as is ensuring that people have the skills to access them, through schemes such as the Prime Minister's lifetime skills guarantee, the kickstart scheme and T-levels. That is especially important in places like Stoke-on-Trent, where high-level skills and wages are far below the national average.

Access to better jobs and opportunities is also critical in a city where a third of households do not even have access to a private car. We need to level back our transport following decades of local bus and rail decline, and I am glad that we are working on just that. Building on the success of the transforming cities fund, we now need to reopen Meir station and the station at Fenton Manor on the line between Stoke and Leek, and we also need to secure important investment from the bus strategy fund.

3.11 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Sir Edward; it is an honour to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing the debate.

There is of course an evident need to level up the nations of the United Kingdom and the regions of England, but rather than bringing communities and nations together for the common good, the Government have used this agenda to make light of our democratically mandated institutions. Nothing more clearly demonstrates this than the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020—legislation so hostile to devolution and destructive to joined-up economic development that even the Welsh Labour Government tried to take the UK Government to court. The “Westminster knows best” school of thought has already left the UK with one of the most regionally unequal economies in the west.

The Government's regional development funds may be dressed up as silk purses, but the most cursory inspection reveals them to be sows' ears. We know that the UK Government have now broken their 2019 manifesto promise that Wales would receive the same level of financial support from the UK as from the EU. Allocated funds are a pale shadow of what Wales received and had control over from the EU. The EU takes a needs-based approach, which resulted in Wales receiving four times the UK average per person. Why? Because that was recognised as necessary to challenge chronic deprivation. What are the UK Government doing? They are taking a competitive approach, which guarantees Wales only 5% of the levelling-up fund. The Welsh Government themselves reckon that Wales could end up getting as little as £50 million a year—a fraction of the £375 million a year that we received from the EU.

On top of that, rather than working with experienced Welsh institutions, UK Government institutions such as the UK Ministry of Housing, Communities and

Local Government, which has no track record whatsoever with devolved affairs, will now bypass the devolved Governments and control funding directly. The consequences are already clear. Local funding will be tied to the effectiveness of representations by local MPs, just as Westminster cuts the number of Welsh MPs by a fifth. How is Wales supposed to receive its fair share? I reiterate that Wales is one of the poorest countries within the EU, the United Kingdom and the western world. We have not received what we needed in the past, and we are set to receive considerably less.

Equally outrageous is how the Tories have engineered a system so that they can indulge in patronage politics. The Chancellor is set to funnel public funds to his own constituency and other Tory seats. My county of Gwynedd was prioritised under previous EU funding, without fear or favour, for the simple reason that it is one of the least developed regions of Europe, let alone the UK, yet now Gwynedd is put at the bottom of the list in the levelling-up fund tiers.

Gwynedd, Wales and indeed the UK are owed more and deserve better. The Government must keep their word and ensure that in future, Wales gets at least the equivalent of what we previously received in EU funding. They should work with the devolved Parliament on the principle of mutual respect and parity of equals. The Tories of all Parliaments should respect their political traditions and repudiate the in-built centralising instincts of Westminster. Public money should be spent on the long-term public good, not on short-term political glory.

3.15 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I join others in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this important debate. The Government have shown clear signs in recent months with the levelling-up fund and the towns fund that they intend to make sure that the future is, indeed, better than the past, to quote the opening speech. On this occasion, I come not to criticise the Government but to praise them.

In the past, there have been certain times when I have been critical, but the levelling-up agenda is benefiting my constituency and, I hope, will continue to do so. When the Government published their industrial strategy four or five years ago, they introduced the concept of town deals. The Greater Grimsby town deal, which includes the town of Cleethorpes, was the first one to be established.

The important point is that, rather than focusing on one-off projects, valuable though they are, applicants need a comprehensive programme that will continue through and therefore attract the different funding streams that Governments introduce. Key to that is getting a team together that knows its way around Westminster, understands local government and has entrepreneurial flair. We created a town board chaired by the local entrepreneur made good, David Ross. We also had the former resident of Grimsby and former Chancellor, Lord Lamont, on our board and the former head of the civil service, Lord Kerslake. We assembled a team that understood the workings of Government and the needs of the area, and they put together a comprehensive plan.

[*Martin Vickers*]

Coupled with that, the Government recognised our freeport bid. The bid for the Humber port was successful in every category and scored high, above all others—congratulations to the team that put the bid together. The Humber is the energy estuary of the UK: we have carbon capture, hydrogen and the offshore renewables sector. The development of the marine energy park by Able UK at Killingholme, close to Immingham, has attracted £75 million of Government funding in the last year. That has taken 10 years to achieve. When I was first elected in 2010, one of the first calls was from Able UK. It has been a long, hard road, but we are getting there.

Connectivity is vital. Sir Edward, you will know of our campaign to get the through train service from Grimsby and Cleethorpes through your constituency to London. We are making progress with that. LNER has pencilled it into next year's timetable, but we need to keep up the pressure.

On local government reform, at long last in Lincolnshire the three top-tier authorities have agreed on a scheme that I hope the Government will push through over the next year or two. If we can align local government with the town board and a comprehensive plan, I think the successes of recent years will continue.

3.18 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on leading this important debate.

Levelling up is a concept that I strongly support. For it to work, we have to identify disadvantage and take action to tackle it. There is a lot that I could ask the Minister to consider today, but he will be delighted to hear that what I am asking for will not cost very much money and could be absolutely transformational in much of rural Britain.

Over the last 15 months of the covid crisis, a housing crisis in areas such as mine in the lakes and dales of Cumbria has turned from crisis to catastrophe. Members who have been monitoring the housing market will have noticed things similar to what has happened in my communities. We have seen an increase in the number of holiday lets in my constituency of 32%. From talking to dozens of estate agents across the county, I know that the proportion of houses purchased during this period that are going into the second-home market is anything from 40% to 80%. At the beginning of the crisis South Lakeland had an average household income of £26,000 and an average house price of £250,000, which shows a serious problem from the start. That problem has been massively exacerbated during this time.

What does that mean for our communities? Hospitality and tourism are critical to our economy and I am proud to stand behind them, but people involved in that industry know that vibrant communities are vital to the survival and strength of the lakes, the dales and the rest of Cumbria. The increasing proportion of homes in the second-home or holiday-let market means no permanent population. No permanent population means no kids at the local school, so the school closes. It means the loss of the post office, the pub and bus services. We end up with beautiful places that are empty. We must surely recognise that as utterly unacceptable.

I have provided some top-line statistics, but on an anecdotal level, people who pay £600 a month for a flat in a lakeland village are being kicked out so that the landlord can charge £1,000 a week for a holiday let. That is happening, and many people are calling it the lakeland clearances. Extreme circumstances require drastic responses if we are to level up here and not leave rural Britain behind.

I am pleased that the Government are closing the loophole that allows people to pretend that second homes are holiday lets, when they are not, and so avoid paying tax. That is a good thing. The Government, however, must accept some responsibility for the stamp duty holiday fuelling this crisis to a large degree, leading to a huge spike in purchases.

The really important thing for the Government to do is to change planning law. They need to ensure that holiday lets and second homes are distinct categories of planning use, so that local authorities can say that there are enough homes of that sort in the community and, therefore, protect it.

Bob Seely: I agree wholeheartedly. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that on the Isle of Wight, although there are not that many second homes on the Island as a whole, in some communities 80% of villages are second homes? It is a thoroughly excellent idea to require change of use for a second home or holiday let.

Tim Farron: That is a free measure the Government could take to have real power. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

The Welsh Government have given local authorities the power to increase council tax on second homes. The right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) talked about Gwynedd, which has been able to double the council tax on second-home owners in those areas. What has that done? It has provided a disincentive in some areas for excessive second-home ownership. It has also led to revenue that can be spent on supporting schools, post offices, buses and other local services, which are losing resource because of the lack of a permanent population. I call on the Minister to do something free but powerful.

Extreme circumstances that come about quickly require a response equally extreme and quick. If the Government are not to get a reputation for taking their eye off rural Britain and leaving rural communities behind—for example, leaving areas such as mine in level three for levelling up—they need to act, not in autumn or winter, but before the summer, to save my communities from the new clearances.

3.23 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I am incredibly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for calling this hugely important, timely and useful debate.

I had thought about how to lever North East Derbyshire into a debate about the Isle of Wight, but my hon. Friend drew the boundaries of the debate so generously that many of us can talk about our constituencies. I hope he will not mind my saying that one of his forefathers lived in North East Derbyshire—that was going to be

my way into the debate. In the century since his forefather lived in Wingerworth Hall, places such as North East Derbyshire and the Isle of Wight have been at the forefront of great change, tumult and, at times, great difficulty. That is the same in my part of the world as it is in his.

We went through a period of huge changes 40 years ago when the mines closed down. We have long-standing structural issues around skills and jobs, and ensuring that school leavers get the quality skills that allow them to thrive over many years. Pre-recession, we did not necessarily share in the benefits that came in the 1990s and 2000s, but we have made huge progress in the past four years. Some Members in this debate have—perhaps understandably—focused on greater challenges, but there is so much coming down the line. It is important that we understand that. We must recognise that in my constituency alone, there is a £25 million town deal for Clay Cross and a town deal for Staveley worth nearly £26 million. Those are huge opportunities for regeneration.

Broadband is being rolled out not only in places such as Stoke-on-Trent South, but in my constituency, as well to villages such as Spinkhill. We have finally moved on the Staveley bypass, which has been stuck for 80 years in design, and the Government enabled us to move that further along in the Budget before last. We are tackling congestion problems on the A61, we had the opportunity to bid to restore new rail for the Barrow Hill line, and we now have the quickest trains that we have ever had to London. Things are really on the up in many parts of the country, including North East Derbyshire, although there is much more to do.

My hon. Friend's question about what levelling up is is the most interesting and important part of the debate today. For me it is important to articulate the point that it is not all about money. We can have as much money as we want, but, ultimately, if that does not achieve anything for people and we do not focus on the outputs, it will not get us anywhere. We can put as many trains on as we want—I would like a lot more trains in my constituency—but if we put loads of trains on that nobody knows what to do with or where to go with them, or how to get to the jobs to transport them, it will have little meaningful effect.

We also have to emphasise the important point, which was lost in a few of today's contributions, that we have the ability to solve some of these problems ourselves. I congratulate places such as Killamarsh Parish Council for sorting out a 20-year problem with our sports centre and the council tax, which it managed to do on its own.

There is also a broader perspective and the important questions about future jobs. We can fix levelling up now for our constituencies, but if the hearts of our constituencies are to be ripped out by AI and automation and all of those challenges over the next 20 or 30 years, we must think about that as well. Where do we get the education and skills from? Process is important. We have to involve people in these debates and discussions. Lots has been done in North East Derbyshire, but there is lots more to do.

3.27 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Sir Edward, and to follow the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley).

I am wholeheartedly behind the Prime Minister in his calls for us to level up, and indeed the action behind those calls in the form of funding. I was grateful to hear that each region will receive a share of the funding to strengthen and enhance areas of excellence. In Northern Ireland, it not just a matter of what we could spend the money on; we have so many areas that are on the cusp of the next level. As the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire said, it is not just about the money; it is about how the money can help us build on what we have. That is what I will speak about.

We are widely considered to be Europe's cyber-security capital. We could easily take that to a global level if we invested more fully in our infrastructure and connectivity, and increased the number of tech placements and learning courses. We have the skills and a pool of available people, so we want to build on that. With more levelling up, we could take it to the next stage.

The film industry has taken off with the success of "Game of Thrones" and "Line of Duty", which featured Strangford lough in my constituency. It was always a challenge for me to find which part of Strangford lough it was on, but it was good to be able to put the two together. Anything from TV series to major film releases, based in any period of history or in the modern day, can be produced in Northern Ireland. Where better to find built-up cities, beautiful countryside and ocean views—we have it all. I say that unashamedly, and investment will certainly bring about dividends as we attract more global companies to our shores.

The agrifood sector is doing well and creating jobs, and the investment has been great. We have the highest standard of products. I look to Lakeland Dairies, Mash Direct and Rich Sauces, to name but a few global entities that are well-grounded and employing local people in large numbers to supply to China and America, as well as Europe. We have the product; we need the marketing and the support to see what level we can get to. Again, it is about levelling up what we have.

We have not even scratched the surface in exploring the tourism potential we have, from spa breaks to second holidays, from walking groups to cruise ship stop-offs, from water sports to mountain hikes, from high-end boutiques to antique treasure troves. We have much to offer. With a bit of levelling up, our borders will not be able to contain the volume of visitors flocking to our shores. With levelling up, we can build on what we have. We need to level up our connectivity and disengage from Tourism Ireland. We need an entity concerned only with promoting what we have to offer in Northern Ireland. I challenge anyone who has come to Northern Ireland to say that it was not more than they expected.

We must also give local councils the ability to get funding to host more global events, such as the golf opens and other sporting events. Northern Ireland is also awash with culture—we have such a tale to tell and we need to attract investment to match that. Again, we must level up.

In the short time allocated me, I have indicated three diverse areas in which we are ripe to level up, and yet the funding allocated cannot carry out all the work. The infrastructure work required is immense and our connectivity requirements are huge, but so too will be the reward. I therefore ask the Minister, whom I greatly respect, and the Government to deliver our share of the funding. If they do so, everyone in Northern Ireland

[Jim Shannon]

will benefit, operating at the top level at which we are designed to operate. We are already levelling up; we need that extra bit to level up and do even more.

3.30 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for securing this debate. Although the sentiments behind the levelling-up fund are laudable at first glance, it has a profound and far-reaching effect on the devolution settlements and the democratically elected Governments of each of the devolved nations. Alongside the UK shared prosperity fund, which also breaches the devolution settlements and UK Government promises, the way in which the levelling-up fund is to be administered encroaches on devolved areas in unconstitutional and unacceptable ways.

It is all very well for the UK Government to huff and puff and protest that the devolved nations should shut up and be grateful for the boundless munificence of their paternalism, but funding should not be tied to riding a coach and horses through the democratically elected Governments of these nations, and nor should it be designed to undermine the democratically established Parliaments in each of these nations.

For the UK Government to reject that analysis plays to the agenda not of levelling up but of exerting undue power and influence over democratic institutions, the very existence of which is due to democratic support for them. These Parliaments in Wales and Scotland were designed, in part at least, to address the democratic deficit that has existed between those nations and Westminster Governments. How does attempting to circumvent, undermine and emasculate those institutions address that democratic deficit?

Yesterday the Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government gave the game away, because he accepted that there is no formal requirement for local authorities to work with the Scottish Government on devolved policy areas, and that this levelling-up fund is “about local authorities and communities working directly with the UK Government”.—[*Official Report*, 14 June 2021; Vol. 697, c. 13.]

Given that this work goes to the heart of devolved powers, that is quite an admission. The idea that each different local authority will submit bids for much-needed funds does not in any way negate the cynicism and political opportunism in the way in which this fund is being distributed, as indicated by my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). This is piecemeal stuff, with no strategic thinking whatsoever.

The Scottish Government expected £400 million in consequential from this fund, but that is now to be decided by the UK Government sitting in Whitehall. How that money will be deployed across local authorities is a nonsense and offensive. There will be no opportunity for a regionalised, Scotland-wide approach. The competitive nature of this process will set authority against authority, while we know that the most effective way of boosting local economies requires collaborative working.

Why does the Minister believe that Ministers and civil servants in Whitehall, with little or no detailed knowledge of Scotland or her local authority areas, are equipped

to judge the merits of competing bids? If levelling up was truly the agenda, why would they not build into that process the strategic expertise of the Scottish Government and local MSPs? Funding should be allocated by formula instead of competitive bidding. That would improve transparency and guarantee support for those places most in need, as pointed out by the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), representing Plaid Cymru.

As it stands, bids will be at the mercy of the whims of this Tory Government and which local authorities are able to submit the best bid—not those most in need. Given the towns fund, will the bids be judged according to which are considered to be the best—whatever that means? Who knows? There is every reason to fear that the bids may be subject to the same pork barrel politics that we have seen in all its glory in the towns fund.

Despite the fact that the Tories have a majority on the Public Accounts Committee, it has delivered a damning verdict on the Tory towns fund, saying that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has

“not been open about the process it followed and it did not disclose the reasoning for selecting or excluding towns”

for funding. Despite the Government’s refusal even to acknowledge that and other damning verdicts and concerns about the Tory towns fund, we are now expected to believe—and, better still, trust—that the levelling-up fund will be shiny, new and bright and we need not worry about transparency because, as the Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government said in the main Chamber yesterday:

“The answer to that is that it is all published on gov.uk and it has been for months now.”—[*Official Report*, 14 June 2021; Vol. 697, c. 14.]

I do not know about you, Sir Edward, but if it is published on a website, I am certainly reassured.

The fact is that this Government have shown that they cannot be trusted to deliver this funding in a transparent way and it has been deliberately designed to undermine the devolved Parliaments. The good people of Scotland and Wales are not so easily fooled as the Tory Government seem to think, which is why they reject Tory Governments repeatedly—at every opportunity. Since the Brexit vote took place, this Government have taken to themselves the power to take decisions on spending, economic development, infrastructure, culture, sporting activities, domestic educational and training activities and educational exchanges, and this fund will further allow the UK Government to bypass devolved decision making and override the democratic process for allocating spending in Scotland. That means that more than £100 million a year could be spent in areas that are usually devolved to the Scottish Parliament.

In this Government’s ham-fisted attempt to undermine devolution, they are in fact cementing support for independence in Scotland. If devolution is indeed the opportunity to do things differently, that opportunity is being eroded bit by bit by this Government, who seem desperate to govern devolved areas in Scotland. They could govern those devolved areas if only they could win an election in Scotland, but they have given up on that, and we see now an agenda to undermine the very institution that the people of Scotland will not vote to permit them to control—the Scottish Parliament.

Of course, every local authority will wish to bid for levelling-up funding. Why on earth would they not? But the towns fund shows that we are wise to be concerned about the transparency of this process. We know that the real agenda on the devolved nations is cynical, to say the least. Any local authority in Scotland and Wales receiving money from this fund will be expected to doff its cap in gratitude for the munificence and benevolence of the UK Government, but the UK Government need to understand that riding roughshod over our democratic institutions, which have huge support from those living in the devolved nations, cannot be excused by fanfare about funding that is not new. We are not so easily bought, and our democratic institutions, including our Scottish Parliament, cannot be so easily bought. Nor can trust in this Government be bought. Some things, such as democracy and trust, are not commodities; they are values and principles, and this Government would do well to remember that.

3.38 pm

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in a debate that you are chairing, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this debate. In his opening remarks, we heard about the very full set of interventions that he believes are needed to fix challenges in his constituency, including jobs, transport, education, housing, long-term economic development and so on.

The hon. Gentleman rightly highlighted the decade of under-investment and the impact that that has had. I know he said that he would not speak later in the debate, but I wanted to ask him who he thinks is responsible for that decade of under-investment and whether he can see in this room a Minister from the party that has been in charge for the past 11 years—because meeting those challenges will need a level of sustained investment in devolution that goes well beyond the one pot of money that is currently on offer in the form of the levelling-up fund. One pot of money will not undo the 11 years of real-terms cuts to public services, stagnating real wages and inadequate investment in the future. One pot of money will not change our country when decisions will still be taken in Westminster by Conservative Ministers, rather than democratically in our communities by locally elected politicians.

As my hon. Friends have set out, far more comprehensive change is needed. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) explained how local government must be in the driving seat and have the resources it needs, and my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) set out the importance of having real determination to invest in the future of all people in this country. It is also telling that as we engage in this debate, my hon. Friends the Members for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) are in the main Chamber right now, pressing the Chancellor and the Treasury to come clean on why they blocked the comprehensive plans put forward by Sir Kevan Collins, the Prime Minister's appointment as education recovery commissioner. The truth is that the Government's decisions on education recovery are very far from achieving anything that looks like levelling up.

When the chips are down—and after months of school closures, the chips are very much down for the children of this country—the choices that Governments make betray the reality behind the rhetoric. We are in no doubt that the Government have chosen to betray a generation. Their expert commissioner set out plans that matched the scale of the challenge, focusing on extending the school day, improving teaching and targeted tutoring. In February the Prime Minister promised that no child would be left behind, and Sir Kevan's proposals sought to make that a lived reality for our children in the years ahead. Drawing on research from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the proposals were informed by the knowledge that urgent, sustained and multi-year expenditure on children's educational recovery has the biggest impact on those who are furthest behind.

That would indeed have been levelling up. Instead, the plans that have been announced are but a truly pale shadow of the programme we need. The money announced is a tiny proportion of the money invested for the same purpose in the Netherlands and the United States, and my colleagues and I refuse to believe that Dutch and American children are five or 10 times more deserving of sustained Government support than British children.

As the Financial Secretary is due to speak shortly, I want to pick up briefly on a discussion that he and I had yesterday in the main Chamber relating to the G7 communiqué, which the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) mentioned and which I believe is also relevant to this debate. A key part of any levelling-up agenda for our country must include the Government doing all they can to create a level playing field for British businesses that pay their fair share of tax, by preventing them from being undercut by a few large multinationals that do not.

I asked the Minister and his colleague three times yesterday to explain why the UK Government's position has been to push for a global minimum corporate tax rate of 15% rather than to back the ambitious 21% proposed by President Biden. The Minister said it was

"completely inappropriate for a Minister to comment".—[*Official Report*, 14 June 2021; Vol. 697, c. 50.]

However, the Exchequer Secretary, who I think spoke after the Minister had left the main Chamber, seemed quite happy to defend the Government's backing of 15%. She said that it was settled on because it would leave

"appropriate room for countries to use corporation tax as a lever".—[*Official Report*, 14 June 2021; Vol. 697, c. 70.]

There we have it: an admission that the UK Government supported a lower rate thanks to a desire to keep alive the possibility of a future race to the bottom.

This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for an ambitious global deal to prevent large multinationals from avoiding paying their fair share of tax, but our Government are letting it slip away. That is a shocking failure. Had they supported an ambitious 21% deal, that would have brought in an extra £131 million a week for public services in this country, while preventing a few large multinationals from undercutting British businesses that pay their fair share of tax. That would have been levelling up.

Lastly, I want to ask Conservative Members why they think this country needs levelling up. It has been 11 years since a Labour Prime Minister left Downing Street, and 11 years since a Labour Budget spread power, income

[James Murray]

and opportunity across the country. For 11 long years, spending decisions in this country have been under the control of the Conservative party, leaders chosen by Conservative Members, and Conservative Chancellors.

Jack Brereton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Murray: I am just about to finish. There have been 11 years of real-terms cuts in so many public services, stagnating real wages and inadequate investment in meeting the challenges of the future—11 years in which so many of the problems that we face have been ignored and their solutions underfunded. We can only conclude that levelling up is a nebulous, undeveloped and yet-to-be honoured attempt by the Conservative party to address the problems that it has created.

3.44 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, as it was to serve under your predecessor, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), when she was in the Chair. I thank her very much for stepping into the breach.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this debate. It is testimony to the importance of the issue and the breadth of the debate that he has created that so many colleagues have made interventions and speeches today—and very welcome they were, too. I am replying for the Government on behalf of the Exchequer Secretary.

My hon. Friend is right that this is a very important public issue. It has been the mission of this Government to seek to overcome geographical disparities—disparities of prosperity and of opportunity—and to do so through what we have called levelling up.

By and large, this has been a very good debate and generally good mannered. I think everyone would acknowledge that it has been a bit of a gallop, given the number of speeches, but that is testimony to the huge interest in the topic. I congratulate colleagues who have passed the conversational baton seamlessly from one to another on the vigorous and effective way in which they have put on the public record their own local concerns. I will talk a little about the wider agenda before turning to some of those contributions.

It is plain that the Government believe in the substance and the importance of levelling up. What does that mean? It will mean different things in different places, but the core idea is that everyone should have access to good jobs, good wages and good economic prospects, wherever they live, whether that be in Barnet, Birmingham, Bolton, Bristol or, indeed, Bembridge.

It is built into the energy of our society that at different parts of their lives many people will want to move to different parts of the country to seek work and opportunities, but some may not wish to do so and many will not. We want people to be able to take pride in their local areas and to see them as vibrant, exciting places to live their lives and build their livelihoods. That is at the heart of levelling up and that is why the Government announced a series of significant policy measures designed to begin a longer-term process of redressing geographical imbalances.

Those measures include, as has rightly been touched on, freeports, which are going to be an important catalyst for regional economic growth. We want them to be magnets for innovative businesses, to provide a platform to generate the greater prosperity that will revitalise each area, and to create great jobs and great economic growth.

At the Budget, the Government announced the locations of eight freeports across England, ranging from Teesside in the north-east, to the Solent, close to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight. That is a potentially very significant intervention, but they are only one part of a wider picture, which is, of course, infrastructure.

Last year we published a national infrastructure strategy that contemplates £600 billion of investment over the next few years—half from the private sector, half from the public sector. Very high levels of capital investment are already being made in many different areas up and down the country, including in roads, through the road investment strategy, in railway, through High Speed 2 and other works, and in many other modes of transport and activities. The transforming cities fund has done a huge amount to support cycling, walking and greener transport across the country.

That investment also includes the towns fund. One or two colleagues have been rather dismissive of the towns fund, and wrongly so. One cannot say that there has been inadequate transparency but then grumble when the details of the fund and the methodology by which the selections were made have been put on the internet for all to review or interrogate. The fund itself is turning out to be a remarkably effective and interesting way to build a holistic local platform for economic growth, because it is not something that can be dominated by local authorities. It requires voluntary and private sector leadership to work with local authorities and, in doing so, bring the best ideas to the table, build long-term pipelines, pump-primed with public money, that will, certainly in many cases, last for years. It is going to prove to have been a very important intervention.

It goes a long way, picking up the point made by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on the importance of supporting rural areas. I come from a rural area myself, in Herefordshire, and I am keenly aware of that. He will be aware that although many of the effects of covid will be, in some respects, negative, they will also be positive effects. People will move out of cities, often at earlier points in their lives, to conduct effective and successful careers, no longer fettered by geography as they might have been, adding new energy and vibrancy to areas that are already vibrant. That is another good thing, in many ways.

We are working on the creation of the new UK infrastructure bank, which will be an important intervention. We will announce its launch soon, but many details are already available for colleagues to look at on the internet. It is designed to act as a cornerstone investor for infrastructure projects, to partner with the private sector and local government to develop major infrastructure projects, with the twin goals of green growth and levelling up.

The bank will act across Government as a place to pool expertise, so that people can pick up the phone and get a cross-governmental view about how projects should be financed, which will itself be very important. It will

prep and prepare important development work in sectors of green economic growth that we have not yet seen—for example, hydrogen for powering the next generation of transport or potentially for home heating, carbon capture and storage, and the like. About a third of the initial £12 billion in funding for the new UK infrastructure bank will be earmarked for local and mayoral authorities, which will make a huge difference. If we can, as we anticipate, then crowd in private sector investment, that will make a remarkable difference.

It is important not to talk about levelling up without mentioning some of the most important aspects of it, which are to do with skills and training. The Chamber will know about the work we have done on the lifetime skills guarantee, on employer-led skills retraining and on apprenticeships. They all point to a holistic approach, designed to tie skills and infrastructure together, with a local perspective that brings a fuller understanding of local needs to bear.

Bob Seely: I thank the Minister for his extensive response. That brings to the fore one of the problems here. When he stood up, he said he would answer to the Exchequer section, or the economic section, but who is leading? How are Government going to deal with a coherent, integrated approach that brings in everything from landscape protection to stamp duty for second home owners, to the skills and education agenda, to immediate economic progress? Who is dealing with that?

Jesse Norman: Of course, my hon. Friend is right to point to this. In many cases, the core is going to be effective local leadership that brings the different elements together. As a Member of Parliament, he knows that the stronger towns fund has shown that energy can be brought in. For example, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government can have a view on the housing aspect of a stronger towns fund bid, and what expertise and expectation will be there. The same is true of other aspects of Government. It may be a bid with a heavy environmental component or a heavy transport component.

Government also need to be joined up. At the Treasury, I lead on the national infrastructure, but on levelling up specifically it is the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch), who leads—she would be here under normal circumstances, but she is in Committee at the moment. However, she and I work closely on this issue, as my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight would imagine.

I turn to some of the points that have been made. My hon. Friend rightly highlighted aspects of his own bid, including East Cowes and Newport. I could not hear him talk about the development of the Isle of Wight without thinking about my own uncle Desmond, one of the founders of Britten-Norman, who designed the aircraft whose wings came off in “Spectre,” the James Bond movie, and that went skiing as a result, which was built on the Isle of Wight. Indeed, he was one of the developers of the first hovercraft, the Cushioncraft. I am well aware of the technology and the genius of the Islanders and the espoused Islanders, one of whom Desmond certainly was.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) mentioned the importance of local authorities. She is right about that. They have been a very important part

of stronger towns fund bids. It is quite interesting when local opinion is surveyed about the public services delivered locally. Whatever one may think about the local authority funding settlement, which was very generous in the past year and before that in many cases, it has not led to a perceived reduction in public services—quite the opposite. In many local areas, public services are regarded as having gone up in quality over the past 10 years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) talked about skills. He was absolutely right and I thank him for that. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke talked about the importance of women and gender equality. That was absolutely right and I salute what she said, because that is an important part of levelling up. There is some wonderful evidence from India, where they looked at the effect of women mayors and leaders in villages. It turns out that, based on the regressions that economists have done, women leaders in those contexts have been more co-operative, more effective and less prone to forms of corruption than their male alternatives. That is an important lesson that we will reflect on.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) invited Ministers to bed and breakfast—a very fine offer that will receive deep consideration in the Treasury—for which I thank him very much indeed. My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) reminded us that Stonehenge would never have been built if they had to drag the stones down the A303. I fully concur, having been more or less parked outside Stonehenge, as have many others.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) talked about the bid that he is putting in for the levelling-up fund. I congratulate him on that and encourage all Members to do that, because the levelling-up funding will be a very important national initiative. I have touched on the remarks of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale. I am glad he mentioned cutting out the loophole on holiday lets, because that was important. I hope he also noticed the speed with which we acted on that, because the tax process is never an instant thing, but we have moved as quickly as we could, given the circumstances, to try to address the issue. Obviously, it has become particularly important in the context of covid.

Tim Farron: Once the announcement was made, they did act swiftly, but I first raised the issue with the then junior planning Minister, who is now the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It took quite a long time to get to the stage where they made the announcement, but I thank the Minister anyway.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Minister, could you please give the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) a couple of minutes to make his closing remarks?

Jesse Norman: I think I have 30 seconds before we get to that point.

Bob Seely: I am very happy not to speak again.

Jesse Norman: I will end in 26 seconds to allow my hon. Friend plenty of time to speak.

I want to engage quickly with the points made by Opposition Members. It is not paternalistic of the UK Government to wish to take a view and to support

[Jesse Norman]

people up and down the country. It is not paternalistic of the UK Government to offer enormous support for the devolved Administrations on an agreed basis, as we have done in a time of crisis. It is not paternalistic for this country's collective resilience to have seen Scotland through three periods of crisis in the last 15 years: the financial crisis of 2008, the fall of the oil price and most lately in covid, which might have had disastrous effects but for our collective resilience.

In answer to the hon. Member for Ealing North (James Murray) quickly, it is not appropriate for me to accuse another Member of Parliament of hypocrisy, but I remind him that this Government are raising corporation tax from 19% to 25%. On 24 February, he himself said, in relation to the Budget and the question of corporation tax, that

"we don't want to see tax rises—this is not the time to do that".

I do not think he is in any position to lecture the Government about corporation tax.

3.58 pm

Bob Seely: I thank everyone for taking part in the debate. I thank the Minister for his eloquent and detailed responses, and I thank you, Sir Edward, and my right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), for your chairmanship.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Thank you for a very good debate on the levelling-up fund—I wish that Gainsborough could get some of the levelling-up fund too, but that is not for me to say.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the levelling up agenda.

3.59 pm

Sitting suspended.

New Airedale Hospital

4.6 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered a new Airedale Hospital.

I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting this urgent debate—it is urgent for reasons that I will outline in my speech—and giving me the opportunity to continue my campaign in this place for a new Airedale Hospital in my constituency. I would also like to record my thanks to the Minister, who has met me on multiple occasions to allow me to raise the issue with him.

I am lucky enough to represent a diverse constituency. My constituency is home to different towns, different communities and, with that, different challenges. Yet one thing that I hear from all four corners of my constituency—be it in Keighley, Ilkley, Silverstone, Worth Valley or any other part—is that Airedale Hospital needs and deserves a rebuild. I am not alone, because the issue is being raised by many constituents.

Airedale Hospital serves a huge catchment that reaches right up into the Yorkshire Dales and into Lancashire, serving many residents in West Yorkshire. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), whose constituents benefit directly from the hospital's services, is also fully behind my campaign for a new rebuild, as are my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) and my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson). They have all worked tirelessly with me on our joint endeavour to secure the hospital long into the future. Even the Chancellor's constituents use the Airedale.

I will outline the background and explain why my ask for a rebuild of the hospital is urgent and very important to our communities. The Airedale employs over 3,500 members of staff and volunteers, serving a population of 200,000 while providing training and education, creating lifelong careers for many of my constituents. The hospital was opened in 1970, construction having started in the 1960s. The original life expectancy of the 1960s build was only 30 years, but last year we celebrated the hospital's 50th birthday.

Like many buildings constructed in the 1960s, the hospital is constructed predominantly from reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, or RAAC—aerated concrete for short. That material is widely known for its structural deficiencies. A staggering 83% of the hospital is made from this material, including the roof—the Airedale has the largest NHS hospital flat roof in the country, compared with any other NHS asset. That does not help when you take into account our lovely Yorkshire weather. Given our geography, our area where the Airedale Hospital is situated is one of the wettest areas in the UK. Coupled with its 1960s-design flat roof, that means that the Airedale unfortunately experiences more leaks than any other hospital in the country, creating challenges with water pooling, which of course increases the weight on the concrete roof panels. It also means that the flat roof soaks up the hot summer sun, and years of heat, rain and frost through the tough winter months have all taken their toll on the current design of the building.

While many of these 1960s constructions have come and gone, Airedale Hospital remains. It is thought to be the oldest aerated concrete hospital in the UK. Aerated

concrete is present in the roof and walls, and the hospital is the only NHS trust asset that has aerated concrete in its floor panels. In fact, in total the hospital has over 50,000 aerated concrete panels, which is five times more than any other hospital affected by reinforced aerated concrete design.

Aerated concrete is known to have about one 20th of the strength of normal concrete. The Building Research Establishment has identified that aerated concrete roof panels are prone to fail when deflections between 50 mm and 90 mm come about. It is deeply concerning that Airedale Hospital has identified a significant number of aerated concrete panels with deflections approaching that threshold.

Time is of the essence. I cannot stress enough to the Minister how important and urgent this is. The warning signs are there for everybody to see, hence my lobbying hard with colleagues for a complete new rebuild of the Airedale Hospital, so that we can completely remove the risks of aerated concrete construction. My worry is that no matter how much surveying and mitigation works are undertaken, all we are doing is delaying the potential risk of a collapse at a later date.

The Minister will be well aware, from our previous conversations, of a school in Scotland where the roof, constructed by aerated concrete, unexpectedly collapsed in May 2019. Fortunately, no one was injured or killed, but that was a matter of timing and luck, nothing else. The collapse was not due to mislaid bricks or improper contracting. The Standing Committee on Structural Safety concluded in its report:

“The cause of the collapse was a shear failure due to inadequate bearing following some structural alterations made by the school. The failure was triggered by outfall gutters becoming blocked which allowed ponding of water on the roof to quickly build up during a storm”.

I understand from previous reports by the Building Research Establishment that it was thought that aerated concrete planks gave adequate warning through visual deterioration before failing. However, recent failings, including the school roof collapse in Scotland in May 2019, showed that this can no longer be relied on. It is therefore necessary to reconsider maintenance and inspection regimes. In fact, the same Committee issued an alert stating that pre-1980 aerated concrete panels

“are now past their expected service life”.

I reiterate that my hospital was built in the 1960s.

The reality is that the longer the hospital remains in its current state, the greater the possibility that such a tragic event could happen, if action is not taken. Should there be such a collapse, even if only in one small part of the hospital, imagine the consequences: the impact on life, services and the day-to-day operations of our much-loved hospital.

I have had several visits to the hospital since becoming an MP, including going on to the roof to see the issues for myself. I also visited parts of the hospital that are currently closed to the public, sealed off for reasons directly linked to mitigating the risk from the fact that the hospital is built from aerated concrete.

When one thinks of how much we rely on the NHS every day, particularly over the past year, the idea of any hospital, or even just a small part of it, having to shut its doors temporarily really hits home. Members of Airedale's trust have also made it clear to me their fear

of a loss of public confidence in the hospital, given its structural deficiencies. Such a loss of confidence would be through no fault of their own. They have a brilliant team and I have been working incredibly closely with them. However, it demonstrates why the problem must be dealt with as soon as possible. The more time goes on without acting, the greater the risk of structural failure.

What is currently being done to mitigate such risk? The Airedale NHS Foundation Trust performs several procedures to try and mitigate the dangers created by aerated concrete. It carries out regular inspections of the hospital, but those inspections have found more than 500 related structural failure incidents caused by aerated concrete, including 27 cracked concrete panels, 327 roof leaks and one incident of falling debris. The trust is regularly forced to make changes within the hospital to deal with those problems and ensure that it can operate.

During the winter months, the trust must act quickly to remove rainwater and snow to prevent the flat roof from leaking and ensure that gully drains remain unblocked. As one would expect, that work comes at significant cost and the trust has already had approval for emergency funding of £15 million, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. The backlog maintenance for the site currently stands at £480 million, making it financially unviable to consider removing or replacing aerated concrete from the existing structure.

Of course, it is not just about the maintenance cost; it is also about the impact on healthcare service. The trust has predicted that if a temporary closure were to happen, 45,000 referrals to treatment across West Yorkshire and Harrogate would be delayed. Some 60,000 diagnostic tests and procedures, including MRI scans and ultrasound therapy treatments, and 2,000 maternity deliveries would also be affected. Overall, the trust has estimated that if an emergency closure were to happen, up to 346,000 patients across the local area could be affected. Those are chilling figures that make a new Airedale Hospital a necessity.

A modular approach has been suggested and provides a potential means to regenerate Airedale Hospital, in line with the Department for Health's commitment to eradicating aerated concrete from NHS buildings by 2035. In my view, while that is an option, it comes with significant challenges in terms of structural connectivity with existing parts of the building—not to mention the impact on the provision of healthcare services. We cannot forget that the trust's independent structural engineers' report warns that the hospital's aerated concrete panels must be replaced by no later than 2030, which is in only nine years' time. I make my case and I know that the Minister, with whom I have had many a meeting and conversation, gets my concerns. However, we need action and we need to make decisions now.

As I continue to lobby with my right hon. and hon. neighbours, Airedale Hospital continues to provide an incredible service to many of my constituents in Keighley and Ilkley, as well as the wider area. A service delivered by incredible doctors and nurses, and other NHS staff, with a real sense of duty. At this point, I must extend my personal thanks to Brendan Brown, the chief executive of the Airedale NHS Foundation Trust, and his team, and of course I also thank Friends of Airedale, a fantastic local charity whose volunteers do so much to help staff and patients.

[Robbie Moore]

We need to look ahead at what the next stage is for Airedale Hospital. I am delighted to say that the trust has provided an ambitious, detailed and affordable plan for a complete new rebuild that we can make into a reality. The proposals are convenient, in that they would not disrupt the current workings of Airedale Hospital in the same way the current problems do, or in the same way that any sticking-plaster approach would. A strategic outline case was completed in January 2021, when a full appraisal recommended that the most cost-effective and future-proof solution would be to build a new hospital for Airedale within the 43-acre grounds owned by the trust. That work could be completed in as little as three years from sign-off.

These are exciting plans, with a strong environmental case. The Airedale trust's vision is to create Europe's first carbon-neutral and fully digitally enabled hospital, with the capabilities to generate renewable energy on site. The financial, environmental and practical case for a new Airedale hospital is clear for all to see, and I am delighted to invite the Minister to come and join me, chief executive Brendan Brown and his brilliant team for a visit to the Airedale, so that we can continue our discussions and get some concrete commitment from him that a new rebuild is the way forward.

Of course, I welcome the announcement that the Government will invest in another eight new-build hospitals, but we want to have an update now on how and when we will be able to bid for this funding, and to know whether those eight places will be ring-fenced for NHS trusts with hospitals that have the highest risk profile.

I will end by sending a message that is loud and clear to the Minister. I cannot stress enough the urgency of this issue and the desperate need for clarity now, so that we can take matters forward in a sensible manner and so that we are not simply throwing good money after bad. I am not in the game of seeking a make-do or half-hearted approach to solve this challenge. Given the facts, the high structural risk profile of the Airedale hospital—the highest of any hospital in the UK—the solution I seek is a complete new rebuild to eliminate any risk and to provide the healthcare service at the Airedale site long into the future for many generations to come.

4.21 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): I have known you a very long time, Sir Edward, so it is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this place.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) on securing this debate. I know that since his election to this House, he has worked tirelessly for his constituency, not just on healthcare matters but in representing all of his constituents' needs, particularly, in the context of my role within Government, on the issue of the hospital estate at Airedale.

Quite rightly and justifiably, my hon. Friend thanked the team there and I hope that he will allow me to join him in doing so. I ask him to pass on to them my thanks for everything they have done, not just during the past extraordinary 18 months, when they have been amazing, but year in and year out. They do so not only for his constituents but for those of the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member

for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), and of course my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). I know that all of them join with him in pressing the case for a rebuild of Airedale General Hospital.

In a sense, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley is also putting his money where his mouth is, because, if I correctly recall my reading of *Keighley News*, one of the things that he is doing—he is certainly a braver, or at least fitter, man than I to do it—is running 100 km in, I think, 10 weeks, to raise money for a number of charities, including Friends of Airedale, which he rightly paid tribute to. I wish him all the very best with that.

As my hon. Friend alluded to, I had the pleasure of meeting him and other local MPs back in February to discuss this important matter; indeed, he and I have spoken about it on several occasions. Since his election to the House, he has never missed an opportunity to lobby me, very politely but firmly, and to raise this issue with the Secretary of State and I, on behalf of his constituents.

My hon. Friend set out the history of the hospital site and quite rightly highlighted the vital issue, which is the fact that reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—the light form of concrete used primarily for roofs from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s—is the key component part of these buildings. He also quite rightly highlighted the limited durability of RAAC roofs, saying that it has been long recognised but that recent experience suggests the problem may be more serious than previously appreciated.

My hon. Friend also highlighted in his comments that surveying is continuing at Airedale General Hospital to assess fully the extent and condition of the RAAC planks, and I believe that completion of that survey is expected in the coming months. I have asked to be updated when that full survey becomes available. However, I understand that preliminary survey findings have found issues relating to the deflection of rack panels, which I know caused his trust concern.

I fully recognise the need to invest in improving health infrastructure across the country. These safety risks are no different, and my hon. Friend emphasised the urgency of this. At the spending review 2020, courtesy of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, we provided the NHS with £4.2 billion in 2021 for operational capital investment to allow hospitals to maintain and refurbish their infrastructure, including a £110 million ring-fenced allocation to address the most serious and immediate risks posed by RAAC planks. Within that ring-fenced allocation, as my hon. Friend mentioned, is a significant multimillion-pound allocation earmarked to mitigate RAAC risks at his local hospital. That will go towards re-roofing, as well as decant facilities while work is under way, helping to improve safety for patients and staff. We will continue to review business cases and progress at RAAC-affected trusts, including his, to ensure that we make the full and best use of all those funds over the coming year.

My hon. Friend highlights an important point: at what point does fixing or mitigating something cost more than actually eliminating the risk by having a modern, fit-for-purpose facility going forward? I fully recognise the need to mitigate RAAC risk beyond this year, alongside further investment in mitigation, which I have

to confess will be a matter for my right hon Friends the Chief Secretary of the Treasury and Chancellor in the spending review. My hon. Friend would not expect me to pre-empt them, as that can sometimes have unfortunate consequences.

My hon. Friend will know, in that context, that RAAC remediation is not the only area we are investing in at Airedale, because of course on top of that the foundation trust received just shy of £250,000 to upgrade its emergency department from the wider package of £450 million for A&E improvements announced last year by the Prime Minister. Last year, the trust also received a £1.7 million allocation to address backlog maintenance at Airedale General Hospital from the £600 million critical infrastructure risk fund.

Of course, my hon. Friend wants me to speak about the future. He highlighted his strong campaign for investment in a new hospital for his constituents beyond the investment we are making to manage and mitigate the immediate risks. As he will be aware, the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary confirmed that 40 new hospitals will be built by 2030, with funding of £3.7 billion confirmed for the first tranche. I know my hon. Friend was disappointed that Airedale was not in that first tranche, but as is typical of him—ever undaunted—he continued his campaign to persuade the Government with ever-renewed vigour. I can offer him some hope on that, in terms of the prospects for the eight hospitals to which he referred.

An open process will be run to identify those eight further new schemes, delivering on the Government's manifesto commitment. He asked a couple of specific questions about those, which I will endeavour, in so far as I can, to answer now. The details of this, the criteria and how that process will be run are due to be announced soon, with a generous period for trusts and sustainability and transformation plan and integrated care system partners to respond. To put a little bit more colour on that, I hope that we will be able to make that announcement of the process before the summer recess. I will of course keep him fully aware of progress on that.

My hon. Friend also asked about funding and how it might be allocated. Again, with the caveat that I cannot pre-empt any spending review announcement and the Chancellor's decision on that, I would not anticipate that all eight of those would be ring-fenced for hospitals such as his. However, I would say, which I think will encourage him, that clearly one of the key criteria and considerations in the allocation of whatever funding is made available will have to be safety considerations and the urgency of any need for a new hospital. That will not be the only factor, but I reassure him that the Secretary of State and I will bear that very much in mind. I also reassure him that any trusts that receive and spend money in the interim to mitigate safety issues will not find that having undertaken that work will in any way count against them in a bid for a new hospital. It will be fairly and openly considered. I am sure the points he has made will be reflected in that.

We continue to work closely with trusts and regions to ensure that the criteria for selection best meets the needs of the NHS both nationally and locally and, of course, achieves value for money for the taxpayer. In that context, those schemes that we will consider will be based on the balance of benefits realised for staff, patients and local communities, condition—going to the safety point—and affordability and value for money.

As part of a national programme, seeking to achieve value for money, we will look for a greater degree of standardisation across those new hospitals, with modern methods of construction and modular builds, where appropriate. I note my hon. Friend's points and, should we get to that point, I suspect he will want to be engaged in the discussions to ensure we get value for money. Were his hospital to get the go-ahead, it would also deliver what is needed locally. As my hon. Friend touched on in his speech, we are looking for new hospitals to be digitally fit for the future, clean, green and sustainable.

I suspect my hon. Friend will continue, until I, the Secretary of State or the Chancellor relent, to make the firm case for Airedale's inclusion in our hospital building programme of those next eight. I very much look forward to seeing the bids for the remaining slots when the time comes for them to be submitted. I suspect, though I cannot pre-empt it, that his hospital might be one of those bids that I see put forward by the trusts.

In conclusion, as ever I want to commend my hon. Friend's work to raise support for Airedale hospital, and personally raise money for the friends of the hospital. On numerous occasions in this House, he has raised the estate issues faced by his hospital. We are taking action in the short term to help mitigate those risks, but he continues to make the case for the long term. His constituents are incredibly lucky to have a Member of Parliament who is so assiduous and determined in carrying out his role in representing them to Government and in this place.

He kindly invited me to sunny Airedale—hopefully sunny, if I go in summer—to visit the hospital and the trust, and I would be delighted to take him up on that. He may face the challenge, given my risk of vertigo, of getting me up on the roof, though I suspect that will not deter him from trying to persuade me to see the issues for myself. I am happy to come and visit him and other right hon. and hon. Friends in the area.

More broadly, I look forward to continuing to work closely with my hon Friend; my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon; the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle; and my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, in seeking to deliver on the Government's ambition of levelling up and improving the NHS services available across the country to our constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

4.32 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 and Loneliness

4.50 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered covid-19 and loneliness.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I am pleased to have secured this debate on covid-19 and loneliness during Loneliness Awareness Week. It is a chance for each of us not only to think about the issue, but to remember to take clear action to address loneliness as organisations and individuals. It comes a day after we heard that some covid-19 restrictions will continue, which may extend the period for some people.

It is appropriate that we have this debate today, the day before the fifth anniversary of the murder of our colleague, Jo Cox MP. I did not know Jo personally—I was not in the House at that time—but I know how people have spoken of her and the tremendous work that the Jo Cox Foundation is doing as part of her legacy, with the Great Get Together bringing so many people together for a chat in many different communities, making those connections and taking real action on loneliness. Of course, there is the important work carried out by the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, which was so influential in the development of the Government's loneliness strategy.

Sadly, loneliness is common, and its negative effects are wide-ranging and complex. Even before the pandemic, between 8% and 18% of adults in the UK reported feeling lonely often. An estimated 200,000 older people regularly went without having a conversation with a friend or relative for over a month. Although loneliness is often thought of as an older person's issue, it can and does affect people of all ages. Young people aged between 18 and 24 consistently report the highest levels of loneliness, and the numbers have increased over the past year, as we have all been so much more isolated during the pandemic.

According to the Office for National Statistics, around 7.2% of adults—3.7 million people—reported feeling lonely often or always in the period between October 2020 and February 2021. According to research by the Red Cross, around two in five—39% of UK adults—say that they do not think their feelings of loneliness will go away after the coronavirus crisis is over, and a third say that they are concerned about being able to connect with people in person in the way they did prior to the pandemic. Finally, more than a third of people feel less connected to their local community than they did before covid-19. That is a sobering thought.

Last Friday, I had the opportunity to visit Gateshead Carers, an organisation that supports unpaid carers, who spend so much of their time looking after others at home. While I was there, I met Irene and Trish. As it happens, they were meeting each other for the first time in person, having been linked up through a befriending scheme that has been operated by Gateshead Carers throughout the pandemic. Trish had been caring for her husband—first at home, and then when he was in residential care—for several years. She told me that before covid-19, she spent every day with him in the nursing home and lived at home by herself, but covid-19 meant that she could not spend that time with him, and she was spending much of her time at home alone. Both

Trish and Irene told me how the befriending scheme had been a real positive for them by allowing them to reach out and make a connection with another person. It was clear to me that they were getting on like a house on fire.

Covid-19 has had a huge impact on so many people, regardless of whether they have contracted the virus. For many people, lockdowns, restrictions on activities, and not been able to see neighbours, friends and family have had a huge impact. For many, it has led to feelings of isolation and loneliness, as those everyday connections and contacts just have not been possible. It has been hard, and although virtual meetings have helped for some of us, they have not helped at all for those who are not so digitally savvy.

However, let us not imagine that loneliness has just appeared since covid-19. For too many people, loneliness existed before, and we must look at it in the longer term, but there is no doubt that covid-19 has made things worse. We need to address the covid-related issues that have highlighted the problem, but also take longer-term action. Loneliness will sadly not go away when covid-19 is no longer at the forefront of our minds or when restrictions are fully lifted.

Over the last year, the all-party parliamentary group on loneliness, with the support of the British Red Cross and the Co-op, has looked at loneliness and how we can best counteract it post-covid and in the longer-term. We held an inquiry over a number of sessions, taking evidence in writing and in person virtually from a wide range of organisations and individuals. We listened to their experiences and heard how they see the issue and how they are seeking to address it. In March, we published the report, "A connected recovery: Findings of the APPG on Loneliness Inquiry". If the Minister has not had a chance to see it, I am happy to send her a copy.

Our inquiry contains a wealth of evidence and experiences about what we need to do to tackle loneliness and build a connected recovery. The recommendations set out action that can be taken at Government, local authority, neighbourhood and individual level. They are detailed and thoughtful. Today, I will set out the main recommendations.

First, tackling loneliness needs national leadership. The Government must commit to a connected recovery from the covid-19 pandemic,

"recognising the need for long term work to rebuild social connections following periods of isolation".

That must include long-term funding to bring together the different strands of action needed to make that difference.

We should translate policy through local action. Our local authorities have been crucial in helping people and local communities during the pandemic. For many people hit by the pandemic, who have perhaps seen their income reduced, been forced to shield or self-isolate, or needed essential supplies, the support of staff in local hubs such as those set up by Gateshead Council in Winlaton, Chopwell and Birtley in my constituency has been essential. It has not only helped individuals, but made connections with voluntary organisations to link people up on more than just the practical level. I visited each of my hubs and found the staff, in many cases redeployed from leisure services or libraries, responding effectively but sensitively to people, many of whom called

in distress. The staff went beyond the practical to make connections with others who could offer broader support. My thanks go to all of them—they have been vital in combating loneliness, and that work needs to be built into the work of councils as we learn lessons.

The report states:

“The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should incentivise and support all areas to develop local loneliness action plans, which should encompass action on placemaking and delivering the activities needed to support social prescribing... Tackling loneliness should be built into all local authority COVID-19 recovery plans and...population health strategies.”

On investing in community infrastructure, the pandemic has shown us clearly the important part played by voluntary organisations, some long-established and some that sprang up in response to the need for practical support for those hit by the pandemic, such as local mutual aid groups. Those groups made a huge difference by shopping, collecting prescriptions and delivering meals. There is real benefit in having support at a local level. However, our third sector organisations, many well-established charities, need reliable funding if they are to continue that important work. The report states:

“The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport should work across government...to create a sustainable fund to support” the work of those organisations on loneliness.

On closing the digital divide, the pandemic shone a light on the need for digital skills. We may be getting weary of endless meetings on Teams or Zoom, or some other platform, but for many they have been vital in keeping that connection with friends and families or in enabling them to join in with virtual activities. The charity Skills 4 Work, based in Birtley in my constituency, has had virtual afternoon teas for local people to keep the connection between the younger members and their local community. Before hon. Members suggest that virtual scones do not sound very attractive, let me assure them that the scones are very real. They are delivered in a covid-secure way by the project members to those taking part. I very much enjoyed mine.

We need to make our local communities and places loneliness-proof by providing places for people to meet. The APPG heard a good deal of evidence on that point recently. Loneliness affects people of all ages, not just older people. Young people reported some of the highest levels of loneliness even before the pandemic, yet they are struggling to access support. I urge the Government to consider the campaign by YoungMinds and the Samaritans to establish and fund mental health support clubs for young people across the country.

I want to briefly mention some of the people and organisations who have responded so magnificently in my constituency, such as Northumbria’s biggest coffee morning, organised by PC Andy Hyde for the local community in Ryton. Last year, it had to be a virtual coffee morning, but we were determined to carry on and make those connections. There are the volunteers at the Winlaton Centre, who provided hot meals for people who needed them; the Chopwell and Rowlands Gill Live at Home scheme, run by the Methodist Homes Association, which, among other things, held a socially-distanced VE Day celebration in which it called on people in a socially distanced way and took the celebration to them; the staff at Edberts House, in particular the community link officers who have been working to keep in touch with people and have an important part to play

in social prescribing; and Age UK Gateshead, which has done so much to support people locally in so many ways. This year, it is making 36,000 phone calls per month. Prior to covid-19, it supported 3,148 individuals; three months later, it was 14,817. As Age UK Gateshead says, at the point of crisis, full need is identified. The chief executive says:

“Moving forward, do not implement services—talk to communities and individuals. Each street, village and town is different. Listen and enable people to help themselves. It’s at this point people talk to people and the real magic happens.”

I ask the Minister to meet me and representatives of the British Red Cross and the APPG to discuss how we can take this important work forward. I finish by remembering again that tomorrow is the five-year anniversary of the murder of our colleague, Jo Cox. I believe we must all carry on her work, bringing people together and working to end loneliness.

5.2 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing the debate and on the way she laid out her case. I pay tribute to her for the work that she does with the Samaritans. I entirely echo her remarks about our late colleague, Jo Cox.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, people with a long-term disability, widowed homeowners, unmarried middle-agers and young renters were most likely to feel lonely, according to the Office for National Statistics, but now the feeling of loneliness has increased in many more of us, as we were told to stay inside and could not see family and friends. If colleagues knew some of my family and friends, they would understand why for me personally that was a small relief, but I know that the majority of people were very sorry not to see family and friends.

With the Prime Minister’s announcement last evening delaying the ending of the coronavirus restrictions, many people who are lonely will still not be receiving the assistance they need. The hospitality industry has not been able to fully reopen, large-scale events are not what they once were and there is still a limit on the number of people someone can see inside and outside. The extension of the restrictions will inevitably result in some people remaining on their own, because they are vulnerable or cannot access the help they require to socialise in their community once again.

Loneliness is a very complex experience. We see colleagues who seem to have lots of friends, but who can be very lonely. If we are all honest with ourselves, the number of true friends that we have can be counted on our hands. I have given up, over the years, on knowing the number of Members of Parliament who are really lonely. I would send a message to our Whips saying, “You do need to look after your flock.” We never know how our colleagues are suffering. Although it is not always accepted, we are members of the human race, so the hon. Member for Blaydon has done the House a great service by drawing the whole issue to our attention.

Despite the delay in ending the restrictions, I am pleased that the Prime Minister announced an end to the 30-person limit on weddings. I have a personal vested interest in that: two of my daughters are getting married this year, so they were cheering about the whole thing, although my bank manager was not necessarily cheering. The relaxations on wakes and visits outside care homes are

[Sir David Amess]

also to be welcomed. Those announcements are a step in the right direction towards combating loneliness. I encourage the Government, with our excellent Minister present, to further ease lockdown rules and allow friends and family to meet as soon as it is safe to do so.

It was Carers Week last week, and that was an opportunity to thank all the carers for the wonderful work that they have selflessly done throughout the pandemic to look after the elderly, the sick, the disabled and the lonely. My area, Southend West, has the largest number of centenarians in the country. Not many of their contemporaries are alive, obviously, so we need to look out for elderly people in particular. Many people in nursing homes in my area and in our local hospital experience severe loneliness, as their friends and families are either unable to visit them or uneasy about doing so because of the health risks. There are many carers in Southend and they deserve recognition. I was delighted with the awards in the birthday honours list for their invaluable work throughout the pandemic in our many nursing homes and at Southend Hospital.

Charities have, similarly, been a lifeline to many individuals who are lonely, and I am pleased that we have so many of them locally in Southend. An example is the St Vincent de Paul Society, which visits vulnerable people and offers them practical support and friendship. Trust Links supports those with mental health and wellbeing issues through gardening and community involvement, and the Southend West scouts bring young people together.

More must be done, however, to raise awareness of the impact of loneliness and to encourage people to speak up about it. There is a stigma about being lonely. Some people think, "Well I am such a horrible person and that is why I haven't got any friends," but that is not the case. There is nothing as sad as going to a funeral when there is nobody there at all. It is absolutely heartbreaking. There is a stigma about being lonely and it needs to be eradicated, because it is hindering people in reaching out for help. Schools and local community groups should work closely with charities and organisations that help reduce loneliness, because—as has already been said—even if someone is surrounded by people every day at school or here, it is very possible to feel excluded. Loneliness does not just affect older people. With young people, parents get anxious when it appears that their children have no friends for whatever reason.

The Wesley Methodist church holds monthly local services for people with dementia, and socialising and art activities take place after the service. That is a great initiative for people with dementia to be active in the community. St Helen's church, my local church, also holds youth clubs and friendship clubs that meet regularly to encourage community engagement. I hope that those events will resume soon.

Friends and Places Together helps young people with friendship groups, activities and trips in England. Younger people can feel lonely too. David Stanley set up the Music Man Project, which played at the London Palladium and went on to the Royal Albert Hall, and would be going to Broadway were it not for the pandemic. It is absolutely inspirational. David Stanley has so helped and encouraged people with learning disabilities through

the power of music, and I hope that the Music Man Project will spread throughout the country to every single constituency.

Friday is the first anniversary of the death of Dame Vera Lynn. We are holding a live event at the top of the white cliffs of Dover. There will be a few surprises for older people, and I hope that those who support older people can tune in. I envisage that on Friday we will all be singing "Land of Hope and Glory", "We'll Meet Again" and "The White Cliffs of Dover".

There has been a considerable rise in the number of people with pets during the pandemic to tackle loneliness. I am animal mad. By and large, animals are grateful for everything that is done for them. Owning an animal is a big responsibility though, and pets are for life, not just until someone gets bored with them. There is no excuse for animal neglect, and I encourage anyone who gets a pet to help with their loneliness to first be sure that they know what is involved in looking after one. There are services that can help people.

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that I am very pleased the Government have introduced support bubbles and the "Let's Talk Loneliness" online service for those who feel left out to give them advice and support. We must, however, continue the support programmes and further reduce the stigma of loneliness as the coronavirus restrictions ease, because many people feeling lonely might be anxious about once again engaging with their community and the general public.

5.10 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, for the second time today. Who am I to speak in this debate after two terrific speeches from the hon. Members for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and for Southend West (Sir David Amess)? I have been here for four years and a couple of days, and it strikes me that one of the best things that Westminster does is the Westminster Hall debate, which is more like a tutorial. What I have heard in the first two contributions is thought provoking and has altered what I am going to say.

Lockdown was not terribly difficult for me and my wife because we had each other, and my son and his wife, just in the nick of time before the first lockdown, came north with their two little girls, which was a pleasure. However, I want to talk about a constituent of mine called Sally Cartwright. Sally is a widow in her 80s. She has been successful in life. She ran a business with her husband and had a successful small business. She became chairman of the local enterprise company—I think the first female chairman of a local enterprise company in Scotland. She was awarded the MBE. Halfway through the first lockdown, I called her about something or other. I asked for advice and she said, "Jamie, I'm so damned lonely. I am not in a bubble. I can't go out. I am not daft. I am not very good with mobility, but I am a thinking lady, and it's really getting me down." That shook me because this lady is a pillar of society and one would not expect that to come from her.

I then took to ringing Sally on a regular basis to say, "How's it going?". In fact, I spoke to her today to get permission to use her name in this debate. My excellent constituency officer manager, Heather Macmillan, said, "You ought to get in the habit of making perhaps 10 calls a day, and I will suggest people you can call."

The reason I am telling Members this is because I was relatively comfortable in my own home in lockdown and I had not seen it for what it really was, and it shook me to the core. So what is the answer?

I am speaking only briefly in this debate and I am speaking only because of Sally. I thought, “Damn it, I will take part in this debate.” I do not normally go on about things in the north of Scotland, as Members know. However, yesterday—this takes me back to the hon. Member for Southend West—hot and bothered I walked from this place to my flat. It had been a really hot day and I longed to get in, pull myself a glass of lager and put my feet up. I heard music as I walked towards St John’s, Smith Square, and it got louder and louder as I walked past that beautiful church heading towards Pimlico. I realised the doors of the church were open because of the heat, and the orchestra was in full practice. I thought, “What are they playing? Is it Prokofiev? What is it? I don’t know.” At that moment, it hit me like a bolt of lightning, exactly as the hon. Gentleman said: music touches the human psyche more than we all realise.

We all have different tastes, but music is a sort of strange common language that works, and I think that it is possibly part of the solution—although there are no solutions to this—but it could be part of the way we can approach it. The next time we have to go through this awful process again, and I fear that we will because viruses mutate and there will be new viruses—although, God, I wish there weren’t—I think more music will be part of the solution.

The second thing is that every time I spoke to Sally, she told me that one of her grandchildren had zoomed in and, for all the difficulties of this way of talking to each other through a small screen, the grandchild saying, “Hello, Granny. How are you?” really gave a little lift to her day. Perhaps we could, in each of our communities, develop the idea of having teams of people, including young people, who can talk to one another. Sally said to me, “I’m not so mobile, but I’ve got a brain on my shoulders,” and so she has. She is, as we say in Scotland, as sharp as a tack. If I put a foot wrong in politics, she is on to me just like that. I was saying, “Sally, if we have to go through this again, how would it be if you did some telephoning or whatever and we just opened this up?”

I do not know the solution, but I have made two suggestions to the Minister. I have enormous respect for the Minister—a lady of compassion. I suspect that we are sowing our seeds on fertile ground, in terms of what the Government might come forward with.

5.15 pm

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. First, I thank the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for calling this debate. At some point in all our lives, we will feel lonely. That may be for an endless number of reasons, but it is worth noting that loneliness is not the same as being alone. We can be surrounded by friends and loved ones and still feel fundamentally lonely.

The covid-19 pandemic has had an undeniable impact on loneliness. A report by the British Red Cross found that almost 40% of UK adults are more concerned about their loneliness now than they were a year ago. A similar number had gone more than a fortnight without having a meaningful conversation. Around 39% of UK adults say that they do not think that their feelings of

loneliness will go away after the coronavirus crisis is over, and one third say that they are concerned about being able to connect with people in person in the way they did prior to the pandemic.

Loneliness has long been thought of as an issue that is most likely to affect older people, and indeed older people are hugely affected. Before the pandemic, an estimated 200,000 older people regularly went more than a month without having a conversation with a friend or relative. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) said, loneliness can and does affect people of all ages. Young people aged between 18 and 24 years old consistently report higher levels of loneliness than any other age group, and more than 11% of children are estimated to feel lonely often.

During lockdown, our young people were isolated from their friends at school and university. Their prospects of starting new careers were dashed as a result of many industries limiting staff numbers. In particular, hospitality, which as an industry is the largest employer of young people, was closed throughout lockdown. All the data show an alarming trend such that the pandemic will have a long-lasting impact on the mental health of young people.

I pledge my full support for a connected recovery. When emerging from this pandemic, we must ensure that nobody is excluded from our recovery. The only way in which we will all recover is by connecting, reaching out, and ensuring that no one is left behind.

In April 2020, at the start of the national lockdown, the Government launched a comprehensive plan to try to tackle loneliness. That included categorising loneliness as a priority for the £750 million charity funding package; continuing the “Let’s Talk Loneliness” campaign; and bringing together the new Tackling Loneliness Network, made up of private, public and charity sector organisations that want to make a difference. Following this, the recommendation from the Red Cross that tackling loneliness should be built into all local authority covid-19 recovery plans and integrated care system population health strategies, would ensure that tackling loneliness was at the heart of the recovery.

I thank the Government for recognising the scale of the issue of loneliness and laying out plans to tackle it. I specifically commend them on attempting to tackle, through the “Let’s Talk Loneliness” campaign, the taboo around discussion of loneliness. My belief is that this problem will not begin to be tackled until anyone can, without fear of judgment, reach out and say, “I feel lonely.”

Covid-19 has also demonstrated how vital our digital infrastructure is. When families and friends could not be together in person, they could see one another online and still connect online. That is why I am so glad that the Government have come together with the national lottery for the local connections fund. The funding will help to bring people together in safe and secure ways, recovering the costs of technology and equipment that will help people to feel more connected in their communities. It is my hope that the funding will begin to bridge the digital divide by building skills and confidence online.

I recently held a number of meetings with WaveLength, a charity that uses technology to help those suffering from loneliness. I was delighted when, just this week, WaveLength was able to support multiple organisations in my constituency of Broxtowe.

[Darren Henry]

Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Blaydon for calling this debate during Loneliness Awareness Week. I end by thanking all the charities and organisations that are working tirelessly to help tackle loneliness—Mind, Age UK, Samaritans, Re-engage, Calm and the British Red Cross. All those organisations help those dealing with loneliness. I encourage anyone listening today who is struggling to reach out to one of those groups. It is more important than ever that we connect with each other while emerging from this pandemic and ensure that we have a connected recovery, so that the message from the Government, coming out of this pandemic, is that you are not alone.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): We now go to Jim Shannon, for the second time this afternoon.

5.21 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship all day, Sir Edward. It does not bother me, and I do not think it will bother other Members here either. We are very pleased to be here. Thank you for that and for calling me.

First, I especially thank the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for bringing this debate today. When I saw the topic in the Westminster Hall diary, I was keen to come down, first, to support her, but also to tell the public a story, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) also did about one of his friends.

The contributions from right hon. and hon. Members have been incredible. I doubt whether any family across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have not had some personal story to tell, as the hon. Gentleman referred to. I have been incredibly impressed by the speeches. The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) referred to the “city to be”. I refer to it as a “city already”. I think we all know it as that; we are just waiting for it to be said officially—that is all.

The hon. Gentleman referred to how some people can be lonely in a crowded room. That is true. I know people who are like that. I know people who were the life and joy of a party and when the party was over, they were the loneliest people in the world. We cannot always tell a book by its cover or a person by the persona we see. That story resonates with me when I think about the people I have known over the years who fit into that specific category.

I have listened to so many difficult stories during this covid pandemic. I have seen at first hand the devastating effect that social distancing has had on the most vulnerable people. I lost my mother-in-law, Jemima, to covid in October last year. Her husband, Robert, my father-in-law, is a very private man and obviously found it devastating, personally, as did the rest of the family. But he had to grieve in isolation, because he was self-isolating when Jemima went into the hospital on the Monday and she then died on the Friday. My sister-in-law, my wife’s sister, was also in the intensive care unit with covid, so we could not even have the funeral until everyone was out of covid-19 isolation. For my boys to have had to contact Robert through a window was not the way it should have been. To say that he is a changed man vastly under-states what has happened.

Who will forget Her Majesty when Prince Philip passed away? Who did not resonate with Her Majesty as she sat in solitude, removed from those who loved her at the funeral service of her husband of 73 years? That was a dreadful scene, but one replicated in too many churches and too many funeral parlours throughout the land.

I think there is some encouragement; it is always good to have encouragement. The book by Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Cambridge, “Hold Still”, struck and stirred a chord in so many of us, as we understand that our pain is shared by so many.

During the lockdowns, my wife and I became grandparents—twice. However, we have not seen one of those grandchildren. Wee Max was born last October; Freya’s birthday will be Monday coming, but we will have a birthday party on 20 June. That will be an occasion when all 13 of us can come together. I should say, by the way, that the hon. Member for Southend West’s time as a grandparent is coming. I was saying one day to my wife, “We started as two, with three sons. Three sons got three wives—and now we have five grandchildren.” That is how the two became 13. Maybe the hon. Gentleman will end up with as many as that—I do not know. It is wonderful that we can come together after 15 months and have some joy. We understand that there are so many other people who have lived through this situation, as well.

The rules were in place for a reason—they were, and they are. They saved lives. We have adhered to the rules the whole way through because, first of all, we have to set an example, but also because I believe is right to do so. If the rules are set, let us adhere to them.

Our mental health as a nation is low—indeed, a lot lower than it ever has been in most of our memories. I live on a farm, so I am very fortunate. I go for a walk every night that I am home, and I must say that I found comfort at home—not just with my wife, but because whenever I went for a walk I took my dog. The good thing about a dog is that it will always wag its tail. It will always be a friend, unlike a cat, which makes up its mind about whether it will be someone’s friend or not. That is how cats are. The point I am making here is this: if I had not had that opportunity to go for a walk, I think it would have been a very difficult time for me.

I commend all the charities, in particular the Red Cross in Northern Ireland, which conducted a poll that found that almost half the people in Northern Ireland—some 47%—said it was hard to talk about their problems when so many people are having a difficult time due to covid-19. Worryingly, more than two in five—some 41%—said that they would not be confident about knowing where to go for mental health or emotional support if they needed it. We need to consider how we can help those people and support them. That is what the hon. Member for Blaydon and others have said.

In Northern Ireland, the Red Cross is calling for the Northern Ireland Assembly to tackle loneliness and social isolation, advocating early action in the covid-19 recovery plans and a mental health strategy, while committing to develop and implement a cross-departmental Northern Ireland loneliness strategy. I think that is really what we need. Mental health issues have become so strong and so disjointed that we really need to have a loneliness strategy in place. I believe this approach

must be funded UK-wide, to rebuild not simply our economy but, just as importantly, our people and our communities.

I also believe that we need to encourage the safe meeting of mother and toddler groups; how important that is, to get normality and for mothers to interact with mothers, and children with children. Children will always play together, because that is what children do, but mothers also need verbal communication and physical contact. Our nature is not to be on our own. I suppose that is the reason why we are all married; I presume that we are all married, or are about to be, or whatever the case may be. We need company; it is very important.

There are also the afternoon tea dances that we held in our neck of the woods, in Strangford in the Orange Halls, or the face-to-face parent-teacher meetings. We used to look almost with fear at the parent-teacher meetings, but now people would just love to have one; it would be great just to have that interaction.

We need to rebuild the notion that we are not alone and that together we are stronger. I join all my colleagues who have already spoken and those who will speak after me in asking the Government to do more to acknowledge the problem and to begin to allow the solution: a renewed sense of family, and of a community standing together, with a real connection, to help as and when needed. That is what we all do every day as elected Members of Parliament and as elected representatives. We do it because our people have chosen us. They often do that because it is our character and personality to help others.

I am very pleased to see the Minister in her place; I always genuinely look forward to her contributions. I know that she has empathy with all of us in the stories that we tell because she has been through those stories as well. I am also looking forward to hearing the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). I did not know that she was back until today and I have seen her sitting there. It is a pleasure to see her in place because I have not seen her physically for a while—it must be six or seven months, I am sure. I very much look forward to listening to her. I am sorry, I have meandered on for a while, but I just wanted to make those comments.

5.30 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, even if it is only once today. Congratulations also to the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this important debate during Loneliness Awareness Week and for her tribute to Jo Cox. The Marmalade Trust runs the campaign, and the theme this year is acceptance. Its purpose is to encourage people to talk about loneliness in an attempt to remove the stigma and shame around it.

The coronavirus pandemic has made me feel very lonely at times, in spite of a busy life and a supportive family and colleagues. I do not intend to dwell on my own loneliness; I just want to say that this is something I really understand. The groups most at risk of loneliness have already been alluded to, but I can add to them and say they also include members of the armed forces, carers, people from ethnic minorities, migrants, refugees, people from LGBT+ groups and homeless people.

Loneliness can and does affect folk right across society and that has been exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic. Living through an extended period of not spending time with our friends and loved ones has been painful for everybody, but extremely damaging for some. The SNP Scottish Government are fully committed to tackling social isolation and loneliness across Scotland and are providing investment to promote equality and digital inclusion. The events of this year have reaffirmed the Scottish Government's commitment to tackling social isolation and loneliness as a serious public health issue. That is why part of the Scottish Government's winter plan for social protection had a specific focus on addressing that.

In addition to funding communities and digital inclusion, the Scottish Government have also funded partners, including £100,000 for befriending networks. Befriending organisations—such as Befriend Motherwell, BeFriend in Bellshill based in Orbiston, and Getting Better Together in Wishaw and Shotts—all cover my constituency. Those and other organisations switched to telephone befriending services, which, although not the same, are helping many folk throughout the pandemic. I also salute all the organisations involved in my poverty action network that have worked so hard during lockdown, combating loneliness.

The SNP Scottish Government have invested £4.3 million to tackle social isolation and loneliness through digital inclusion via the Connecting Scotland programme, which has helped 5,000 older and disabled people get online and so tackle isolation and digital exclusion. It also supported families to maintain contact with a loved one in prison custody through digital services and internet access, and it will have invested £5 million to increase the work organisations already do, fund new ones and help provide safe places online and in person for people to connect. We should expect that level of commitment from the UK Government too.

The SNP remains committed to supporting the mental health, wellbeing and equality of our communities. Our manifesto says that the SNP is committed to increasing direct investment in mental health services by at least 25% and ensuring that by the end of the Parliament, 10% of the frontline NHS budget will be invested in mental health services, with 1% of NHS frontline spending being invested in child and adolescent mental health services.

A sense of community, and the resilience that we all draw from it, has helped Scotland get through this pandemic. In the first 100 days of the new SNP Government, they will develop their new five-year social isolation and loneliness plan, which is backed by £10 million over five years and is focused on reconnecting people as we come out of the pandemic and tackle loneliness head on. They will also establish a steering group, inviting cross-party representation in order to progress the delivery of a Scottish minimum income guarantee. People are more isolated if they do not have the funds to make social contacts, travel short distances and view the world outwith their four walls.

Loneliness is a blight on people's lives and has impacts on their mental health. All Governments should and must work with community partners to end the scourge of loneliness. Funding spent now will decrease the cost to ongoing health services in the future. Governments across the four nations have a duty to improve people's

[Marion Fellows]

lives by allowing them to feel less lonely and anxious. Again, following what the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Darren Henry) said, we should thank all the organisations across the UK that have done so much to alleviate people's loneliness in all sorts of circumstances. As hon. Members have already said, we do not know how someone feels when we look at them, but it should be incumbent on us all to make sure that we always have a friendly word and an understanding of how other people live their lives.

5.36 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Sir Edward, in what has been an outstanding debate. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who not only set out the scale of loneliness, but has served well on the APPG on loneliness. Of course, she focused all our minds on tomorrow, the fifth anniversary of the passing of Jo Cox.

Few people have never felt the aching pain of loneliness. Thankfully, it is fleeting for most—those moments pass—but not for all. Once trapped in the cycle of loneliness, it can be difficult to escape. Lost connections happen at transition points in life, such as a move or a new baby, when old friends are left behind or new demands fill people's days. For some, however, those days turn to weeks, months and years. Disabled people are trapped behind a multitude of barriers, refugees are in a strange land, single people are home alone, and the elderly are often confined to their own homes and, for many with dementia, their own worlds. Their carers, too, can fall into loneliness, as demands replace time with friends. For others, loneliness has stemmed from the loss of a job or a loved one.

The past year has been particularly brutal. Some 41% of adults say that they feel lonelier than they did before the first lockdown. Being bereaved in lockdown has been particularly harsh—not being with loved ones as they died, and not being able to grieve properly. It hurts. The digital divide in an increasingly digitalised society can make isolation all the more challenging. Others just find it hard to make secure friendships, and it is okay to say so. If someone quietly longs for a buddy—someone to share things with, or to journey parts of their life together—help with making connections must be available. The call for connected recovery is a recognition that things do not have to be that way; they can change and bring meaning, friendship, love and purpose back into our relationships.

Loneliness is the greatest public health challenge of our age. Each day, millions of people would identify with such a diagnosis, but instead of the hope of a cure, the deafening chill of emptiness pursues them. For some people, it never departs. Although the Government's loneliness strategy is a packed agenda on combating loneliness that is high on aspiration and complex in ambition, we have to be honest: it was incapable of responding to covid-19. The reality is that relationships are built from within communities, and they need the tools and means to respond.

As with all public health emergencies, we need to map those who are lonely. Our directors of public health should lead the local partnership to reach different

environments, ages and intersectional challenges with a strategy to reach their communities. Government have to trust directors of public health to formulate their public health frameworks and provide them with the tools and the means to deliver. So, the first issue is trust in a local public health approach.

Secondly, there is funding. Let us not pretend that this can be done on the cheap, because not delivering is costly. A recent survey commissioned by the Government concluded that severe loneliness cost just short of £10,000 a person each year. Let me scale that up. Researchers calculated that it cost £32 billion a year. Public health budgets have been slashed, the communities sector has been starved and charities are struggling more and more each day that restrictions are extended, yet Government have completely failed to recognise that they need support. Just £5 million was given to addressing loneliness at the very start of the pandemic, over a year ago. Charities have been largely forgotten. The very organisations that can address loneliness are now facing further restraints from cash-strapped local authorities.

Will the Minister take a strong message back to the Minister for Loneliness? Until this Government get a grip on the funding crisis in the sector, they have no chance of supporting people who experience loneliness as the infrastructure is simply unsustainable without funding. It must be addressed now and in the comprehensive spending review.

Thirdly, success must be measured and shared. Such a project must be evaluated and a long-term commitment to meet need achieved.

Finally, the Marmalade Trust, the British Red Cross, Age UK and the Jo Cox Foundation are all at the forefront of finding ways to break the stigma of loneliness. If people say they are lonely, it is okay. If they are lonely, it is okay. However, it is not okay that the Government are not providing the tools and the resources to the very people who can make those connections.

May Loneliness Awareness Week empower all to recognise loneliness, to reach out to those who are lonely and to rekindle the hope that as a society we can build strong connections, so that no one need be lonely.

5.42 pm

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage):

It is a great honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I am delighted to be able to discuss such an important topic. It has been a high-quality debate. Without exception, every single contribution has been first class and I thank everybody who has taken part. There were some heartfelt and touching contributions.

I particularly thank the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for calling for such an important debate. I know that she is a member of the all-party parliamentary group on loneliness and she brings a great deal of knowledge and experience, as well as passion and care, to the debate. I am grateful to her and I join her in paying tribute to our former colleague, Jo Cox, who we all miss terribly.

I am grateful to the APPG for its review of loneliness during covid-19 and the recommendations for the Government's role in supporting a connected recovery from the pandemic. I am sure that my brilliant colleague, the Minister for Loneliness, will be very happy to meet the hon. Lady and her colleagues on the APPG.

The covid-19 pandemic has associated social distancing measures with loneliness. We know that, but the importance of social connection has been highlighted for us all during this. As the Office for National Statistics indicated, levels of chronic loneliness among adults in England has increased between spring 2020 and February 2021 from 5% to 7%.

As we start to be able to see each other in person more, we know that there will be a large number of people who felt lonely and isolated long before the pandemic started, and will continue to feel that way after the restrictions lift. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) said, unpaid carers, who give so much of themselves with their love and their care for those they love, often feel the impact of loneliness and deserve our attention.

There will also be those who have lost confidence as a result of the impact of covid, who may struggle to reconnect or feel left behind as a restrictions ease. That is at the top of the Government's agenda. As the APPG report sets out, the Government's response to covid-19 has recognised the importance of social interaction and connection. That work built on our existing commitments, set out in our strategy of 2018 and reiterated in two annual loneliness reports since. We have provided funding to organisations that provide vital support to a wide range of people at risk of loneliness.

Contrary to what the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) says, since the beginning of the pandemic we have invested more than £34 million in such organisations in England alone and helped people who experience loneliness through a £750 million charity funding package. We also set up a £4 million local connections fund in partnership with the National Lottery Community Fund. Through the first round of the local connections fund, we have already awarded more than 840 microgrants to charities and community groups that help people to connect via the things that they enjoy.

The "Let's Talk Loneliness" campaign, which a couple of Members spoke about, aims to raise awareness of loneliness and remind people that it is okay to ask for help when feeling lonely. Several colleagues beautifully set out how loneliness hides in plain sight. Anybody can feel lonely at any time; it can affect anybody at any age. During the pandemic, we have used the campaign to share advice on simple steps we can all take to support ourselves and others.

In response to covid-19, we also set up the Tackling Loneliness Network of more than 80 organisations from across the private, public and charity sectors to take action on loneliness. We published an action plan in May setting out a series of actions that they are taking. In this Loneliness Awareness Week, they have launched the Connection Coalition's loneliness chatbot service on WhatsApp.

Local people understand what is needed in their communities, and we agree with the APPG that local and grassroots action is vital in tackling this issue. That is why we want to build a shared understanding of communities' needs and assets and focus on supporting local areas to share and learn what works locally.

I really welcome the APPG's emphasis on digital inclusion. As Minister of State for Digital and Culture, I know that the ability to connect digitally during the lockdown has been a lifeline, but too many people faced a barrier to connecting because they lack the mobile technology, the internet or the skills and confidence to do it. That is an issue that the Government are dedicated to addressing. Our £2.5 million digital lifeline fund is providing tablets, data and free digital support to more than 5,500 people with learning disabilities, allowing them to connect with friends and support.

As I mentioned, this Loneliness Awareness Week is a really important opportunity to highlight some of the amazing work that is happening with grassroots organisations around our nations, as a number of Members have already. We have seen extraordinary examples over the past year of community spirit and of charity groups and organisations that have really stepped up and adapted to this new world to ensure that local people do not feel isolated.

Through our "Let's Talk Loneliness" campaign we will this week partner with a wide range of organisations to encourage everyone across society to continue to reach out to support people who may be feeling lonely, even as restrictions ease. Every single one of us can make a difference, and the Government are really determined to do our bit as well. I thank everybody for their great contributions to the debate.

5.48 pm

Liz Twist: I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. It has been a useful debate in making sure that, during Loneliness Awareness Week, we do not forget this issue and we pay attention to it. It is interesting to hear the different experiences of colleagues in their constituencies.

I conclude by reiterating that we would very much like to work with the Government, and I hope that it will be possible to arrange the meeting we talked about so that we can progress things further. We need not only to talk about loneliness in debates like this, but to really make a difference, which is what so many organisations are doing on the ground.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered covid-19 and loneliness.

5.49 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 15 June 2021

CABINET OFFICE

Declaration on Government Reform

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The covid-19 pandemic has strained our country's resilience like nothing we have seen out of wartime, and the public have endured huge sacrifices. Our mission now is to respond by transforming the country for the better, levelling up, and making opportunity more equal. These changes will require the re-wiring, and renewal, of government. That is why reform is necessary—not as an end in itself, but as a means of delivering the better Britain the public demand and deserve.

To this end, the Cabinet and permanent secretaries have committed today to a collective vision for reform, agreeing immediate action on three fronts:

People—ensuring that the right people are working in the right places with the right incentives;

Performance—modernising the operation of government, being clear-eyed about our priorities, and objective in our evaluation of what is and is not working; and

Partnership—strengthening the bond between Ministers and officials, always operating as one team from policy through to delivery, and between central Government and institutions outside it.

The “Declaration on Government Reform” sets out the Government's ambitions in more detail, with a set of concrete actions under way and more planned for the year ahead. Copies of the declaration have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS93]

Strengthening Transparency and Fairness in Elections

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The Government's 2019 manifesto pledged to take steps to protect the integrity of our democracy, tackle electoral fraud, and prevent foreign interference in elections.

Further to the written statements of 12 May 2021 (HCWS10) and 27 May 2021 (HCWS62), I am announcing today further measures to be included in the forthcoming Elections Bill to support public confidence in the integrity of our electoral system, by strengthening and updating political finance and campaigning regulation. This will ensure that our electoral law continues to be fair and transparent.

Political parties

While political parties are already required to give details of their assets and liabilities in their annual accounts, a new requirement will be brought in for new political parties to declare if they have assets and liabilities of over £500 when registering with the Electoral Commission and, if so, to provide details of these. This will allow earlier public scrutiny of their finances and ensure public confidence in the transparency of all political parties' financial positions.

We will also protect the integrity of spending limits further by prohibiting third-party campaigners—also known as “non-party campaigners”—from additionally registering as a political party. This closes a loophole that was highlighted in the 2019 general election, as a route to access multiple spending limits and unfairly increase spending potential.

Third-party campaigning

All third-party campaigning will be restricted to UK-based campaigners or otherwise eligible campaigners, including overseas electors, further ensuring that only groups with a legitimate interest in UK elections are able to spend money to campaign at UK elections.

In addition, to bring about greater transparency in electoral campaigning, we will introduce a new tier of registration for third-party campaigners. This will require any campaigners spending more than £10,000 during a regulated period to register with the Electoral Commission, ensuring clarity about who is campaigning.

The Government will extend reporting requirements for joint campaigns to cover political parties and third-party campaigners who are working together. This will ensure existing spending limits cannot be unfairly expanded by sharing costs and will rightly increase the transparency of such arrangements.

Candidates

To ensure transparency and fairness around political finance, the Elections Bill will clarify the rules on notional expenditure so that candidates and agents are only liable to report benefits in kind that they have used themselves or have directed or encouraged others to use on their behalf.

Following a Supreme Court ruling in 2018, the current rules in this area have led to widespread uncertainty and risk a democratic chilling effect by discouraging parties from campaigning in marginal constituencies. This clarification will also be extended to other campaigners who are subject to notional expenditure controls. This will defend the British tradition of party leader “soapbox” visits. Expenditure which promotes an individual candidature would continue to count towards a candidate's own spending limit.

Campaigning material

The Elections Bill will legislate to extend the “imprint” regime to digital campaigning material. The imprint regime ensures there is accountability over who is promoting campaigning material (and on whose behalf), provides a recourse to challenge, and can help discourage the publication of anonymous intimidatory material.

The Government today are publishing a response to the consultation on how digital imprints should be implemented. This is a complex area, given the need to avoid unreasonably restricting the free speech of individuals, or impose disproportionate measures which would discourage political campaigning. These balanced measures on digital imprints will update our campaigning laws for the modern age and protect the integrity of our democratic processes. A copy of the response has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Government have engaged with the Electoral Commission, social media companies and political parties through the Parliamentary Parties Panel in developing all these provisions, and carefully considered policy recommendations made by respondents to the consultation, think tanks and by parliamentary Select Committees.

Overall, these measures strike the right balance between further strengthening our regulatory framework and ensuring democratic engagement in this country can continue to be vibrant and inclusive.

[HCWS92]

TREASURY

United Kingdom Debt Management Office: Business Plan

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

The United Kingdom Debt Management Office (DMO) has today published its business plan for the financial year 2021-22. Copies have been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses and are available on the DMO's website, www.dmo.gov.uk.

[HCWS91]

Public Service Pensions: Government Actuary Review of the Cost Control Mechanism

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay):

The Government have today published the Government Actuary's final report on his review of the cost control mechanism.

The Government are committed to providing public service pensions that are fair for public sector workers and for taxpayers. The cost control mechanism was introduced into the valuation process for public service pension schemes in the Public Service Pensions Act 2013 following consultation with member representatives. It was designed to ensure a fair balance of risk with regard to the cost of providing defined benefit (DB) public service pension schemes between members of those schemes and the taxpayer.

I commissioned the Government Actuary to conduct a review of the mechanism amidst concerns that it was not operating in line with its original objectives. These objectives are:

To protect taxpayers from unforeseen costs;

To maintain the value of pension schemes to the members;

To provide stability and certainty to benefit levels—the mechanism should only be triggered by “extraordinary, unpredictable events”.

The Government Actuary's report sets out his findings and makes a number of recommendations on possible changes to the mechanism. The Government will respond to this report in due course.

The report can be found on the following link: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cost-control-mechanism-government-actuaries-review-final-report>.

[HCWS90]

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