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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

Thursday 17 June 2021

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# House of Commons

Thursday 17 June 2021

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

## Oral Answers to Questions

### ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

#### Microchipping of Cats

**Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): What his timescale is for introducing compulsory microchipping of cats announced in the Animal Welfare Action Plan. [901400]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis)**: The Government have a manifesto commitment to introduce the compulsory microchipping of cats, which was recently reaffirmed in our action plan for animal welfare. We carried out a public consultation and are analysing 33,000 responses. We will publish a summary of them soon and the detail of our proposals later this year.

**Rosie Cooper** [V]: That is good news from the Minister, as Cats Protection indicates that a quarter of all domestic cats, 2.6 million of them, are not microchipped. What support will the Government provide to ensure that cats are microchipped as a priority?

**Victoria Prentis**: I encourage the hon. Lady to feed in her views and those of her constituents to our consultation. We are working up detailed proposals now. I know how important this issue is—I have lost a pet to a road traffic accident—and it is important that we get this right, both legally and in support terms.

#### Shellfish Industry

**Anthony Mangnall** (Totnes) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the shellfish industry. [901401]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis)**: The European Commission's ban on the import of live bivalve molluscs from class B waters is wrong and unjustified. We have repeatedly told the European Commission that and we will continue to raise the issue. I am pleased to say that the Food Standards Agency has recently revised its shellfish waters classification process, ensuring that classifications are awarded in ways that are proportionate and pragmatic, and provide high levels of public health protection.

**Anthony Mangnall**: I thank the Minister for that incredibly helpful answer and for visiting my constituency yesterday to see the fishermen and shellfish industry of Brixham—it is deeply appreciated. She mentions the FSA's report, so in the light of the Prime Minister's answer yesterday, is there any chance that those recommendations can be brought forward ahead of September 2021?

**Victoria Prentis**: I can confirm that my hon. Friend represents one of the most beautiful constituencies that I have visited, and it is full of positive and innovative people involved in the fishing industry. As he heard yesterday, the Prime Minister is doing everything he can to accelerate the process, as are we in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but it is important that the process arrived at by the FSA is both robust and fair.

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Government have got this one wrong and instead of blaming the European Union, they should see that the responsibility sits closer to home, with Ministers. Fishing businesses—shellfish businesses—will go bust if a solution is not found soon, and reclassifying waters is a partial fix at best. Being charitable to the Minister, if she thinks she has a case that the EU has acted unlawfully or incorrectly, why has she not begun legal proceedings against it?

**Victoria Prentis**: I do not need the hon. Gentleman's charity; I would like his support in representing our position to the European Commission. There is a process for doing this and we intend to follow it carefully. We have made it clear that we do not agree with its analysis of the situation; our shellfish from class B waters is fantastic to eat, and they have always done so. We will continue to use the proper processes, through the new Specialised Committee on Fisheries, and if necessary, we will continue to consider when and if legal action should become appropriate. However, I know, as a lawyer, that legal action is never a quick fix and there may be a better way to do this.

**Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con) [V]: First, may I correct the Minister? She did not go to the most beautiful constituency in Devon when she visited Totnes, as she had come to Axminster, in my constituency, previously. The point about the shellfish is that the European Commission has acted very badly. I have sympathy with the Ministers and huge sympathy with the shellfish industry. The FSA can still move faster to reallocate waters from B to A. We also need all the agencies working together more quickly, and I would like to see some direct support to the shellfish industry, because we are putting shellfish businesses out of business, and no politician and no Government want to do that.

**Mr Speaker**: Some might argue that the beer in his constituency is pretty good as well.

**Victoria Prentis**: I had the most lovely lunch in my hon. Friend's constituency the day before yesterday. It was unbelievably beautiful and the weather favoured us at River Cottage. It was just magnificent in every way and it was great to see him there. He also raises some important points about shellfish and rightly says that this is a very difficult issue. It is not one we wanted or

would have chosen. We want to export class B molluscs still to the EU, and we think that that should be possible. However, we are looking in a granular way at how we can best support the industry. I am very involved in that work and have spoken to colleagues across Government, including repeatedly to those in the FSA and the Department of Health and Social Care. I reassure my hon. Friend that we are dealing with the issue in a proportionate and joined-up way.

### Native Species and Wildlife

**Kate Griffiths** (Burton) (Con): What steps he is taking to protect native species and wildlife. [901402]

**Sir Roger Gale** (North Thanet) (Con): What steps he is taking to protect endangered native species. [901417]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow)**: To support the recovery of native species in England, we have tabled an amendment to the Environment Bill to require a new, historic, legally binding target for species abundance by 2030, aiming to halt the decline of nature. This is in addition to the long-term, legally binding targets we are developing under the Bill. We expect to publish a consultation on the proposed targets in early 2022. We are looking at the action needed on the ground and will launch at least 10 landscape-recovery projects to restore wilder landscapes. In partnership with stakeholders, we will determine the specific actions that will be paid for by our new schemes to reward environmental land management. In addition, the £80 million green recovery challenge fund has kick-started a pipeline of nature-based projects, many of which relate to native species.

**Kate Griffiths** [V]: The Washlands in my constituency is a fantastic place to visit: an expansive piece of natural land that follows the river through the heart of Burton upon Trent. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking East Staffordshire Borough Council, Staffordshire Wildlife Trust and other organisations for their efforts in transforming the Trent valley to create spaces that work for both people and wildlife?

**Rebecca Pow**: There is hot competition this morning for the best constituency, and my hon. Friend's area is an extremely interesting and diverse landscape. I of course thank all organisations that are working to transform the Trent valley, including East Staffordshire Borough Council and the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust. Such partnerships and collaboration between partners and the community are absolutely key to the building of successful projects to restore and enhance natural and cultural heritage. I visited the Somerset levels yesterday, where similar partnership working is going so well, with so many partners. I am grateful to all the partners for their efforts towards goals for thriving plants and wildlife right across England.

**Sir Roger Gale** [V]: First, I would be grateful if my hon. Friend confirmed that her Department will support the properly managed reintroduction of beavers, which can contribute so much to the environment.

Secondly, endangered species suffer because of loss of habitat more than anything else. If we rip out hedgerows and headlands and build over all our agricultural land,

the habitat will be destroyed and wildlife will be destroyed, so will my hon. Friend join me in campaigning against the use of agricultural land for development?

**Rebecca Pow**: I knew that my right hon. Friend was going to mention beavers, of which he is a great champion. As he knows, we are to consult on the reintroduction of beavers this summer. There are myriad benefits, but we must also look carefully at the management and mitigations that might be needed.

My right hon. Friend raises an important point about our precious agricultural land. I absolutely reassure him that we on the Government Benches are working hand in glove so that not only do all our new schemes deliver for nature but we can produce the sustainable food in this country that we want. This morning, I went to New Covent Garden market, where I saw a whole lot of our British produce. There were a lot of imports, but a lot of great British fruit and vegetables, and particularly flowers—it is British Flowers Week. Government Members are absolutely supportive of not only productive agriculture but recovering nature.

**Mr Speaker**: I welcome the new shadow Minister, Olivia Blake, to the Front Bench.

**Olivia Blake** (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The Government have made some grand claims about the species-abundance targets that they will add to the Environment Bill to protect our native species and wildlife. The Secretary of State has said that the Government want

“not only to stem the tide”

of the loss of nature

“but to turn it around—to leave the environment in a better state than we found it.”

However, last week the Government published their amendment; will the Minister explain why the proposed legislation commits only to

“further the objective of halting a decline in the abundance of species”

rather than reversing the decline?

**Rebecca Pow**: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. This is the first time that we have had questions in the Chamber together.

This is a tremendous commitment by the Government to halt the decline of nature by 2030. No other country has done anything like this, so we are totally committed to the target. All the framework that we are putting in place will build towards this nature recovery: our local nature recovery strategies; our national nature recovery strategies; our 30% of land and sea protected; our 10 new large-scale landscape recovery schemes; and the entire environmental land management system. I could go on and on. I do not think that I could reiterate more the Government's commitment to that. We will be consulting on the exact detail of the target in 2022, along with all the other targets in the Environment Bill.

### Food and Drink Manufacturing Sector: Competitiveness

**John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con) [V]: What steps he is taking to help ensure the competitiveness of the food and drink manufacturing sector. [901403]

As the Minister knows, the food and drinks manufacturing sector is the largest in this country, employing more than 400,000 people directly. It is a major innovator and exporter. My concern is that the sector may get too much red tape and regulation. If we look at the obesity strategy, for example, there could be a lot of regulation with very little gain. Can she reassure me that there will be proper scrutiny of any legislation, and that the minimum burdens will be put on this sector, which is vital to our economy?

**Mr Speaker:** Can you pick up the substantive question, Minister? That was my fault.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis):** Thank you, Mr Speaker; we will manage.

Our manifesto was clear that we want people at home and abroad to be lining up to buy British. We are lucky to have, as my hon. Friend referenced, a fantastic network of manufacturing businesses, most of which are small and medium-sized enterprises, so we are very alive to the needs of those businesses and the difficulty of excessive regulatory burdens. I am quite sure that we will debate the new obesity strategy fully, both in this House and outside. Some of the legislation can be made using powers in the Food Safety Act 1990, and other parts in the health and care Bill. We meet regularly with the sector and are keen to engage with it on a practical level as to how regulation will affect its businesses.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP) [V]: Given that the Australian trade deal is predicted to save the average household an incredible £1.23 per year in the long term, while destroying agriculture and businesses and opening us up to similarly lowered standards and bad deals with the US, Argentina, Brazil and so on, perhaps the Government are counting on that extra disposable income making up for an uncompetitive sector. What protections are intended to be put in place to make sure that our farmers are not undercut by cheap imports?

**Victoria Prentis:** One thing that I have just said in reference to this question is that we are very keen to promote the buying of British produce. We have a plan to promote domestic products, and we are further strengthening export support. On the other part of the hon. Lady's question, we will have a chapter in the new Australia deal to deal with the protection of animal welfare standards. I encourage her to get engaged with the details as they emerge in the course of this year.

#### Trade Deal with Australia: British Food Standards

**Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for International Trade on maintaining British food standards in a future trade deal with Australia. [901407]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice):** I have had regular discussions with the Secretary of State at the Department for International Trade and, indeed, other Cabinet colleagues on the issue of food standards in the context of our negotiations with Australia. The UK has a prohibition on the sale of beef treated with hormones, and the agreement recognises our right to regulate in this way.

**Ms Buck:** The Secretary of State will be aware that environmental, animal welfare and farming groups have all expressed their concern about both the small print in the deal and the precedent that it sets. The Minister knows that trust is in very short supply, and that deals have a habit of unravelling, as we have seen very clearly in recent months.

Can the Minister give us a date by which the Trade and Agriculture Commission will be fully operational, and the date on which the analysis of this deal will be published?

**George Eustice:** The Secretary of State for International Trade will, I think, be giving a statement later. The Government have now published the key components of the agreement in principle, and some analysis of the impacts of this agreement has already been cited. Australia is a very important partner of ours, and it is important that we get a trade agreement with it. It is, of course, a smaller economy and the opportunities are therefore not as large as they would be with a larger economy, but nevertheless, Australia is an important ally and this is a good agreement between us.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): I hardly need to explain to the Secretary of State the level of disbelief and anger that there is as the betrayal of British farming unfolds this week. The level of detail is unclear, but *The Daily Telegraph* helpfully reports a major win for the Secretary of State for International Trade—doubtless briefed by her. The key losers in this situation are British farmers. Given that we now know that there is going to be a huge increase in the amount of beef and lamb coming in from Australia—produced to lower standards at lower cost, disadvantaging our farmers—will the Secretary of State tell the House what he is going to do to help our farmers meet that challenge?

**George Eustice:** We secured some important mitigations to help the farming industry, including the fact that a tariff rate quota will stay in place for the first 10 years on both beef and sheep, and for the subsequent five years there will be a special agricultural safeguard that means that if volumes go above a certain trigger, tariffs immediately snap back in. We have put in place mitigations through the quota for the first 10 years and through that safeguard.

#### Horse Tethering

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle horse tethering. [901405]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis):** The current legislation and guidance provides the right safeguards and powers in respect of horse tethering. The code of practice for the welfare of horses, ponies, donkeys and their hybrids provides information on acceptable standards of tethering. We want every owner to follow that guidance.

**Robert Halfon** [V]: In my beautiful constituency of Harlow, we sadly see many horses tethered by the roadside and in dangerous locations. These horses often have no water and are left for days on end. Sometimes the tether breaks, causing danger for the horses and passing cars. Will my hon. Friend consider introducing not only tougher measures to penalise individuals who mistreat their horses and break the code of practice for

the welfare of horses, ponies, donkeys and their hybrids, but a mandatory duty on local councils to implement a licensing system to ensure that horses are monitored and receive regular vet checks, and that the highest animal welfare standards are upheld?

**Victoria Prentis:** My right hon. Friend, from his beautiful constituency, has long campaigned on this important issue. People who mistreat their horses face prosecution under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. The good news is that the maximum penalty under the Act increases this month to five years' imprisonment. Anyone who has concerns about inappropriate tethering should report the matter to their local authority. Local authorities have powers under the 2006 Act to take action where a horse is suffering.

#### **Agricultural Sector: Labour Supply**

**Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of labour supply for the agricultural sector. [901406]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis):** DEFRA is working closely with industry and wider Government to ensure that UK growers get the labour they need. This year, the seasonal workers pilot has been expanded from 10,000 to 30,000 visas. Many workers are among those who now have settled or pre-settled status.

**Alex Cunningham:** The Minister will be aware that the Government's bizarre approach to labour from the EU is causing chaos across all manner of job roles, including in agriculture. Just this week, haulier Martyn Levitt from Stockton told me that there is a huge shortage of drivers as companies can no longer easily hire from the EU, and goods are not being delivered. That needs to be sorted. Today, the National Farmers Union and I would like to know whether the Minister will extend the seasonal workers pilot scheme to ornamentals to ensure that plants and flowers in fields and nurseries get picked and are not left rotting, bringing joy to no one and bankrupting businesses.

**Victoria Prentis:** The Secretary of State is working actively on this issue and had a meeting with several representatives of the ornamentals sector only yesterday to discuss it. We are working hard across Government to address these worker shortages. I am working with the Department for Work and Pensions to promote picking and to support the horticultural sector, as well as to recruit more UK workers. Automation will be at least some of the solution to this issue, and we are actively promoting new technologies.

#### **Leaving the EU: Agriculture and the Food Industry**

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the UK's departure from the EU on agriculture and the food industry. [901408]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice):** Farm incomes are heavily influenced by exchange rates, and in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum there was an immediate boost to farm profitability and that has remained the case since.

For the first time in 50 years, we are also free to create an independent agriculture policy that works for our own farmers. Our future agriculture policy will support farmers to farm sustainably, to make space for nature in the farmed landscape, and to improve their profitability.

**Mr Bone:** I thank the most excellent Secretary of State for that response. Is he as fed up as I am with doom and gloom from those on the Opposition Benches when our farmers do such a good job? Coming out of the EU allows them to turbocharge their exports. Get rid of that lot and concentrate on the good stuff that we are doing.

**George Eustice:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point. British agriculture in many sectors is world-beating, world-leading, competes internationally and can export internationally. We will be announcing plans to increase the support that we offer to exporters, and there are important opportunities for our goods in some of the Asian markets.

#### **UK-Australia Trade Deal**

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for International Trade on safeguards for British agriculture in a future trade deal with Australia. [901409]

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What assessment his Department has made of the potential effect of the proposed UK-Australia trade deal on (a) UK and (b) Scottish agricultural producers. [901420]

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice):** As part of the agreement with Australia, we secured a special agricultural safeguard, which has a strict automatic volume trigger. It means that for the first 10 years, Australian beef and lamb will be subject to a tariff rate quota, and for the subsequent five years it will be subject to a special agricultural safeguard with a volume trigger.

**Christine Jardine [V]:** This particular Opposition Member has no doubt about the world-class nature of our crofting and farming sector and our food production throughout the UK. However, I am aware of the concerns expressed by those sectors about the lack of consultation with the trade bodies and with Parliament before this deal was announced. What can the Secretary of State do to reassure these industries that a dangerous precedent is not being set and we are not going to see a lack of consultation repeated with trade deals, however important they might be, in future?

**George Eustice:** The Department for International Trade has a number of groups, including one covering agri-food, that discuss the approach to trade deals and help the Department to identify priorities. Necessarily, when in the final stages of a negotiation, the mandate the Government have is kept confidential, otherwise it would undermine our negotiating position, but we do share as much as we are able to with stakeholders, including the National Farmers Union.

**Stuart C. McDonald:** Will the Secretary of State confirm that there is tariff-free access for Australian farmers from day one up to a meaningless cap 60 times current levels of imported beef, and the same applies to

lamb up to a cap three times current import levels? Does that not render promises of a 15-year protection period absolutely redundant, and can we expect the same so-called protections in future trade deals?

**George Eustice:** We have to look at this in the context of the fact that at the moment Australia does not sell us any of these goods because, in the case of beef, it has a minuscule tariff rate quota of only about 1,400 tonnes. We also have to look at it in the context of the fact that we already have a TRQ with New Zealand that is over 100,000 tonnes, and New Zealand does not fill that quota.

#### Shark Fins: Ban on Imports

**Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP):** What recent discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on enforcement of the proposed ban on importing shark fins. [901411]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis):** As we set out in the recently published action plan for animal welfare, we will be bringing forward legislation to ban the import and export of detached shark fins. DEFRA has been working closely with the Home Office and Border Force officials. We need enforceable legislation that will lead other nations to join us in banning this dreadful trade.

**Dave Doogan:** I quite agree that we do need enforceable legislation, and not just on whole shark fins but on shark fin products. I have asked the Minister about this in a written parliamentary question and in Westminster Hall, and I have not had a satisfactory response. Can she confirm today that shark fins and shark fin products will be proscribed from UK borders, which will be a great relief to my Angus constituents?

**Victoria Prentis:** We are in the process of preparing the legislation at the moment. I would be very willing to meet the hon. Gentleman on the detailed wording of how we do this. We are making good progress. We need to make sure that our measures are as effective as possible in delivering shark conservation measures globally.

#### UK Fishing Industry

**Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con):** [901412] What steps he is taking to support the UK fishing industry.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis):** The seafood sector has faced significant challenges over the past 18 months, but the situation is now improving as hospitality opens up and we adapt to new export requirements. Sector support worth £32.7 million is available this year, plus an additional £100 million to help rejuvenate the industry and our coastal communities.

**Chris Loder [V]:** Seafarers UK conducted a report in 2019 that found that most small-scale fishermen often had few savings and reduced financial resilience even before covid, and many have fallen through the gaps of Government funding because they either changed vessels or because their fishing opportunities and earnings in 2019 were not enough to reach the threshold for the fisheries response fund. What steps can the Minister take to address this issue and to support the small fishing boats in my constituency in Lyme Bay?

**Victoria Prentis:** That excellent report, which I was very pleased to provide a foreword to, highlights that small-scale fishermen face not only financial challenges but social pressures. The report's recommendations point to where industry and the Government might tackle these challenges together, and we are currently considering these in more detail.

#### Topical Questions

[901360] **Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice):** Today is Clean Air Day. The recent coroner's inquest into the tragic death of Ella Kissi-Debrah highlighted the importance of making progress on delivering clean air. The Government are working on a new targets framework for air quality and a range of policies to improve air quality, and in particular to reduce particulate matter. We will also do more to raise awareness of the risks of air quality in our urban areas.

**Mr Betts [V]:** In 2007 there were major floods in Sheffield, which not only affected homes but destroyed large parts of industrial areas, including Meadowhall shopping centre, Forgemasters and other industries. A great deal of work has been done on flood defences, with the council and the private sector working together, with some Government support. However, one thing that would really help is the preservation of the peat bogs in the moorlands above Sheffield, which act as a massive sponge to stop the run-off and the cascading of water down into Sheffield. Will the Minister take action now to stop heather burning on the peat bogs and to make sure that peat does not end up in unnecessary products, such as compost for gardens?

**George Eustice:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The Government are clear that we will consult on a ban on horticultural peat, and we will shortly bring forward the legislation that will implement a new ban on the burning of heather on blanket bog. It is our intention to treble the rate of peatland restoration, for all the reasons he said.<sup>1</sup>

[901361] **Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con):** My borough of Bexley is one of the greenest in London, with great parks and open space. Will my right hon. Friend explain what action is being taken to increase the number of trees planted in urban areas?

**George Eustice:** My right hon. Friend makes an important point. The Government set out proposals in our recent England tree strategy. There will be a new urban tree challenge fund and a new treescapes fund for local authorities, and of course our policy of biodiversity net gain absolutely intends to make space for nature in new developments, which will include tree planting.

**Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op) [V]:** I hope that today is not the Secretary of State's last Question Time, given the recent rumours from Downing Street that he is due for the chop. If those rumours are true, how will he spend his next few weeks ensuring that he is not remembered as the Secretary

1. [Official Report, 21 June 2021, Vol. 697, c. 8MC.]

of State who betrayed our fishing industry and who rolled over and betrayed our farmers over an Australian trade deal?

**George Eustice:** Ministers never comment on reshuffle speculation, particularly when it is about oneself. In the context of fishing, we recently got an agreement with the EU on how to approach shared stocks for the remainder of this year. We of course got an increase in quota of around 25%, with 15% of that coming this year, and we have deployed that to almost double the fishing opportunities for our inshore fleet in this year.

[901362] **Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): The moors of the Dark Peak are staggeringly beautiful, but unfortunately they remain some of the most depleted in Europe. The case for restoring our peat moorlands makes sense on so many levels. It enhances biodiversity and improves water quality, helping keep water bills down. It reduces the risk of flooding and of wildfire, and it helps tackle climate change. I am proud that the Government are investing huge sums of money in restoration already, but we do need to go further and faster. Can I invite the Secretary of State to come up on the moors of the High Peak with me, so he can see the excellent work being done first-hand and so we can make the case for continued investment in this vital restoration?

**George Eustice:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Our peat habitats are vital for our biodiversity, can be a vitally important carbon store and can also help with both drought and flood risk mitigation. We will be dramatically increasing the funds available for peatland restoration. I or one of my ministerial colleagues would of course be delighted to visit his constituency in the High Peak and see some of the work being done there.

[901368] **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab) [V]: Further to the previous question, the Climate Change Committee warned this week that the area of land suitable for peat-forming vegetation in the uplands could decline by 50% to 65% by the 2050s through the effects of climate change alone, potentially dramatically increasing UK carbon emissions. How is the Secretary of State planning to amend the “England Peat Action Plan” to bring forward plans for peat protection and restoration in light of the Committee’s damning report?

**George Eustice:** We are dramatically increasing the rate of peatland restoration to get to 35,000 hectares by the end of this Parliament. It will be a big feature of the landscape recovery component of our future agriculture policy. We have great ambitions to see the natural hydrology of our deep peat habitats restored.

[901363] **Richard Fuller** (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Fly-tipping is a blight on rural areas. Central Bedfordshire alone issued 400 penalty notices last year, but with the fine only being £400—frequently discounted—it is treated really as just a cost of doing business if someone gets caught, does my right hon. Friend agree that the fine is too low? What other efforts can he take to improve deterrence?

**George Eustice:** I know that fly-tipping is a challenge. My hon. Friend says that £400 is too low. That is an immediate on-the-spot penalty fine, which was introduced

just a couple of years ago. Prior to that, local authorities had to try to bring a prosecution, but we are doing more to try to improve the traceability of waste, to strengthen the waste carrier transfer system and to digitise the notes to improve the traceability and track down the criminals behind this fly-tipping.

[901369] **Beth Winter** (Cynon Valley) (Lab) [V]: Today marks Clean Air Day, which aims to improve public awareness and understanding of the damage caused by air pollution and to promote campaigning on this critically important issue. I am proud to say that the Welsh Government’s “Programme for Government” published this week included a commitment to introduce a clean air Act for Wales consistent with World Health Organisation guidance and to extend the provision of air quality monitoring. Will the Minister commit to following the Welsh Government’s lead at a UK level?

**George Eustice:** This issue is very much the subject of debate in the Environment Bill, which is currently going through both Houses of Parliament. We will be setting targets for clean air, and we will also be looking at a population exposure target, since it is not just about the absolute levels of particulate matter—we want to continue to reduce those—but about looking at the issue of population exposure, too.

[901364] **Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger** (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: The Secretary of State is fully aware that we have an issue at the moment with customs. West Somerset Garden Centre in Minehead, which is at the far end of most supply chains, is getting a lot of these articulated lorries from across Europe, and they start their drop in Minehead, which means that customs forms are done in Minehead for the whole load, regardless of whether only a third of it is coming off there. The other problem is that when these plant trays come off—the Secretary of State knows what I am talking about—even if only three of those plants are coming off in Minehead, the rest still have to go through the customs rigmarole there. The customs officers either do not get to Minehead or do not know where it is, and there is a huge problem with this, as the Secretary of State is aware. We need an answer to this fairly quickly, because the paperwork is swamping a small garden centre in Somerset.

**Mr Speaker:** Topicals are meant to be brief, so you will have a brief answer, Secretary of State.

**George Eustice:** I will be brief. I would be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this particular issue in relation to customs.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) [V]: The reason why Cumbria’s farmers feel betrayed is that the Australian trade deal gives Australian farmers an unfair advantage over British farmers, because their production costs are lower due to significantly worse animal welfare and environmental standards in Australia compared with those in our country. Given that this sets an appalling precedent for all future deals, will the Secretary of State ensure that farmers’ representatives in this House get the final say and a veto before this deal is signed off.

**George Eustice:** Under the provisions that we have to ratify treaties, of course this House will have the ability to decline to ratify any treaty, including this particular one. On the issue of animal welfare, it is the case that we have a chapter on animal welfare co-operation. Of course, we will be seeking to address some of the welfare deficiencies in Australia and, for instance, to get it to follow New Zealand's lead on the issue of mulesing. It is also important to recognise that this agreement does not cover pork and poultry, on which its standards also have problematic approaches.

#### ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

*The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission was asked—*

##### Voter ID: Fraudulent Votes

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent estimate the commission has made of the potential number of fraudulent votes that will be prevented with plans to mandate voter ID at future elections. [901320]

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester): The commission has made no detailed assessment of the number of fraudulent votes that could be prevented as a result of the Government's proposed policy to introduce voter ID requirements. While levels of reported electoral fraud in the UK are consistently low, they do vary and there is no reliable methodology for forecasting instances of electoral fraud. The commission has highlighted the lack of an ID requirement as a vulnerability in polling stations in Great Britain. Public research shows that this issue concerns voters.

**Mr Carmichael:** We know, as the hon. Gentleman says, that previous work by the commission has shown that voter impersonation is a very rare occurrence in this country. We also know from the other side of the Atlantic that schemes there involving the production of identification at polling stations have suppressed turnout, especially among poorer communities and minority ethnic communities. Will that experience be taken into account by the commission in formulating further advice to the Government in respect of their proposed legislation?

**Christian Matheson:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that question, and he raises an interesting point. Hon. Members will have seen that, at both state and federal level, there are discussions at the moment about electoral law. We may have lessons to learn from fellow democratic countries, and I will pass that recommendation on to the commission for its consideration.

#### CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

*The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—*

##### Online and In-person Communal Worship: Covid-19 Restrictions

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Whether the Church of England plans to support online and in-person communal worship as covid-19 restrictions are lifted. [901321]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous):** The Church of England is strongly encouraging churches to support both in-person and online communal worship, and training has been given to thousands of clergy to enable this. It is up to local churches to decide how best to do this.

**Martin Vickers:** I thank my hon. Friend for his reply. It is welcome that the Church is encouraging this both online and in-person. For those housebound, who perhaps in the past have only received home communion, to be able to participate more is very welcome, but nothing can actually replace the fellowship of being a part of a real-life congregation. Can he give an absolute assurance that no barriers will be put in the way of achieving that?

**Andrew Selous:** I could not agree with my hon. Friend more, and I can give him a complete assurance that the Church of England fully recognises the importance that so many people attach to worshipping communally together in church. At the same time, we are very keen not to lose those who join us online, and we hope we will be able to get to know many of our new online attendees as soon as possible in due course.

##### Choral Singing in Churches and Cathedrals: Covid-19

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What discussions the commissioners have had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on reintroducing choral singing in churches and cathedrals during the covid-19 outbreak. [901322]

**Andrew Selous:** The Church is having ongoing discussions with the Government about when choral and communal singing in churches and cathedrals can return, and I am very aware how frustrating the current situation is for choirs across the country.

**Mr Speaker:** Let us go to the shadow of Lichfield cathedral, with Michael Fabricant.

**Michael Fabricant** [V]: Some people relax with yoga, others with tai chi—perhaps you do, Mr Speaker—but in the good old days when I used to have a week in Westminster and then get back to Lichfield, I unwound by going to evensong in Lichfield cathedral, which is very relaxing indeed. Whatever reason people go to evensong—perhaps even religious reasons, for worship—there is a need for it to be restored. What assurance can my hon. Friend give that, come 19 July, things will truly get back to normal in Lichfield and elsewhere?

**Andrew Selous:** I was praising my hon. Friend in front of all the cathedral deans on Tuesday for his diligence on behalf of Lichfield cathedral. He is absolutely right about the beauty of our choral tradition and how much it is cherished. We all want to see a return as quickly as possible.

## PARLIAMENTARY WORKS SPONSOR BODY

*The right hon. Member for East Hampshire, representing the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body, was asked—*

### Restoration and Renewal: Procurement Opportunities

**Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What assessment that body has made of the procurement opportunities for businesses in Hastings and Rye constituency as part of the restoration and renewal programme. [901323]

**Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire): Restoring Parliament will benefit businesses in the UK, using UK materials wherever possible and creating jobs and apprenticeships nationwide—including, I hope, in my hon. Friend's constituency—in fields from engineering and high-tech design to traditional crafts such as carpentry and stonemasonry.

**Sally-Ann Hart**: The restoration and renewal programme will cost billions, but at the same time it will employ thousands of British people. The Sponsor Body is required to procure and manage the contractors and supply chain. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in doing so, it can help towards delivering the Government's levelling-up agenda by ensuring that businesses, contractors and so on from our more deprived socioeconomic areas across the UK have real equality of opportunity to access the variety of employment opportunities afforded by the programme?

**Damian Hinds**: Absolutely; my hon. Friend is quite right. The programme is currently developing its supply chain plans to help to ensure that the benefits of the programme are felt across the country. There is also an innovative loan scheme for apprentices to be employed by the programme and then loaned to businesses working on the restoration, and dozens of young people from more disadvantaged areas will be offered paid internships and placements in a partnership with the Social Mobility Foundation.

## CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

*The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—*

### Families and Marriages: Support from the Church

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What steps the Church is taking to support and strengthen families and marriages. [901324]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous)**: Both archbishops are very committed to strengthening families and marriages across the country, which is why they have launched their commission on families and households to see what greater support the Church can provide in this vital area of our national life.

**Dr Cameron** [V]: What a welcome response. Given that the Government have recently announced the foundation of the National Centre for Family Hubs, led by the Anna Freud Centre, and given the interest in

family hubs from our local Hope Church in Blackwood, what communication has the hon. Member had with the Family Hubs Network to ensure that churches are involved in this support that is being offered to vulnerable families across our local communities?

**Andrew Selous**: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's question. Like her, I am a great fan of family hubs. The families and households commission will be looking carefully at how family hubs can help families to flourish and how churches could be involved in this important work.

### Rewilding in New Tenancy Agreements

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to promote rewilding in new tenancy agreements. [901325]

**Andrew Selous**: I commend the hon. Lady's continued focus on this vital area. Our new farm business tenancies strongly encourage good environmental practice, such as ensuring that watercourses are kept clear, hedgerows are well maintained and topsoil is preserved. We are reviewing tenancy obligations as our new environmental strategy is developed.

**Kerry McCarthy**: I thank the hon. Member for his engagement with me on this issue—and his tolerance, in some cases. I am pleased to see that the commissioners will be carrying out a natural capital audit of their 105,000 acres of land. Can he say whether that is likely to result in recommendations on conservation and rewilding? If so, will he consider looking at the National Trust's model tenancy agreements to see whether that is something that could be put in future tenancy agreements on the commissioners' land?

**Andrew Selous**: I continue to be grateful to the hon. Lady. The Church wants to be an exemplar in this area. I can tell her that we expect the results of the natural capital audit shortly and will use it to see where we can enhance the environment of our rural land after we have listened to and collected the necessary data from our tenants.

## ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

*The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—*

### Voter Registration: Principal Residence and Secondary Address

**Mr Steve Baker** (Wycombe) (Con): If the Commission will make an assessment of the potential merits of introducing a system for voter registration requiring a person to (a) indicate their principal residence allowing them to vote in parliamentary elections and (b) register a secondary address which would allow for voting in local elections only. [901326]

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester): Following the 2017 UK general election, the commission recommended that the UK Government should consider making just such a change to the registration system. It is possible for somebody to be lawfully registered to vote in more than one place. At local elections, such people are able

to vote in each place in different elections. However, it is an offence to vote twice in a single election, such as in a parliamentary general election. The commission report in 2017 highlighted that requiring such voters to choose which area they will vote in at a UK parliamentary election could reduce the risk of electors voting twice. One practical issue is that we do not have one single national register, but lots of local registers held by individual registration officers.

**Mr Baker:** I am very grateful for that answer. Of course, this is a problem we have seen in Wycombe. I have seen evidence of it, which is why I raise it. On the point about a single national database, the House will remember that we had this conversation in relation to the NHS track and trace app. As a software engineer, may I, through the hon. Member, encourage the Electoral Commission to take the advice of expert software engineers on how such uniqueness could be assured on registrations without having a single national database?

**Christian Matheson:** I am very grateful for that and I think the House is aware of the hon. Gentleman's professional experience in this area. If he has solutions to suggest to the Commission, I could ask it to meet him to discuss what is possible.

## HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

*The hon. Member for Broxbourne, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—*

### **Covid-19: Ongoing Protection for Staff**

**Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What ongoing facilities there will be to protect staff from covid-19. [901327]

**Sir Charles Walker** (Broxbourne): The House of Commons Commission will continue to ensure that all necessary measures are in place to protect everyone in the parliamentary community from the risk of covid. The specific measures to be retained or implemented will be informed by the current Government guidance in place at the time, public health advice received and the parliamentary covid risk assessment. The covid risk assessment has been continuously updated in the past year to reflect the changing position, and will continue to be so as long as covid poses a risk to the health and wellbeing of our community. At its meeting on Monday 8 March, the House of Commons Commission agreed that the House makes all necessary arrangements to ensure the resilience of business and the safety of all passholders in relation to covid through to March 2022.

**Mrs Murray:** Will my hon. Friend please pass on my thanks, and I am sure those of all Members, to all staff who continue to work through the pandemic in this place? Will a review take place into the procedures used, so they can be improved to protect against the threat of disease in future?

**Sir Charles Walker:** I will certainly pass on my hon. Friend's thanks to all staff who have worked in the House of Commons during the past difficult 15 months. I think I speak for everyone when I say they have done a simply outstanding job. Learning lessons from our response has been a key priority throughout this time. It has

allowed us to refine and improve our response as time has progressed. The House service, through the business resilience group, will ensure planning is conducted to prepare for a range of public health emergencies, alongside identifying and mitigating against a number of other novel risks if they occur.

## CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

*The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—*

### **Church Estates: Rewilding, Tree-planting and Sustainable Farming**

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): What plans there are for rewilding, tree-planting and sustainable farming on Church estates. [901328]

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the Church of England is taking to increase planting and rewilding on its land. [901354]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous):** Ahead of the new environmental land management schemes, we are undertaking a natural capital audit across our rural holdings. The report, which is expected later this year, will include a review of woodland management and new tree planting, including riparian planting.

**Alex Sobel [V]:** The Church is a significant UK landowner, owning 105,000 acres of land, with a property portfolio worth over £2 billion. May I ask what plans it has for rewilding, tree planting and sustainable farming on its estates, as well as for being more transparent about what land it owns and how that land is used?

**Andrew Selous:** I can tell the hon. Gentleman that like him I want to see a lot more trees planted. The Church in 2020 planted 1.1 million trees, on top of the 2.6 million we planted in 2019. Page 24 of the 2020 annual report shows our top 20 property holdings and our top 20 equity holdings.

**Rachael Maskell:** The Church of England is in the business of restoration. Yet over the centuries we have seen our natural habitats retreat into manufactured and managed landscapes, which are just ineffective at balancing our delicate ecosystem. As a significant landowner lagging behind the national ambition on rewilding as well as planting, what are the next steps the Church will take to build our natural cathedrals of woodlands and wildernesses ahead of COP26? How much will it invest in that project, and will it set a diocesan and local church challenge in this year of COP26 for them to play their part too?

**Andrew Selous:** There was a lot there, but I will do my best. I can tell the hon. Lady that, of the 184,000 acres we own in total, 92,000 acres are timber, but she is right that there is more to do. I will be attending the Groundswell conference next week, as will some members of the Church Commissioners, along with a number of Environment Ministers, and we are very conscious of the important issues that she raises.

### Investment in Companies: Transparency and Low Carbon Economy

**Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What progress the Church of England has made on engaging the companies it has invested in to (a) improve transparency and (b) transition to a low carbon economy. [901329]

**Andrew Selous:** The commissioners have a long history of leveraging their position as an investor to increase transparency and to make sure that companies are Paris-aligned—most recently, with ExxonMobil. The commissioners’ work alongside other investors can often play a leading role in organisations such as Climate Action 100+, the United Nations Principles for Responsible Investment and the Institutional Investors Group on Climate Change.

**Janet Daby** [V]: This week, the Young Christian Climate Network began its relay for justice, where over 500 young people will take part in the trek from Truro Cathedral to Glasgow to call for bold action from our political and religious leaders. We all know that warm words will not stop the earth’s temperature rising, and although I very much welcome the update from the commissioner today, will he confirm that every component of the Church, including the commissioners, is on track to reach zero carbon by 2030?

**Andrew Selous:** All parts of the Church are absolutely committed to reaching net zero. The Church will shortly be meeting Environment Ministers to see what more we can do together, and our ethical investing has won a number of awards in that area.

### ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

*The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—*

#### Voter ID

**Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What recent discussions the Commission has had with the Government on the introduction of voter ID. [901330]

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester): The commission has regular discussions with the Cabinet Office at both official and ministerial level, including to provide feedback on the development of the Government’s policy on voter ID. These discussions followed the commission’s independent evaluations of the Government’s voter ID pilot schemes at the local elections in 2018 and 2019. The commission recommended:

“Any ID requirement should deliver clear improvements to current security levels...ensure accessibility for all voters”,

and

“be realistically deliverable, taking into account the resources required to administer it”.

**Marco Longhi:** Does the hon. Member agree with Labour colleagues when they seem to suggest that voter ID is racist or discriminatory, when, actually, most industrialised nations use it?

**Christian Matheson:** It is not a question of what I agree with; it is about what the Electoral Commission agrees with, and I am here to answer questions on behalf of the Electoral Commission. It believes that there is a perception of the potential for fraud and that is what it is seeking to address in the advice that it has given to Government.

**Mr Speaker:** Well manoeuvred.

### CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

*The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—*

#### Net Zero Target

**Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What progress the Church of England has made towards its 2030 net zero target. [901331]

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous):** We estimate that the net carbon footprint for our church buildings is 12.5% lower than in 2006. We have developed an energy footprint tool, which has been shortlisted for an award at this year’s Energy Awards, and 38% of our parishes have engaged with the footprint tool. I suggest to my hon. Friend that she encourages parishes in her constituency to do so as well.

**Selaine Saxby:** I am sure that my hon. Friend would agree that small rural churches, of which there are many in my North Devon constituency, have an important role to play in hitting net zero. I know many congregants who are keen to do more with their local church to help. Will he explain what the Government are doing to promote the role that individuals and small rural churches can play together in this national issue?

**Andrew Selous:** I am delighted to be able to tell my hon. Friend that the diocese of Exeter has just received a £1 million grant from the Church for its Growing the Rural Church project. She could encourage local churches to join the Eco Church scheme and suggest that they move to a renewable electricity supplier. For those fit enough to cycle to church, she might ask them about where bikes could be left securely during services.

## Speaker's Statement

10.28 am

**Mr Speaker:** I have received a report from the Tellers in the Aye Lobby on the Division that took place at 6.59 pm yesterday on the question “That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Steps and Other Provisions) (England) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2021” be made. The hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) has informed me that the number of Aye votes was erroneously reported as 461 rather than 489. I will direct the Clerk to correct the numbers in the *Journal* accordingly. The Ayes were 489 and the Noes were 60, so the Ayes have it. The names were correctly recorded in *Hansard*.

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

10.29 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Free Trade Agreement Negotiations: Australia

10.32 am

**The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss):** I wish to make a statement on the new UK-Australia free trade agreement secured by our Prime Ministers this Tuesday. We have agreed a truly historic deal, which is the first negotiated from scratch by the United Kingdom since leaving the European Union. This gold-standard agreement shows what the UK is capable of as a sovereign trading nation: securing huge benefits such as zero-tariff access to Australia for all British goods and world-leading provisions for digital and services, while making it easier for Brits to live and work in Australia.

The agreement also paves the way for the UK's accession to the vast market covered by the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, coupling us with some of the world's largest and fastest growing economies worth £9 trillion in global gross domestic product. Our Australia deal shows that global Britain is a force for free and fair trade around the world. We believe in 21st-century trade. We do not see it as a zero-sum game like our critics, who doubt we can compete and win in the global marketplace. We want to be nimble, positive and open to new ideas, talent and products, without sacrificing our sovereignty.

We have laid out the core benefits of this deal in the agreement in principle document. It means that £4.3 billion-worth of goods exports will no longer have to pay tariffs to enter the Australian market, from Scotch whisky and Stoke-on-Trent ceramics to the 10,000 cars we currently export from the north of England. Meanwhile, we will enjoy greater choice and top value in Aussie favourites such as wine, swimwear and biscuits. Young Brits under the age of 35 will be able to live and work in Australia for up to three years with no strings attached. Our work and mobility agreement goes beyond what Australia agreed with Japan or the US, making it much easier for Brits to live and work in Australia.

We have agreed strong services and digital chapters that secure the free flow of data and the right for British lawyers and other professionals to work in Australia without needing to requalify. We have secured access to billions of pounds in Government procurement, which would benefit businesses such as Leeds-based Turner and Townsend, which is contracted to expand the Sydney Metro.

This deal promotes high standards, with the first animal welfare chapter in an Australian trade deal, as well as strong provisions on climate change, gender equality and development. On agriculture, it is important that we have a proper transition period. That is why we have agreed 15 years of capped tariff-free imports from Australia, which means that Australian farmers will only have the same access to the UK market as EU farmers in 2036. We should use this time to expand our beef and lamb exports to the CPTPP markets, which are expected to account for a quarter of global meat demand by 2030. I do not buy this defeatist narrative that British agriculture cannot compete. We have a high-quality, high-value product that people want to buy, particularly in the growing middle classes of Asia.

This Australia deal is another key step to joining the trans-Pacific partnership, a market of 500 million people that has high-standards trade, 95% tariff-free access

[Elizabeth Truss]

and very strong provisions in digital and services, which are of huge benefit to Britain, the second largest services exporter in the world. It covers the fastest growing parts of the world, where Britain needs to be positioned in the coming decades. While some look to the past and cling to static analysis based on what the world is like today, we are focused on the future and what the world will be like in 2030, 2040 and 2050.

Of course, Parliament will have its full opportunity to scrutinise this agreement. Our processes are in line with those of other parliamentary democracies, such as Canada and New Zealand; the Trade and Agriculture Commission will play a full role, providing expert and independent advice; and the House can rest assured that this deal upholds our world-class standards, from food safety and animal welfare to the environment.

Following the agreement in principle, we will finalise the text of the full FTA agreement, which will then undergo a legal scrub before being presented to Parliament, alongside an economic impact assessment. I look forward to further scrutiny from the Select Committee on International Trade and the Chair of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

This deal means we have now struck agreements with 68 countries plus the EU, securing trade relations worth £744 billion as of last year. The deal with our great friend and ally Australia is just the start of our new post-Brexit trade agreements. It is fundamentally about what kind of country we want Britain to be. Do we want to be a country that embraces opportunity, looks to the future, and believes its industries can compete and that its produce is just what the world wants? Or do we accept the narrative some peddle that we need to stay hiding behind the same protectionist walls that we had in the EU, because we cannot possibly compete and succeed? To my mind, the answer lies in free trade. Our country has always been at its best when it has been a free-trading nation. This deal is a glimpse into Britain's future—a future where we are a global hub for digital and services, where our high-quality food and drink and manufactured goods are enjoyed across the world, and where we are open to the best that our friends and allies have to offer. That is what this deal represents, and I commend this statement to the House.

10.39 am

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement and for publishing the outline agreement at quarter to 1 last night—nothing screams confidence in the deal you have negotiated like slipping it on to your website after midnight. I will not address every element of the deal she has highlighted today. On some, we will have to reserve judgment until we have seen the full treaty text and the economic impact assessment. After all, this was the Secretary of State who agreed a brand new Japan deal that turned out, according to her own figures, to deliver lower benefits for Britain than the one we already had.

However, the one area of this deal on which we can reach a verdict now is the terms agreed on agriculture. In doing so, I am not going to hold the Secretary of State to some impossible ideal; I am simply going to

hold her to the past commitments she has made to protect our standards and our farming industry. Let us start with standards. She said last October that she would not sign a trade deal that would allow British farmers to be undercut by cheap imports produced using practices that are allowed in other countries but banned in the UK. She called that an important principle, so let me give her just 10 examples of such practices in Australia: allowing slurry to pollute rivers; using growth-promoting antibiotics; housing hens in barren cages; trimming their beaks with hot blades; mulesing young lambs; keeping pregnant pigs in sow stalls; branding cattle with hot irons; dehorning and spaying them without pain relief; and routinely transporting livestock for 48 hours; and doing that without their having rest, food or water. All those practices are in common use in Australia, but banned in Britain. Yet, under the deal she has signed, the meat from farms that use those practices will come into our country tariff-free, undermining British standards, undercutting British farmers and breaking the promises made to the British people.

So much for protecting our standards, what about protecting our farming industry? The Secretary of State said last November:

“We have no intention of ever striking a deal that doesn't benefit farmers”.

Yet the deal she has just signed will allow Australia's farm corporations to export more than 60 times the amount of beef next year as they exported to Britain last year before they face a single penny in tariffs. It is the equivalent of immediate, unlimited tariff-free trade, which is why when the Secretary of State says that Australian farmers will be in the same position as EU farmers after 15 years, she is talking nonsense. They will be in exactly the same position from year one, but without the requirement to meet EU standards. No wonder Australia's former negotiator at the World Trade Organisation said:

“I don't think we've ever done as well as this. Getting rid of all tariffs and quotas forever is virtually an unprecedented result.”

Of course, he is right. When Japan and Korea negotiated their deals with Australia, they set tariff-free allowances in year one that allowed for a modest increase in the amount of beef Australia had exported to them in the previous year—7% for Korea and 10% for Japan. By comparison, the deal the Secretary of State has just signed allows Australia to increase its exports of beef by 6,000% without paying any tariffs. In the Government's own scoping paper last July we have it in black and white. That increase in Australian exports will mean:

“A fall in output and employment”

in the UK's agricultural sector. [Interruption.] The right hon. Lady says it is wrong, but I am just quoting her Department. So British farmers are to be left worse off as a result of her deal. This is another broken promise, with more to come when New Zealand, Canada, Brazil and America demand the same deal for their exports. Let me be absolutely clear. We want good trade deals with other countries. We want trade deals that will create jobs, support our industries, and strengthen our economy and our recovery. But, to be blunt about it, we want the kind of results from our trade deals that Australia has just achieved from us.

The Secretary of State told the newspapers in April that she would sit her inexperienced Australian counterpart in an uncomfortable chair and show him how to play at

this level. I am afraid that this deal has exposed the Secretary of State as the one who is not up to the job. Britain needs and deserves better.

We need someone who will keep the promises they make to the public and to Parliament; someone who will promote British standards around the world, not allow them to be undermined; someone who will protect our farming and steel industries, not throw them to the wolves; someone who will get the results for their country that the Australian Trade Minister has delivered for his. The Secretary of State has shown that she is not that person, so there is only one question that matters today: will she guarantee to give Parliament not just a debate but a binding vote on the deal that she has agreed with Australia so that we can reject the terms she has agreed on farming and send someone else back to the table to get a better deal for our country?

**Elizabeth Truss:** Well, it is not a surprise that the right hon. Lady is relentlessly negative about the opportunities of the Australia deal and the trans-Pacific partnership. I am surprised that she is known as the shadow Secretary of State for International Trade; she should be known as the shadow Secretary of State against international trade, because there is not a single trade deal that she supports.

The right hon. Lady had nothing to say about the tariff-free access for all British goods—from cars to whisky—that we are going to secure under this agreement. She had nothing to say about the benefits for the under-35s of being able to live and work in Australia for three years with no strings attached. She had nothing to say about digital and services, even though the UK is the second largest services exporter in the world. Instead, she talked about agriculture, which is a new interest for her; we have not really heard her say much about it in the past.

Let me be clear: in year one, the cap on Australian beef exports to the UK will be 35,000 tonnes. We currently import 230,000 tonnes from the EU, so the cap is 15% of what we currently import from the EU. That is not the same access that the EU has; it is only 15% of the access. In fact, Australian farmers will only have the same access as the EU in 2036.

The right hon. Lady talks about animal welfare standards. Australia has been rated five out of five in international ratings on animal welfare standards. In many cases, those animal welfare standards are higher than they are in the EU, but not once did the right hon. Lady complain about the zero-tariff, zero-quota deal from the EU. Not once has she talked about animal welfare standards in the EU, apart from claiming that she likes Danish pork. The reality is that the right hon. Lady simply wants to stay in the EU. She does not want to look at future opportunities, she is not interested in where Britain can go in the future, and she is not interested in expanding Britain's trade and delivering more jobs in this country.

**Sir Roger Gale** (North Thanet) (Con) [V]: I certainly do not intend to criticise my right hon. Friend—who has clearly put a lot of work into this—without even beginning to know the details of the deal that has been struck. It is clearly the case that we need to strike agreements not only with Australia but with the trans-Pacific partnership, Canada, the United States and South America.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister spent part of the G7 weekend firefighting the fall-out from a badly negotiated deal over the Northern Ireland protocol, which demonstrates why parliamentary scrutiny is necessary. I am pleased to hear that my right hon. Friend the International Trade Secretary has said that this deal will be the subject of a parliamentary debate. I assume—perhaps she can confirm this—that that means that there will also be a vote. When will the Trade and Agriculture Commission be fully functioning and up and running, and when will the impact assessments in relation to this deal be published?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I can tell my right hon. Friend that we have already put out expressions of interest for serving on the Trade and Agriculture Commission. That will be in place before we need to scrutinise the agreement. The scrutiny of the agreement will take place when we have reached the final signed agreement. That will be presented to Parliament. In advance of that presentation, it will be given to the International Trade Committee and to the Chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee for scrutiny. It will then go to Parliament and go through the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act process, during which MPs are able to block the deal if they do not support it. I believe the deal I have negotiated is positive for the United Kingdom and will command parliamentary support, but there is always that option open to Members of Parliament.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement.

For all the bluster, the Secretary of State knows that any deal with Australia cannot even make a dent in the shortfall created by the trading disaster of leaving the EU. The simple fact is that we are doing much less trade now than we were before 1 January. This deal will take 15 years to deliver one 200th of the benefits lost from EU membership—and that loss has already cost Scotland's economy around £4 billion and is projected to cost every person £1,600 in red tape and barriers to trade.

The Secretary of State talks of whisky exports to Australia, while ignoring the fact that the Brexit costs of goods for distilleries have shot up by around 20%, and that is in addition to lost trade. This deal cannot come close to mitigating those costs or loss of sales. Fourteen of Scotland's food and drink organisations have written to the Secretary of State to say that they have been ignored by this Government. They are Scotland's farmers, crofters, producers and manufacturers. They know that they are being dragged underwater by yet another Westminster Government who simply do not care. And for what—swimwear?

In the 1970s, the Tories officially called Scottish fishing expendable, and they repeated that attitude on the way out of the EU. Even the Tories in Scottish constituencies now show the same contempt for Scottish agriculture. They have failed to back any amendments to legislation that would protect UK standards in trade negotiations or even public services.

Can the Secretary of State guarantee that the deal does not include investor-state dispute settlement mechanisms that could give corporations the right to sue Governments over actions that affect their profits, thereby potentially leading to the privatisation of public

[Drew Hendry]

services such as the NHS or changes to workers' rights? How will she guarantee that no cut of hormone-injected beef from Australia or food products treated with pesticides and antibiotics will appear on our supermarket shelves? She cannot, can she? Will she simply duck these questions and prove, once again, that the only way to protect Scotland's business and consumers is through independence?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I was hoping that the SNP spokesman would welcome today's announcement about the Airbus-Boeing dispute and the fact that we have continued to suspend the tariffs on Scotch whisky in a deal with the US.

I have much more faith than the hon. Gentleman does in Scotland's beef and lamb industry. It is some of the best beef and lamb in the world. I am excited about the opportunities in the trans-Pacific partnership, which will be eating 25% of the world's meat by 2030. The hon. Gentleman should be looking forward to those opportunities rather than harking back to the time when we were members of the EU. He needs to look at where the fast-growing markets of the future are; that is where Scotland's opportunities lie.

I can absolutely confirm that ISDS is not part of our trade agreement with Australia, and I assure the hon. Gentleman that no hormone-injected beef will be allowed into the UK.

**Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con):** G'day, Mr Speaker.

I thank the Secretary of State for this gold-standard trade deal with our long-standing friends and allies. She will know that Teesside has a long history of exporting to Australia—including the Sydney Harbour bridge, which was moved from Dorman Long's Teesside steel plant. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that this trade deal will mean simpler trade for chemicals, cars and steel; cheaper prices for my constituents; and easier travel to and from Australia?

**Elizabeth Truss:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right: Teesside is absolutely set to benefit from this deal. There will be a removal of tariffs on products such as steel and chemicals—no British product will face tariffs into Australia. The north-east is already incredibly successful in exporting 10,000 cars to Australia every year. The tariff on cars will be removed, allowing even more of our fantastic exports down under.

**Mr Speaker:** Let us go to the Chair of the Select Committee, Angus Brendan MacNeil.

**Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) [V]:** Tapadh leat, Mr Speaker. Some are saying that Australia has never before had such good luck in a trade negotiation and are wondering how this would have been different had the UK not been at the table. They suspect that Canberra is running out of champagne.

The reality is that in year one of the deal, UK farmers face the arrival from Australia of more quantities of beef, sugar, lamb, cheese and other dairy products than ever arrived in any year from the EU. To make up for the Brexit damage, we would need 245 such deals, which are very risky to farming. There is a feeling of unseemly haste with this deal. Incidentally, the EU would not create such risks for its farmers. With all that

in mind, and given the need for scrutiny, will the International Trade Secretary appear before our Select Committee in the next week to 10 days so that we can have a good to and fro and investigate the issues before she signs the deal and Australia has her in handcuffs?

**Elizabeth Truss:** It is interesting that the Chairman of the Select Committee accuses me of haste. It is true that the EU is in the fourth year of its negotiations with Australia, just as it takes a very long time to negotiate any deal with any party. Fundamentally, the EU's instincts are not to open up its markets. That has cost British business over the years, because we have not had access to Australian and Pacific markets on the same terms as others.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will appear in front of his Committee to answer questions prior to the signing. I am very happy to give him any kind of briefing. As he knows, he will get a copy of the signed trade agreement before anyone else—[*Interruption.*] I am afraid I cannot understand the hon. Gentleman's gesticulations, because there is no sound. I think he is very happy that I will appear before the Committee—that is the message I am receiving.

As I have already said to the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), in none of the 15 years of the transition period for beef and lamb access is the amount higher than that we currently import from the EU. It is extraordinary that the Labour party is happy with a zero tariff, zero quota deal with a landmass that is much closer to the UK, but afraid of a country that is 9,000 miles away. It seems to be one rule for its friends in the EU, and another rule for everybody else.

**Mr Speaker:** It might help if the hon. Gentleman went on a British Sign Language course.

**Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con):** May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this agreement? As she will know, certain farming organisations have expressed concern about this deal. Will she repeat once again that there will be no reduction in the standards of food that will be allowed to be offered for sale on the British market? Further, will she invite those organisations to, rather than express concern, work with and her Department to secure the best possible outcome of the agreement she has achieved?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I thank my right hon. Friend. There are huge opportunities for British products overseas. There is a growing global market for these products. The vast majority of Australian beef and lamb goes to the Asian markets, where prices are higher. The opportunity for Welsh lamb and beef lies in getting better access to those markets so that we too can benefit from those higher prices. I welcome the opportunity to work with the farming industry. I have already talked to the National Farmers Union about how we can work closely together to promote British exports and get more agriculture counsellors into those markets so that we can realise the opportunities of this deal.

**Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD) [V]:** The Secretary of State just referred to the fact that Australia is 9,000 miles away compared with the EU markets and the trade we were doing with it. I would be grateful if she could confirm how this deal will help the UK reduce its

carbon emissions in international trade. What will this deal do to help the Government achieve their net zero goals by 2030?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I am pleased to say that this deal is the first that Australia has signed that has specific references to our achieving our climate change objectives. We are working very closely with the Australian Government and other allies to reach net zero.

**Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con) [V]: I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on this deal. She has now signed nearly 68 trade deals. Given the shadow Secretary of State's comments, I would love to know how she thinks that that is not up to the job. While the doubters are still stuck in the past, can my right hon. Friend reconfirm not only that this free trade agreement paves the way to CPTPP membership for the UK, but that membership of the CPTPP would provide untold opportunities for our businesses by opening up access to 11 Pacific markets worth £9 trillion. As a believer in free markets, that is something that we cannot overlook.

**Elizabeth Truss:** We are expecting trade with those 11 countries to grow by 65% by 2030. The deal is a huge opportunity for the United Kingdom. The country has very high standards in areas such as digital and services where we are the second largest exporter in the world. What we have agreed with Australia also covers the market access negotiations for CPTPP, so this is very important stepping stone for those broader opportunities that are in the trans-Pacific partnership .

**Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab) [V]: Investor-state dispute settlement clauses allow multinational corporations to take sovereign Governments to court simply for acting in the best interests of their citizens. They have been used to sue Governments for taking parts of their health services back into public control, and by fossil fuel companies to undermine vital environmental regulations. They make a mockery of the idea that we are taking back control. Will the Minister reassure the House that investor-state dispute settlement clauses will be excluded from the UK-Australia negotiations, and will she guarantee the House that there will be a full debate and meaningful vote for MPs on this and all future agreements?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I disagree with the hon. Gentleman's characterisation of ISDS. The fact is that those clauses are in trade agreements, and we already have more than 60 ISDS clauses in various investment agreements to protect British businesses from unfair actions by overseas countries, such as the appropriation of property. Furthermore, the UK has never ever lost an ISDS case, because we are a country that follows the rules and implements our laws and regulations in a fair way. In any case, there is not an ISDS clause in the Australia trade deal.

**Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con) [V]: The Snowdonia Cheese Company, which is based in Rhyl but also has footprints in Deeside and Wrexham, is expanding 20% to 30% per annum and is a north Walian success story, combining milk from local farmers with brand Britain to rapidly expand its sales overseas. Australia is a key market for Snowdonia cheese, and, with tariffs lifted, the company stands to do even better.

Will my right hon. Friend visit Rhyl to celebrate with the company its enthusiasm for a UK-Australia trade deal?

**Elizabeth Truss:** This deal is great for UK cheese companies. There is currently an 11% tariff on products such as Snowdonia cheese, which will be removed as part of this deal. I would be delighted to visit the company and celebrate its success. This is what we want to see. Currently, only one in five of our food and drink companies exports. There are huge opportunities overseas and we need to see more and follow the lead of the Snowdonia Cheese Company.

**Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: There is grave concern across the farming industry not just about this deal, but about the potential precedent that it sets for our future deals with New Zealand, the United States, Brazil and Canada. Will the Secretary of State agree as a matter of urgency to publish an assessment of the amassed impact on our farming communities if deals with all those other countries are agreed on the same basis as that with Australia?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I am very clear that this deal does not set a precedent for other agreements. The reason that we have agreed to this liberalisation is that Australia is liberalising all of its trade with us, including on goods, services, digital and mobility. This is an agreement between two very like-minded partners that share the same high standards and that believe in free trade. Of course, we will be striking different sorts of agreements depending on how much other partners are prepared to open up their markets.

**Dehenna Davison** (Bishop Auckland) (Con): While some in this place hark back to a delightfully rose-tinted past, I am pleased that Government Members are really looking to the future. This is the first major trade deal we have signed since we left the European Union. On that, does my right hon. Friend agree with me that this is a fantastic example of how we can use the opportunities available to us as a sovereign trading nation to deliver for Bishop Auckland residents and for people right across our nation?

**Elizabeth Truss:** This is our first from-scratch negotiated trade deal, and I think we have shown here what we want to do as the United Kingdom. We have gone further than the US or Japan did with Australia in getting the ability for British workers to go to work and live in Australia. We have achieved huge amounts on youth mobility, with under-35s being able to go to Australia for three years with no strings attached, and complete tariff-free access for British goods, with gold standards in areas such as digital services and technologies of the future, including artificial intelligence. I think that benefits my hon. Friend's constituency, but also the entire United Kingdom.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: Antimicrobial resistance is a major global health threat, which led the EU and the UK to ban regular antibiotic use to promote growth in farm animals in 2006. Australia continues to allow antibiotics to be used as growth promoters, without any requirement for farmers even to report multi-resistant bacterial infections. How will the Trade Secretary prevent the import of such antibiotic-fed meat to protect Scotland's high food standards, our farmers and our future health?

**Elizabeth Truss:** Let me be absolutely clear that we are not lowering our food import standards as a result of this deal. We are absolutely maintaining that, so no hormone-injected beef will be allowed into the United Kingdom. Let me just be clear: all of the questions coming from the Opposition side of the House seem to imply that we need regulatory harmonisation with everybody we trade with. That is the EU model; we have left the EU. We believe that other countries should be in charge of their own rules and regulations, and we should have the sovereignty to set our own rules and regulations. What Opposition Members seem to be arguing for is global regulatory harmonisation.

**Danny Kruger** (Devizes) (Con) [V]: My constituency of Devizes is home to some of the best farmers in the world, including the current *Farmers Weekly* beef farmer of the year, James Waight of Enford farm, so I am very positive about the opportunities for more exports of Wiltshire produce, and I congratulate the Secretary of State on concluding this deal. However, I am even more positive about the opportunity for our farmers to have a bigger share of the UK market. We already import three quarters of the food we eat in this country, and to my mind that is too much, so can she reassure me that this deal will not under-cut farmers in Wiltshire with cheap, low-quality imports?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I know my hon. Friend believes in both beef and liberty, and I can assure him that that is exactly what this deal delivers. There are huge opportunities overseas for our beef farmers, and that is what we are seeking to open up, of course. We opened up the US market last year, and we now have beef going from England, Wales and Northern Ireland into the United States. I agree with him: I think there are huge opportunities for our farmers, freed from the common agricultural policy, which has held them back, and with a new pro-animal welfare, pro-environment policy here in the United Kingdom.

**John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): Australia, like Canada, is one of our oldest and closest allies, and many of us have family and friends there, so does the Secretary of State share my concern that the anti-trade lobby does not want us to do a trade deal with either of them, nor indeed with the United States and Singapore for that matter? Has she had any indication from the anti-trade lobby about which countries it thinks we can and should do trade deals with?

**Elizabeth Truss:** What a welcome voice from the Opposition Benches! If only the right hon. Gentleman could be promoted to a position on the Front Bench—[HON. MEMBERS: “Make him leader!”] Or even leader; that is a good idea. If that happened, we might see a more sensible, pro-growth, pro-trade policy on the Opposition Benches. It seems to me that the only group the Opposition want us to do a deal with is the EU. In fact, they want us to rejoin the EU. That is the strong message I am getting from the Opposition.

**Aaron Bell** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and congratulate her and her team on this achievement. The point about free trade, as she said in her statement, is that it is not a zero-sum game; it can be a win-win for us and for Australia, and for exporters such as the ceramics firms

in neighbouring Stoke-on-Trent and for consumers such as my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Can she confirm that, through this deal, Aussie favourites such as wine—including Jacob’s Creek and Hardy’s—swimwear and confectionery will be a much cheaper and that there will be more choice for British consumers, saving more than £34 million in year one?

**Elizabeth Truss:** My hon. Friend is right. The idea that a free trade deal is simply about who wins and who loses is completely wrong. The whole point is that Australia is an old friend of the United Kingdom and we want to trade more with each other. We want to give opportunities for our young people in both countries. We want to give opportunities for our exporters and thus, all of us can become more successful, have more jobs and more growth in every local area, from ceramics to all the other industries, as well as being able to get their hands on those fantastic Australian goods such as swimwear and Tim Tams and, of course, Australian wine, which I have been drinking quite a lot of this week.

**Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): The Secretary of State has mentioned climate change in earlier answers, but she has not said what assessment has been made of increased greenhouse gas emissions because of shipping the volumes of Australian beef and lamb that their acting Prime Minister is salivating over. Has that assessment been done, or is it anticipated that the price will be paid and offsetting will come from a reduction in ferry and freight traffic in rural parts, particularly in Scotland, which will pay the price as a consequence of this?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I absolutely refute the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion that Scottish farmers are not going to benefit from this deal. This is a key stepping stone to CPTPP. By 2030, CPTPP countries will be eating 25% of the world’s meat, and I want to make sure they are eating Scottish beef and Scottish lamb. Of course we are absolutely committed to our net zero target. The Australians are committed to a net zero target, and we will make sure those targets are achieved.

**Craig Williams** (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for engaging with the International Trade Committee, and I look forward to scrutinising the legal text. Welsh beef, Welsh lamb, Welsh dairy, Welsh cheese and Welsh agriproducts are wanted around the world, and my farmers and I are confident that this trade deal and access to CPTPP will benefit them. There are scaremongers bleating on the other side, in an echo of the former Brexit debates, so will my right hon. Friend reassure me and my farmers that they are at the heart of our trade policy, not an afterthought?

**Elizabeth Truss:** Farming is absolutely at the heart of our trade policy. That is why we have worked to get the US market open to British beef. Yesterday we announced that British poultry will now be going into Japan for the first time. There are huge opportunities in these markets, which generally have higher prices than here in the United Kingdom, and that is where the future of global Britain lies. This is about supporting our farmers with their fantastic products, getting them out into world markets and learning from others with ideas and innovation, not closing ourselves off to the future, which is what the Opposition seem to be advocating.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC) [V]: The Secretary of State makes much of the so-called transition period secured for farmers, but information on the Australian Government website suggests that the tariff-rate quota for Australian beef will increase nearly tenfold immediately, and that the deal will see the quota for Australian lamb nearly doubled in the first year. If she is serious about wanting farmers to compete and succeed, why, at the very first attempt, has she conceded to such a drastic and immediate increase in tariff-rate quotas that imperils the future of Welsh agriculture before domestic post-EU agricultural policies are even in place?

**Elizabeth Truss:** The fact is that there is very little Australian beef imported at the moment. What makes much more sense is to compare the amount in year one, 35,000 tonnes, with the amount that we currently import from the EU, which is 230,000 tonnes of beef. I do not remember the hon. Gentleman complaining when we agreed a tariff-free, quota-free deal with the EU, which is exporting far more beef and lamb than under our agreement with Australia. In fact, the likelihood is that, over time, some of those Australian exports will simply replace exports from the EU.

**Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con) [V]: I welcome the prospect of a productive trade agreement with our closest friends in Australia, but it must be right for both partners. As a vet who has worked on farms in the UK and Australia, I very much welcomed confirmation from the Prime Minister yesterday in the House that this deal will be the first ever to incorporate high animal welfare standards. Will my right hon. Friend reassure the farmers and food producers in Cumbria and across the UK that tariff rate quotas and animal welfare clauses will be used in the agreement to safeguard it, and that the Trade and Agriculture Commission will be constituted in time to allow for meaningful parliamentary scrutiny of this deal, so that we get it right for farmers, producers and not least animals in both our countries?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I can confirm to my hon. Friend that there will be an animal welfare chapter in the agreement. We have published the outcomes of that in the AIP document that we have put online today. I can also confirm that there will be a transition period of 15 years, which will give our farmers significant time to work on this and to expand exports into the important CPTPP markets. I recognise my hon. Friend's expertise in this area and would very much welcome his engagement as we approach the signing process.

**John Cryer** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): It always amazes me how a legion of Ministers come to the Dispatch Box and pretend they are great independent-minded Euroseptics and always have been. The reality is that most of them toed the line, voted for remain and then did a bit of quick backpedalling afterwards, like the Minister at the Dispatch Box today. While we are on the subject, she said that the deal would be subject to full parliamentary scrutiny. Does that mean it will be subject to primary legislation or not?

**Elizabeth Truss:** The deal will be subject to full parliamentary scrutiny—exactly the same parliamentary scrutiny that the EU deal was.

**Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): I thank this outstanding Secretary of State for coming to the House to update us on the free trade agreement. Does she agree that all free trade agreements result in lower consumer prices and great opportunities for exporters, make industry more efficient and allow developing countries to develop? In a way, I agree with the previous questioner: let us have a debate on the Australian free trade agreement, and let those of us on the Government Benches vote in favour of it, and let Opposition Members decide whether they believe in Britain or not.

**Elizabeth Truss:** I fear we already know the answer to whether they believe in Britain or not. This deal will go through the proper parliamentary scrutiny process, through the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 process, as all international treaties do. I concur with my hon. Friend that the idea that Britain's future should be in closing ourselves off to the rest of the world—in putting up high-tariff barriers, not innovating, not learning and not sharing ideas—is the recipe for penury, not the recipe for success.

**Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): My constituency overwhelmingly rejected Brexit, because we knew what it would do to our farming and fishing industry. Is the Secretary of State concerned that the Australian farmers are hailing this as a huge victory, while Scottish farmers see it as a complete betrayal? Will she therefore explain to the hill farming communities in my constituency how flooding the UK market with cheap, factory-farmed, inferior produced meat is the golden opportunity that the Prime Minister promised that this deal would be?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I think the hon. Gentleman's farmers deserve better than the ludicrous scaremongering that he has been putting forward.

**Mr Steve Baker** (Wycombe) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and all her officials on this excellent deal. Is not the quality of this deal and the speed with which it has been agreed a testament to what can be achieved by high-standards nations when they come together properly as partners and negotiate in good faith? Does she agree that this augurs very well for our accession to CPTPP?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I agree with my hon. Friend. The fact is that the UK is now open to doing liberalising trade deals around the world. We believe that our farmers, our manufacturers and our services companies are able to compete successfully. We also believe that we are better when we are able to share ideas and trade with our friends right across the globe. I can assure him that this is only the start of our free trade agreement programme. We are working on CPTPP accession. We are working on deals with other countries around the world. We are going to make global Britain a success and make the UK a hub for trade in all areas, from food and drink to manufacturing, services and digital.

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab) [V]: Can the Secretary of State confirm that her proposed deal will reduce tariffs on meat produced using growth-promoting antibiotics, which UK farmers are banned from using? If so, how is that consistent with the repeated promises that she and other Ministers have made that our farmers will not be undermined by food produced to lower standards than they are required to meet?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I reject the argument that standards in Australia are low. The hon. Gentleman seems to be arguing that we should trade only with countries that have exactly the same regulations and rules as the United Kingdom. That is frankly a ludicrous proposition that would lead to us trading with virtually no one. Let me be clear: we are not reducing our import standards and we are not allowing hormone-injected beef into the United Kingdom.

**Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): I join other Members in congratulating my right hon. Friend on this great deal. I also thank her for making the first scratch-built deal with a Commonwealth country, Australia being a key member of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth has historically been neglected by this country over the past few decades. Does she agree that now we can do our own free trade deals outside the European Union, we should focus our efforts on the Commonwealth and keep maintaining our great ties with the Commonwealth nations? We have a great deal of history and cultural issues together, and trade will bring us all together even better.

**Elizabeth Truss:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. These are like-minded countries that we have long historical links with. They are our friends and family. I am pleased to say that immediately after this statement I will be meeting the New Zealand Trade Minister to hopefully make further progress on that deal.

**Stephen Farry** (North Down) (Alliance) [V]: Post Brexit, the EU remains our biggest export market by far. I believe that the overarching trade priority must be to address the remaining non-tariff barriers with the EU beyond the trade and co-operation agreement, including around sanitary and phytosanitary rules. Can the Secretary of State assure me that the SPS chapter of this Australia deal, based around equivalence rather than alignment, will not compromise the UK's options regarding any future EU veterinary agreements? I believe that it will.

**Elizabeth Truss:** The New Zealanders have a veterinary agreement with the EU, but they also have their own independent SPS policy. Let me be clear: we are not dynamically aligning with the EU's SPS policies. In fact, our agreement in principle makes it very clear that both Australia and the United Kingdom have their own independent SPS regimes.

**Richard Fuller** (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): There cannot be British citizens in the Australian Parliament but there are Australians in this Parliament.

I, for one, commend my right hon. Friend for securing this deal. She will understand that one of its strategic benefits is to set the basis for a global arrangement on standards in services. What progress did she make towards that strategic objective?

**Elizabeth Truss:** My hon. Friend is right. In this deal, we have agreement on the free flow of data, advanced provisions on the mobility of professionals, recognition

of qualifications and a whole host of positive arrangements in areas such as investment and procurement. By Australia and the United Kingdom working together to set standards alongside other allies, we can help challenge unfair trade practices across the world and make sure that we stand up for good, rules-based trade in areas where the UK leads.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): While I welcome the deal as a signal of things to come when we are unfettered from Europe as an entire nation, not just three out of four regions, I still have grave concerns for our quality lamb and beef sectors, particularly those in Northern Ireland, which are so renowned for quality and high standards and which depend on exports across the world. Last week the Secretary of State, in reply to another question, referred to the contract secured by Foyle Food Group. While it is good news that one person has done that, there has to be more. Will the Secretary of State give assurances over standards, such as the use of antibiotics, which may be notably higher in meat from other countries? Our standards in Northern Ireland are some of the best in the world. We need to retain them.

**Elizabeth Truss:** Northern Ireland is a very successful exporter of agricultural products, and we want to make sure that there are more opportunities not only in the US market, which is now exported to by Foyle Food Group, but right across the world, including through the CPTPP.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con) [V]: I congratulate the Secretary of State on this significant achievement. She has also set an important precedent: as this deal was done from scratch, it potentially sets the basis for all our future trade agreements. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must include in this agreement something missing from other international free trade agreements around the world—we must establish and maintain a fair and level playing field for UK businesses employing UK people, particularly in the food and farming sector?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I am pleased that our agreement with Australia will contain a strong labour chapter, and also a small and medium-sized enterprise chapter that will cut red tape on our fantastic SMEs that want to export around the world, cutting their paperwork so that they can get more of their fantastic goods, including, of course, food and drink companies.

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

11.27 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Speaker's Statement

11.30 am

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call the Leader of the House, I want to pay tribute to Sir Roy Stone, the principal private secretary to the Government Chief Whip, who is leaving the civil service this week. Sir Roy is only the fourth person to have held this role in a century, and he has done so with distinction for more than 20 years.

In helping facilitate the smooth running of parliamentary business, he has served this House, as well as successive Governments. I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing him well for the future. I have to say that personally I have always felt he gave great advice and worked very well behind the scenes, in charge of the usual channels. He will be missed by all sides of the House, and I wish him well.

I now call the Leader of the House to make the business statement.

## Business of the House

11.31 am

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg):** The business for the week commencing 21 June will include:

**MONDAY 21 JUNE**—Opposition day (3rd allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion relating to planning, followed by a debate on a motion relating to steel. Both debates will arise on a motion in the name of the official Opposition.

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

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

**THURSDAY 24 JUNE**—General debate on the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, followed by a general debate on UK defence spending. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 25 JUNE**—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 28 June will include:

**MONDAY 28 JUNE**—Second Reading of the Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Bill.

**TUESDAY 29 JUNE**—Estimates day (1st allotted day). Subjects to be confirmed.

**WEDNESDAY 30 JUNE**—Estimates day (2nd allotted day). Subjects to be confirmed. At 7.00 pm, the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

**THURSDAY 1 JULY**—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Bill, followed by a general debate on Windrush day, followed by a general debate on Pride month. The subjects for these debates were recommended by the Backbench Business Committee.

**FRIDAY 2 JULY**—The House will not be sitting.

I am pleased to announce the remaining recess dates for the rest of this year. Subject to the progress of business, the House will rise for the conference recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 23 September and will return on Monday 18 October. The House will rise at the conclusion of business on Tuesday 9 November and return on Monday 15 November. Finally, for the Christmas recess, the House will rise at the conclusion of business on Thursday 16 December and return on Tuesday 4 January.

We often talk of parliamentary democracy in sweeping and even grandiloquent terms, but its day-to-day success rests on the hard work of unseen officials. Yesterday the Prime Minister paid tribute, as you have, Mr Speaker, to Sir Roy Stone, the departing principal private secretary to the Chief Whip, who came to his current post at the start of the millennium, after serving Margaret Thatcher, Sir John Major and Tony Blair in Downing Street. While Sir Roy did not waste any time on my appointment in making it clear to me that the term “usual channels” was best kept away from the Floor of the House—in fact, I was told in no uncertain terms that I was not to use it—I intend to break the rule today, to make it clear that, when people mentioned the usual channels actually they meant Sir Roy. He was and has been the usual

[*Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg*]

channels for the past 20 years. He is, as you pointed out, Mr Speaker, only the fourth person to have held this particular set of responsibilities since Sir Charles Harris' appointment a century ago.

Over the last 21 years, Sir Roy has kept the parliamentary show on the road—not least in helping to smooth occasionally troubled waters in recent years, working phantasmagorical wonders behind the scenes and accomplishing feats of which Houdini would be proud, to ensure that the show went on. A predecessor of mine, Richard Crossman, described the job as

“a little round ball-bearing which makes the huge joint work that links the Opposition and Government Whips' Offices.”

That does not quite do it justice. Sir Roy himself would say that he is an honest broker. This is nearer the mark, but underplays his significance. Instead, Sir Roy's occasional declaration that this or that politician is offside is nearer the mark, because it invites comparison to a popular game known as association football, where referees may instinctively understand what is appropriate and what is not.

My own view is that Sir Roy has been a guardian of our constitution and its proprieties, the keeper of the democratic clocks, devoted to maintaining the position of and the balance between our constitution's weights and counterweights: Executive and legislature; Front Bench and Back Bench; Opposition and Government. I cannot think of a more important or solemn duty, but Sir Roy has proved himself the sort of man who performs near miracles with considerable regularity. He has been an inspiration and a teacher who we will all miss enormously; and, to his great credit, he still has much more to give. I wish him and his family every possible blessing.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business. I know that the staff of the House who have been asking me about the recess dates will be very pleased to hear them, given the hard year that so many of them have been through.

Every day, we sit here under the protective shield of our loved friend, Jo Cox. We can hear her voice. We are inspired by her. She mattered then; she matters still. Her life made a difference to millions and we miss her very much. This week especially, we send our love to her family.

Mr Speaker, the Opposition—particularly the Whips Office—join you and the Leader of the House in saying a big thank you to Sir Roy Stone, who is retiring this week after 44 years of service. We want him to know how much we appreciate him.

In this Cervical Screening Awareness Week, I encourage all women to take up the screening when offered, and to encourage other women to do likewise.

The British people deserve to have a competent Government, but this Government, unfortunately, are anything but competent—hopeless, in fact. This is costing the country dearly. Four years on from the Grenfell tragedy, where on the business is the plan to make all homes safe from fire and the law reforms to give tenants true voice—something that the survivors and bereaved people were promised?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced yesterday what he called an economic support package, but it consisted of just one single measure, which does not a package make. Failure to help businesses who have lost thousands of pounds because of the covid measures extension—itsself needed only because of other Government incompetence—will cost many people's jobs. Hopeless.

Similarly, the Prime Minister came back from a weekend with a few mates in Cornwall, describing something as a global vaccination programme that is anything but: 870 million doses of vaccine is a fraction of the 11 billion that the world actually needs, and his level of leadership at the G7 a fraction of what the country needs. The Government are not preparing the UK for the impacts of climate change, according to the Climate Change Committee; the Ministry of Justice is having to remove children from Rainsbrook secure training centre because it cannot keep them safe; there is little hope for young people who have lost months of education; social care is failing vulnerable children; trade deals are undermining farmers and fishers; and exports are down. Hopeless.

Will the Leader of the House please explain to people who own homes with fire defects, to the world's poorest people, to businesses losing money, to care workers and people who need care, and to our children and young people why the Government could not get around to arranging the business to sort out problems that are predictable, predicted and fixable?

There is now a steady stream of Government announcements on major matters that Members have to find out about from journalists, instead of here in this Chamber: covid regulations, parliamentary rules on English votes for English laws, the publication of the review on rape prosecutions—and that's just this week. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is, at best, not in the spirit of the ministerial code, and, at worst, treating our constituents with contempt?

The British steel industry supports tens of thousands of jobs, but the Trade Remedies Authority's decision to withdraw steel safeguards plunges steelworkers, their families, and communities that rely on the industry into a deeply precarious situation. Will the Government bring forward emergency legislation so that Ministers can reject the Trade Remedies Authority's recommendation, temporarily extend current safeguards and protect British jobs in steel?

When will the Leader of the House bring in the rule changes that he and I both know are urgently needed to allow constituents to petition to recall their MP when the independent complaints process finds them to be a bully or sexual harasser?

Finally, I did not need leaked texts from one hopeless person, about another hopeless person, moaning about a third one; I only needed to listen to the care workers in Bristol West to know that there is not, and never was, a ring of protection around them and the people they care for. Why did the Prime Minister keep on as Health Secretary someone he thought was hopeless in a global health crisis? Why?

The British people recognise incompetence and waste when they see it, they know what is right and what is not, and they know when a Minister is hopeless. The Leader of the House is always welcome to listen to the people of Bristol West, as I have been listening to the people of North East Somerset. My constituents

and his share a strikingly similar view of his hopeless Government, and a shared belief that we all deserve better.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The hon. Lady has very kindly promoted me. Of course, the Government are not mine but Her Majesty's, and that is not a role to which, I confess, I aspire.

As regards text messages, there is a great line from Dr Johnson:

“In lapidary inscriptions a man is not upon oath.”

I think the same applies to text messages, which are essentially the trivia, the flotsam and jetsam, the ephemera of life, and fundamentally unimportant. The fact that the hon. Lady finds them so exciting shows how little she has to go on.

As regards bringing in rules relating to recall, the hon. Lady is a member of the Commission. May I remind her that, as shadow Leader of the House, she has that role that goes with the job? The Commission will be meeting on Monday. It is up to the Commission to deal with Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme-related matters; it is not the responsibility of Her Majesty's Government. Obviously, the Government have a view on this, but this House is not run by the Government, and it is really important that people understand that; it is run by the Commission, on behalf of all Members.

That ties in with the hon. Lady's point about EVEL. There may always be discussions in Government about how the procedures of this House operate, but the procedures of this House are a matter for this House. In that, many Members may notice that EVEL has been suspended over the last year, without any great consequence or complaint—nobody seems to have minded very much—and it is therefore worth considering how it will operate in the future. We should always bear in mind the fundamental constitutional equality of every Member of this House, regardless of the size of their constituency, the location of their constituency or, indeed, whether they are a Minister or shadow Minister, Front-Bench or Back-Bench.

There is a fundamental equality of Members of this House, and that is an important constitutional principle—as is the one that announcements are made to this House. I would point out that over the course of the pandemic, I think we have had 40 announcements made at the Dispatch Box by the Department of Health and Social Care, many of them by the Secretary of State himself. There has been one most sitting weeks during the course of the pandemic. I think the record of the Government in keeping the House informed is actually extremely good.

The hon. Lady then makes a broad list of socialist complaints about how the Government are operating, but what would we expect? The left like to say these things, but they are an awful lot of nonsense. First of all, trade deals. Free trade makes every country in the world that adopts it better off. Our deal with Australia is fantastic. For those who like Australian wine, Australian wine will be cheaper. The deal is good for consumers, but it is good for farmers too, because we want farmers who can be competitive and can succeed. I know that there are not many farmers in Bristol—poor old Bristol—but farmers in North East Somerset are competitive.

They are able to succeed. I know that the SNP is worried that the farmers it represents are not efficient enough. I do not believe that; I think Scottish farmers are very efficient too.

I am as proud of Scottish farmers as I am of Somerset farmers, and they can be world leaders, as the Prime Minister was a world leader at the G7, with an amazing list of successes to his name, including a billion doses of the vaccine next year for developing countries. The vaccine that will go out will mainly, of course, be the Oxford vaccine. Why? Because the Oxford vaccine is being done at cost price because of a deal so successfully done by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care—the brilliant, the one and only, successful genius who has been running Health over the last 15 months. He has done so much to make not only the country but the world safer.

There is going to be \$2.75 billion for funding the Global Partnership for Education to help ensure that all children go to school around the world, and G7 leaders signed up to the UK's target of getting 40 million more girls into school. That is just the beginning of the success that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister achieved at the G7.

Then we get carping about the support being given for people during the pandemic—some £407 billion of taxpayers' money. A socialist thinks that money grows on trees, but the truth is that eventually they run out of spending other people's money, and that is something that has to be remembered. The furlough scheme is going on until September. The cut in VAT continues. The reduction in rates continues. The support is there, and it is very considerable, but we believe on this side of the House in faintly living within one's means. One day, this money will have to be paid back. There is not a bottomless pit. There is not a magic money tree.

The hon. Lady mentions the building safety Bill, but we have been getting on with it. An amazing amount has been done already. Some 95% of high-risk residential buildings have either been completed or have work under way—that is, the buildings over 59 feet high. Some £5.1 billion of taxpayers' money—money that, as I said, is not growing on trees and has to be earned by people going out to work—will be found to fund the cost of remediating unsafe cladding for leaseholders, but as the Prime Minister said yesterday, not all high-rise buildings are dangerous. It is not axiomatic that a high-rise building is dangerous. It is important to bear that in mind.

May I finish on a much more consensual note? The hon. Lady is so right to remember Jo Cox, whose shield, as she pointed out, is behind her, and which we see from the Front Bench every day when we are in the Chamber. Eternal rest grant unto her, and all the faithful departed.

**Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con):** I am sorry to say that it came as no surprise to me when Labour voted against tougher sentences for rapists and child rapists this week. My constituency of Dudley North has been waiting for a new police station in the centre of Dudley for many years, as was promised by the Labour police and crime commissioner. Will my right hon. Friend agree to explore this issue with me, and perhaps with the Home Secretary, and agree to a debate on the effectiveness of police and crime commissioners more generally?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. The socialists, as always, are weak on crime and weak on the causes of crime, and they have shown their true colours in the recent refusal to support tougher sentences for violent criminals. Unfortunately, socialist police and crime commissioners have been failing their constituents. I hope that my hon. Friend will continue to hold his local PCC to account and at the highest level, because the Government are continuing to back the police and to support the public in fighting to bring down crime.

I am glad to see the Minister for Crime and Policing, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), just behind the Speaker's Chair. We are taking the landmark Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill through Parliament at the moment, which will tackle serious violence throughout the country. We have hired nearly 9,000 additional police officers and are well on track to meet our target of 20,000 new officers this Parliament. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) for the important issue that he raises.

**Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): I echo the comments of the shadow Leader of the House and the Leader of the House on Jo Cox. It is important that we all continue to remember her and share our thoughts with her family in what will obviously be a very difficult week.

I join the tributes to Sir Roy Stone. In my time in office, he has been a great help and support. I know that view is shared by others who have held this post, including my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), in the Whips operation for our party. It was always great to have the ability to have that conversation and to get advice from Sir Roy over that time. I am sure he will be missed. I wish him very well in whatever he decides to go on to do next.

Tuesday saw the publication of a written statement from the Cabinet Office announcing new measures to update campaigning regulations in the upcoming elections Bill, including a crackdown on loopholes exploited by third-party campaigners and the introduction of digital imprints. I am glad to see that. The Government here are following in the footsteps of the Scottish Government in introducing digital imprints, but we need assurances that these measures will only be the beginning of the legislation, and that it will be continually updated in the light of ever-changing circumstances. Can we have a debate on these new measures in Government time to give Members a chance to feed in at this very early stage?

This week is Loneliness Awareness Week. Particularly given the year we have all had, will the Leader of the House join me in thanking organisations such as the Red Cross which have helped to reach out to people struggling alone during the pandemic? Will the Government set out how they plan to build a more connected community after covid, ensuring that those most at risk of loneliness are able to access the support they need?

This week I bring good news: the Perthshire One has been freed. My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) shall be returning to his rightful place from next week. In my final effort, may I ask: there is a historic backlog of Opposition days that our party did not secure. Could consideration be given to that?

Finally, Mr Speaker, if I may, both our nations are independently represented at the Euros tomorrow evening. While I have a dream, I am sure that many would agree that neither the Leader of the House nor I are perhaps the best examples of who could boogie, but will he join me in wishing both teams all the very best—for a Scotland victory? [*Laughter.*]

**Mr Speaker:** I'm not sure about the last bit.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I may be willing to go further than the House would expect, because the corridor of the Chairman of Ways and Means has a sweepstake and in this sweepstake I have been fortunate enough to draw Scotland, so I shall have very divided loyalties tomorrow. But I am glad to say that it is very encouraging for the Union. I was pleased to see Wales do well yesterday—the Rees side of me was coming to the fore. I am looking forward to supporting whichever side does best, because I have an interest in all three of them doing well.

I am delighted to hear that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) will be returning to his place, but it has been very enjoyable crossing swords with the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson), who brings a great tone to these exchanges.

Loneliness Awareness Week is important. It is something that is very hard for Government to take control of, although we have a very distinguished Minister for loneliness. We have to try to work with civic society, with people such as the Red Cross and the Samaritans, to help people as we begin to get back to normal. As we do get life back to normal, that will help to reduce loneliness.

As we are on what is happening during the week, it is worth bearing in mind that 18 June is Waterloo Day, a day always of celebration in this country. We can celebrate it all together, which will make us less lonely. It is also a wonderfully Unionist day. I do not know if you know this, Mr Speaker, but there were Scottish, Welsh and Irish regiments there: the Black Watch, the Gordon Highlanders, the Royal Scots, the Royal Welch Fusiliers, the Welsh Regiment, the Inniskilling Fusiliers and the Inniskilling Dragoons. I think Sharpe was there with the Prince of Wales' Own, but I am not sure that that was a real regiment or whether it was invented for the purpose of fiction. No doubt other wise people will be able to tell us. So that date is happening, too.

Finally, on digital imprints and so on, the Second Reading of the electoral integrity Bill will be an opportunity to debate what may go into it. I can confirm that when it comes forward there will be an opportunity to do that, but I am very grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support. I would say that it is always open to the Government to learn from what the devolved authorities do. We want to work collaboratively with the devolved authorities, even if we have an ultimately different vision for our nation.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I also join the tributes to Sir Roy Stone?

May we have a debate in Government time on the imminent changes the Government are to make to the NHS integrated care system boundaries to make them co-terminus with upper-tier local authority boundaries? This is in fact a wholesale reorganisation of NHS commissioning in areas such as Essex, Waveney and the

Frimley ICS, which covers parts of Berkshire, Surrey and Hampshire. Why is this being done before we have even seen the legislation that is necessary to make it effective? Who is advising Ministers to implement this major change, when they should be leaving things be while we catch up with the massive NHS waiting lists? Why has there been so little consultation with MPs about this until very late in the day? Why is NHS England withholding a consultants' report which Ministers promised to us last week? It has still not been given to us and is apparently the basis on which the decisions are being made, but we are not allowed to see it. There is a real failure of scrutiny here.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this point. There are issues of scrutiny around arms-length bodies, which are of fundamental importance to this House and are rightly brought to the Floor of the House. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that NHS England is a quango and is not invariably under direction from Ministers. However, the point he makes is a very serious one and I will ensure it is taken up with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: I echo the sentiments expressed about our late colleague, Jo Cox, whom we commemorate this week. I also add my best wishes to Sir Roy Stone for a very long, happy and healthy retirement, which he fully deserves. He has been of great help and assistance to me during my time as Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the Backbench Business debates on 24 June and 1 July, when we will commemorate Windrush Day and the end of Pride month. If we get time on 8 July, we have a debate lined up on the independent medicines and medical devices safety review—the Cumberlege report—regarding historical dangerous flaws in elements of healthcare. Lastly, the Backbench Business Committee is having an additional meeting at 1 pm today to determine the subjects for the estimates day debates that the Leader of the House has announced for 29 and 30 June.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very good plea for time on 8 July, because I was part of the all-party group that was very brilliantly chaired by the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who worked so hard on the Primodos issue, so it is one I take very seriously. Unfortunately, the particular interests of the Leader of the House do not necessarily determine how business is set, but his appeal is heard.

**Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): I join others in paying tribute to Sir Roy and remembering the murder of one of our own, Jo Cox. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on erecting a permanent memorial to Dame Vera Lynn? Tomorrow marks the first anniversary of her death. At 11 am on the white cliffs of Dover, a public appeal will be launched to raise the memorial and a record will be released called “Unforgettable”. I would like to thank you, Mr Speaker, for your support for this project and the starring role that you will be taking.

**Mr Speaker:** As long as it is not singing.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** We are looking forward to your karaoke efforts in due course. It seems to me, as my hon. Friend raises this question, that we could try to turn the white cliffs into Mount Rushmore and have a statue of Dame Vera Lynn there, but then I am worried that because they are made of chalk, it might not be as lasting as Mount Rushmore has proved for American Presidents. He is so right to raise this, and I know that he had an Adjournment debate on the subject on 11 May. Dame Vera Lynn was inspirational to this country at one of its lowest points and was held in the highest affection, and she continues to be fondly remembered.

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab) [V]: Today is Clean Air Day, yet independent analysis has found that almost a quarter of schools across the country are located in areas with high levels of small particle pollution, exceeding the World Health Organisation limits. This means that an estimated 3.4 million children are learning in an unhealthy environment. Given that air pollution has already been linked to increased asthma, obesity and mental disorders in children, can we please have a debate in Government time about finally introducing ambitious legal limits on air pollution?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The hon. Lady is so right to raise this very important issue. It is worth reminding the House of the terrible scandal involving the Blair Government, the European Union and the German car manufacturers, which encouraged everybody to buy diesel cars, pumping out particulates and nitrous oxides and lowering the standard of our air quality. The Government are involved in a project to improve this. They are doing what they can to see that cleaner cars are in use and that there are general policies to remove noxious substances and, particularly, particulates from our air.

**Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): During the height of the pandemic the Government quite rightly introduced restrictions to protect the most vulnerable members of society in care homes, but I wish to raise with my right hon. Friend the experience of Frank Thompson and his wife of 57 years. Mrs Thompson is in residential care in Warrington. Prior to lockdown, Frank visited her every day, from 8 am in the morning until 8 pm in the evening. During the lockdown, he did not get to see her at all. As restrictions were eased in May and the road map moved forward, everybody in the care home was vaccinated, Mr Thompson was vaccinated and the care staff were vaccinated, and Mr Thompson was allowed to see his wife for 30 minutes once a week.

The hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) mentioned that this week is Loneliness Awareness Week; even those in care homes suffer loneliness. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is now time for the Government to be clear with those who provide care that the rights of residents are crucial to ensure that they do not suffer loneliness and that their families can get reasonable access to see them?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend raises an important and sensitive point. Members from all parties will be concerned about this issue and will have heard from constituents suffering difficult circumstances in visiting family and friends in care homes. The liberalisation of care home visiting rules was announced in the latest

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

covid regulations. Residents will be able to spend more time with family and friends, including overnight stays, as part of the easing of visiting restrictions announced today. From 21 June, people admitted to a care home from the community will no longer have to self-isolate for 14 days on arrival, so residents will have a less disruptive introduction to their new home.

This has been a really difficult time for people in care homes. As the Prime Minister himself said, we will soon reach the terminus day, and the terminus means the end. Some people have thought it means an interchange, but it is Paddington, not Crewe. When we reach the end, the restrictions will go.

**Kim Johnson** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): The British Government are responsible for a grave injustice on the Chinese community in Liverpool. After the second world war, thousands of Chinese merchant seamen were forcibly deported back to China without the knowledge of their families, and it would be decades before they found out the real truth. In March, I asked the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary to acknowledge this crime and provide an apology to the descendants of those families. I have not had a response, and that was more than three months ago, so will the Leader of the House provide time for a debate in Government time to discuss and debate this most important issue?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** It is always important that the Government recognise mistakes that may have been made by predecessor Governments. I encourage the hon. Lady to seek an Adjournment debate in the first instance, but if there is correspondence awaiting a reply that she was expecting, I will of course take that up, via my office, to ensure that she gets a reply.

**Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): The Royal Oak Inn, just up the road from my home in Glossop, is celebrating its 200th anniversary this year. It was built in 1818 and first opened its doors in 1821, serving thirsty travellers heading over the Snake Pass between Manchester and Sheffield. It is a lovely pub and I have enjoyed drinking in it on a number of occasions, and it used to be run by my good friends George and Jean Wharmby. Instead of people being able properly to celebrate the pub's 200th anniversary, its future has been cast into doubt, as a planning application has just been submitted for the pub's demolition. May we have a debate on how we can reform our planning laws to strengthen protections for historic pubs such as the Royal Oak?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I sympathise with my hon. Friend: we want planning applications to appreciate and understand local heritage and culture. A listing scheme is in place to try to protect buildings, and means of buying community assets have been in place for some years now, but we need new homes as well. It is about trying to get the right balance in the planning system to protect what needs to be protected but to develop where development is needed. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has been doing an excellent job in engaging with Members of Parliament and listening to and understanding their concerns about planning, but we have this balance to achieve. I hope that, in the meantime, my hon. Friend

will manage to get to the Royal Oak before any planning application is completed and drink a yard of ale. We look forward to seeing the picture on Instagram.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): You have just missed a lovely exchange on a tribute to Dame Vera Lynn, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have to admit that I use her for my own purposes whenever people struggle to pronounce my name, as I say, "Just think of Dame Vera Lynn."

Home Office delays in granting indefinite leave to remain mean that two of my constituents have been refused student finance. In one case, the deadline was missed by just three days. If they pay their fees for this year, the rules stipulate that they are privately financing their course and they will have to pay the student fees for the whole length of the course. That would put them into severe financial difficulties and this has already taken a huge toll on their mental health. May we have a statement from the Department for Education outlining how some discretion could be applied on student finance in situations where delays to granting indefinite leave to remain have been caused by the Home Office?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** It is very concerning when one arm of the Government causes a cost to be created with another. The requirement for a student to hold the status on the first day of their first academic year is a condition defined in the Education (Student Support) Regulations 2011, and Student Finance England does not have any discretion in that. However, I would be very happy to help the hon. Lady, and any right hon. and hon. Members, in liaising with the Home Office if there are delays. I visited the Home Office parliamentary team in Croydon recently, and they do an excellent job, with very high demand put upon them. However, if there are cases that have urgent consequences, I would be more than happy to do anything I can to facilitate a speedier response.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): I refer to the case of a brutal attack on my constituent Gwen Kaplan. Three years ago, her neighbour was attacked by her boyfriend outside their house. Mrs Kaplan opened her door and tried to help. The attacker then smashed her window, got into the house, smashed a hole in the bathroom door and proceeded to stab Mrs Kaplan on the scalp, face, neck, shoulder and hand. He was charged with attempted murder and sentenced to 20 years. Her application to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority was rejected. She appealed and was rejected again. The chief constable of Humberside, Lee Freeman, wrote to the authority in support of her, but to no avail. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the work of CICA, when we may consider the criteria by which it makes awards?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** This is a deeply troubling case, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the matter and for holding the CICA to account. The criminal injuries compensation scheme's rules are approved by Parliament and are independently administered. Under the current approach, strict eligibility criteria apply and awards under the scheme are determined in accordance with a detailed tariff of injuries. All applicants have the right to request that their initial decision is reviewed and, if dissatisfied, they have the right to appeal to the independent first-tier tribunal. I assume from what he said that Mrs Kaplan has already done that, so I will pass on his concerns to the Lord Chancellor.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): My constituent Olivia Dickson is 13. Last year, she was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukaemia. What Olivia and her family do not understand is why, with five children in the UK diagnosed with cancer every day, there has been such a dearth of research into treatment; we are still using adult-focused treatments developed decades ago. So may we have an urgent debate or statement on what specifically the UK Government will do to make swift progress on this vital research and how they will support children's cancer charities, which have been hard hit by covid, to make sure that the research is progressed as a matter of priority?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The hon. Lady is so right to raise this case. Cancer in children is such a worry for parents and so difficult to deal with. Carrying out research is fundamental. It is amazing what advances have been made in cancer treatment in recent years. I will pass on her comments to those at the Department of Health and Social Care, because I think it would be better if she had a full answer from them.

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): Terminally ill people and their families should not have to spend their final months grappling with the cruel benefits system. On 11 July, it will be two years since the Government announced their review into the welfare system for the terminally ill, and in that time thousands of people have died waiting for a benefit decision. When, with just weeks to go until the recess, will a Minister come to the House and announce the scrapping of the six-month rule?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Once again, I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this issue. The reason that it has taken so long is that it is not an easy one to determine. It is very hard to know with any certainty how long life will last, and that problem is difficult for a system to deal with. The uncertainty makes it problematic to find a good solution, whereas everybody wants a system that is sympathetic to those in their final weeks and months. I will take this up once again with the Department, but it is not torpor that means that there has been no full response; it is simply the complexity of the issue.

**Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger** (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend knows, as we all do, about the patience of King Alfred: he had to wait 25 years before the Danes stopped bothering us. I sincerely hope that Ministers will take less time to answer my questions about official consultation on local government reform in Somerset. Two months ago, I asked a series of parliamentary questions on how many responses were received and how many genuine Somerset residents took part in the Government's consultation. Since then there has been silence. This is rather strange. The district council has just held a full and fair independent referendum. Two thirds of registered electors supported its plan. All the figures are public and were sent straight to the Secretary of State. Why do the Government's own consultation results remain secret? King Alfred would not stand for it and neither should we. Can we have a debate in this House as to what on earth is going on in local government?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I understand that there were some problems with the district council's website, which did not have entirely the desired effect, and it caused some

considerable and understandable distress to people who were linked to a website of ill-repute. There are questions to be raised about that. However, with regard to hon. and right hon. Members not receiving responses to written parliamentary questions, it is part of my job to chase that up, and I will do so for my hon. Friend.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I find it astounding that we will not have a statement from the Chancellor today following the vote yesterday on extending the public health measures. In my constituency, I know that businesses, charities and my community are really, really struggling. York, as the Leader of the House will know, depends on 8 million people visiting it each year. It is a visitor economy and, with tourism down, people are really struggling, and yet the Chancellor seems invisible. Can the Leader of the House take a message back from my city to say that we expect the Chancellor to bring forward a statement on Monday, so that we can scrutinise what measures he will give to our communities to help them survive this next season? Otherwise, there may not be a future for them.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The shadow Leader of the House asked me on Tuesday for a statement by the Treasury and one was provided on Wednesday. I wish I could say that it was immediate cause and effect, but it was in the pipeline anyway. The push from the hon. Lady moved us in the right direction. That statement was in relation to the Treasury support around the pandemic. It is worth bearing in mind, as I have said already, the total amount—£407 billion—that has already been spent on supporting 14 million jobs and people through furlough and self-employed schemes. Furlough continues until September. There are retail grants of up to £18,000 for retail, hospitality, leisure and personal care businesses. The business rates holiday continues to the end of June, but then tapers for another nine months. The 5% VAT cut continues until the end of September. Of course, I share the concern of the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell); it is a really difficult and uncertain time. The extension to the terminus date of 19 July is one that nobody wanted, but it was necessitated by events. The end is now in sight. The support has been extremely generous and, I am glad to say, effective, as we see the economy beginning to bounce back. However, I will of course pass on her comments to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

**Mr William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): Could we have a debate on the subject of working from home? It has been reported that a consultation will soon be launched. What is being done to support those who wish to return to their place of work, but are prevented from doing so by their employers? Loneliness and isolation have become endemic during this pandemic, and people's experiences of working from home have been very different. We must have a balanced debate about relying on assumptions, not least because of the implications for our public transport system and the prosperity of our towns and cities?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right about this. The guidance is clear that if people need to go into work, they are allowed to go into work. If employers think that they need their employees to come into work, they are entitled to ask them to come into work. Even within the civil service, managers are advised

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

to accommodate requests to work in the office when home working is not suitable for wellbeing reasons. These can be a whole variety of reasons—it could be loneliness, or it could be the unsuitability of the accommodation, in that particularly younger people who are part of the workforce do not necessarily have an excess of space in their flats in which to work.

It is really important that we get back to normal. We want to have vibrant towns and cities, we want people coming back into work, and we want commuting systems—trains, buses and so on—that are financially viable, and that means people coming back to work. The sooner we get back to normal the better, but in the meantime, anyone who wants to go into work should have a conversation with his or her employer and say, “I want to come back into work”, and employers should facilitate that.

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: I am increasingly concerned at the exploitation of vulnerable customers through energy suppliers and providers’ pricing strategies, such as the exclusion of existing customers from the cheapest available energy tariff on offer. Could we have a statement from Government or a debate about including exclusive tariffs in Ofgem’s cheapest tariff messaging rules? This is a scandalous loophole that we need to address.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this point, and I think it goes wider than electricity tariffs. I do not tend to tell personal anecdotes, but when my car insurance with Churchill came in at £2,800 earlier this year, I managed to get it from LV=, the people who sponsor the cricket, I am glad to say, for under £600. It is quite extraordinary how existing customers are taken for a ride. I would encourage hon. Members and all our constituents to shop around, but I am also glad to say that the Financial Conduct Authority has introduced rules on this recently that will help protect people from this type of rip-off. My example, I do feel, shows that just a little bit of going online to shop around can save a very significant amount of money.

**Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): I have been alarmed by reports this week that Sandwell Council’s cabinet was due to sign off a reduction in the number of SEND—special educational needs and disability—transport contracts awarded from 20 to just two. Following interventions in the media by Councillor David Fisher and others, this decision has been deferred. Both of these companies are owned by the same person, a former council employee and the son of a former Labour deputy leader of Sandwell Council, who is named in the damning Wragge report, in which both father and son are revealed to have been involved in land deals, among other interesting activities. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the way that Sandwell Council is continuing to let down residents of the borough with these very questionable dealings and misuse of public funds?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend raises something extraordinarily troubling. There are problems sometimes within councils, and I understand that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is monitoring the situation at Sandwell Council closely

following a recent report. Councils have an absolute duty to manage taxpayers’ money responsibly, and must be held to account when they do not. I understand that the Wragge report highlights that hundreds of thousands of pounds of public money were misused by a cabal of councillors. I know that the Home Office was alerted to its findings at the time, but I will of course pass on my hon. Friend’s concerns to the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. It may also be something that the police ought to be looking into. This sounds like a really serious *prima facie* case.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): Mr Deputy Speaker, I know you will be pleased at last night’s result, and I know the Leader of the House is very proud of his Welsh roots and congratulated the Welsh team earlier. Can he pass on my commiserations to the Prime Minister, who I know is equally proud of his Turkish roots, on the 2-0 defeat of Turkey last night? It was a good reminder to him that Wales is in the tournament, which of course he did not realise last week.

I want to raise the serious issue of my constituent Luke Symons, who is still incarcerated in Yemen by the Houthis. I have asked on behalf of Bob Cummings, his grandfather, for a meeting in the near future with the Foreign Office Minister concerned. Do the Government have any plans for further debates or statements on the situation in Yemen, and in particular the plight of this young man, who has done nothing wrong other than hold a British passport?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point about the Prime Minister’s Ottoman antecedents, although as the Ottoman Empire has fallen away, I have a feeling that he was probably more behind Wales than Turkey yesterday.

With regard to Luke Symons and the issue in Yemen, the Government are working closely with our partners in the region to ensure that Mr Symons is released and reunited with his family as soon as possible, and that work continues. I view it as part of my role to try to facilitate meetings between hon. Members and Ministers when they request it, so if the hon. Gentleman has any difficulty in that regard, I hope he will contact my office.

**Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): In Rugby, we are providing new homes 25% faster than the rate in the country as a whole. The consequence of all those extra residents is that 83% of people now live more than 15 minutes’ drive of a major accident and emergency unit. The residents of Rugby have time after time expressed a firm wish for that service to be provided at our local Hospital of St Cross. NHS commissioning has already been raised this morning, so I wonder whether any debate could also consider how population changes should drive the provision of NHS services.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I will certainly raise that with Health Ministers on behalf of my hon. Friend, and there was a health Bill referred to in the Queen’s Speech, so there will be an opportunity to debate these issues at length in due course. The health infrastructure plan will deliver a long-term rolling programme of spending in health and infrastructure, including district hospitals. These hospitals have benefited from our £600 million critical infrastructure risk fund and our £450 million spending to upgrade

A&Es. University Hospital Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust has received £2.2 million from the critical infrastructure risk fund to address the maintenance backlog at St Cross and £3 million for an emergency department expansion, as part of the A&E upgrades investment, so there is a recognition that there are population pressures, and spending does seem to be following accordingly.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): I can understand why the Leader of the House would want to dismiss the text messages published by the Prime Minister's former adviser, but if he were a member of a family who had lost someone in a care home in the last year, I do not think he would dismiss them so lightly. These messages expose the fact that the Government knew that there was not a protective ring round our care homes and that testing of people being discharged from hospital to care homes was not taking place. If we are to be subjected to this public spat between the Prime Minister and his former adviser continuously, should we not, in the interests of those who lost someone, be calling the public inquiry now, or at least have the Prime Minister here to answer questions on this?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The Prime Minister is regularly here to answer questions. He was here yesterday at considerable length, both with Prime Minister's questions and then with a statement, so there are many opportunities to raise these points directly. For some reason the Leader of the Opposition either had not noticed or did not want to discuss these text messages.

It is right to have the inquiry at the point at which the pandemic has ended and a considered view can be taken. There is some difficulty with the Opposition's position. On the one hand, they complain that there was not enough equipment and on the other hand they complain that procurement was not done according to the most bureaucratic systems. They cannot really have it both ways.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: On Sunday, we commemorate World Refugee Day, when we commemorate the plight of the Kashmiri Pandits, who were forced out by jihadists and are still refugees in their own country. But on Monday, we celebrate International Day of Yoga, which is India's gift to the world. Can we arrange for statements to be made to the House next week on these two vital subjects, which the House should attend to and, indeed, could celebrate by using Monday for some yoga exercises before the House meets?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am not sure I shall be joining in with the yogic flying exercises, which I think were the policy of the National Law party, which stood in previous elections. World Refugee Day, however, is very important. This country has a proud and long record of providing a place of safety for refugees. One of the really important things about the changes that are going to be made to our immigration system is that they will protect those who are in genuine fear and who come here as refugees, and will make this country continue to be a safe place for them to come.

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab) [V]: Emerging from the pandemic as a healthier country is one of the Government's key priorities for

this Parliament, but communities that already face some of the country's worst health inequalities, such as West Denton in my constituency, have, sadly, seen their local fitness facilities close for good during the pandemic. Reducing health inequalities is essential to delivering on the commitment to level up the poorest parts of the country, and access to modern local fitness facilities is a key part of that. That is why the Government should back Newcastle City Council's levelling-up fund bid to develop a new, state-of-the-art, net zero carbon leisure development in the Outer West of Newcastle. Could we please have a debate on using the levelling-up fund to manage the recovery in a way that helps people to lead healthier lives?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I am delighted that the hon. Lady is so supportive of the levelling-up fund. It is a great opportunity to help communities across the country have additional resources so that they can improve their local communities. Engagement from MPs is greatly to be encouraged, so I thank the hon. Lady for her enthusiasm for Government policy.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Learner drivers in Kettering who are currently awaiting a test date are being offered November as the earliest available time, if they are lucky. If we are going to get our economy moving again and give people their lives back, particularly young people, that is simply not good enough and urgent action is required. Could we have a statement from the Department for Transport and urgent action from the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency to increase the number of driving tests being made available in Kettering and across the country, so that the huge backlog caused by the covid restrictions can be reduced far faster than currently planned?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I notice that the use of private cars has increased post pandemic, as people are very keen on driving, as I must confess am I. I assure my hon. Friend that the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency has in place a number of measures to increase the number of practical driving tests. After lockdown, it went to six rather than seven tests a day, but since 14 June it has gone back to seven tests a day per examiner, which increases capacity across the national network by an average of 15,000 to 20,000 tests a month. My hon. Friend may wish to raise this at Transport questions on 24 June, but yes, we are going to have backlogs and we have to make a really big effort to get Britain moving, and most of us want to move in our motors.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for his kind words for Scotland tomorrow evening, as we will be playing a country that Conservative Members regularly remind us is aspiring to achieve its own independence.

On a more serious point, cancelled flights mean that individuals such as my constituent Mohammad Gohar find themselves stuck abroad after having visited dying relatives. They are now struggling to get back because the Department for Work and Pensions has, in its wisdom, decided to stop their universal credit because they have been abroad for three weeks. That seems a very-heavy handed approach. Could we have a debate or a statement on people who find themselves stuck abroad after having visited dying relatives, to ensure

[Chris Stephens]

that they do not have their universal credit stopped and can have the money to find themselves the way back home?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The hon. Gentleman raises a difficult point. There are very sensible rules in place for normal times, but these are abnormal times. Therefore, when, because of a reduction in flights and the complexities of international travel at the moment, people are delayed, through no fault of their own, there is certainly an argument for sympathy. What I do not know is whether the system that Parliament has passed into law allows for any discretion. However, if the hon. Gentleman gives me the details, I will take the case up directly with the Department for Work and Pensions on his behalf.

**Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con):** Many of my constituents who live in Silsden and Steeton have been waiting years for a pedestrian bridge to be built over the extremely busy A629 dual carriageway so that they can safely get from one side to the other. In fact, five years ago, £700,000 was secured by my predecessor, Kris Hopkins, for Bradford Council to carry out a feasibility study into this project, which has only recently been completed. We need to get this bridge built, so will my right hon. Friend permit Government time for a debate so that I can continue to raise this, so that we can get the funding we desperately need to secure this bridge once and for all?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My hon. Friend has successfully raised it on this occasion. I think a debate on a bridge is probably more of an Adjournment debate; justifying a day's debate in Government time might upset other hon. and right hon. Members. However, I can tell him that £51.3 billion of taxpayers' money will go to local government next year—a 4.6% increase, the biggest year-on-year increase in core spending power in a decade—so I encourage him to lobby his local council. There is a further £45 billion to help local authorities support their communities and local businesses, including £4.5 billion for Yorkshire and the Humber. I understand that the socialist council of Bradford has not been working very fast, but sometimes the tortoise comes through, so may I suggest he give the tortoise a prod?

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** The Leader of the House will be very aware of deep concerns in Northern Ireland that this Parliament and this Government have on a number of occasions gone over the heads of the people of Northern Ireland and their elected representatives and imposed legislation on marriage, abortion and the Northern Ireland protocol without the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. Now the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland proposes to do the same on legislation related to sensitive matters on the Irish language and other cultural issues. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland comes to the House to make a statement on this at the earliest opportunity? This goes against all that is democratic. The Northern Ireland Assembly is the correct place for legislation. Again, unfortunately and disgracefully, this place rides roughshod over regional Administrations and the democratic process.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** The hon. Gentleman and I normally see eye to eye on most issues, but on this I must diverge from him. The New Decade, New Approach deal was an historic achievement that brought to an end the three-year political impasse in Northern Ireland. Commitments in that deal were negotiated and agreed by all parties in the Executive, but there has now been a delay, a problem, in bringing forward some fulfilment of those commitments. That is why the Government have now committed to delivering these important commitments through the United Kingdom Parliament. I say to him, as a Unionist, that ultimately it is this Parliament—and we rejoice in it being this Parliament—that is the uniting focus of our nation, so when something is agreed at a political level and then not implemented, it is absolutely right that it should be implemented through this Parliament. I happen to think that the other changes, which were done when there was no clear majority in this Parliament, were done for more political, rather than constitutional, reasons.

**Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con):** On Monday at 3 o'clock, the media were given an embargoed statement on covid road map changes. At six o'clock, there was a glitzy press conference featuring the Prime Minister. It was not until 8.30 pm that evening that the Secretary of State came to this House to make a statement. Mr Speaker has already said that that is unacceptable, and he is meeting the Prime Minister. I will not ask the Leader of the House to comment on that, because the Speaker has ruled, but I would guess privately that he was making similar noises within Government. However, I ask my right hon. Friend whether he would like the Government to adopt my private Member's Bill, which will be presented on Monday and which would increase his authority? He is an extraordinary parliamentarian and a great Leader of the House, but if this House in the future was to elect the Leader of the House—from the governing party—he would have further authority and could not at any time be put under pressure or removed. Will the Government adopt my private Member's Bill, and then I will not need to present it on Monday?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** Flattery may get you everywhere, but not on this occasion, because I think the question misunderstands the role of the Leader of the House. Up until Lloyd George, who handed the post over to Bonar Law, the Leader of the House was the leader of the governing party in the House of Commons—the Prime Minister when the Prime Minister was in the House of Commons and somebody like Stafford Northcote when Disraeli was in the House of Lords. The role of the Leader of the House is to ensure that Government business passes through the House, and that cannot be done by somebody who is not an integral part of Her Majesty's Government. It could not be done in the way that a Chairman of a Select Committee does their job and has a mandate from the House of Commons, or indeed the Speaker does his job and has a mandate from the House of Commons.

So I fear that constitutionally my hon. Friend's proposal does not work, although I can reassure him that the Leader of the House has a dual-facing role and also has to make representations to Government on behalf of the House of Commons. Members may have noticed that when it comes to issues relating to written questions

not getting a reply or correspondence not being replied to in an efficient way, I do my best to ensure that the Commons' views are represented.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I thank the Leader of the House for his business statement and responding to questions for over one hour. We will now suspend for a few minutes for covid protection measures.

2.35 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Future of the Planning System in England

### HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

#### *Select Committee Statement*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** We now come to the Select Committee statement. Clive Betts will speak for up to 10 minutes. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Mr Betts to respond to these in turn. I call the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Clive Betts.

12.39 pm

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Thank you Mr Deputy Speaker. I would also like to thank the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to make this statement on the Committee's report on the planning system in England. I thank all members of the Committee for agreeing the report unanimously, and our Committee specialist Edward Hicks for producing a technically challenging and detailed document, with the excellent support of our specialist advisers, Kelvin MacDonald and Christine Whitehead.

The report was launched partly in response to the Government's publication of proposed reforms of the planning system back in August. We also build on previous reports by the Select Committee on local plans, land value capture and social housing. It is a comprehensive document and it was drawn up with widespread public interest in it; there were 154 pieces of written evidence; 14 witnesses came to give evidence; we had 6,000 responses to a public survey; and 38 members of the public came to join in our deliberations. We are grateful to all those who participated.

I have got time today, Mr Deputy Speaker, to deal with only some of the key recommendations of our report, which are as follows. A plan-led system, which is generally supported in this country, is rightly seen as the heart of the planning process, and local plans are seen very much at that heart. The Committee recognised that the Government want to place increased emphasis on local plans, and are supportive of the proposals to digitise them, to make the process of formulating local plans simpler and to see them updated more regularly.

Many of these ideas, together with making local plans a statutory requirement, were proposals that the Committee made itself in 2016, so we are pleased to see that the Government have now recognised their importance. In the report, however, we express significant concern about the proposals to reshape local plans by zoning every single site into a growth, renewal or protected area. We simply do not believe that the process can be done in 30 months, bearing in mind that many local authorities currently do not have a local plan in place, or many have plans that are significantly out of date. There is a shortage of both financial and staff resources in planning departments, and it is crucial that the Government produce a comprehensive resources and skills strategy, which they have promised.

The Committee members were all concerned about how the zoning system would operate in practice. The proposals lacked detail, which made them very difficult to assess.

[Mr Clive Betts]

We asked for greater clarity about what detail will be needed in local plans to give necessary certainty to developers and other stakeholders for the future. We were unpersuaded that the Government's zoning system approach, as proposed, would produce a quicker, cheaper and more democratic planning system, and we recommend that the Government reconsider the proposals they put forward.

A real concern that was expressed very strongly to the Committee was that the Government's proposal in the White Paper would lead to a lack of ability of councillors and their local communities to influence decisions on individual planning applications. At present, most public involvement is at the point when a planning application is made. The Government are right to want to see more local involvement at the local plan stage, as local plans should set the scene for future development. However, to change the system so that local plans are the only point at which communities can get involved, and then to tell communities that they have no say afterwards, risks undermining support for the planning system and undermining the democratic process at local council level.

Our report emphasised the importance of ensuring that members of the public can continue to comment meaningfully on individual planning applications. We call for further research into public involvement in the planning system, so that we can have nationwide figures showing what is actually going on at present and how it can be improved. The Committee is concerned at this stage that the Government's plans are in very general terms and ultimately planning policy and planning law will need to be written in great detail. The content of the detail will determine whether the Government's proposals are workable in practice. That is why the Committee believes that producing a planning Bill in draft form, and making it subject to pre-legislative scrutiny by the Select Committee would help ensure that whatever proposals come forward are workable and that planning lawyers and consultants will not be the greatest beneficiaries from any changes. We were warned of the real possibility of a flurry of judicial reviews.

One of the forceful points made to the Committee was that the Government's planning proposals were essentially housebuilding proposals. The White Paper contained no mention of commercial property, for example, as the British Property Federation pointed out, and virtually no mention of employment, leisure or climate change. All these issues are absolutely central to a holistic, integrated and complete planning system that shapes the places where people live and work.

With emphasis on housing, however, in the Government's White Paper, our report also looked at the housing formula and housing delivery. We call for clarity on how the Government intend to achieve their housing target of 300,000 new homes a year, which the Committee strongly supports and has been achieved in only a handful of years in the 1960s.

We ask for further information about changes to the housing formula, including how the Government's proposed urban uplift in 20 major towns and cities, which came during the course of our inquiry, will work in practice, why those areas were chosen, and the rationale for the scale of the uplift. We must also ensure that changes to

the housing formula do not reduce the level of house building in other parts of the north and midlands, as that would not contribute towards the levelling-up agenda.

Our report argues that the Government should be very cautious about sweeping away section 106 agreements. Those are legally enforceable contracts between developers and local authorities that ensure the delivery of new infrastructure such as schools and roads for new developments and the provision of affordable housing. If the Government want to proceed, they should bring in levies at local rates that reflect local land values. The Government should also guarantee that there will be no reduction in affordable rented housing due to the reform of the levy and the introduction of the First Homes programme.

Our inquiry considered the pace at which developments with planning permission were being completed. We concluded that it is too slow. Local councils complain regularly that the problem is not the lack of planning permissions but slow build-out rates, over which they have no control. We recommend that if, 18 months after the discharge of planning conditions on a site, the local authority is not satisfied with the extent to which work has progressed, it should be able to revoke the planning permission. We also recommend that if, after work starts, progress is not moving ahead satisfactorily, local authorities should be able to take into account a whole variety of factors to levy council tax on each uncompleted unit. We hope that the Government will take that proposal seriously.

Our report also makes recommendations on the countryside, the environment, the use of brownfield land, the green belt, and many other issues. It is a very comprehensive document. We are currently undertaking a separate inquiry into permitted development rights.

As a Committee, we look forward to the Government's response to our report. We also stand ready, as I have said, to undertake prelegislative scrutiny of the planning Bill to ensure that changes to the planning system, which will always, by necessity, be complex, are given the full and detailed scrutiny they need. That is vital to ensuring that our planning system builds on its past accomplishments, of which there are many, addresses its present challenges, and is fit for the future.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): The whole House—those who are here virtually and those who are here physically—will want to thank the members of the Committee and its Chairman for the work they have put into this report and the work they do on other parts of planning and housing.

I am glad that the Chairman said that the Committee is going to do a review of permitted development rights. The notorious statutory instrument 2020/632 is causing chaos all round England.

I want to add to what the Chairman said—he said that he could not cover every point—to reinforce the absence of the words “local councillor” in the planning statement. It seems to me that the Government need to realise that Members of Parliament matter and so do local councillors, especially in the planning process.

I am glad that the Chairman of the Committee raised the point about non-housing development, whether that is commercial development or making provision, where

there is large-scale development, for churches, sports areas, children's facilities and the like, so that a whole community is held in mind.

I would like to end by inviting the Chairman of the Committee to come with the Minister to my two planning authorities, Arun District Council and Worthing Borough Council, to look down from the chalk garden at Highdown, which is well renovated now, look at the vineyard and then look at the north and south Goring gap, and give assurances to my constituents that that green area around the town of Worthing, the largest in West Sussex, will not be built on as a result of anything in these proposals. If it were metropolitan, it would be green belt and protected. It is not. It still should be protected.

We should not have to build on every strategic gap between one town and a village, or between the hamlet of Kingston and the villages of East Preston, Ferring and Goring. Please come.

**Mr Betts:** I thank the Father of the House for his question and his invitation. I am happy to take up the invitation; let us hope that two of us accept it and come along. He is absolutely right: there are many issues not contained in the initial proposals. We hope that the Government will address them in their response to the consultation and the eventual Bill. Again, it is a major omission that local councillors are not mentioned. Local councillors are absolutely key to the local planning system. We must recognise the amount of work they do and ensure that they are not bypassed by any proposals ultimately adopted.

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for his statement and for his tireless work on producing this report. Does he agree that the Government's approach to permitted development undermines their own policy objectives in the planning White Paper, with a particular emphasis on local and neighbourhood plans?

**Mr Betts:** My hon. Friend is a very valued member of the Select Committee. He has contributed to this report, and he is absolutely right. The Housing Minister came to the Select Committee yesterday to talk about permitted development rights, and a point we made in our questions to him was that the overall reform of the planning system, and giving greater certainty to what developments will or will not happen in a local plan, must not be undermined by permitted development running contrary to the proposals in the local plan. Local authorities must have the right to shape the place for which they are responsible, and that is something we will be looking at further in the report we produce on permitted development.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: It will come as no surprise to the Chairman of the Select Committee that I agree with every word of his statement and of the report that we have published. Does he agree, however, that one of the prime concerns is that if the Government come forward with zoning of particular areas within a local authority area, and if a growth area is to be used with planning permission not going through the normal process, it will be essential that those areas are subject to a full public consultation by the local planning authority, setting out clearly the boundaries for height, density and other aspects of development on the site before any developer is allowed to get on site and do as they choose?

**Mr Betts:** I thank the hon. Gentleman again for his role. He is a long-standing member of the Select Committee and was around in 2016 when we produced our previous report on the changes that we want to see to local plans.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that this level of detail is so uncertain at present, and if we are going to produce a zoning system, particularly in growth areas with major development proposals effectively being given the go-ahead without much more scrutiny at the local planning stage, there will have to be an awful lot of detail and consultation put into that local planning stage. This comes back to the question of whether that can realistically be done for every single site in a local plan within 30 months. The Committee simply does not believe so.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his work on the report and I thank the Committee Clerks for all their hard work on this excellent report.

We heard in the Committee how local people want to continue to be able to comment on specific local planning applications, so the proposal to remove the legal requirement to publish planning notices in local newspapers and on lamp posts and the like, with that becoming only a discretionary element, would create a postcode lottery as to where that service would continue. That would undermine local democracy and create barriers for those who do not have digital access, such as the elderly or those on low incomes. It would also damage local and regional newspapers, which are an important source of local information for people. Does the Chair agree that the existing statutory notice requirement must be retained for all local authorities, to safeguard transparency, equality and democracy in our communities?

**Mr Betts:** I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution to the report, and she is absolutely right: we made this point in our recommendations. We welcome the Government's proposals to digitise the system, which could bring in a better system with more community public access to it, but we should not then take steps that would exclude those who are not comfortable in the digital environment. Therefore we want to see the retention of statutory notices in physical form, in newspapers or on lamp posts, alongside digital arrangements.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (The Cotswolds) (Con): I congratulate the Chairman and his Committee on producing a very comprehensive and constructive report on this all-encompassing subject. In the report, he says:

"We think the Government's abandonment of its proposed formula for determining housing need is the correct decision."

For many areas, such as the Cotswolds, the formula would have produced a staggering 144% increase in housing numbers, but it would not have addressed the affordability ratio. Can he suggest what his Committee's recommendations to the Government would be on a revised approach, and, importantly, whether affordability and housing mix—the need for smaller properties or flats for first-time buyers and elderly people who are downsizing—should be considered?

**Mr Betts:** The housing needs formula is a desperately difficult one, and the Government have a difficult job. It is right that we should try to have a housing needs

[Mr Betts]

formula, because it can reduce the amount of time taken up with planning inquiries in the local plan. They nearly always devolve down to long arguments about housing numbers, which is not really helpful. If local areas have particular problems they should highlight them, because a one-size-fits-all needs assessment does not necessarily meet the requirements of every individual authority.

On the particulars on the sort of housing, local councils ought to be given an opportunity to be more granular in their approach. Indeed, we made a specific recommendation in a previous report that every local plan should not just have an assessment of housing numbers but, particularly in relation to elderly people's housing, how many of those units should be built and where they should be built to ensure provision for elderly people going forward.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): I thank the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee for its very thorough report on the future of the planning system in England. In particular, I welcome the Committee's recommendation that all individuals must still be able to comment and have an influence on all individual planning proposals. I see from paragraph 226 of the report that a major feature of responses as part of the public engagement work was the importance attached to nature and wildlife. Does my hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee agree that the Government must be absolutely explicit about how the provisions in the proposed planning Bill and the Environment Bill will work together to ensure that the key issue of safeguarding our natural environment and ensuring biodiversity gain is actually achieved?

**Mr Betts:** I thank my hon. Friend, a past member of the Committee, for those comments. There are omissions in the Government's proposals so far. House building is connected to other issues, and how the planning system deals not just with house building but with a variety of environmental concerns needs fleshing out. One thing we commented on in relation to the environment was that the Canal and River Trust and Natural England are currently statutory consultees on individual planning applications, but they are not statutory consultees on local plans. If in future all the details on particular sites are going to be in the local plan, how will the statutory consultees relate to that? Most of them say that they could not possibly do all that in 30 months, so there are some real challenges that need bringing together in the eventual proposals when they come forward.

**David Johnston** (Wantage) (Con): I add my thanks to the hon. Gentleman and his Committee for the report. Does he agree that most of our constituents are not necessarily opposed to planning reform or to more housing, but that they want to feel that their area is not getting a disproportionate share of that housing and that what goes up needs to be good quality, good for the environment, genuinely affordable and supported by the right infrastructure?

**Mr Betts:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is those sorts of issues that are often resolved at the planning application stage. Whether they can all be

dealt with in a local plan, however well intentioned, is the real challenge. Often, it is the particular designs of a scheme—how they relate to the environment and how traffic issues are dealt with—that really cause most concern and problems for people. We must ensure that the public voice on those issues is not lost in any reforms.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD) [V]: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for an excellent report. I congratulate him on a valuable report and on such an extensive consultation. Among the responses garnered have been those that have raised the failure to tackle excessive second home ownership in areas like mine. Is he aware that over the period of the pandemic a very bad situation has got much, much, much worse? The proliferation of excessive second home ownership in areas such as the Lakes and the rest of Cumbria robs those communities of a permanent population and can kill those communities altogether.

During the pandemic there has been a 32% increase in the number of homes in the holiday let market, and something like 80% of all new purchases in the Lakes have been to the second home market. Does he agree that the planning Bill is a place where the Government could very quickly tackle this problem by making holiday lets and second homes a different category of planning use, so that communities like mine in Cumbria can protect themselves from being cleansed of local people?

**Mr Betts:** I hear the problem. It was not one that the Committee specifically considered in our report, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that this is something that the Government could take into account in their legislative proposals.

**Sir Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I, too, congratulate the Chair of the Select Committee and his colleagues on an excellent report. I particularly welcome the emphasis that has been put today on the need for continuing involvement for elected representatives of local communities and the communities themselves, because, done properly, planning is not just about building, but about shaping communities and the infrastructure and other services that form part of them. Will he also help us on what might be done to increase the supply of qualified planners? Many local authorities struggle with their staffing levels. What more can we do to get good people into the system and keep them there?

**Mr Betts:** I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman: it is absolutely essential that we recognise the shortage of financial resources and the shortage of staff resources, particularly skilled expertise. In past years there has been an exodus of some of the younger, brighter people out of the planning system, often into private consultancies. The Government have promised that they are doing a strategic review of planning resources, including staffing expertise. The Minister said to us yesterday that that was something he was looking to give further information on, I think when the Government respond to the consultation on their proposals. We very much want to see that, because unless we get that right, there is not a chance of bringing any reforms into play and getting the system to work as it should.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I add my congratulations to the Chair of the Committee, his members and his team on a comprehensive report into quite a detailed and lengthy White Paper. The Government set great store by their levelling-up agenda and have also committed themselves to net zero. The planning system is central to delivering these and many other key objectives, so does my hon. Friend believe that the White Paper has enough detail on either of those two issues?

**Mr Betts:** I do not think either is really mentioned in the White Paper, which is something we drew attention to. The lack of any mention of climate change comes back to the lack of any linkage with some of the Government's environmental proposals. On levelling up, I refer to the fact that the Government changed the housing needs formula midway through our inquiry and moved some requirements to build homes from southern, more rural areas to major cities, many of them in the north and midlands. Many cities will struggle to deal with that without building on their green belts—that is the feedback we are getting, including about problems in London. However, the requirement to build homes for areas outside the major cities in the north will be reduced, which does not quite square up with an ambition to get more development, infrastructure and jobs in the north outside the major cities, and removing that requirement will also mean a lack of support from Homes England to get the building under way. That is a major concern, which we have drawn attention to and needs addressing.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his statement and for responding to Members' questions today. We will now suspend for three minutes for covid protection measures.

1.4 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Backbench Business

### Misuse of Drugs Act

1.7 pm

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting us the time for this debate, to the cross-party Members who supported the application, and particularly to the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) for co-sponsoring it.

This May marks 50 years since the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 received Royal Assent. Back in 1971 there were three television channels; smoking indoors was normal everywhere from schools to doctors' waiting rooms; and women could legally be sacked for being pregnant. Our culture and society now are completely different from that time, but our drugs regime remains the same, focusing on prohibition, criminalisation and punishment rather than looking at the evidence on what reduces harm to individuals and to society.

The 1971 Act was intended to prevent the use of controlled drugs, eliminate illegal drug markets and reduce the harms of drug use; it is not working. The data suggests that in 1971 there were fewer than 100 drug-related deaths in England and Wales; in 2019, drug-related deaths in England and Wales rose for the eighth year in a row to 4,393. There has been a 52% increase in drug-related deaths over the past 10 years, and 2,883 deaths resulted directly from drug misuse. These people mattered and many of their deaths were preventable. If there were better laws and properly funded treatment services, many could still be with us today.

In the late 60s, around 1% of adults had used drugs at some point in their life; the proportion is now 34%. While the drug market remains in the hands of criminal gangs, drugs are getting stronger and more adulterated. People are dying because they do not know what is in the drugs they are using. Even the Government acknowledge the failings. A 2014 Home Office report reviewed the evidence and said that

“there is no relationship between tougher/punitive sanctions on drug possession and the level of drug use in a country.”

Last year, Carol Black's review of drugs for the Government said that the evidence suggests that

“enforcement crackdowns have little...impact on the overall drug supply...and can often have the unintended consequence of increasing violence, for example by creating a gap in the market for dealers to compete over, or increasing distrust in the drugs market.”

The police force in County Durham published evidence in which drug users were interviewed about a large-scale undercover police operation, which lasted six months, cost more than half a million pounds, and resulted in the arrest of over 30 people involved in the supply of class A drugs. When users were asked how long they thought the operation had strangled the supply of heroin for, one estimated four hours, and another just two hours. If people want more evidence than that, I recommend the books by former undercover cop, Neil Woods, who gives a graphic illustration of how the market is there and how, even if that market is interrupted, people come in and fill the gap. We cannot arrest our way out of this problem.

[Jeff Smith]

Through county lines, dealing and exploitation, more and more young people have been pulled into drug supply and a life of crime. In 2017 alone, 38,000 people were criminalised for possession of drugs in England and Wales, almost 3,000 of them under the age of 18—people unnecessarily criminalised, limiting their future life chances and their educational and employment opportunities.

A third of the prison population are there because of drug offences or offences relating to drug use. Putting people in custodial settings as a result of their substance use punishes those who need help, does not address the root cause of their issues, and is, more often than not, counterproductive. All those things add up to part of the human cost of our drugs policy, but what about the financial cost?

According to the Home Office, in England alone, policing and enforcing current drug policy costs £1.4 billion annually. Half of acquisitive crime is related to illegal drug use. A different Home Office-commissioned report said that the failure of drug policies costs the taxpayer £10.7 billion a year in policing, healthcare and crime. The total societal costs of harms relating to illegal drug use is now £19.3 billion.

Another consequence of the 1971 Act is how it has held back scientific and medical developments. Drugs in schedule 1 such as Psilocybin, MDMA, LSD and DMT are showing real promise as potentially life-changing treatment options for conditions such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and addictions. While it is technically possible, it is slow, difficult and expensive to do medical research into schedule 1 substances. Under this policy regime, we are wasting money, wasting the resources of the criminal justice system, wasting the chance to do better research and to find evidence to inform our drug policy and our medical interventions, and wasting lives.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for setting out the scope of the impact of the drugs scene today and the implication that it has on residents, including in my constituency of York Central where there is an incredibly high level of drug deaths. This is how I got involved in the issue. I have been on a journey and learned how a public health approach can be transformative in diverting people away from crime, in ensuring that there is no exploitation, in providing good treatment, including engagement with drug consumption spaces, and in taking that full public health approach. Does he agree that we need a sea change now to see harm reduction, as has been tried and tested elsewhere, which has incredible outcomes that he, too, has seen.

**Jeff Smith:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This anniversary is surely the time to take stock, to change our approach to one that is rooted in evidence, and to do what is best for public health.

In 2019, the Health and Social Care Committee recommended such an approach. It called for “a radical change in UK drugs policy” moving “from a criminal justice to a health approach.

It said:

“Responsibility for drugs policy should move from the Home Office to the Department of Health and Social Care.”

It supported a consultation on decriminalisation of drugs for personal use. By the way, decriminalisation is supported by the World Health Organisation, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the Royal College of Physicians and the Royal Society for Public Health.

The Government published their response earlier this year, saying that they had “no intention” of decriminalising drugs. They said:

“Drugs are illegal because scientific and medical analysis has shown they are harmful to human health”—

apart, of course, from alcohol, a drug that is more harmful to the user than most drugs aside from heroin, crack and methamphetamine. It is certainly not less harmful to the user compared with cannabis or ecstasy, for example, and it is legal.

Let us think for a minute, following the Government’s logic, what would happen if we made alcohol illegal because it is harmful to human health. People would not stop using it. They would get it from the black market, as they did during prohibition in the USA. People would die from badly produced moonshine, as they did in the USA, and the profits would go into the pockets of criminal gangs. Instead of that, we mitigate the harm from alcohol use by legalising it, regulating it, making sure that it is not poisonous and making it safe, and we can invest the tax raised from its sale in the NHS and public messaging. No one has ever given me a convincing argument as to why we do not take the same approach to cannabis, as many US states and increasing numbers of countries around the world are now doing. There is simply no logic to the Government’s approach.

There would be different approaches to different drugs, but what is common is that the current regime is not working. Over the last half a century, there have been calls for reform from a wide range of parliamentary Committees and public bodies. We have an increasing body of evidence to look at on how things could change for the better. The evidence from countries that have liberalised their approach to drugs does not suggest an associated increase in use.

The example of Portugal is worth highlighting again. In the early noughties, Portugal was in the grip of Europe’s worst heroin and drug death crisis. In 2001, it ended the criminalisation of people who use drugs and established a health-led approach instead. Since then, drug-related deaths have fallen and have remained below the EU average. The proportion of the prison population sentenced for drug offences fell from over 40% to 15%. The number of annual drug overdose deaths reduced from 318 in 2000 to 40 in 2015. There was an 18% reduction in the social costs of drug use in the first 10 years of decriminalisation. Problematic use and school-age use both fell, and rates of drug use in Portugal remain consistently below the EU average.

Even within the current regime, the Government could stop blocking some proven harm reduction measures, such as overdose prevention centres and drug safety testing, and they could ramp up and even out the provision of naloxone and heroin-assisted treatment. They could have encouraged more diversion schemes and more deferred prosecution schemes and could properly reinvest in the treatment budgets that have been cut in recent years.

**Rachael Maskell:** On the issue of diversion, I was told a powerful story about how young people, instead of getting a criminal record, were given the opportunity in life for someone to invest in them. As a result, they got apprenticeships and then got a job instead of a criminal record. Surely that is a better way forward for these young people's lives.

**Jeff Smith:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have the evidence in the UK. There have been some very good diversion schemes in Durham and the west midlands, and there are others. We do not need to look at the evidence abroad; we can look at the evidence in the UK.

**Dr Kieran Mullan** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, particularly in relation to cannabis, the initial warning and the fixed penalty notice that we use at the moment do not prevent in any way, shape or form people from also being given a diversion scheme and other steps being taken? There is no barrier to that at the moment, for example, in relation to cannabis.

**Jeff Smith:** That is true. My problem with cannabis is that the supply is still in the hands of organised criminal gangs. That, for me, is not a sensible way to approach our drug policy.

We can explore models of decriminalisation, and we know that those are associated with reduced risks of recidivism, a reduced burden on police resources and savings to the public purse related to social costs, or we can look at models of legalised regulation. Whatever happens, we need a wholesale, new approach to this problem. The Government need to be honest that the last 50 years of drug policy have been a failure and have come at a terrible human, societal and economic cost. We need to commit to a public health approach rather than a criminal justice approach to drugs policy—one focused on saving lives and rooted in support and compassion for those who abuse drugs.

Among the MPs who want to speak in today's debate, there will not be a single view on the way we go forward and what an alternative to the current approach to drugs policy should look like, and there will be different approaches for different substances. I look forward to hearing the views of Members, but I suspect that we probably mostly agree that, on the 50th anniversary of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, it is worth looking honestly at the legacy of that 50-year-old legislation and considering what needs to change to better serve our constituents and our communities. We should take this opportunity for political parties and the media to stop weaponising drugs policy and have a grown-up discussion about how we protect our communities. Today I am calling on the Government to launch a full, open-minded review of this legislation to learn from our mistakes, because we cannot afford another 50 years of failure.

I will leave the final words to Anne-Marie Cockburn, who is a campaigner for Anyone's Child: Families for Safer Drug Control. Anne-Marie's daughter Martha, like people through the generations for thousands of years, just wanted to have a bit of fun and get high. She researched on the internet how to get high safely. She was 15 years old when she took an overdose of MDMA that killed her. Anne-Marie says: "As I stand by my daughter's grave, what more evidence do I need that UK drug policy needs to change?"

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** This is a very important debate and we have another important debate following. I will not introduce a time limit at this juncture, but I ask Members making contributions to be mindful of the length of those contributions in order that we can get everybody in.

1.21 pm

**Crispin Blunt** (Reigate) (Con) [V]: I draw the House's attention to my unremunerated interest as chair of the Conservative Drug Policy Reform Group Ltd.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), my co-chair on the all-party parliamentary group on drug policy reform, on securing this debate. I commiserate with him on his promotion from Whip to spokesman on local government. It has been a real pleasure working with a decent and humane colleague with a very different career background from mine. I hope this can continue despite his new Opposition policy responsibilities. I appreciate his leadership in delivering today's debate.

Fifty years ago, this House passed the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Its laudable aim was to deter unlawful controlled drug use and stifle supply. This followed what happened in 1961 when the United States persuaded UN members to sign up to a global narcotics ban. Had the House then seen through the clouds of both excitement and worry about the Woodstock generation—magnified by a popular press which then, as now, was prone to more than a modest amount of exaggeration—to the evidence of the extraordinary success of what was then known as the British system in addressing problematic drug use, by comparison with the American system, it would surely have thought twice. It perhaps also should have paused at the American invitation to follow the same principle towards all other drugs that the USA had deployed, with such disastrous consequences, towards the drug alcohol in 1919. Perhaps we should not be surprised at the global disaster that has now overtaken us.

If the House had known then what we know now, passing that Act would have been an appalling betrayal of its duty to the public interest. In the UK we have invested countless billions in the approach put into law by the MDA, with what success? Illegal drugs are today cheaper, and more available, potent and widely used, than ever. Most of all, victims of drug policy-related crimes are off the scale. They range from exploited children, to young, usually black men knifed on our streets, to half—half!—of acquisitive crimes in the UK. As the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington said, we have seen a 40-fold increase in drug deaths in this period.

This is a policy choice we have made. In 2001, Portugal implemented a policy that has the key aspects of the British system from the 1960s. Portugal has dropped its drug deaths, in some years, by up to 90% as a consequence. We listen with proper attention to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) when she reads out the list of names of women killed by men each year: 125 in 2016; 113 last year. If I did that in respect of women, men and children dead as a consequence of the way in which successive Governments have implemented this Act, I would need to read out an equivalent list of names—killed by law and policy, accountable to this House—every single week that this Parliament sits, and still that would not be enough.

[Crispin Blunt]

In the late 1960s, about 1% of adults had used drugs at some point in their lives. Now it is 34%. In 1971, heroin use was below 10,000 people. It is now more than a quarter of a million. In 1971, less than half a million people used cannabis. It is now more than 2.5 million people, and users of cannabis supplied by criminal gangs today also consume a much more potent drug, which is of real danger to growing young minds.

There are those who say that we just have not implemented the powers in this Act hard enough. One of those people is Peter Hitchens. To his credit, he is prepared to debate, but to my astonishment the last time that I debated with him, he referenced a collection of relevant newspaper headlines. Does he have no idea of the harm that his industry has done through these lurid, fear-mongering headlines that so mislead about the pathetic lives put beyond rescue by this Act that creates the innocent victims of our policy? Rather more academic research and experience take us to a much more reliable conclusion.

Last year, part 1 of Dame Carol Black's review of drugs stated that, even if enforcement agencies "were sufficiently resourced it is not clear that they would be able to bring about a sustained reduction in drug supply".

She went further, stating that

"enforcement activity can sometimes have unintended consequences, such as increasing levels of drug-related violence and the negative effects are involving individuals in the criminal justice system."

As soon as I can, I want to ask Dame Carol whether she could also have said "almost always" or simply "always" instead of "can sometimes", as I am unaware of any evidence to the contrary—ever, anywhere.

Thirty-four per cent. of UK adults admit to having consumed an illegal drug at some point in their life. Having debated this with the then chief constable of Durham, Mike Barton—the most authoritative operational police chief on the issue—when 80% of an audience of hundreds of fresher students make the same admission in front of a serving police officer, I rather expect that proportion is growing fast. Our policy has a third of the British population potentially facing a two to seven-year sentence, including senior members of the Government. I am now convinced that this is precisely why so few colleagues are really prepared to engage in this debate; it is personally politically dangerous—ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

We represent the population in this matter as much as anyone else, and I would be surprised if most Members of this House had not enjoyed what a former Prime Minister dismissed as the "normal university experience". The Leader of the Opposition implied as much about himself, but even he was not prepared to be candid. This issue is far, far too important for colleagues to take a pass on. We have a duty to engage and personal experience should not be used to drive colleagues out of considering the wider evidence about the success or failure of this policy. My advice to colleagues is, do not answer the personal question; you have a wider duty to the public, so that all parliamentarians can contribute to the consideration of what is in reality an appalling policy failure, with 50 years of evidence to draw on.

We wait for the publication of part 2 of Dame Carol's report. Dare I hope that the Government have run into someone prepared to state the inconvenient truth? Only yesterday she reported at a meeting of the Criminal

Justice Alliance her shock at finding so little research and science to underpin policy making, commissioning and practice in the UK. The Government might point to the role of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, yet its members are overworked, unremunerated and supported by a very limited secretariat. They are also appointed on the basis of political vetting, which inevitably compromises their necessary objectivity, and of course they have the example of Professor David Nutt's inconvenient truth in 2008, which had him sacked.

The damage done by this Act to public health and its devouring of the criminal justice system is only half the story. What opportunities have we also missed? The powers to schedule drugs under regulation derived from the 1971 Act. Those 2001 regulations should allow for the lawful possession and supply of controlled drugs for legitimate purposes such as research and medicinal use. Yet our drug scheduling plainly lacks scientific validation and has not been subject to analysis or any recent official analysis of harm. The Home Office has no plans to commission a comprehensive review of the relative harms of the drugs that have been put in schedule 1. This evidence-free approach must change.

Cannabis-based products for medicinal use were rescheduled only because the mother of one child with a severe form of epilepsy was prepared to challenge the system for confiscating her son's medicine, which had been prescribed overseas. Billy Caldwell duly became seriously ill, and to his credit the then Home Secretary returned the confiscated medicine to Billy under special licence and asked the chief medical officer if there was any evidence for this medicine's efficacy. In two weeks, which is a record-breaking time in medicine assessment, she confirmed that there was. There is rather a lot, in fact—it appears to go back about three millennia. It should hardly have been a surprise to the House—a House of Lords Committee had recommended it 20 years earlier—but the system is still broken today for patients to get access to medicine from cannabis. Only yesterday, we witnessed a wretched plea to the Prime Minister from a sick child's brother for his medical cannabis. That should never have had to be the case.

We are not just talking about cannabis, where our approach has denied us 50 years of research into, among other conditions, multiple sclerosis, pain control and, it seems, all too probably a significant advance in cancer treatments, because evidence is emerging of a number of substances that find themselves in schedule 1 that also have great potential. The current scheduling of substances such as psilocybin, MDMA, LSD and DMT now appears to have prevented a probable step change in more effective mental health interventions for conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, anorexia nervosa, addiction and depression. We continue to hinder medical research at a time when there have been no new pharmacological treatments for depression since the advance of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors 30 years ago. With a mental health crisis in waiting following this pandemic, we must immediately remove barriers to research.

If we want an example of why we should do that, we should look no further than the experience of our recently active service veterans, 7,500 of whom have returned from active service in Iraq and Afghanistan with PTSD. The charity Supporting Wounded Veterans believes that 2,400 of them are beyond available current

treatment. So many of them turn to alcohol and street drugs to manage their service-inflicted pain—destroyed, in our estimation, from military hero to alcoholic and junkie because we have not enabled the research that would break their spiral down to death by their own hand or otherwise.

Finally, given what she said yesterday, Carol Black will ask for accountability and co-ordinated delivery across Government that acknowledges drug dependency to be a chronic condition. Drug policy, owned and led by the Home Office—vainly trying to enforce the provisions of this Act over decades through a criminal justice enforcement approach—must change to a public health, cross-Government approach. We have tried and tested 50 years of policy based on instinct and what now appears to be prejudice towards drug users, whom we have put outside the law. Meanwhile, we knock back our alcohol and smoke our tobacco as drugs inside the law. Prohibition of either would clearly drive drinkers and smokers underground, with all of the accompanying wider cost to the overall public good. We have accommodated their undoubted harms, which are massively greater than those we have criminalised, and we can and are starting to control them to a better degree inside the law, as the recent substantial public health progress over tobacco consumption shows.

The Misuse of Drugs Act has failed. It ended the British system towards drug users of the 1960s. Our oldest ally, Portugal, faced with its own drug crisis of the late 1990s, returned to it in 2001, with conspicuous success over the past two decades. Its politicians climb over each other now to claim responsibility. After 50 years, it is about time we all took up our responsibility to understand the evidence and how we can best mitigate this policy disaster which arises from a law passed 50 years ago here in the United Kingdom.

1.35 pm

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I wish to associate myself entirely with all of the comments that my two colleagues have just made from either side of this House. I wonder what it says about our ability to function as a body that makes and reviews legislation that such a significant piece of legislation, dealing with such a major social problem, can lie on the statute book for 50 years without review or amendment. That is all the more incredible when we consider that by any conceivable measure it has been an abject failure in trying to achieve what it set out to achieve. As we have heard, back in 1971 just 1% of the British population said that they used the drugs that the Act would go on to criminalise, whereas today the figure is 34%. We are facing the biggest social policy catastrophe of our generation. Thousands of people are dying every year needlessly because they do not know what they are taking and help is not available for them when things go wrong. Tens of thousands of people every year get a criminal record because of the way in which we try to tackle this problem. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people, living in communities up and down this land, have their lives blighted, not just by the misery of people dependent on those drugs in those communities, but by the brutal violence used by those involved in organised crime to enforce their regulation and supply of these products.

By any measure, this policy and this legislation ought to be reviewed. It is not just the fact that the legislation has not been able to do what it wanted to do; it is worse than that, because the legislation is now an active cause of the problem, because the entire area is looked at not as one of public health and wellbeing, but as one of criminal activity. The centre of the Act is about criminalising people who use drugs, and that does a number of things. First, it immediately means that the state has no role in the supply and regulation of these products, and that responsibility is given to the private sector and to organised crime within it. That is the first consequence of the Act. The second is that if people are getting into trouble and need medical help because of their substance addiction, many of our health and social care staff working in our public agencies are unable or unwilling to put themselves at risk of criminal prosecution by offering that help.

**Dr Mullan:** If that is true, how does the hon. Gentleman account for the fact that we have tens of thousands of heroin users on methadone replacement therapy?

**Tommy Sheppard:** I will come on to look at that concept and drug consumption in a minute, but what I am talking about is the fact that people have no ability to come to a health professional and say, “What is this?” They have no ability to ask for clean needles, because these actions are prohibited under the 1971 Act and the schedules to it.

The third thing, which has already been remarked upon, is that the Act stigmatises, big time, those who use drugs and puts them in a position where they are unlikely, because of social opprobrium, to ask for help. We surely need to have a review and a fresh think about a problem that is so manifestly out of control and where the existing legislation is so manifestly unable to provide any assistance.

I always like to try to see the other side of the argument, so I want to ask: why are people resistant to review? Why do they want to hold on to things as they are? I can only conclude that it is because they fear the consequences of decriminalisation or of changing the law. They must somehow think that if we were to do that, we would open the floodgates and unleash supply into communities where there are not already drugs, and that many more millions of people would get caught up in the problem, because we would not have the criminal mechanisms that we have at the minute. I say to any colleagues who think that: wake up and see what is happening on the streets of your constituencies.

Those colleagues should come with me to any medium-sized town in this country, stand in a bar and make their intentions known as to what they would like. Within one hour they will be offered any drug of their choice. If they do not want the personal contact, they could order in advance. If they go on the internet, they will find a mobile phone number on which, through the county lines network, they can order whatever they want and it will be delivered to their door. Sometimes people will even get a customer service message asking for feedback on the supply. That is the extent of what we have at the moment.

It is just fantasy to suggest that there are loads of people out there who are somehow prevented from getting into drugs by the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. That is not the case, so we surely need to have a

[Tommy Sheppard]

grown-up conversation about what we should do given that potentially a third of our citizens could be made criminals by legislation that is so manifestly unfit for purpose.

I hope that the Home Office and Ministers can begin that process of review with an open mind, rather than just defending the status quo. They should be prepared to look at an evidence-based approach, drawing on international comparisons, and to try to work up a better system that is grounded in protecting public health and wellbeing, rather than trying to criminalise behaviour. I and my party would support—I think there would be support in all parts of the House—any bold Minister who wanted to take that initiative and begin that dialogue. I am not saying prescriptively what should be in such a review; I am not saying how it should be done. I simply want to have the dialogue, the discussion and the debate, because too many people are dying for us not to do so.

While we are doing that, there are some things that ought to be done immediately. I want to turn for a moment to the question of drug consumption rooms—probably better called overdose prevention centres. These are medical facilities, and I have been in them and seen them working in Portugal, Germany and Canada. These are medical facilities where someone can use their own drugs under medical supervision. Such places are not going to make the overall problem any better; what they do is drive a focus into the very sharp end of the problem—the point at which people are dying.

At the moment, people do not voluntarily overdose because they are fed up with life and want to commit suicide. That is not the case at all. People are taking substances and they do not even know what is in them. Sometimes these substances contain a lethal concoction which is much, much stronger than they thought it was going to be. Because it is all criminal activity, it has to be done behind closed doors. It is not something that someone does in the open. By the time someone realises they have a problem—by the time they cannot breathe, they have a heart attack or they need medical help—it is too late to call for assistance. For the limited number of people in those circumstances, being able to satisfy their immediate addiction under medical supervision would literally be a lifesaver. That is what happens in other countries.

It is blindingly obvious that we ought to try to consider having such places here, but the law forbids it. Even pending a change in the law, by regulation the Home Office should allow pilot centres to emerge so that we can see for ourselves whether they would work here. After all, what is there to lose? There is nothing to lose and everything to gain—there are lives to gain.

This idea does not stop people using drugs; it does not get rid of the problem; it does not make people get their life back together; it does not get people the medical help or social services help that they might need; it does not get them a job if they have not got one—of course it does not, but it keeps them alive long enough so that those interventions can take place further down the line. We cannot give help to a dead person, and that is why it is so vital that we have a sensible discussion about drug consumption rooms and supervised facilities. The Scottish Government stand ready and

have been pressing the Home Office to allow them to go ahead and do that in Glasgow, which brings me to my final point; I know you did not want people to go on too long, Mr Deputy Speaker, so this will be my final point.

We have a bit of a disjuncture in the interrelationship between the devolution of political authority and Administrative action in the United Kingdom and this particular problem, in that the whole criminal framework—the 1971 Act and others—is a reserved matter for Westminster, which sets the problem, if you like, but dealing with the consequences of that, including the health and social care and the economic fall-out from that policy, is a matter for the devolved Administrations. Without getting into the arguments about Scottish independence or whatever, it seems to me a matter of ultimate sense and grown-up policy to have the same part of government responsible for the regulation as is responsible for mopping up the consequences of the problem. That is why, when the time comes, we need to urgently look at devolution of the controls currently in place in the '71 Act, and whatever replaces it, to the devolved Administrations, and to locate them within a health and social care context, which is already devolved.

In advance of that, I have spoken with the Minister several times on this matter, and I trust that he is thoughtful about it. I think he is prepared to consider other points of view and evidence, but I think he feels himself mightily constrained by tradition, convention and, perhaps, political pressure elsewhere. However, he has now received a letter from the Drugs Policy Minister in Scotland, Angela Constance, asking for a four nations summit to consider, among other things, establishing pilots of these types of medical facilities. I hope very much that he will today confirm that his reaction to that is positive and that, if we cannot change things overnight across the whole UK, he is prepared to let us employ the apparatus of devolution to allow one part of the UK to go beyond where other parts are perhaps willing to go at the minute and to collate the evidence to point a way to the future, which could then lead to best practice being adopted throughout.

We have a responsibility not to continue to stick our heads in the sand on this matter; there has been a collective exercise of ignoring the blindingly obvious for far too long. We are not voting on this today, but I appeal to colleagues to do what they can through the various structures of this place and within their political parties—this matter should not divide us on party grounds—to consider why we need a review after this half-century and why things are so clearly wrong that we must do something. We cannot continue to stick our heads in the sand and pretend that things are okay. Now, 50 years after the passage of the Act, is the time to admit that it is not working and to do better. The citizens of this country deserve that.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I ask every Member to focus on not speaking for more than five minutes, if they could. I will not put a time limit on yet, but I may be forced to in order to protect other business.

1.47 pm

**Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con):** Politicians are often most criticised for sitting on the fence. While I am sure that Whips across the House like to believe they are skilled in the power of persuasion, there is no hiding the

fact that, often, many MPs made up their minds on issues long ago. However, it is clear that the time for an open and honest debate on the future of the UK's drug policy is desperately needed, not least because the current strategy does not appear to be working.

When I speak to individuals from South Yorkshire police, the problem is self-evident. While time spent catching dealers temporarily reduces supply, there appears to be no lack of criminals. An ex-police officer told me recently about a huge drugs bust in April, in which everyone from the top ring leaders to the small dealers were arrested. After thousands of hours of police work, millions of pounds-worth of drugs were discovered, yet according to the former police officer I spoke to, the raid managed to keep cannabis off the streets for a whole two hours. Being tough on dealers does not seem to be working. The gains made by the police are small, and for this reason I have concluded that enforcement alone will never get us to a solution.

Every time someone buys drugs, they become part of the criminal supply chain; put simply, it links them directly to dealers who have no problem with carrying a knife or a gun. Because suppliers operate outside the law, they do not have the police to protect them, so instead they protect themselves with weapons. They do not pay taxes either, nor do they give a receipt. Equally, they are not held responsible if their product leads to hospitalisation or even death. While we are talking about drug reform, decriminalisation where users are not penalised for possessing drugs will not fix these issues.

The answer may be to totally legalise cannabis and, potentially, other drugs. I have heard some say that putting drugs in the hands of the Government or a legal partner takes the production and supply chains and any customer transaction out of the hands of criminals. I have also heard that such a policy makes sense as it would ensure that the quality of products will be controlled, leading to fewer deaths from consumption. Taxes could be raised and we could get consumers out of the supply chain.

Yet I am not convinced that adopting these policies would be trouble-free. For one thing, are we to believe that the persons involved in drugs would simply leave and go to find employment in a regular job? I am not convinced. After all, research from the Institute of Economic Affairs concluded that the current black market in cannabis is worth £2.6 billion per year, with 255 tonnes sold to 3 million users in 2016. Any movement to Government-controlled legalisation of cannabis would be a huge loss for current criminals, and I fear they would simply move into selling harder drugs, which it would be grossly irresponsible even to consider regulating.

Secondly, the legalisation of something like cannabis may lead to an upsurge in usage. There is conflicting evidence, but a recent peer-reviewed study conducted in the United States concluded that cannabis use has increased in states where the drug was legalised. With cannabis use increasingly being linked to psychiatric disorders, including depression, anxiety and schizophrenia, what toll would liberalisation have on our NHS and its mental health services?

**Jeff Smith:** The hon. Member makes an important point, but is he aware that the difficulty with cannabis is that it is made up of different compounds? THC and

CBD are the two main ones, and the problem with the cannabis we buy on the street, which is mainly skunk, is that it is very high in THC, and that is what causes the problem. If we legalise cannabis and make the product safer by regulating it, we would have a better balanced product that is not as dangerous and will not be leading to the kind of consequences he has talked about.

**Nick Fletcher:** I thank the hon. Member for saying that, but I still go back to what I said before. If we legalise the cannabis we have talked about and make that safe, I still think the illegal or the criminal element would continue selling the cannabis—[*Interruption.*] It is not a good place to be.

The questions I have raised today are not new to those involved in policy making, yet such arguments will be new to many of my constituents, who unfortunately have had to deal with the effects of illicit drug dealing in their communities. That is why I believe this House and the Government need to have an open mind when considering reform in this regard. Before we rush into anything, we must ask what the potential effects of reform are, especially for our children and young people.

I therefore believe that, as compassionate individuals, the best thing for us to do is to deter people from starting the habit in the first place. With regard to drugs, this means doing everything we can—as parents, family members, community members, society, Government—to educate our children and look out for them, too. We need to look at who all their friends are, have high expectations for how they behave, keep them entertained and encouraged, keep them fit and healthy and, most importantly, give them a vision of a great future.

We also need to take responsibility for our own actions. That means the minority of successful people out there who are earning good money need to stop their weekend coke habit or their marijuana habit because, contrary to what they think, this practice is hurting communities and putting lives in danger. They need to think again because they are part of the problem. They are part of that chain and they are fuelling demand. Every time these people take drugs in expensive bars and nightclubs, they are part of the chain that has a nine-year-old running drugs, they are part of the chain that puts a knife in the hands of a 16-year-old, and they are part of the chain that leaves grieving parents mourning the loss of a son or a daughter who has just overdosed.

Put simply, there will be a lot less demand if the people who are not addicted but take drugs recreationally stop doing so. This reduction in demand would ensure that the market would shrink, and the number of dealers and crime would be reduced. When our police do the big drugs bust, maybe the streets will be drugs-free not for two hours; just maybe they will be permanently free from these dangerous substances.

In summary, we need to stop our young people getting involved in drugs by educating them about the damage they cause. We also need to put more support into helping those already affected by drug addiction. These two simple policies alone will help drastically reduce demand and therefore the size of the market. In turn, this would give our police forces a fighting chance to catch the dealers and other criminals involved in these supply chains.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** I am afraid that I am going to have to introduce a time limit of five minutes, which is still fairly generous compared with what a number of Back Benchers are used to. The next speaker is Adam Holloway. Sorry, Adam, but I know that you are a seasoned contributor and will be able to do it within five minutes.

1.54 pm

**Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con) [V]:** In my experience, drug addiction is very clearly an illness. Opiate addiction, for example, is a health problem. As we have heard very passionately from three speakers today, we urgently need to move from a criminal justice response to a health response.

A couple of weeks ago, I spent 10 days or so in the US going round homeless shelters on the east coast and looking at what is probably a historic opportunity to stabilise the street homeless population coming out of the pandemic. Of course, the problem of street homelessness in the US is somewhat different from the one we have here, given the benefits that are available to pay for housing here, but they share the common thread that very large numbers of the street homeless are mentally ill or drug addicted.

I spent an extraordinary day with Professor Jim O'Connell, who set up Boston Health Care for the Homeless back in the mid-'80s, when he realised that street homeless people did not have medical records. He now has an enormous operation. One of the things that he does is what the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) described very movingly as "overdose prevention"; he has a tarmac area, half the size of a tennis court, called the Southampton comfort station, where opiate-addicted people come and shoot themselves up with fentanyl.

I used to be a TV reporter, and I had the same emotional response to seeing those 200 people shooting up, staggering, preparing to inject themselves, as if they were on a picnic or rolling a cigarette. It was an appalling scene. It was—I do not know—like I imagine somehow hell would be. I would not want to live one second of any of those people's lives. Pam and Sue from Professor O'Connell's operation wait there to get people breathing again when they have had an inaccurate dose of fentanyl.

As I say, the overwhelming majority of street homeless people here are drug addicted or mentally ill. Whatever someone's route to addiction, and whatever judgments we want to make about these things, the reality is that these people are addicted. They have a very serious illness. I have taken opiates for pain relief, and I can absolutely see how someone could very quickly become addicted to this stuff.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) and the hon. Members for Edinburgh East and for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) have said, we have to be pragmatic about this. We have to have a grown-up discussion to find a humane way out of it, not just for the people who are addicted but for wider society. We need to think about all things—at the very least about having overdose prevention places, but also about prescribing, decriminalisation and moving this out of the criminal justice sphere. These people are ill, and, as the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington said, we cannot arrest our way out of this problem.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Thank you for your co-operation, Adam; I am really grateful.

1.58 pm

**Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP) [V]:** The stated purpose of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 is to prevent the misuse of controlled drugs. By any measurement that we wish to employ, the Act has failed. The fact that it has been allowed to fail for 50 years is an abomination. As was stated, we have gone from fewer than 100 deaths in 1971 to more than 5,000 in 2020. The legislation is flawed and the job we are asking the law enforcement agencies to do is impossible. The legislation is flawed and the job we are asking the law enforcement agencies to do is impossible. The fallout is picked up by the NHS and many, many third sector organisations.

A lot has changed since 1971. Asbestos is no longer a popular building material. Women can no longer be fired for being pregnant. In many situations we have moved forward with the times, but on drugs policy we are firmly entrenched in the past. When we changed our drug policy in 1971, we junked the British system in favour of the misguided policy of Richard Nixon's America. The result has been an increase in crime, an increase in corruption, an increase in harm, and an increase in the number of drug-related deaths. This involves our communities being subjected to violent crime, vicious turf wars, and the corruption of the young and often vulnerable members of society. We cannot and never will be able to arrest our way out of a drugs war. Substances that were once legal are now made by criminals with scant regard for consumer safety. They are often cut with other products and potency cannot be guaranteed. As a result, many young people have died experimenting with drugs. One tablet—one tablet—is all it takes and a life can be lost because drugs are not regulated.

Other countries are not inflicted by this paralysis. They have decriminalised and legalised drugs. They have drug consumption rooms. They have diversion schemes. I visited Portugal and Catalonia to see what they are doing and it works. It saves lives and it rehabilitates. Theirs are humane schemes because they treat drug addiction and harm as a health issue, not a criminal justice issue. They are creating an environment where people are not marginalised and ostracised. As a result, they are not experiencing prejudice because of their health issue. That can only happen when there is a change of mindset that facilitates the provision of services. We need to waken up to the reality that the policies we are pursuing are not doing any good and, in some cases, are actually making the situation worse. Recent evidence from Canada, as quoted in the Scottish Affairs Committee's drugs and crime report, showed overdose prevention centres in British Columbia alone saved between 160 and 350 lives in 20 months. Yet the UK Government's attitude is that the establishment of drug consumption rooms would condone drug use.

This lack of empathy and refusal to bow to evidence makes me wonder if the UK Home Office thinks that the life of a drug addict is a life not worth saving. Neither the Home Office nor the Department of Health and Social Care has provided any evidence to contradict the findings of numerous reviews, including by the European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drug Addiction and the ACMD, which said that such facilities have not been found to increase injecting drug use or

local crime rates. Listen to the United Nations executive board chaired by the UN Secretary-General and representing 31 UN agencies, including the World Health Organisation and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. They have called on member states to promote alternatives to conviction and punishment in appropriate cases, including the decriminalisation of drug possession for personal use.

Minister, please drop the coming-down-hard-on-criminals rhetoric. It may sound good, but it does not work today and it has not worked for 50 years. It is time to end the war on drugs and start the war on the causes of addiction. And please engage with Scotland's Minister for Drugs Policy, Angela Constance. Help her to remove obstacles, so we can have a more progressive and more effective drugs policy, one that has health at its core.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** Thank you very much, Ronnie. I am sorry you couldn't have the timing clock visible, but my goodness me you did finish within the five minutes, so thank you very much.

2.3 pm

**Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): I come at this debate from my experiences as Justice Secretary in Scotland for seven and a half years. It would also be fair to say that I think I reflect the views, privately, of many senior individuals in both law enforcement and the judiciary. Mike Barton was mentioned. Only a few have had the courage to speak out, but privately many will tell you, as I have come to see, that this issue cannot be solved by justice. It has to be treated as a health problem.

I always recall that when I started as Justice Secretary a drug debt was seen as being recovered or paid off by a stab in the buttocks. By the time I was demitting office it was the production of a firearm. Now in Scotland, it is almost invariably the use of that firearm. The levels of violence are escalating. What was seen on the streets of London is now seen on the streets of Glasgow. What was viewed as the norm in Glasgow is now prevalent in Edinburgh. The whole equivalent of the county lines is spreading across our country and we are not defeating it in any shape or form. If it could be done by law enforcement or by military power, the United States would be drug-free, but it is not and this approach is a total failure, despite all the US weaponry and the assets at its disposal. That is why there has to be a change. It is affecting our safety with not only the escalation of crime, but the level of the corruption of our economy. Whole areas of our economy are literally being taken over by the drug trade and laundered money.

I recall asking senior police officers in Scotland whether there was a clean one in a particular trade in Glasgow that would be viewed as clean—I will not name it, for those who are the clean ones—and the answer I was given was, “Probably, but we do not know of them.” This will be the case not only in particular cities in Scotland, but across the UK. I am referring to the so-called “colourful businessmen”. We know who they are and where they get their money, and the Misuse of Drugs Act fuels that and provides for it. That is why we have to change.

Of course, it would take the wisdom of Solomon to provide a solution, because at the heart of the drug addiction problem are deep roots—poverty, health, inequality and hopelessness. Of course there are some

elements of hedonism, but in the main those who suffer are people who are tragic, who are individuals, who are captured and caught, and we need to help and treat them, not to punish them and worsen their situations. As other Members have said, other countries have shown that a different path can be taken. The Portuguese method is the way that should be chosen. The power should be devolved to Scotland so that we can go on a different path. If we get it wrong, it will not impact on the rest of the UK. If we get it right, ours will be a method whereby people here will be able to see what has happened. After all, there has been no calamity on the Iberian peninsula and no effect upon Spain. All the suggestions that every drug addict in Spain was going to depart to Faro on the Algarve have been shown to be false. Portugal has managed to improve the situation. It is no Valhalla, but it is better. If the Minister is not prepared to devolve drug policy as a whole, there has to be some flexibility.

My friend the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) mentioned the request by the Scottish drug Secretary for a summit to discuss aspects that can be changed. The Scottish Parliament has control over justice and health, abortion and end of life, yet because of the restrictions of the drug policy, we are not able to deal with drug consumption rooms or overdose prevention rooms, whichever one calls them. We are not able to test street tablets for people who are going to take drugs. It is surely better that we should know that what they are buying is something that can be consumed safely and will not be the equivalent of getting the proverbial black spot in their hand that will result in death or a living hell thereafter. All of that can be dealt with by simply allowing some latitude and some powers. There will be no danger or difficulty for the rest of the UK. Scotland can be used as a testing ground, because there is an issue there—people are dying. It is entirely inadequate to say that this can all be solved simply within the current powers of the Scottish Parliament, because it cannot. I will be the first to say that more has to be done, more should have been done and blame has to be accepted by the Scottish Government in respect of providing treatment orders and the ability for people to get support. Equally, that on its own will not address the fundamental problem.

There has to be a radical change, which I believe should be pan-UK, but if the Minister is not prepared to accept that and if he accepts, as I think he does, that there is a particular problem that is worse in Scotland, we have to be able to address it. That means that we have to have the powers, if not in whole, in part. We have to be able to provide the drug consumption rooms to ensure that addicts can take safely. We have to be able to ensure that what is being bought and traded is capable of being consumed, even if we do not want it consumed. There has to be a better way, because the intransigence being shown by Westminster is being paid for in the communities of Scotland and with the deaths of far too many individuals.

2.8 pm

**Dr Kieran Mullan** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): In my time both as a doctor and a volunteer special constable, I have seen up close the harms that drugs do to our society, and I have also seen this in my personal life.

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

I wish to begin by focusing on areas of agreement with the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) and others. It is clearly right that the best outcome for an individual addicted to drugs is to be supported to overcome that addiction. It is clearly better for individuals who end up using drugs that they can do so in a way that minimises the risk of harm. It is clearly true that often it is not going to be the best use of police time to pursue individuals who are using drugs on a personal basis. Those are things I think we can all agree on, but some of the other arguments put forward today fail on a number of fronts. They fail to understand the reality of the policing of drug use in society at the moment. They fail to understand the nature of criminality associated with drug production, and they fail to understand the complexity of addiction recovery. As is so often the case with those on the left, they take for granted all the quiet benefits of our current approach to drugs that could potentially be lost in reform. Fundamentally, abstinence-based policies are stopping very many people from taking illicit drugs. The overwhelming majority of people do not take drugs. What Members have done today, without any evidence whatsoever, is to draw association with cause. An enormous number of social ills have exploded over the past 30 years. We cannot say that, because our approach was X, it has been the cause of that. There are many, many factors that drive drug use and we have no idea what drug use would have been had we taken a different approach.

Let me ask a question of the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington, who I know DJ-ed in nightclubs that I frequented a long time ago in Leeds and Manchester. How many times were his nightclubs raided by police bent on catching everybody who was taking amphetamines? How many times has he seen police with their sniffer dogs outside a festival desperate to catch people taking these types of drugs? As I mentioned earlier, the overwhelming majority of people who are caught with cannabis are charged only with possession if they are an adult. If they are not causing any other problem for the local area, such as smoking it publicly or being involved in criminality, they will end up with a warning notice and a fine. Very few of the people who have been talked about for being in prison for drug offences are there for consumption. Overwhelmingly, they are in there for dealing. If they are there for consumption, it is usually because they have had a string of other interventions—whether it be a suspended sentence, a community order, or other things. Ultimately, it is fair that, if they continue to cause misery in their local communities, they face a prison sentence for that. They are not there because we are sending people away to prison because they smoke cannabis or because they take ecstasy. That is just not the reality of the situation.

The question that we might ask ourselves is why do we not just decriminalise these drugs, especially if people are relatively able to use it in proportion. It goes back to what I said earlier. First, I do not endorse that situation. My strong view is that criminalisation deters an awful lot of people from using drugs. Members cannot have it both ways. They cannot say on the one hand that there is all this stigma around drug use, that people cannot get treatment, cannot speak about it, and cannot be freely open with it, and then say that decriminalisation

will not increase usage because it is freely available anyway and people can just get it. We cannot have both those scenarios; we must have one or the other. There is either a stigma, which will have a social effect, or there is not; we cannot have it both ways.

Let me turn now to the nature of criminality related to drug dealing. Drug dealing and drugs being illegal do not create criminal gangs. Those gangs exist because sections of our society are willing to step outside the rules and the norms, use violence, be thugs and do things that the rest of us will not do to make a quick buck. They happen to be doing that with drugs, and decriminalising them will not change that. First, they will just do more of other things. There will be more racketeering, more counterfeit money, and more people trafficking. There will always be people who will look to make money and to be violent as a result.

As has been mentioned, whatever limits we put on drugs—unless Members here really think that Boots will be giving out injectable heroin—there will be limits on the drugs that will be decriminalised. The evidence in Amsterdam is that it has one of the biggest problems with potent cannabis. Decriminalising the use of cannabis in Amsterdam has not stopped that, so, whatever we do, there will always be people who want that hit—it is the nature of addiction. The nature of addiction is that people want a bigger hit. They want more than they got the first time, so they will always hit those limits and want someone else to go above what the law will allow, while accepting that there will be some kind of barriers.

Finally, I want to draw on my experience at university. As a doctor, we had former heroin addicts come in to speak to us. There was a lady who had multiple problems with addiction. Her ongoing addiction was not as a result of not being able to get treatment; she had multiple opportunities to seek treatment. She went on some treatment courses, but, actually, it was when she hit rock bottom, having no help from anyone and having exhausted everything that was available to her, that she turned it around. I am afraid that even the very best addiction programmes are not particularly successful unless people go on them multiple times and go on a bit of a journey.

The idea that we will fix this problem by giving people treatment is naive I am afraid. The problem will carry on regardless because of the inherent nature of these substances, which, on balance, should be banned. We have to weigh up the costs to society of even a small increase in the number of people who take these drugs, and, of course we feel sorry for them, but they have ended up taking them anyway.

2.14 pm

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): I really do feel privileged to speak in this debate. It has been an absolutely terrific debate, with some fantastic contributions. I do not wish to denigrate the contributions of the hon. Members who take a different point of view, but I particularly associate myself with the remarks of my good and hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), and the hon. Members for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) and for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill). This is an important subject, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for the debate.

Clearly, we have had 50 years of failure with the Misuse of Drugs Act. Any objective analysis indicates that the current policies are not working, and for me that means it is time to try something new. There have been some terrific suggestions about pilot schemes, which I have advocated for a number of years now. Originally, I had the same views as some Government Members, but I have taken the time to get involved with the subject and to meet people like the late Ron Hogg—our former police and crime commissioner in Durham, who was extremely brave and introduced some heroin-assisted treatment programmes and diversionary programmes—and Mike Barton, our chief constable. Introducing those measures was brave because they were not popular with the general public, but they were effective in reducing crime and the number of avoidable drugs deaths, and successful in removing some of the burden from the criminal justice system.

Problematic drug or alcohol deaths are higher in areas of significant deprivation. I think that is a given, and it is another reason why I am very concerned about the issue. I do not consider drug use an individual moral failing; I do not make such judgments. There is a complex interplay of economic, societal and family factors that affect someone's chances of developing substance misuse issues.

We need to ask ourselves what the Misuse of Drugs Act has achieved. As we have heard, in the late '60s about 1% of adults had at some point used drugs that are now criminalised. That figure is now 34%. Heroin use has risen exponentially—25-fold since 1971. Cannabis use has risen fivefold. Tens of thousands of people have been imprisoned, and hundreds of thousands of years have been served. More enforcement will not solve the problem.

I am a member of the drugs, alcohol and justice all-party parliamentary group, which stands for evidence, not prejudice, in policy; and treatment, not punishment, in practice. The group is advised by Humankind, We Are With You and the Westminster Drug Project—charities that together support about 150,000 people across the UK each year. Although the third sector is well placed to support those with complex needs and vulnerabilities, and has the necessary talent, tenacity and experience to do so, it has lacked resources due to a number of years of cuts to local budgets.

Significant and sustained investment is needed now to rebuild and reinvigorate our services. If we do not invest, we are simply storing up problems for the future with the way services are delivered at present. In order to address health inequalities effectively and create change for the people who are most affected by these inequalities, the Government must commit to a public health approach, rather than a criminal justice approach, to drugs policy.

I recommend the book "Good Cop, Bad War" by Neil Woods. It is a very instructive read about the experience of an undercover policeman. It is an inconvenient truth. Indeed, Paul Townsley, the chief exec of Humankind, said: "After 50 years, it is high time the Government really committed to taking a health-first approach to drugs use. Locking people up hasn't worked, but we know that access to high-quality treatment and support does work. Over 25 countries across the world have decriminalised possession of some or all drugs and the international evidence shows an alternative policy is possible and effective."

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** The timing clock should now be visible on video connections.

2.19 pm

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 has failed. It has not stopped the flow of illicit drugs into our country. It has not prevented people taking drugs, and it has not kept them alive. In communities up and down these islands, predominantly but exclusively those where deprivation has been rife, families bear the scars of loved ones criminalised and lost to drugs. Generations of policy and politicians have failed them. It is inexcusable, and it cannot go on.

Drugs legislation is reserved to Westminster under schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998, which specifically mentions, at B1,

"the subject matter of...the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971."

In small areas such as needle distribution, life-saving naloxone provision and the excellent heroin assisted treatment programme operated by the Glasgow health and social care partnership under licence from the Home Office, allowances have been made under the Misuse of Drugs Act, but the UK Government could go much further. I would have them tear up the Act and start again or devolve all drugs policy to the Scottish Parliament, but in the meantime they could allow the Scottish Government to take further action to reduce harm and save lives.

Medically supervised drug consumption rooms, safe injecting facilities or overdose prevention rooms—there are different names, but their purpose is the same—get those who are injecting drugs inside, out of the pouring rain, the bin sheds, the filthy waste grounds and the lonely back lanes, and into a place where they will be looked after and get access to support, advice, a cup of tea and some dignity. If they overdose, they can receive treatment right away, not whenever a passer-by happens to find them. People can move from DCRs towards treatment and recovery when they are ready, and stay alive long enough to get there. It is not asking much; it is what we would all want if someone we loved was in that position. DCRs will not fix everything, and I would never claim that, but they are part of the picture.

I was lucky enough to visit the Quai 9 DCR in Geneva in 2019. It marks its 20th anniversary this year with some reflection on where it has come from. In 1986 Switzerland had among the highest reported HIV prevalences in the world. According to Miriam Wolf and Michael Herzig, between 1991 and 2010 overdose deaths in Switzerland decreased by 50%, HIV infections decreased by 65%, and new heroin users decreased by 80%. This is the result of a public health, rather than a criminal justice, intervention. Switzerland is not alone. As colleagues have made clear, countries around the world have taken similar paths.

I still recall the astonishment of the staff in Quai 9 when I described the situation in Glasgow and showed them the pictures of where people inject in the waste ground near my constituency office. I pay credit to Serge Longère, Garance Zarn and the team at Quai 9 for all they are doing to ensure that those who use their service are given hope and dignity. They offer access to support, training and jobs, as well as providing a place where people can take drugs in safety and move towards recovery.

[Alison Thewliss]

Glasgow has had a plan for a similar facility since the 2016 “Taking away the chaos” report. It is the Home Office that stands in the way of that plan. An amendment to the Misuse Of Drugs Act—a simple statutory instrument—would at a stroke protect from prosecution those who seek to operate, work in, or use such a medically supervised drug consumption room. In a brave attempt to provide the beginnings of a facility, the campaigner Peter Krykant has been operating an overdose prevention project using a refurbished ambulance as a safe injecting van. He puts himself at risk doing so, and I thank him from the bottom of my heart for that work. Peter is reducing harm, and he is saving lives, but it should not just be up to him.

I think of all the people who might still be alive today had the Home Office approved a proper facility for Glasgow five years ago, and had it not fallen back to the same tired old political rhetoric. The cowardly Ministers in the Home Office will not even come to my constituency to walk the streets, to listen to the campaigners with lived experience like Peter Krykant, and to meet those such a facility would support. It would not solve everything, we know, but it would help, and if it saved one person from being added to the grim total of drugs deaths in Scotland, it would be worth it. The UK Government must give up their damaging rhetoric, stop listening to the *Daily Mail*, and instead listen to the overwhelming global evidence of how medically supervised drug consumption rooms reduce harm and save lives—and do it now.

2.23 pm

**Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) for securing this significant debate. Fifty years of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, according to the charity Transform, are 50 years of failure, and I agree. It is time we took a public health approach to drugs policy that puts people before prejudice, and it is time we had review and reform of the Act.

I will speak first about the prejudices before I speak about the public health approach. Professor Robert Reiner, a retired lecturer at the London School of Economics who I had the privilege to learn under, has spoken about the over-policing and under-protection of black young men for decades, and for decades very little has actually happened to improve their plight. They have been stigmatised by officers; they have experienced stop and search, often for suspected drugs. They have experienced inequality of strip searches that lacks adequate monitoring. They have experienced inequality of due care and concern while in a police cell. They are less likely to be given a warning and more likely to be given a caution. They are often released from custody in the early hours of the morning and have to walk miles to return home. They experience inequality of sentencing and often receive a harsh sentence.

Hon. Members may be wondering where I am getting this information from. Most of it comes from my constituents. The impact on children is especially heartbreaking. I have heard stories of boys as young as 12 from the black community being groomed and exploited by gangs to sell drugs and to carry knives. These boys may have been doing well at school and had dreams for their future. Once they are caught in the net of drug

dealers, it is almost impossible for them to leave without their lives being harmed. The stories I have been told are of older men offering to buy them trainers and give them money, and offering them a place to hang out in their homes. When they cannot be coerced, manipulated or bribed, they are often threatened: “We know where you live. We know your family, your sister.” It becomes sinister and then they are made a slave to crimes, but that is not their sin: they are powerless to their masters, and we must remember that they are children.

Where are the Government in this? Where is the policy? Where is the national campaign message? Where are the messages to children, parents, carers and teachers? Where is the advice and the support? Who is it safe for children to confide in, and where should they go without being stigmatised, criminalised or threatened by the very officials who are meant to protect them? The Government keep children who are exploited by gangs between a rock and a hard place, and that should not be so.

Like me, many will remember the “Grange Hill” campaign and song “Just Say No”. It was a national incentive, and what followed was people saying no to alcohol and drugs. I know that times have changed, but we need strong campaigns and to remember that young people—boys—are victims, not criminals. They, their families and carers and the public need the Government to step up and protect vulnerable young people, no matter the colour of their skin tone.

On the public health approach, addiction is an illness. How many of us choose to be ill? People have deep-rooted issues that they need help with. It has never made sense to criminalise people for harming themselves. Of course, everyone should face the consequences of their actions if they commit a violent crime, but criminalising people for drug possession or supply and applying punitive prison sentences are not the answer. Criminalising people for drugs is also an inadequate use of public funds. Instead of building prisons, we should be investing in youth centres, women’s centres, hospitals, community outreach centres, advice centres and preventive initiatives.

A focus on rehabilitation in countries such as Norway has resulted in them having among the lowest incarceration and reoffending numbers in the world. We need to learn from other countries that are doing better than us. We need a transformational policy, and it is time that we review and reform this Act.

2.27 pm

**Anne McLaughlin** (Glasgow North East) (SNP) [V]: I trained some 15 years ago as a primary school teacher in a very deprived part of what is now my constituency. I will not name it because people are rightly tired of their community being characterised by drugs alone. There is, however, a huge drug problem.

I was doing a placement with primary sevens, so they would have been about 11 years old, just getting to be gallus but still quite clearly innocent kids. It did not take long for me to become attached to every single one of them. Some of them were funny, some super smart, some very caring, others artistic or musical. They all had things they were good at and distinct personalities.

One day, during the lunch break, the wonderful woman who was their teacher told me that every single one of them had a live connection to drugs. I am changing names here, but she told me, “Connor’s brother died of

an overdose. Sharon's mum was murdered because she owed a dealer money. Peter's dad is on the run from the police. You can see Nicole's sister on the street most days asking people for money to feed her habit." Every single one of them had a live connection. The most heartbreaking thing to hear was that she believed that most of them would not be able to avoid that connection in their adult lives, because that was what she had seen over the previous 20 years.

That teacher had taught Nicole's sister and said that she was every bit as lovable as Nicole at that age. She pointed out to me that if I saw Nicole's sister on the street asking people for money to feed her habit and clearly off her face, I would possibly feel irritated or even angry with her, and I might even wonder why she did not just pull herself together. We have all been there—none of us is a saint, and we have all judged. But she pointed out to me, "I know you're very fond of wee Nicole, and if you saw her doing that, you wouldn't be angry—you'd be terrified for her. And I know, Anne, that you would want to scoop her up and find a way of helping her—anybody would." She explained that she had known Nicole's sister, now 20, since she was five years old, so when she saw her in the grip of her addiction, she saw that little girl.

Now, some 15 years after my teaching practice, I am acutely aware that this group of 11-year-olds will be in their mid-20s, and if that teacher was right, many of them will have some connection with drugs. Some will be dead. Some will be addicted. Some will have escaped, but some will be dealing and some will be in jail. I know—and the evidence, as we have heard from so many hon. Members today, tells us—that a very different legislative approach to drug use would undoubtedly have seen their lives turn out very differently. It is well documented that most addicts are self-medicating to deal with unresolved childhood trauma. I have given a number of examples of the trauma some of the children I taught experienced. When trauma is unresolved, it is very common for adults to respond to triggers as their five, seven, 10 or 12-year-old selves.

I ask everyone listening to think about that and think about what that teacher taught me that day—that we should not abandon a child just because their body takes on an adult form. Rather than turn our backs, lock them up and ostracise them, we should recognise drug abuse and addiction as an illness and as a public health matter—now a public health emergency. What we should be doing, as that wonderful teacher was sure I would do, and was sure anyone would do with any child in trouble, is scooping them up to get them to a place of safety and help them to recover from their illness, as we do with every single other illness.

We have heard the evidence today—so much evidence—that the public health approach works. It is better for drug users, of course, but if I cannot convince the Government to care about that, then surely the evidence that it is better for our health services, our economy and our justice system will encourage them to think again and make this a public health matter rather than a criminal justice matter.

2.31 pm

**Allan Dorans** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): The United Kingdom Government must ultimately commit to adopting the evidence-based solutions to drug use. This

means no longer rejecting evidence-based recommendations and ignoring evidence that shows that the current approach is simply not working.

Let me briefly provide the House with my personal experience of being a frontline police officer and a detective in London during the 1970s and 1980s. At the time, the Misuse of Drugs Act was well established as the Government's preferred method of dealing with drug use, on the basis that people would not use or be found in possession of controlled drugs for fear of arrest and prosecution. The Government's solution was to arrest their way out of the problem by criminalising every aspect of illegal drug supply and possession. Some of the provisions in the Act were very successful in introducing specific offences making involvement in the production or supply of drugs punishable with long prison sentences. It is right that those concerned with the supply of drugs continue to face these increased penalties.

However, where the Government got it wrong at that time was in criminalising the possession of even the smallest amount of controlled drugs, particularly cannabis. The police's prescribed method of dealing with possession of cannabis was the same as for drivers who provided a positive breath test for alcohol: a zero-tolerance approach with absolutely no discretion. When someone was stopped and searched, for whatever reason, and cannabis was found, irrespective of the quantity, they were immediately arrested. The suspected drugs were then analysed by a scientist to provide legal proof that the substance was in fact cannabis. The arrested person would be taken to a police station and bailed to return at a later date when they would be formally charged with possession of cannabis, their fingerprints and photographs would be taken, and they would be bailed to attend court. That was in the days before the Crown Prosecution Service when the arresting officer prosecuted every single individual case personally, requiring the officer to attend court. The defendant invariably pleaded guilty and received a fine of probably no more than £30. This happened in hundreds of cases every week and remained the procedure for many years. All that for a few grams of cannabis for personal use: on reflection, what a complete and utter waste of everyone's time, police and court resources, and taxpayers' money. It benefited absolutely no one.

Enforcement of this legislation for possession of cannabis undoubtedly created serious tensions and distrust among the police and communities and led to increased racial tension. It continues to do so to this very day. Another serious consequence of this was that tens of thousands of people—disproportionately young black men, already facing barriers to employment—would receive a criminal record and be deprived of the opportunity to improve their life chances by being disqualified from ever entering certain professions.

Drug misuse must be treated as a public health issue and people who use drugs should be helped, not just punished. Advice, support and education should be provided in the same way as they are for other health issues, including alcohol and tobacco. The Misuse of Drugs Act criminalised and failed millions of people, often the most disadvantaged in our society. I call upon the Government to order a review of the law and produce and introduce an evidence-based drugs policy that is founded on the principle of a multi-agency, public health approach, rather than a criminal justice approach. The success of such an approach has been

[Allan Dorans]

demonstrated by the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit, established in 2005, which has since reduced the number of homicides in Scotland from 137 to 64 last year. That policy, procedure and strategy works. If the Government are not minded to adopt such an approach, the responsibility for drugs policy must be devolved to the Scottish Parliament so that we are no longer bound by this discredited legislation and approach.

2.36 pm

**Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD) [V]: I am relieved to be able to speak in this powerful, emotive debate today but I am also very angry that, half a century on, this country is still somehow clinging to an Act that has signally failed in its intention. It has failed more than one generation and it is time that we listened to the voices raised against it, including the families appealing for help.

I am sure beyond any possible doubt that when the Misuse of Drugs Act was originally debated in this place, the genuine belief was that it was needed to tackle a problem that had already taken lives, destroyed families and promoted crime and antisocial behaviour across the country. However, can anyone now be in any doubt that the Act and the war on drugs that it epitomises have failed? If criminal convictions were the measure, we might be able to argue for its success. There have been more than 1.8 million convictions under the Act since 1971, but those convictions are actually also another indication of failure—failure to change the fact that the illegal drugs trade has been a driving force in crime in this country.

If we look at the real impact in terms of lives destroyed and lost, it is clear that the belief in the Act was, although well intentioned, misplaced. If we look just at Scotland, in 1969, there were 244 drug deaths. In 2019, that figure was almost 1,300, but those are just numbers, and there are so many more. Heroin misuse has risen twenty-fivefold. The UK drug-related death rate is five times the EU average. Scotland's drug-related death rate is more than 15 times the EU average. However, this is about so much more than statistics. It is about every life lost and family left desolate by the death of a loved one. It is about lives stamped out amidst an epidemic that is destroying and has destroyed futures every day for the past 50 years, and yet, somehow seems to go unnoticed.

My constituency is not immune from the problem. None of our constituencies, none of our communities and no family can be sure that they are safe from it. In response to the point that was made about the role of families, I know parents who have worked hard to educate their children, spend time with them, talk about drugs, provide for them and create a good, stable family life for them, but that could not protect them. Yes, drug problems can be more prevalent in areas of deprivation—we know that—but not exclusively. We are all vulnerable. Recently, a mother in Scotland allowed the BBC to film the funeral of her son who died of an overdose of street Valium. The heartbreak was difficult to watch. His mother wanted his story to serve as a warning to others, to remind politicians of the grief caused by our common failure to tackle successfully the problem of drugs on our streets. She let us witness it.

What makes that failure worse is that there are examples close at hand of how it can be tackled. Portugal, for example, had one of the worst problems in Europe. In 1999, one in every 100 people there had a problematic drug addiction, and the country's HIV rate was the highest in the EU. Then, in 2001, it completely changed tack from criminalisation to decriminalisation. Now, if someone is caught with a personal supply, they receive a warning or a fine, or they are referred to a multidisciplinary team of doctors, lawyers and social workers. Rates of overdose deaths and drug-related crime have plummeted, as has the HIV rate.

It is clear what we need to do. Where prohibition has failed for 50 years, control and regulation can work. We need education, social action, health spending and projects designed to help, and I firmly believe we need to look at where the decriminalisation and regulation of drugs, specifically cannabis, have worked. More than 25 countries have decriminalised possession of some or all drugs. Cannabis has already been legalised and regulated for adult non-medical use in Canada, Uruguay and 15 US states. Decriminalisation is supported by the World Health Organisation.

To take away the power that control of drugs has given the criminal world, and to break the stranglehold of the gangs, we should reform, regulate and license; we should offer medical treatment to those found in possession rather than criminalise them; and we should recognise that this is a public health and economic problem. We have tried one way for 50 years, but it has failed. It has failed families up and down this country, and it is time we tried another way, a better way.

2.41 pm

**Angela Crawley** (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP) [V]: The Misuse of Drugs Act has damaged individuals, families and communities and entrenched social injustice. The war on drugs has been lost. This Government have failed, and there is nowhere with more evidence of the problems of criminalisation than here in Scotland, when we consider the stark number of drug-related deaths. Rather than adopting a public health approach, this Government ignore that possibility. They have failed on an unprecedented scale. In Scotland, this is a public health emergency, and it must be treated as such. This Government have an opportunity, on the 50th anniversary of the legislation, to consider whether the Act is still fit for purpose.

The UK Government wish to take a hard line on this issue, but that simply is not working. The introduction of safe consumption facilities to reduce public harm is one solution, but they have blocked reform at every turn. The Government are entrenching the problem by refusing to amend or repeal this outdated legislation, and the Scottish Government, who wish to fall in with international best practice by decriminalising the use of drugs and introducing safe consumption rooms, are unable to do so. In comparison, Portugal ended the criminalisation of drug use 20 years ago. Since then, drug-related deaths have fallen and remained below the EU average, the number of drug offenders in prison has more than halved and the number of drug-injection-related HIV diagnoses has fallen dramatically.

Does the Minister agree that we should aim for a similar outcome in the UK? If he does, when will he take action to make that happen? The UK Government

must now allow the Scottish Government to implement a range of public health-focused responses, including the introduction of supervised drug consumption facilities, or devolve the power to do so to the Scottish Parliament. We are facing a public health emergency. This Act continues to fail too many families, and too many have lost loved ones. We can change this, and we must change this. If this Union is truly strong, surely it can withstand this. It can take a pragmatic approach and it can act. If this Government will not act, they must devolve the power to Scotland to take that action. Inaction is not a solution, and their compliance and ignorance are complicit in the problem. Drug-related deaths are real. These are not just figures; they are real people, real families and real communities, and they need real action.

2.43 pm

**Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba) [V]: I am really encouraged by the voices across the UK and across the Chamber, including those of the hon. Members for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) and for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and the compelling contribution from my colleague in the Alba party, my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill).

I also pay tribute to frontline workers in my Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath constituency: Pauline Buchan, Kelly Rodgers and their team at the Kirkcaldy Cottage Family Centre and Dave Dempster and team at ADAPT. They are dealing with this problem head on. As a result of the current crisis in Scotland, I have spoken to them recently and will continue to meet them and give them all my support. The challenge that they face is a frightening number of drug deaths. In 2019, 1,264 drug deaths occurred in Scotland. Behind each number is a person with hopes and dreams. Not one of them dreamed of becoming addicted to drugs or having a criminal record; it happened in the context of the prohibition under the 1971 Act. It is unacceptable and change is essential.

To become a drug user is not a rational choice. The idea put forward by Nancy Reagan—the ineffective “Just say no to drugs” soundbite—sounds easy, but often it involves just saying no to poverty, just saying no to abuse, just saying no to neglect and deprivation, just saying no to hopelessness, just saying no to joblessness and just saying no to childhood trauma. “Just say no” serves only to demonise and stigmatise, criminalising and othering the most vulnerable in our society and communities—addict, dopehead, junkie, waster, stoner, user—and just like poverty this is not an accident.

Users are blamed for their substance use, their social circumstances and the failure of the scant treatment schemes available to them. Substance misuse is undoubtedly associated with deprivation and unemployment, and users are blamed for the lack of opportunity and shamed for their failure to meet neoliberal notions of a productive citizen. The pejorative of strivers versus skivers, as used by Mr Cameron, really illustrates that sentiment. All the while, the structural causes of substance misuse and inequality are ignored and dismissed, reinforcing that stigma. Demonising and criminalising vulnerable people serves only to misdirect the public from the abject failure of drug and social health policy.

Let me tell the House briefly about a case in my constituency of a person with deep childhood trauma who became involved in drug misuse. They were supported by services in my constituency to overcome that challenge, go to university and secure a business degree, but every opportunity that they tried to secure for a new future was rejected because of their background and the criminality, all related to drugs. They have since returned to drug use. That is absolutely heartbreaking. Current drug policies are criminalising people who have already suffered greatly, exacerbating that deep trauma.

The 1971 Act, and the continuation of prohibition, serves only to lock some of the most vulnerable people in a cycle of hopelessness. Release, the national centre of expertise on drugs and drug law in the UK, has rightly characterised the Misuse of Drugs Act as “50 years of failure”. Tinkering around the edges of drug legislation simply will not do. Dependency is a health issue, but it is not the core problem; it is but a symptom of iniquitous social policy and the state’s indifference to grinding poverty. The money spent on criminalising our most vulnerable would be much better spent and more effective if it were redirected to public health and social policy initiatives.

It is essential to devolve to the Scottish Government every lever required to adopt a public health approach. The failure to do so is a dreadful dereliction of duty. Control over drug policy must urgently be reviewed. As a minimum, I suggest that the devolution of all policy to Scotland is essential to help us to save lives.

2.48 pm

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): In a sense, it is a real pleasure to take part in this debate, as has been said, principally because it has been a terrific one with some fantastic contributions from all parts of the House. I commend the hon. Members for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) for securing this debate on an incredibly important topic, and for their persistent pursuit of a policy-based approach to the subject. I could offer the same commendation to lots of Members in the Chamber, including hon. Friends.

In other ways, I very much regret having to take part in this debate. First, because, as other Members have said, I do not think it should be home affairs or policing spokespersons speaking today; it should be health spokespersons and we should be debating this issue absolutely through the prism of public health, not criminal justice. Secondly, like every hon. Member in this debate, I wish that we did not have to be here because drugs had been suppressed or eliminated a long time ago, but clearly we are as far away from that being a reality as we ever have been. That is fundamentally why Members are pushing for reform. There is no sign of significant change under the current regime.

Hon. Members have illustrated eloquently that this is a crisis, in terms of scale and the impact that it is having on individuals. Addressing this crisis will absolutely require the use of the full range of tools at the disposal of Governments: measures to address poverty and inequality; education; prevention; tackling stigma; treatment; harm reduction; recovery; mental health; housing; and, of course, law enforcement and criminal justice too—every arm of government must be involved.

[Stuart C. McDonald]

We have debated and will continue to debate all the different policy responses, but today the focus is on the Misuse of Drugs Act at 50, the legislation that underpins and, I am afraid, casts a shadow over everything else we do to combat drugs. I share the analysis of the vast majority of hon. Members who have spoken that, in the 50 years since it was passed, the evolution and, sadly, the growth of the drugs trade has been extraordinary, as has been our understanding of it, but our legislation has tragically failed to move on in response. Indeed, many would argue that it was the wrong response at the outset, as the hon. Member for Reigate eloquently said.

**Dr Mullan:** If the central analysis is that the legislation is the cause of the problem, and the legislation is exactly the same in Scotland as in England, how does that account for the fact that the problem in Scotland, on some metrics, is more than twice as bad?

**Stuart C. McDonald:** Two things. Yes, the metrics in Scotland are very bad. The metrics for the whole United Kingdom are terribly bad—[*Interruption.*] Some metrics; I am not sure which particular metrics the hon. Member is referring to. However, that is not the point. With respect, I also do not think the point is to ask, “What is the cause?” We could say that, in some ways, the Act has caused all sorts of harms, but it is beyond dispute that it has failed to fix the problem. We are all calling for an evidence-based debate on whether we can do better, and whether different legislative approaches can do better. I cannot really see how Government Members can say that this is as good as it gets. Yes, there are other things that both Governments—all Governments—are doing, but if this is as good as it gets, we are a hopeless bunch. I think we should try to provide some hope to our constituents. That is what we are trying to do today. This debate should not really be about whether reform is needed but should rather be an evidence-based debate about the nature of that reform and how far we should go. I think even Government Members think changes can be made. Some of us will want to go much further, which I will come to right now.

There is an abundance of evidence on not only the need for reform but what sort of reforms work, coming from health and medical experts; law enforcement, as we heard; those working on the frontline with those with addiction; and those who have experienced addictions directly. International best practice can be a guide as well. That is why report after report, including reports from cross-party Committees of this House, have all called for reform. I will focus on three brief recommendations that both the Health and Social Care Committee and the Scottish Affairs Committee flagged up.

First—as I said, so I do not need to expand on it anymore—this policy area should be led by the Health and Social Care Department, not the Home Office. Secondly, both Committees said that, at the very least, we need to pilot and look at the use of overdose prevention facilities or drug consumption rooms. We heard from numerous hon. Members how these have been shown to save lives and reduce harm. They assist in ensuring that those who most need it can access support and treatment, and they protect the public from antisocial and dangerous public injection.

Thirdly, both of those cross-party Committees said that there should at least be a consultation on decriminalisation of possession. The SNP believes that there is already enough evidence for that, and we acknowledge that international evidence shows that that leads to less problematic drug use and less harm as a result, and less waste of police and justice resources. Let us at least look at it and review that.

I absolutely appreciate that the Government will not announce today that they will rip up the Misuse of Drugs Act and start again. However, knowing that the Government will not do that, and knowing that they are conservative and cautious about the possibility of reform, they surely to goodness must at least trial and research some of these possible new approaches. If they do not want to do that, they should devolve powers so that we can try—to Scotland, but also to other parts of the UK willing to pilot a new approach. As has been said, we will all benefit from what we learn as a result; whether it is a success or a failure, let us try. Instead of being scared of public opinion, test it. Put it to a citizens assembly and build consensus. I believe that the more folk understand about this issue, the more they see the need for reform. If nothing else, people see that it is their brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, sons and daughters who the Government are criminalising rather than helping.

Finally, I have one or two nuts-and-bolts questions that I would be keen for the Minister to answer. First, as has already been asked, will he respond positively to the request for a four nations drugs meeting, which could hopefully include discussion of drugs overdose prevention facilities? Can he update the House on the issue of pill press regulation? What is his latest position on naloxone and widening distribution? Will he also look at drug checking facilities and allowing that approach to be trialled? Let us work constructively, follow the evidence and leave no option unexplored as we seek to tackle this crisis. That should include the possibility of radical reform of drugs legislation.

3 pm

**Conor McGinn** (St Helens North) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to follow the SNP spokesperson. Before I begin, in the last hour, the Manchester bombing inquiry has published its first report. While the findings no doubt will be debated, I think it is right and appropriate that we send our sympathy and thoughts today from this House to the families and those who are bereaved, and indeed to the city of Manchester.

It is fitting that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), who is such a tenacious campaigner on the issues that we have discussed today, secured this debate, along with the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt). I congratulate them and all Members who have spoken in this afternoon’s thought-provoking and impassioned debate. The perspectives that we have heard—from those who have worked in the NHS or the police, and from colleagues with a long-standing interest in this area—have been hugely beneficial.

We know that drugs, and the wider causes and effects, are a huge issue for our country. We know that the restless grip of drug abuse and substance addiction has a shattering and pervasive impact on people right across this country, in every community. It not only causes desperation for individuals and families alike, but affects the very fabric of our communities and wider society.

We know that the harms resulting from illegal drug use and the tragedy of drug-related deaths in this country have, I think it is right to say, been on a disturbing trajectory for some time. As has been mentioned, in 2019, there were nearly 4,500 drug-related deaths in England and Wales alone—the highest level since records began. That represents a shocking 52% increase over the last decade. The total cost to society of illegal drugs, including drug-related crime and social harm, is estimated to be £20 billion, and the UK has one of the highest drug-related death rates in Europe. It is clear, then, that we as a country are not where we would want to be, or indeed should be.

While this is admittedly a profoundly complex area, I am duty bound and obliged to say that the Government's current strategy is failing badly. Whether on the key metrics of reducing harm to those vulnerable to drug addiction and those exploited in the drug trade, of providing adequate education and awareness of the associated dangers, or of backing our police with the tools needed to tackle the serious violence and crime that proliferates from drugs, the Government have fallen short. They failed to get a grip on the use, prevention and treatment of harmful class A narcotics, the use of which was on a downward trend between 2009 and 2013, but has since continued upwards.

Even the Minister's own Department admitted that it was too slow to notice the rising levels of harmful substances such as crack cocaine back in 2014. The truth is that it has been playing catch-up since, because despite drug use and violence rising, we have had debilitating cuts, including underfunding of local government budgets and national services, and of course systemic police budget cuts. Frankly, that has eroded the foundations on which any credible comprehensive treatment or prevention strategy needs to thrive.

Our young people are being let down as well. We know that more of them are being groomed into violence that is fuelled by drugs—it was in a leaked research document that, again, the Minister's own Department authored. Yet the Government have continued to gut young people's services, with spending cut by 73%, 900 youth centres closing and 4,500 youth worker jobs being cut. How can the Minister justify that? The Government are nowhere near to matching the scale of the action needed.

Our focus has to be on protecting the public, and that means reducing harm—harm to users and harms to the community—and, similarly, tackling the insidious crime that underpins it. We recognise that a wide and comprehensive response is needed to reflect the diverse, complex arenas over which the issues surrounding drug use and supply intersect, but it means: effective prevention and early intervention measures; properly resourced education programmes; decent housing; as well as the tackling of potent social drivers of drugs abuse, such as poverty. It also means building and supporting substantive health services for vulnerable people based on dignity, respect and clinical need. We also need a strong and robust enforcement policy, and that has to be critical to the approach that we take.

We need to do more to disrupt and cut off the wider factors of drugs and serious and organised crime to prevent exploitation, grooming and criminalisation, especially with regard to young people and the scourge of county lines. The scale of that challenge is grave, and I do not underestimate it, to be fair to the Minister.

There are approximately 600 county gangs operating in the UK. The Children's Commissioner estimates that 27,000 young people in this country identify as gang members. That is an absolutely shocking and appalling figure. Murders where the victims are aged 16 to 24 are growing, and the figure has almost doubled in the past five years.

If we are serious about tackling this issue, we need to ensure that the police and their partners are given the tools they need to carry out their work and that they have the services required to support that. We know that deep cuts have inevitably affected the police's priorities and overall operational capacity to tackle this issue, but despite that, the work that is being done has yielded impressive results. I pay tribute to the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for county lines, Deputy Assistant Commissioner Graham McNulty, and Lynne Owens, director general of the NCA. Their teams across the country have pursued a relentless campaign against these criminals, often putting themselves in harm's way.

Just a few weeks ago, we saw a co-ordinated crackdown on county lines leading to more than 1,000 arrests, as well as the seizure of nearly 300 weapons and hundreds of kilograms of illicit substances from criminals. Some 80 drug-dealing lines vital to the operation of the network were identified. That is great work, and we need to boost those efforts and ensure that officers can be free to get on with their jobs effectively. The police are not the problem; the criminals are the problem, and I urge all colleagues right across the House to remember that in any of the discussions that we have.

This has been a constructive debate. It is right that we continue to monitor the drivers and effects of drug use on our country and consider evidence-based solutions. It is clear to me that we need a fuller, more holistic and comprehensive approach to what is a complex issue, but one that is also urgent, because of the effect it is having on our communities, as we have heard today. The challenge is great, and I will work where I can with the Government to support them in anything we can do to address it. Only then can we ensure that people are protected and that we reduce the devastating harm that comes from drug use and the trap of addiction.

3.2 pm

**The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse):**

I thank the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) for calling this important debate. Indeed, I am grateful to Members from all parts of the House for their commitment and passion in what has been, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) rightly pointed out, an interesting and thought-provoking debate.

There are obviously a wide range of views on the best way to tackle drugs and the harms they cause, and I remain open to listening to those views to ensure that our approach is both balanced and evidence-based. I recognise the importance of a balanced approach with tough enforcement against the right people in the right way, alongside treatment and recovery support for those dependent on drugs.

On the issue of drug controls, I think it is important that we come at it from the perspective of what keeps the public safe while enabling healthcare and legitimate

[*Kit Malthouse*]

business and research to flourish. Controls on harmful drugs continue to be adjusted in the light of new evidence and information, including, for example, the changes over recent years to allow specialist clinicians to prescribe, where appropriate, cannabis-based products for medicinal use.

Members should make no mistake: drug misuse has a profound and tragic consequence that is felt right across society, and that can occur even in the official and regulated sector, as we have seen sadly in the United States with the opioid crisis. It devastates lives, communities and neighbourhoods, with the most deprived areas facing the highest prevalence of drug-driven crime and health harms.

The Government recognise that this problem demands a whole system, cross-Government approach, and that is exactly what we are pursuing. The Home Office is working extremely closely with partners, including law enforcement, the Department of Health and Social Care, Public Health England and others right across Government. Our activity in this area of policy is necessarily broad, but there are two key elements of the strategy that I would like to emphasise: first, the use of targeted enforcement to restrict supply; and, secondly, our focus on providing truly effective treatment and recovery services. This approach responds to the evolving threats and challenges that continue to emerge from drug misuse, including changing drugs markets, changing patterns of use, and an ageing and more complex group of people who need wide-ranging support to recover.

**Grahame Morris:** On that point, is the Minister willing to commit to working with police and crime commissioners to try to ensure that in all force areas there is a treatment-first approach to offenders with a history of substance misuse?

**Kit Malthouse:** I do not have to commit, because that is exactly what we are already doing in five parts of the country. As the hon. Gentleman may know, I instituted a series of projects going by the acronym ADDER—addiction, diversion, disruption, enforcement and recovery—in five areas of the country to build a new modus operandi on drugs, bringing police and crime commissioners and enforcement alongside health, local authority, housing and other therapeutic providers to see if we can shift the numbers in Blackpool, Hastings, Middlesbrough, Norwich and Swansea Bay.

If we are to refine and improve our response, we must have a comprehensive picture of what is happening on the ground. That is why part one of Dame Carol Black's review on drugs—a number of Members mentioned it; its findings were published in February last year—was such a valuable and insightful contribution to our understanding of the problem. The report underlined the impact of the so-called county lines criminal business model, where illegal drugs are transported from urban areas to be sold in smaller towns and villages. That is one of the most disturbing and pernicious forms of criminality to emerge in our country in recent years, as the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington mentioned. We are making significant progress, which I will talk about shortly.

In July last year, the Department of Health and Social Care commissioned part two of Dame Carol Black's review on drugs, focusing on prevention, treatment

and recovery. It will build on Dame Carol's work to ensure vulnerable people with substance misuse problems get the support they need to recover and turn their lives around. It will look at treatment in the community and in prison, and how treatment services work with wider services that enable a person with drug dependency to achieve and sustain recovery, including mental health, housing, employment and the criminal justice system.

In 2019, the Government appointed Dr Ed Day as the Government's recovery champion to provide national leadership around key aspects of the drug recovery agenda and to advise the Government on where improvements can be made. His first annual report was published in January. When I have spoken to Dr Day he has talked passionately about the importance of recovery and the work he is doing with a huge number of fantastic advocates in the sector, including people with lived experience of drug misuse who are celebrating being in recovery. It is very motivating to hear their stories and the extent to which recovery can provide hope and help people to turn their lives around.

We also continue to work closely with the devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to ensure drug misuse is tackled as a UK-wide problem. Following the UK drug summit, which I called in Glasgow in February last year, the Minister for public health and I jointly hosted a meeting in September, bringing together academic experts and Government Ministers from across the home nations of the UK to discuss topics such as drug-related deaths, treatment and recovery services, and the impact of the pandemic on illegal drug taking. The Government remain committed to tackling the harms caused by drug misuse on a cross-UK basis and I will, I am happy to confirm, be holding another such meeting in the autumn for all the home nations to discuss these matters further.

**Rachael Maskell:** I welcome that the Minister is talking about the impact of harm. What is his assessment of the harm-reduction model, particularly that deployed in Portugal?

**Kit Malthouse:** I am just coming on to what we are doing about harm reduction. As I said in my opening remarks, I think that should be at the forefront of our mind. Opinions may differ across the House on the balance between enforcement, and treatment and recovery, in the mix of dealing with this pernicious social problem. My view is that they have to be balanced. I am not sure that experiences around the world on decriminalisation, for example, necessarily give us quite the silver bullet that Members have suggested, but I will come on to that in a minute.

In January this year, we announced £148 million of new investment to cut crime and protect people from harms associated with illegal drugs: £80 million for drug treatment services, the biggest rise in funding for 15 years; £28 million for the ADDER projects across the UK that I have already outlined, building a new modus operandi for tackling drugs and creating a foundation from which I hope we will expand; and £40 million to tackle drug supply and county lines. As the hon. Member for St Helens North illustrated, we are surging our activity against those awful groups, focusing on them as businesses as much as groups of criminals, and we are seeing significant success.

Although some have expressed the opinion during the debate that enforcement does not work, I would point out that our new approach—the new tactics that we have agreed with the police—is resulting in significant results. In Norfolk, for example, 16 months ago there were over 100 county lines; that is now down to under 20. Bangor in north Wales was declared county lines free, along with Swale and Tonbridge. Kent has halved the number of county lines moving drugs into that part of the world. There is a lot that we have done: over 780 lines closed; 5,100 arrests; £2.9 million of cash seized; and, importantly, 1,200 vulnerable young people safeguarded. That funding demonstrates our commitment in this area and the effect that we can have when we focus.

If I may crave your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to deal with one or two particular issues that have been raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate and I have been in ongoing correspondence and conversation about the impact of the legislation on research and the business that may come from it, and he raised that during his speech. As he will know, there are clinical trials already under way into the use of the compound psilocybin, and I am hopeful that they will produce positive results. If they do—if there is a proven clinical and medical use—then obviously, as we have in the past, we will have to adapt to that as we go. I have commissioned the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs to look more widely at barriers placed in the way of clinical research in all sorts of areas of narcotic and other drugs, to ensure that we are getting the balance right to enable that legitimate form of research, and the health benefits that may come from it, to be pursued.

My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), in a very thoughtful speech, raised the issue of cannabis. There have been quite a lot of calls for legalisation of cannabis. I point him to the Canadian experience. As he rightly identified, rather than legalisation producing a reduction in the illegal sector or its elimination, that business, like any other, has adapted to competition, producing a stronger product more cheaply, provided more conveniently, and it still exists in Canada. Obviously, we will be monitoring closely Canada's experience and those of other areas that have legalised. However, as was pointed out, in Amsterdam, where consumption has been liberal, shall we say, for some time, I am not convinced that criminal gangs are not still pursuing their trade.

We have had a strong showing from the various factions of Scottish nationalism this afternoon, which is no surprise given the truly appalling number of drugs deaths that Scotland has seen over the past few years. I am not a man moved to anger very often, but I found my blood boiling at being accused of intransigence, dereliction of duty and ignorance when I literally went to Scotland 18 months ago to beg the Scottish Government to do something about this issue and to spend more money on health. The whole point of my immediately starting to convene a four nations drugs summit when I came into this job was to focus on the real tragedy—the scandal, the emergency—that there was in Scotland.

I was amazed that the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) had the gall to say that she imagines the number of people who might have been

saved if the UK Government's actions had been different, given the number that could have been saved if the SNP had not sat on its hands for 10 years while the numbers mounted. Only a looming election saw it step up to its responsibility. I ask it, please, to look to the log in its own eye before it looks to those in others'.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), who has unique experience in and perspective on this as both a former police officer and a doctor, showed us the truth of this very complex situation, which is that there is no silver bullet. This is a complex area where Government have a duty to listen, to look at the evidence and to consider what can be done both on enforcement and on public health to make sure that we try to minimise, reduce or remove this most pernicious of social evils from the areas of our society that are benighted by it.

3.15 pm

**Jeff Smith:** I thank the Minister for his response—I am pleased that he is open to listening on this issue—and my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), and the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), for their contributions, although I agree with the SNP spokesperson that it is regrettable that those three individuals, rather than health representatives, should be responding to a debate on drug policy.

We await the second report of the Carol Black review. The first report set out the very significant problems very well. However, the Government were very clear, in the remit she was given, that she is not able to look at legislative change, and I think that it is regrettable. I agree actually with the Minister that there is no silver bullet. This is a complex issue, and all I have been saying really, and all that most people have been saying, is: let us look at the evidence, let us review the Act and let us see if it is still fit for purpose. I personally do not think that is too much to ask.

This is the first time we have had a debate on drug policy in this Chamber since 2017, which is a shame because it is an issue in many—probably most—of our constituencies. As politicians, we really need to address this issue thoughtfully and with careful consideration to find the right way forward. I hope it is not another four years before we discuss this issue and look at the best way forward by looking at the evidence of how we reduce harm to our communities.

Finally, I thank all the speakers who have taken part in the debate today and, again, the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the time.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.

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

3.17 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative

*[Relevant documents: Seventh Report of the International Development Committee of Session 2019-21, Progress on tackling the sexual exploitation and abuse of aid beneficiaries, HC 605, and the Government response, HC 1332. Eighth Report of the International Development Committee of Session 2019-21, The humanitarian situation in Tigray, HC 1289.]*

3.21 pm

**Anthony Mangnall** (Totnes) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK's Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative and the G7.

May I start by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for providing me with the opportunity to raise the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative—otherwise known as PSVI—and the G7 on the Floor of the House today? I promise I will stop pestering the Committee for at least a couple of days.

I stand before the House as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative. I am delighted to see some members of the APPG here, as well as the Chair of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who has been a stalwart supporter of this initiative. Her being here today is a reflection of the importance of the International Development Committee being maintained, sustained, and continuing to scrutinise our aid and development programmes around the world.

I have been fortunate to have worked with the founding members of the PSVI—Baroness Helic, Lord Hague and Chloe Dalton—and to have seen the evolution and success of that initiative over the last nine years, so I feel that I am quite well placed to be able to debate why it is important and why it cannot be allowed to fail.

Conflicts, both old and new, are often viewed by the loss of life on the battlefield, the death and casualty lists, the land conquered, the treasures plundered, and the armies and arms deployed. But in reality, conflict is also about those on the sidelines: the innocent bystanders, the women, the children—those who bear the brunt of the conflict but receive little attention, recognition, support or, indeed, justice. It is my hope that during the course of this debate, I can remind the House and the Government about the purposes and objectives of PSVI, and reignite our global leadership on this issue.

Now more than ever, we have not only the moral duty to act, but an international landscape that is calling for action. After all, in a digitalised world, we are now greeted daily with recordings, news articles and accounts of systematic conflict-related sexual violence. Far from the issue diminishing, it is becoming more acute. Yet the objectives of PSVI have always been clear: to end the culture of impunity for perpetrators; to provide support for survivors; and to document crimes of sexual violence in conflict. Those aims stood prominently at the initiative's inception and they hold true today.

In 2012, the collaboration between a Bosnian refugee, a Yorkshireman and a Hollywood film star resulted in not only the UK Government-led initiative, but a seismic collective collaboration from the international community to address this issue. Speaking in the Foreign Office, the then Foreign Secretary Lord Hague spoke of the need for a

“UK team of experts devoted to combating and preventing sexual violence in armed conflict.”

This short notice overseas deployment team was directed towards gathering evidence and testimony in the hope of supporting investigations and prosecutions. It used the expertise of doctors, lawyers, police, psychologists and forensic specialists. That team of experts was drawn down so as to help to protect victims, as well as support international organisations, lead training operations and develop laws and capabilities—all with a view to shattering the culture of impunity, ending rape as a weapon of war, bringing perpetrators to justice and raising awareness.

In the early years up to 2015, the UK deployed its team of experts no fewer than 65 times, to countries including Kosovo, Bosnia, Turkey, Mali and Kenya. These operations proved useful in gaining insight and experience and revealed the systematic use of rape and sexual violence in conflict areas around the world. The missions demonstrated not just that we were right to create such an initiative, but that there was a genuine need and requirement for action, so in 2014 the UK hosted the first ever global summit to end sexual violence in conflict, attracting 1,700 delegates from around the world and bringing together survivors, experts and Governments, all with the aim of addressing rape as a weapon of war. I believe there are plans for a further conference in due course; I hope the Minister might explain and reveal them.

Under UK leadership, we brought together 156 countries at the UN to denounce the use of rape as a weapon of war through the UN declaration of commitment to end sexual violence in conflict. The early success of that initiative was readily apparent: teams of experts were being deployed; the UK political leadership was ever present; the international community was full square behind the resolutions of the day; and countries were supporting PSVI through their own domestic and international training programmes. The action was tangible, the results were measurable and the optimism was infectious.

Unfortunately, as is so often the case, a change of Ministers and Governments saw PSVI pushed down the agenda. The high funding levels of 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016 were steadily reduced. The PSVI team was amalgamated into different sections of the now Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office as opposed to remaining as a stand-alone body. The levels of deployment were scaled back: from 2016 to 2020 they were reduced by almost 50%, despite the number of conflicts and the documentation of sexual violence increasing over that period. Today, the international community is no more at peace than it was nine years ago, so it is essential to fulfil our obligations to PSVI.

**Gareth Davies** (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): The Administration in the United States changed recently; what is my hon. Friend's assessment of that change of Administration? Does he see any greater willingness from the Biden Administration to help his cause?

**Anthony Mangnall:** I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent intervention. We now have a US President who has form in addressing gender-based violence and preventing sexual violence in conflict. With America resurgent and talking about multilateralism, that should be the hook on which we can hang our coat to ensure that initiatives such as PSVI are able to flourish over the coming years.

In Ethiopia, widespread sexual violence against the people of Tigray is ongoing. On Monday, I asked the Minister whether we would be deploying our PSVI team of experts to that area; I hope he might be able to answer when he responds to the debate. In Bangladesh, the Rohingyas are gathered in refugee camps and are detailing the appalling acts of sexual violence conducted against them in Myanmar. In Nigeria, the terrorist organisation Boko Haram kidnaps girls and forces them into marriage, as well as subjecting them to acts of sexual violence. In Iraq, we are only just beginning to learn about the true extent of sexual violence committed by ISIS.

Last year, the UN predicted that there would be 31 million more cases of sexual violence in conflict during the pandemic alone, and 2 million more cases of female genital mutilation. This crisis has been ongoing and must be addressed. The list goes on and on, yet the one common thread among all instances is that the perpetrators of these crimes will, in all likelihood, escape justice. Tackling rape in war, providing justice and supporting survivors—all are integral to peace negotiations, conflict resolution and helping communities and countries to recover and rebuild after conflicts.

The success of the weekend past shows that the Government can convene global leaders, reach international agreements and strike new trade deals—all of which I consider to be part of global Britain's agenda. The pandemic has reasserted the need for the international community to work together, not just to defeat covid but to address the major global challenges that humanity faces. From climate change to girls' education to tackling conflict-related sexual violence, the only resolution to these issues will arrive through international agreement and co-operation and designated leadership and action. The UK has shown that leadership in previous years and can do so again. It was particularly welcome that at the summit and in our own communiqué we committed to consider how best to strengthen international architecture for conflict-related sexual violence. However, I might go further and ask whether the Government will consider adopting the suggestion of the G7's own gender equality advisory council, which called for an international convention to eliminate the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, with clear consequences for perpetrators and for Governments who fail to act.

Given our own G7 communiqué calling for the strengthening of international architecture for conflict-related sexual violence, I have the following, I hope helpful, suggestions. First, a new international body should be created in the international community to collect and preserve evidence of conflict-related sexual violence and help bring perpetrators to justice. Providing support for survivors and delivering justice are necessities that cannot be overlooked. After all, it is not just the absence of conflict that denotes peace, but the presence of justice.

Secondly, responsibility for the PSVI must be restored to the Foreign Secretary. At this point, I would like to apologise to Lord Ahmad, because I am trying to take a job away from him. He has done a sterling job in promoting the Murad code and the faith leadership declaration, but top-level leadership is needed on this issue. It must be viewed not as a supplementary matter but as an integral part of the Government's agenda, and that is where it must be firmly placed.

Thirdly, the PSVI must be run with a long-term funding cycle and strategy. The yo-yoing of budgets, as highlighted by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, restricts the initiative's ability to address deep-rooted issues. Instead, we should seek to create a long-term, 10-year plan that regularly reports to Parliament on the progress made and the strategy implemented.

Fourthly, the PSVI team should be institutionally ring-fenced in the FCDO. Such a team, or unit, should be able to stand the test of time and the changing of Ministers. In ring-fencing the PSVI, we can build real institutional knowledge that is to the benefit of us at home and those abroad as well.

The G7 has reminded us all that multilateralism is once again in the ascendancy. We should seize that opportunity, create new bodies and lead successful initiatives. The Prime Minister has rightly and admirably focused on the promotion of girls' education. I wholeheartedly support him in that mission, but the success of one should not mean failure in another. If we are to address education for girls, we will have to tackle gender-based violence.

As I reach my concluding remarks, I respectfully ask the Minister to consider the following questions. Will he work with Members across this House and the other place to help create a new international body? Will he help to ring-fence spending and create that long-term strategy for the PSVI team? Does he agree that the PSVI must be led by a Cabinet Minister, preferably the Foreign Secretary? When will the PSVI team be deployed to Ethiopia, as mentioned by Lord Ahmad on 24 May? Does he agree with the G7 gender equality advisory council recommendations? When will the PSVI global conference be held? I recognise that an election and a global pandemic have got in the way of it, but we are eagerly awaiting the opportunity to hold a second conference and reignite that leadership.

In Christina Lamb's book, "Our Bodies, Their Battlefield", which should be compulsory reading for any Member who is interested in this subject, she details the different communities around the world that have been victims of sexual violence in conflict. She makes many powerful points, but perhaps the most powerful are the words:

"rape is the cheapest weapon known to man".

It has become a tool of Government forces, militias, terrorists and criminals. It costs nothing to the perpetrator and everything to the victim. It is the weapon that brings incomprehensible harm and damage to victims. It destroys communities and societies, and it is, more often than not, responsible for sowing the seeds of future conflicts.

As I said at the start of my remarks, I am only highlighting the commitment that we made in 2012 and asking the Government to step forward to reignite their global leadership on this issue. Failure to act now not only lets down our allies and flies in the face of what we have already achieved, but can result in the blocking of other countries taking meaningful action. If the UK lacks the willpower, the ambition or the vision to renew its efforts in this area, we must be prepared to take steps to hand the initiative over to willing partners, such as America, Canada or Germany. For the sake of the Government, and for my own sake, I hope that today they will reassert their intentions to provide that global

[Anthony Mangnall]

leadership. The point of today's debate is to reflect on the positive work that has been done to date in a constructive and positive way. I look forward to hearing from other Members who have far greater experience in this area than I do. We have the opportunity here. We have the international community waiting for us to take this step. I thank the House for its time in hearing me.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** We will begin with a time limit of seven minutes, but I envisage that that will later be reduced to six or even five minutes.

3.35 pm

**Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab):** It is always a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

May I say what a huge pleasure it is to speak in the wake of the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), who is such a force when it comes to making the argument for why we should be investing in preventing sexual violence in conflict? The work that he and his colleagues have done over the years is truly admirable. I am proud of what our Government have done, but I am very concerned that it is starting to drip away, so I share his request to the Minister to champion this moment and make it very clear that the UK will continue with its PSVI programme.

The hon. Member spoke about the work that started in 2012. I want to bring this slightly more up to date, because 2020 was set to be a historic year for women's rights, marking the 25th anniversary of the Beijing declaration, which is the most progressive blueprint for advancing women's rights, and the 20th anniversary of the UN security resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. But here we are, halfway through 2021, and we have seen the pandemic pull girls out of school, increase unequal pay, expose women and girls to more abuse, and halt the employment of women and girls, often overnight and without any safety nets on which to fall. Progress on women's rights and gender equality across the globe is unfortunately in retreat. The International Development Committee's report on the secondary impacts of covid-19 highlights the stark increase in violence against women and girls, noting that the pandemic could result in an additional 2 million cases of female genital mutilation and an additional 13 million child marriages by 2030. This surge in violence is horrifying, but covid-19 has, unfortunately, just exposed and indeed reinforced deep structural inequalities.

When we think about the PSVI, one thing that always comes to my mind is that, if someone is shot in the leg, we immediately identify that as a war crime, whereas raping someone is almost seen as a side effect and inconsequential because of it. As the hon. Member has clearly outlined, rape needs to be seen as a weapon of war with the devastating impact that it has as a consequence, which I will go into later in my speech.

The situation in the Tigray region of Ethiopia serves as a horrific reminder of sexual violence in conflict. Women have been raped by soldiers in camps for displaced people, while others were abducted from their homes in rural areas and held for days as soldiers repeatedly abused them. That is not unique to Ethiopia. Sexual

violence in conflict is pervasive and, despite being punishable by international human rights and humanitarian laws, the cases highlighted by the hon. Member, or those that we have seen in Ethiopia, could have been in Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia and Myanmar right now.

It is very sad to say that where there is conflict, sexual violence is very likely to follow. Women and girls, and indeed men and boys, are subjected to these horrifying acts, and it leaves lasting trauma and really intense long-term physical and mental health conditions as a consequence. The impact ricochets across communities, pushing peace further and further out of reach.

The report of my Committee, the International Development Committee, on the humanitarian situation in Tigray highlights the issue and calls for support services to be restored and expanded to meet present and future needs without further delay. These services are vital. On Monday, the Minister estimated that 26,000 people could be in need of support in Ethiopia in the coming months. Astonishingly, though, he could not say whether the PSVI team would be deployed. I hope that he can clarify that point today. The UK must act to set out how it intends to ensure that services are there for those who need them in conflict zones the world over. That is especially important as vital programmes addressing violence against women and girls, of which sexual violence in conflict is of course a part, are currently being cut.

On the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative, I praise the Government for initially showing real leadership. Women's rights organisations welcomed it as crucial to the global debate around peace, conflict and women's rights. But profile-raising alone is not enough unless it is followed by a positive impact on the ground. An investigation by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact on how the UK followed up on its PSVI summit commitments concluded that there were

"unsatisfactory achievements in most areas, with some positive elements".

The close association between the PSVI and the then Secretary of State ultimately appears to have been detrimental to the programme's long-term success, and we cannot let that happen.

ICAI's report also highlights that the intervention suffered due to short one-year timeframes, a lack of investment in technical expertise, the lack of any overarching theory of change, and a failure to allow women's and girls' voices to be part of a survivor-centred approach. All this led to a weakening of the programme. The final point is key, and led to one of my Committee's key recommendations. We will not make meaningful inroads into preventing sexual violence and abuse if we fail to take a survivor-led approach. Survivors' voices, and the involvement of women's rights organisations, can no longer be an afterthought or an add-on. This input must be built in through consultation, through to design, delivery, implementation and evaluation.

We are at a crossroads in preventing violence against women and girls, including sexual violence in conflict. The G7 delivered on the rhetoric, but we need more than this, especially given the cuts to the aid budget. Ahead of the UK PSVI conference, the UK has a unique opportunity to scale up quality work on prevention, protection and responses in conflict-affected states and to ensure that survivors are at the very heart of this work. I really hope that is exactly what will happen.

3.42 pm

**Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con) [V]: I want to touch on two concerns. The first is the reports of widespread sexual violence as a weapon of war by armed groups in Tigray, as referred to by the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) in her excellent speech, which I am pleased to follow.

The second is the separate but by no means disconnected issue of the importance of promoting the fundamental human right of freedom of religion or belief, or FORB. Preventing the abuse of FORB helps, in turn, to prevent atrocities such as sexual abuse from happening in the first place—atrocities sadly occurring, as we have heard, in many parts of the world today. Societies that respect FORB are more likely to be stable, secure places in which to live and flourish, but sadly, this respect is sometimes absent. A lack of respect for the right of another person to hold their faith or core beliefs, and disrespect for their culture or ethnicity, are all too often the root causes of conflict, and are even at times used to justify atrocities such as sexual violence in conflict.

Reports of the experiences of women in Tigray bear this out. One Tigrayan woman was told by her rapists, “Our problem is with your womb. Your womb gives birth to Woyane”, a derogatory term, and “A Tigrayan womb should never give birth.” Hundreds of women have reported horrific accounts of rape and gang rape since the start of the conflict in Tigray nearly six months ago. Medics have reported removing nails, rocks and pieces of plastic from inside the bodies of rape victims. Individuals are allegedly forced to rape members of their own family. We hear of sexual violence against women and girls in refugee camps, and even of child soldiers forcibly conscripted and then being subjected to sexual abuse.

The UN Security Council heard evidence of an internally displaced woman who, when conflict began in her town, fled and hid in the forest for six days with her family. She gave birth while in hiding, but her baby sadly died a few days later. At the same time, her husband was also killed. When she resumed her journey, she met four soldiers, who raped her in front of the rest of her children throughout the night and into the following day.

Mark Lowcock, the UN’s emergency relief co-ordinator, has concluded that

“there is no doubt that sexual violence is being used in this conflict as a weapon of war, as a means to humiliate, terrorize, and traumatize an entire population today and into the next generation.”

I therefore welcome the statement from the Minister for Africa that the UK is working to prevent sexual violence in Tigray, to provide support for survivors and their children, and to promote justice for them. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Eritrea, I want to ask the Minister a number of questions before turning more specifically to the issue of FORB. What steps is the UK taking to press for UN investigators to have full access to the region to conduct its assessment of such atrocities? How is the UK supporting the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to ensure that its joint investigations into atrocities with the Ethiopian high commission are independent, transparent and impartial? Will that assessment look specifically at the situation of ethnic and religious groups?

What update can the Minister give following plans to deploy the UK Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict team to the region? What action has been taken following the mission by UK representatives to Shire in Tigray to assess humanitarian access, emergency services provided in camps and the support gaps that need to be filled, in particular for survivors of sexual violence and their children? Finally, what steps will the UK take to ensure that those responsible for such crimes are held to account and that a timely mechanism is implemented to collect and preserve evidence of sexual violence, to ensure the best possible opportunity to bring perpetrators to account and allow victims to see justice?

Let me turn to the separate but by no means disconnected topic of freedom of religion or belief. As the Prime Minister’s special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, I welcome the G7 Foreign Minister’s communiqué, in particular paragraph 55—which I hope *Hansard* will perhaps print in full—which states that, as representatives of

“nations...engaged in creating a safer, more stable...world,”

the G7 Ministers

“are committed to promoting freedom of religion or belief for all”

and

“to co-ordinated action...to defend freedom of religion or belief for all”.

I also welcome last week’s G7 Open Societies leaders’ statement, which similarly committed countries to working together and with partners to promote freedom of religion or belief, and the joint statement by our Prime Minister and the US President in the new Atlantic charter, which again specifically referred to the UK and the US working together to support democracy across the globe, including by

“protecting freedom of religion or belief”.

The coming year is a vital one for the UK to demonstrate our global leadership in championing FORB and putting those words into action. I am doing so as the PM’s special envoy by actively working to oversee the full implementation of the Bishop of Truro’s independent review by its three-year review deadline of July 2022. Recommendation 21.b makes reference to matters relevant to today’s debate, and looks forward to the UK hosting the FORB ministerial international gathering, also in July 2022, when we can bring senior Ministers and others concerned about FORB from across the world to discuss what actions have been taken and need to be taken in this respect.

Another key platform for action on FORB is the International Religious Freedom and Belief Alliance, of which the UK is a leading member, where over 33 countries meet regularly through representatives, such as myself, mandated to take forward FORB internationally, including by challenging specific abuses and violations. I look forward to continuing to work with Ministers, partners in likeminded countries, faith leaders and non-governmental organisations, as we seek to put the G7’s words on FORB into action, not only to help those suffering abuses of the kind that we have heard about today but, equally importantly, to help to prevent them from happening in the first place.

3.49 pm

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP) [V]: Sexual violence in conflict is not inevitable. It is often an intentional strategy to further terrorise vulnerable women, girls,

[Hannah Bardell]

men and boys. Sexual violence can be committed at the hands of state-affiliated perpetrators or, indeed, non-state armed groups, including terrorist organisations. Violence against women and girls—gender-based violence—is much more common, as we have heard, in conflict zones. Victims of sexual violence in conflict are often subject to rape, forced prostitution, genital mutilation and forced marriage. These unspeakable acts and their unspeakable consequences are almost unbearable to discuss, but we must speak up, and debates like this are absolutely vital. Also vital are the funding and resources that help tackle these horrific acts and support those who face it. As a developed family of nations, we have a moral obligation to do our bit. However, the disturbing direction in which the Prime Minister and his Government have taken the UK breaks a legally binding commitment and yet again, another of his manifesto promises.

Having set up the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative, which 155 nations joined to commit to ending sexual violence as a weapon of war, the UK has sadly rowed back. The initiative has faced significant issues, and in a report by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact in 2020 it was found that, despite initial strong leadership following the departure of Lord Hague as Foreign Secretary, senior ministerial interest waned and funding and staff resources fell. The initiative made some important achievements, it said, including creating an international protocol, that was used to secure convictions, but also had no overall strategy, did not focus on learning and failed to include survivors systematically, which we have heard is absolutely crucial.

The Government are asleep at the wheel on this important issue, and the Prime Minister, who was previously Foreign Secretary, is front and centre of this folly. The UK is the only G7 member to cut its international aid as a covid-19 response. That should shame us all, and it is not supported by a majority of Scottish MPs or, I suspect, the majority of the Scottish people. The Scottish Government recently conducted a review of its international development policy and committed to offer at least £500,000 for projects that promote gender equality in partner countries across the world. Rather than claim to be hampered by it, our review in Scotland was prompted by the covid-19 pandemic. Scotland will continue to employ whatever levers and resources it has within the constraints of this Union to ensure that it is doing its bit, but I have no doubt that an independent Scotland would take its place on the global stage as a nation ready to meet its international obligations.

As even the Prime Minister's own Back Benchers have admitted, the aid cuts will cost lives. The UN said that more than 500 rape cases were reported in the Tigray region of Ethiopia in March this year; at least 27 cases of sexual violence have been recorded during the recent protests in Colombia, and China stands accused of organised sexual violence against its Uyghur population. These are just a few horrific examples of what people, mainly women and girls, are at risk of enduring in an already devastating and volatile situation. So the UK must not use the covid-19 pandemic to shirk its responsibilities to fight what the UN calls a global pandemic of gender-based violence. It is an outrage that the House and its democratically elected representatives

were stripped of our right to vote on the cut to aid. It shows once again that this Tory Government cannot be trusted.

The people of my Livingston constituency and indeed, the people of Scotland are an outward-looking, forward-thinking and progressive nation. I cannot wait for the day when we as an independent nation on the global stage have the full basket of powers to operate and support those in need with all our might and power. Until then, we in the Scottish National party will continue to challenge the Conservative Government on their despicable actions. A change of heart and a change of actions are sorely needed. The world is watching, and the UK is at present at grave risk of doing lasting damage to its international reputation and, more importantly, to the most vulnerable people on the planet. At the very least, the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative needs new money and new life breathed into it.

3.53 pm

**Gareth Davies** (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): Throughout our history, rape and sexual violence have been used as weapons of war. They are horrendous crimes so it is important that we debate the subject today. Let me first congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) not just on giving a great, well-informed speech but for all his work over many years on this subject, and his leadership of the APPG, of which I am very pleased to be a member. It is good to see a man with a leading voice on this important issue, for it is overwhelmingly men who are the perpetrators of these horrendous crimes. Our gender has an incredibly important role in helping to drive action against those responsible, and my hon. Friend is at the forefront, leading the calls.

It is also an important time to have this debate, in the context of the global pandemic, for we know that the pandemic has exacerbated gender inequality, and we know that gender equality is one of the key drivers of gender-based violence. My hon. Friend pointed out that the United Nations estimated that last year, in just six months of the lockdown, 31 million cases of gender-based violence were recorded. By my rough maths, that is about five million a month—truly staggering—so it is incredibly important that we meet today to discuss this.

We should not forget that much progress has been made over the last decade. The Murad code—the global code of conduct—was introduced by Lord Ahmad and Nadia Murad for the recording of sensitive information from survivors, and that should be applauded. Our British armed forces are playing an important role, with British troops now receiving comprehensive pre-deployment training on preventing sexual exploitation, abuse and violence against women. We have also made strong commitments to ensuring that UN peacekeeping is equipped to tackle sexual violence. Indeed, on the international stage, 150 countries have now endorsed the declaration of commitment to end sexual violence in conflict. Some progress is being made but, as Lord Hague of Richmond has pointed out, apathy does endure, sadly, on the world stage so we must go further to re-engage the international community.

The main point that I want to make today is that I entirely endorse and wholeheartedly support those calling for a new international, independent, permanent body

focused on the collection of evidence. Ultimately, the way we solve this issue is to increase prosecutions, and I believe that this body could help drive that forward. Britain could help drive that forward.

The situation you walk past is the situation you accept. It was Plato who once said, “Only the dead have truly seen the end of war.” If military conflict is to endure, let it be Britain that ensures that the existence of rape as a weapon of war does not.

3.57 pm

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on securing this debate and on his very powerful remarks, because there can no doubt that, as he said, these are the most terrible crimes and we must step up in this situation. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) was right to say that, in the past, the UK has been an important global advocate for survivors of these appalling war crimes. Sadly, though, this UK Government are swiftly squandering that reputation, and that is deeply regrettable.

Conflict-related sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls, but also against boys and men, is a horrendous crime. The use of rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, forced sterilisation, forced marriage—I could go on—as weapons are things that do not always hit the headlines. Actually, they so often go unreported to the wider world, but that does not mean that these things are not happening and, in fact, regrettably, these things are happening more and more.

We know that during crises and conflict, sexual violence can both increase and yet be less noticed. This pandemic is no different. In fact, the United Nations has described gender-based violence as a global pandemic, so we need to be very clear that the current covid-19 crisis cannot mean that this issue is allowed to fall down the priority list, because it absolutely must get the attention and funding that it deserves.

In 2012, when the Foreign and Commonwealth Office set up the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative and 155 nations joined forces to make that commitment to ending sexual violence as a weapon of war, things looked to be on a positive track, but momentum has fallen away since that point. In 2020, an Independent Commission for Aid Impact evaluation of the initiative concluded that, since 2014, ministerial interest has “waned”, and that there was an overall lack of strategy and an overall lack of funding.

It is also a pity that recommendations have not yet been published, given that we are in a state of limbo on the previously planned international conference on PSVI, which should have been held during 2019. I appreciate that that was put off because of the general election, but we are some way down the road from that now and victims cannot wait. I say that in the context of the UK Government’s own narrative. The recent integrated review of foreign policy does not give gender equality globally the priority it deserves. The word “gender” is mentioned only once in what is a very lengthy document. That is in stark contrast with the Scottish Government’s vision, which is the correct focus, as my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) set out.

The lack of attention here is not new, and programmes to tackle gender-based violence are notoriously and persistently underfunded. According to the International Rescue Committee, from 2016 to 2018, global allocations for sexual gender-based violence funding were just 0.1% of total humanitarian funding. That is 0.1% to tackle this most harrowing aspect of conflict across the globe, with more than 500 rape cases reported in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, 27 cases of sexual violence reported in Colombia in recent weeks, and many others deemed likely. Persistent reports exist of organised sexual violence against the Uyghurs in China, reports very effectively highlighted by the campaign group Yet Again, which is hosting an important event on that topic with the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities this weekend. Continuing reports of this kind of violence emerge across the world from countries including Cameroon and Iraq.

What is the UK Government’s response? Their response is to cut the aid budget that helps to tackle this global pandemic of gender-based violence. While the Prime Minister has been pleased to host global leaders and sign high-sounding charters, the fact is that the UK was the only country present at last week’s G7 that is cutting its aid budget. Yet again, the UK Government demonstrate their strategic incompetence by cutting aid at a time when they should be increasing it. It is Tory austerity all over again, but this time on the global stage. France is growing its budget and is set to reach 0.7%. Germany will exceed 0.7% this year. The Americans are increasing aid by \$14 billion.

It is easy to sign a charter to get your name in the history books, but as is often the case with this Prime Minister the follow-through is sadly lacking. Instead of working to confront injustice, he is forcing through swingeing cuts at the worst possible time. He does not even have the courage to give this House a vote or to publish an honest assessment of what the cuts will mean for the world’s poorest, most vulnerable and most marginalised. President Biden may come to regret putting his name to a charter with a Prime Minister who seems to have an unerring ability to commit to one set of actions on paper while planning all along to do the opposite.

We do not need a formal assessment to see the damage that those cuts will do to efforts to protect the most vulnerable from sexual violence in conflict. The UK Government have already cut research programmes aimed at advancing gender justice, equality and security in 22 countries. Spending that helps to keep more girls in school and for longer has been slashed by 40% compared with 2016 levels. The UK does not even contribute to the UN Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, which helps women and girls in severe distress.

Baroness Helic and Chloe Dalton, both advisers to William Hague when he was Foreign Secretary, have recommended ring-fencing a minimum of 1% of our aid budget to challenge violence against women and girls abroad. That would not only increase the UK’s capacity to tackle this horrendous problem at source; it would also set a valuable example for others to follow. That is a proposal that has wide support across this House. I would ask that its adoption be seriously considered, as well as using some of the additional funding to reverse the troubling decline in the budget of the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict team.

4.4 pm

**Jackie Doyle-Price** (Thurrock) (Con): I am very pleased to be able to speak in this debate on the very important issue of preventing sexual violence in conflict and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on bringing this matter to the House. We probably do not spend enough time tackling these humanitarian issues in this place—we spend far too much time playing knockabout—but this country is at its best when it shows global leadership on these humanitarian matters.

We know that sexual violence is a weapon of war. It has been since time immemorial, but perhaps only in recent years have we collectively faced up to that. That might be the case for any number of reasons. Interestingly, it is a fundamental part of the strategy where conflicts are between ethnicities and, when we think about it, it is pretty obvious why. Although we readily talk about the murders and killings that take place as part of an ethnic genocide, we talk rather less about the rape and sexual violence that is associated with it. That has to change. We need to face up to the fact that men are perpetrating terrible, heinous, evil acts against women and girls specifically, but also against men and boys. Rape and sexual violence are being used as a way of exerting power, and humiliating and degrading people. We need to show that and shame the perpetrators out of it. Things such as the Geneva convention have pointed out international and multilateral actions against gratuitous execution, and we need to do exactly the same about rape and sexual violence.

I think that “sexual violence” is often a vanilla-sounding term for something that is fundamentally evil, so let us call it what it is. It is rape; forced incest; mutilation; and buggery. It is the ultimate defiling of human beings, and the ultimate corruption of an act that should be about love and intimacy. In that sense, it is a crime against humanity and one that we should show global leadership on in tackling.

I am very proud that William Hague, when Foreign Secretary, showed that global leadership on the issue by establishing this initiative. It was a very personal interest of his and in that sense he put it front and centre of foreign policy at the time. I hope we can use this presidency of the G7 to reboot that agenda, particularly in the light of the other ethnic conflicts going on in the world at this time, which we have heard about in previous speeches.

I remind the Government that this is entirely complementary to their wider policy towards women and girls. Domestically, we are for the first time having a proper violence against women and girls strategy, so it makes perfect sense to take that into the international field. At the heart of our international aid programmes is the focus on education for girls around the world. We recognise the immensely civilising influence that the education of girls has on societies. So it is absolutely consistent that we put the prevention of sexual violence at the heart of our future agenda.

As I said earlier, since the dawn of time, rape has been a weapon of war and it is important that we continue to treat it as a serious crime as we prosecute on a global basis, but it is only recently that we have begun to understand just how prevalent it is. It is only by

making sure that we spread that understanding of how prevalent it is that we will encourage anyone to take action.

The conflict in Bosnia was the first time the international community recognised properly that rape was being used as part of the military strategy. We understand that there were as many as 50,000 rapes during that conflict. When we think that each of us represents 80,000 constituents, it brings home how significant this is. When we remember Srebrenica, we always remember the murder of all those men and boys, but we never talk about the rapes. I was a student at university during that conflict. I remember seeing the pictures of the camps and the shelling in Sarajevo, and hearing about the fact that this was an ethnic conflict between Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs, but I never heard about the rapes. We will not be able to take actions until we are honest about this. We should not just see this as an inevitable fact of any ethnic conflict. We have to call it out for what it is and say that it is unacceptable. I am pleased that, in prosecuting the war crimes following the conflict in Bosnia, rape was included. It was seen as a genocide and as a crime against humanity.

It is inevitable in an ethnic conflict that rape will be a fundamental part of the strategy. Again, we need to highlight exactly what we are talking about. In the Bosnian conflict, rape camps were established where women were systematically raped and released only once they were pregnant. Gang rape and public rapes were common. Men were forced to rape their family members. There was one report of a 14-year-old boy being forced to rape his mother. Forced oral sex and forced anal sex were also common, and in some prisons detainees were forced to rape other men. How horrific that this should be happening just 20 years ago in Europe. Once we face the facts about sexual violence in conflict, we cannot look the other way. This country is a great country that shows leadership on these matters, and it should please continue to do so.

4.10 pm

**Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) for securing this debate today and for the way in which he so persuasively talked about the need for continued focus on this hugely important issue. It is really challenging to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price); she really put her finger on it when she talked about the appalling way in which this abuse can affect people for generations.

The use of sexual violence as a weapon of war is always unacceptable. The Conservative party's work on preventing sexual violence in armed conflict was born of the tragedy of Darfur and the survivors of Srebrenica. It is a tragedy that today, 12 years on, and despite that leadership, events like these are still happening in places such as Ethiopia. Hon. Members are right to say that debates such as this are vital to ensure that we keep the focus on the use of rape, torture and abuse, particularly of women, as a weapon of war. We have to keep that central to the debate.

We also need to focus on the facts. This is where I think the debate needs to lie. There has been a great deal of progress as a result of the leadership of this Government, of the Conservative party and of Ministers who are in place now. We can see that in the

integrated review and in the G7 communiqué. The integrated review makes it absolutely clear that the Government want to continue

“to strengthen justice for survivors of sexual violence in conflict”, as well as providing support to survivors and children born of conflict-related sexual violence. I do not think it could be clearer than that. In the G7 communiqué, I was pleased to see the leaders of the seven most important developed nations in the world, clearly with leadership from this Government, setting out clearly that the use of sexual violence in conflict situations constitutes crimes against humanity or war crimes. We could not be clearer, and that leadership should not be underestimated. The UK also continues to be one of the largest providers of international aid.

But let us get the debate to where it really needs to be, which is what we do next and how we move forward with this clear goodwill to make the sort of changes and approaches to this appalling crime that we need to see. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes is absolutely right on this point. We need to hear from the Minister more on the specifics about how this Government are going to continue to drive forward this important agenda. I am interested in some of the ideas that he put forward, which echo those of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact. It would be sensible to hear more about how an international convention on preventing sexual violence could be developed, or indeed, how we could have an international body to do more to collect evidence to bring perpetrators to justice. That has the added benefits of making it a crime that people are fearful of committing in the first place—for fear of that evidence being collected—and of bringing perpetrators to justice.

I also have huge sympathy for the need for longer-term funding commitments. We all too often hear as Members of Parliament about the problems created by short-term funding approaches. I hope that the Minister might be thinking carefully about that, as well as the ring-fencing of those working on this issue. That would build the sort of consistency that my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes was talking about.

We should not speak about this issue without also remembering that in February Save the Children estimated that 246 million children around the world are living in conflict zones and that more than 70 million—one in six of those children—live within 50 km of conflicts where armed groups have perpetrated the most heinous sexual violence not only against adults, but against children, and that is in the past year alone. None of us can allow that to pass us by, because if we do, all the work we are doing on international development is for naught. If we allow children to be exposed to heinous acts and become the victims of sexual violence in conflict zones, we leave ourselves with generations of problems with trying to achieve peace and reconciliation, as well as all the consequences that my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock went through so eloquently in her speech.

I hope that the Minister will use his contribution today to give us all more information and details on how the Government are taking forward the incredible piece of work done over the past 12 years, so that we can make sure that we save the next generation from the impact of war crimes. We have to ensure that our nation's work on and reputation for dealing with issues of sexual

violence in conflict zones continues to be something of which we can all be extremely proud as part of this Government's legacy.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I thank the right hon. Lady for being brief. We are doing fine on time.

4.17 pm

**Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP) [V]: The horrific nature of sexual violence in conflict, the deliberate, humiliating violation of those targeted, the fear that it instils in survivors and potential victims, the stigma it can create and the trauma it leaves behind mean that it is rightly recognised by the International Criminal Court as a war crime and a crime against humanity. However, all too often sexual violence goes under the radar or, worse, is considered an inevitable consequence of war. Programmes to tackle it are notoriously and persistently underfunded, with global allocations for funding against sexual gender-based violence making up just 0.1% of total humanitarian funding between 2016 and 2018. There is no excuse for neglecting these efforts, and all Governments have a responsibility to increase support to those who have already suffered such crimes and to protect those who are targets now and will be in future.

In the past, the UK Government have shown that it can be a global leader on conflict-related sexual violence, such as with the establishment of the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative in 2012. However, the regrettable keywords there are “the past”. Sadly, the momentum behind the initiative has not been sustained. The Government must revitalise that work to be an effective global partner in tackling sexual violence.

The budget for the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative team has been decreasing for several years, and the number of deployments of the UK's team of experts has been falling, too. In 2020, there was just one deployment, in contrast with 27 deployments in 2014. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact concluded that since 2014, ministerial interest in the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative has “waned” and “fragmented”. The protection of fundamental human rights and the prevention of such war crimes cannot be treated as a short-term campaign, rather than a long-term strategy. It has consequences.

In March, the UN said that more than 500 rape cases had been reported in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, and that is likely to be a gross underestimate. In Ethiopia alone, the UN Population Fund estimates that there might be 22,500 survivors of sexual violence who will seek clinical care this year. It is clear that this is a weapon of war.

At this moment, the FCDO should be deploying teams of experts and specialist aid to treat survivors in Ethiopia and in neighbouring Sudan, where tens of thousands of refugees are arriving. However, we have yet to hear any news about that, and I hope the Minister will speak on it today. Will the FCDO be doing that? Given that its spending in this area was declining even prior to the cuts to official development assistance, does the FCDO still have a budget and resources for the initiative, particularly with aid now being cut to Africa by two thirds?

[Chris Law]

The UK Government have taken their eye off the ball, and there is a real danger that this issue will continue to be neglected and imperilled as further cuts to aid programmes are announced. The reduction in spending means there will be an almost £1 billion cut to the UK Government's work on conflict in open societies. Surely making every effort to prevent conflict occurring must be part of the strategy to prevent conflict-related sexual violence. For every programme that is wholly or even partially suspended, there is an increased risk of bloodshed, conflict and sexual violence. That is penny-wise and pound-foolish.

Each and every one of us was horrified when we heard stories of the sexual slavery of Yazidi women by Daesh, yet this year the Government have not only decided to slash aid to Syria, but, for the first time since 1991, will provide no bilateral aid to Iraq—none. How do those reckless decisions help protect against conflict and sexual violence? The simple answer is that they do not.

Ahead of the G7 summit, the UK Government spoke about building momentum to end violence against women and girls, denouncing the use of sexual violence in conflict situations, but words are simply not enough. Covid should have been a reason to step up, not step away. The UN estimates that each month in lockdown will result in an additional 5 million cases of gender-based violence. There will be 2 million more cases of female genital mutilation and 13 million more children forced into child marriage.

This Government are taking us all for fools by claiming that we had to cut the aid budget because of the pandemic. That was a political choice, and that was shown by the fact that other G7 countries increased their aid. Indeed, the Scottish Government increased our contributions by 50%. This cruel Tory Government's austerity 2.0 is now on the backs of the most vulnerable in our global community. I am sure the Government will try to defend themselves by rattling off the statistics of what they are doing. However, we must ask whether, even though they might be doing something, they are doing enough. For every project this UK Government mention, we should remember the many more that have had their operations hindered or completely shut down.

Let us remind the Tories who exactly is affected when they make their cuts. For example, a woman in South Sudan was tied to a tree after her husband was brutally murdered, and forced to watch her teenage child being gang raped by soldiers. A primary schoolboy in Syria, who should have been watching cartoons and playing with friends, was instead kidnapped by Daesh, imprisoned and sexually abused over and over again. A Yemeni man was imprisoned and subjected to rape, electrocution, beating of genitals and threats of sterilisation. These actions are replicated many thousands of times the world over. These are the people this Government are abandoning with their cuts.

To answer my own question, no, this Government are not doing enough, despite their claims of support. This Government will not be doing enough until we can return to a full aid commitment, reprioritise the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative and ensure that the victims of sexual violence get the full amount of support they need and deserve.

4.23 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me and for the opportunity to speak in today's debate. This is not a topic that many like to discuss: it is uncomfortable and it is difficult. To be honest, I feel a bit uneasy about some of the things I have heard. I know they are true, but it is particularly hard to try to deal with them. However, I feel obliged to stand up today on behalf of those who cannot, especially as a father and a grandfather, given that evil triumphs when good people do nothing. I believe that we in this House, as good people, have an opportunity to speak out on behalf of those who need our help.

Sexual violence in conflict areas has become very common. It is often seen as a tactic of war, not a crime. These acts are not limited to rape and sexual assault; they can include forced prostitution, enforced sterilisation and arranged marriages. Save the Children estimates that some 72 million children—one in six children living in conflict zones—are at high risk of sexual violence by armed groups, which is a truly astonishing figure. It is also important to remember that these crimes do not discriminate and can occur to men, women and children of all ages. This is absolute, pure evil and pure wickedness of a bestial nature that is almost impossible to comprehend as we try to figure out what to do.

With the pandemic causing distress to all walks of life, sexual violence crimes in conflict zones have gone unnoticed. In 2020, the United Nations reported more than 200 sexual violence cases in many conflict zones, including Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Colombia and many others, but we find it difficult to take it on. Many of these have been ignored owing to the lack of reports and reliable data due to covid. As we gradually come out of the pandemic, there is time for reflection, and more importantly, time for action.

We look to the Minister on the Front Bench to give us the necessary reassurance. The preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative set up by the Ministry of Defence and FCDO to raise awareness of these horrific crimes is welcome, but I am afraid that raising awareness is simply not enough. That is what we are saying: we can all raise awareness via the speeches we make, but we look to the Minister for how that awareness can be turned into action. That is what I want. As a legislature, we must legislate and act against this issue. We must work on delivering better access to support and healthcare for the victims of conflict; we cannot simply be aware of the need. Being aware of the need and of the issue is one thing, but acting on it is another.

Conflict and violence are things that Northern Ireland is familiar with—we still bear the scars—but they do not come close to the devastation that some in conflict zones face when that is combined with the impacts of sexual violence. Most recently, in March, I was horrified to read that some 500 rape cases were reported in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. Note the words “were reported”. Sometimes that probably means that there were actually more, which is worrying. It is incomprehensible for people who have not been confronted with this before to try to deal with.

**Sarah Champion:** I am always grateful to hear the hon. Gentleman speak, because he speaks with such passion. He talks about the reported cases. In the UK, it

is estimated that about 15% of women report cases, so I absolutely agree that the reported cases of PSVI will be the slightest tip of the iceberg.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I think every one of us is aware that these figures come nowhere near the magnitude of the difficulties. I commend the hon. Lady—she is Champion by name and champion in the way she takes up her causes. I am certainly encouraged by everything she says.

In these and other post-conflict situations, survivors carry the effects of their trauma while the perpetrators, who deserve punishment for their actions, often walk free. A local church man in my constituency often brings issues of sexual violence in conflict zones to my attention. He has travelled to areas that are subject to such brutality, which reminds us of how essential it is that work is done on the ground. That kind of work starts here in this House, from us as elected MPs to our Minister and the Government. I also commend Lord Ahmad, who was mentioned by the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), on his statement at the conference:

“It is time for justice. It’s time to put survivors first.”

We wish to do that. To help those survivors, we need accountability for those who carry out these awful, horrible attacks upon people, including women and children.

I note that, in 2014-15, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office legislated for more than £20 million to be allocated for PSVI activities. I find it quite distressing to see that figure reduced each and every year. I understand that the Government are trying hard to balance the books, but the good that this does and can do should outweigh the cost of it. In the last year, the figure was just £2.6 million, compared with £20 million in 2014. We in this House can take those decisions. I know that we cannot fund all the world’s problems, but we can honour commitments that we have made.

Where was that money used? The Library statistics referred to the deployment of PSVI expert teams. In 2020, we deployed only one team. My goodness, should we not be doing more? We deployed six in the previous year, 11 in 2018, and 27 in the big year of 2014.

Again, I thank the hon. Member for Totnes for setting the scene extremely well and for the work he does as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group. He highlighted how the PSVI has been downgraded and underfunded. I ask the Minister, with, as always, great respect, why that is the case, and will he change that decision?

As I have said, only one PSVI expert team was deployed in 2020. That may be as a result of the pandemic—that is a possible reason—but we need to do more groundwork to eradicate this. The Redress charity has done amazing work with non-governmental organisations in areas such as Sudan, Kenya and Uganda to ensure the effective documentation of crimes, which helps bring proper legal claims against perpetrators and accountability. People who carry out such damnable and terrible atrocities need to be made accountable. I want something to be done about that.

Finally, I urge the Minister to dedicate time to communicate with charities and NGOs, which ultimately give all their time to supporting victims and getting

justice. As elected representatives in this House, we have a platform to act on this issue. What a privilege we have to act on behalf of other people and help them if we can. Thank you again, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I have faith that the Minister will listen to all the comments and allocate funding to help address this issue rather than simply talk about it.

4.31 pm

**Brendan O’Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I congratulate and thank the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), and indeed all Members who have contributed to this afternoon’s debate. There is no doubt that we are all united in our complete revulsion at, and total condemnation of, this awful practice. Yet, despite being widely acknowledged as one of the most heinous and despicable crimes imaginable, the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war still, to this day, goes largely unreported and generally unpunished.

As we have heard, it is a long and depressing list. From Sinjar to Sri Lanka, Colombia to China, Tigray to Myanmar, Nepal to Nigeria, Bosnia to Libya—the list goes on and on of countries where women and girls are being raped and abused by men carrying guns, who act in the almost certain knowledge that they will never be held to account for their actions.

We have heard from a number of hon. Members that, having initially shown leadership on this issue, the Government have, unfortunately, at best stalled and at worst back-pedalled in recent years. I urge the Minister to recognise that we have a moral responsibility to ensure that those women and girls receive the justice to which they are entitled and that the perpetrators know that they will be tried and punished for their crimes.

Although legal consequences are vital, so too is the responsibility on us all, and all states, to ensure that survivors of sexual violence receive trauma counselling alongside any healthcare they require to assist in their recovery. It is absolutely vital that we all work to end the stigma that survivors of sexual violence experience both in their communities and in wider society. That is particularly relevant to children born of rape. Although a robust legal framework is essential, it is important that a holistic approach is taken towards the healing and recovery of those living with the consequences of these atrocities.

I have spoken a number of times on this issue since 2015, mainly in relation to the Yazidi genocide and the sexual enslavement of Yazidi women by Daesh. I have had the enormous privilege of getting to know very well Nadia Murad, whose story of how she was kidnapped, enslaved and raped shocked the world but shone a light on the vile atrocities perpetrated by Daesh on Yazidi women. Nadia is without doubt one of the bravest and most inspiring people I have ever met. Although I have quoted her in the Chamber before, I make no apology for retelling her story today. Having been taken from her village to Raqqa, Nadia was held, along with other women, in a school. She said:

“There were thousands of families in a building there, including children who were given away as gifts. One of the men came up to me. He wanted to take me...I was absolutely terrified...He was like a monster. I cried out that I was too young...He kicked and beat me...A few days later, this man forced me to get dressed and put on my makeup. Then, on that terrible night, he did it...He

[Brendan O'Hara]

humiliated me daily. He forced me to wear clothes that barely covered my body... That night he beat me. He asked me to take my clothes off. He put me in a room with guards, who proceeded to commit their crime until I fainted."

That is the harrowing reality of sexual violence in conflict. Sadly, in what will be an all too familiar story to women and girls who have been victims of these crimes, no one has been charged or convicted for what has happened.

Despite the well-documented atrocities of Daesh, and its military defeat and the mass arrests that followed, the crime of rape appears to have been completely forgotten, as criminal courts continue to use counter-terrorism legislation to prosecute members of Daesh, with no charges of sexual violence being brought. These Yazidi women deserve justice. The crimes that have been inflicted on them cannot and should not be airbrushed away. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) said, the Government talk a good game, but the reality is that they cannot do that and yet take away funding from the very bodies that can make a difference. That is fundamentally wrong.

The women and girls who have suffered these awful crimes deserve justice, and their perpetrators cannot be allowed to believe that they act with impunity. I urge the Government to work with the United Nations, non-governmental organisations and other international partners to ensure that all countries have legislation that ensures effective prosecution of sexual violence as a stand-alone international crime. Sadly, as we have heard from many Members, wartime rape remains a rule, and accountability the exception.

As the hon. Member for Thurrock said, in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995, 50,000 Bosnian women were raped, mainly but not exclusively by Bosnian Serbs and Serbian paramilitary units, who used rape as an instrument of terror and a key tactic in their programme of ethnic cleansing. It is reckoned that for every reported rape, between 15 and 20 went unreported.

The same despicable tactic of ethnic cleansing was used during the Rwandan genocide, with half a million women raped, sexually mutilated or murdered in the course of just 100 days. The aim was to produce more Hutu children and, in other cases, to infect woman with sexually transmitted diseases, thereby destroying their reproductive capabilities. It is an appalling act.

What unites these women of Bosnia and Rwanda, and the Yazidi women, is that despite these atrocities—atrocities that have ruined hundreds of thousands of innocent lives—the number of men charged, prosecuted and convicted of carrying out these rapes is minimal, while survivors of conflict-related sexual violence have struggled to achieve recognition as legitimate victims of war and therefore access to reparations and redress.

In August last year, a UN report concluded that, almost a quarter of a century after the conflict in Bosnia, investigations into sexual violence had been "ineffective and slow" and that

"compensation and support for the victims were inadequate."

To almost painfully illustrate the point, one Hutu commander, Jean Téganya, who was accused of the rape and murder of Tutsi woman at a local hospital,

was convicted—of two counts of immigration fraud and three counts of perjury in the United States. That is appalling. It is simply not good enough. We are all failing these vulnerable women and girls. I repeat the call that I made earlier for the Government to give this issue a much higher priority.

Tragically and appallingly, rape and sexual violence in conflict is endemic—so much so that while it is loudly and rightly condemned, it has almost become an accepted norm. That has to change. We all have a moral responsibility to be part of that change. I am afraid that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) said, right now the UK Government appear to be asleep at the wheel. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) asked, how can the UK Government talk seriously about preventing sexual violence in conflict while at the same time taking away desperately needed funds from those organisations whose job it is to combat and prevent it? I urge the Minister, please, to rethink the cut to overseas aid. It is killing people.

4.39 pm

**Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) on obtaining this timely debate, with the UN International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict on Saturday. The quality of debate from all hon. Members, on both sides of the House, has been excellent. Everybody is passionate about the commitment, and thinks this is a serious issue that needs to be addressed and properly funded.

Nine years ago, there was a global summit to end sexual violence in conflict, where, following the 2012 creation of the United Kingdom's preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative—PSVI—there was a commitment to bring the international community together to put an end to this act. We know that covid-19 has increased the risk of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence around the world. Projects that support survivors and train officials to identify and combat the issues are vital to address the symptoms of sexual violence.

The Government have not done enough. Only two weeks ago, Lord Hague, who helped to spearhead this initiative, stated:

"The UK government has continued PSVI but with lower priority. The sense of energy at a senior level...has dissipated. Funding for the initiative is the lowest since we started it. The team of experts is rarely deployed. The raising of the issue across all diplomatic gatherings has dried up."

That is a damning indictment of what was a powerful initiative.

The Minister will know that in a critical report last year, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact found that the PSVI's staffing dropped from 34 members in 2014 to just three now. In an answer to a written question, it was revealed that funding for the PSVI has fallen by 87% in the past seven years. The expert team that was assembled to be deployed to conflict areas to help gather evidence and support survivors has been cut from 27 members in 2014 to just one in 2020—thus, the claim by the Foreign Secretary that the PSVI is still a major priority for Government is plainly not correct. Instead of stepping up, the Government have actually scaled back.

If we are truly serious about ending sexual and gender-based violence, we need to begin by changing the way we think and talk about sexual violence and the motivation of its perpetrators and enablers. Yes, we need projects that support survivors and train officials to identify and combat the underlying issues, as this is vital to addressing the symptoms of sexual violence. But we also need to acknowledge the impact of structural gender inequality, which justifies, normalises and accepts these things as part of life.

We know that violence against women increases in conflict settings. Most notably, this takes the form of systematic rape by military actors. This has long been considered a strategic weapon of war; as the hon. Member for Totnes said, it is cheap and costs nothing. But we know that sexual violence is not unique to conflict settings. Policies that focus solely on military rape risk failing to address the continuum of violence between these crimes and the everyday, private forms of abuse that happen everywhere, in increasingly inequitable and unsustainable societal environments. In the United Kingdom and around the world, covid-19 lockdown measures have unleashed a surge in gender-based violence at exactly the same time that the services on which these survivors rely have been cut or forced to close.

UNICEF has reported that at least 120 million girls under the age of 20 have experienced forced sexual intercourse. Furthermore, it is anticipated that 47 million women are expected to fall into extreme poverty and, on top of the 131 million girls who were out of school before the crisis, 20 million girls are now unlikely to return to school. That is why the Opposition have been calling for gender analyses in the UK's international response to covid-19. Instead the Government have shut down the Department for International Development, which was renowned for its work on gender equality throughout the world, and are now intent on slashing the aid budget, with women and girls disproportionately impacted.

The response to gender-based violence remains severely underfunded, with less than 0.52% of the overall global humanitarian response plan for covid-19 having been dedicated to it. We missed an opportunity at the G7 to right this wrong. As G7 host, it was an opportune time for us to look ahead to the value of the PSVI and the planned conference on preventing sexual violence in conflict next year.

We should be putting commitments to women, peace and security at the heart of our work and our recovery from covid-19. Does the Minister agree that we need to scale up the quality of our response to gender-based violence, including in respect of sexual violence prevention and protection, and services in conflict states? If that is to happen, the UK Government must make a concrete commitment to gender equality and other forms of prevention.

The Government have slashed their funding to the United Nations Population Fund by 85%. The fund helps more than 150 countries and has helped to prevent a quarter of a million child and maternal deaths, 14.6 million unintended pregnancies and 4.3 million unsafe abortions. The director of BRAC said that the cuts to Bangladesh will be "catastrophic" for millions of women and girls.

Apart from the cuts, many in civil society have reported that there is a lack of transparency around the funding decisions that are being taken, with little or no consultation

with external partners and poor and erratic communication. The G7 Gender Equality Advisory Council 2021 was clear that to achieve gender equality, world leaders should renew their commitment to spend 0.7 of GNI on ODA, to tackle violence against women and girls and invest in the care economy; will the Government and the Minister listen to that?

The United Kingdom is the only G7 country to be cutting its aid budget this year. Does the Minister agree that it is hypocritical to commit in public to the PSVI, the sustainable development goals and gender equality, while at the same time slashing aid to all those things? Every day, women and girls around the world face discrimination in every aspect of life, purely because of their gender, along with many other discriminatory issues.

Of course, in addition to financial resources we have to ensure that the voices of local activists are heard and that they are leading the decision-making process. That is why the Opposition have launched a gender equality consultation to understand how we can work with local activists and deliver a policy platform that seeks to tackle the effects of gender inequality as well as the causes.

Ending sexual violence in conflict requires a holistic approach, covering a legal framework to open up access to justice for survivors, gender training and support for authorities, and initiatives to prevent conflict in the first place. I want our Government, our country and our Ministers to be ambitious and to support the PSVI—to support it financially, properly, not with a piecemeal approach to reform. I urge the Minister to listen to what everyone in the House has said and act on it.

4.49 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Duddridge):**

The House is clearly very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) and to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this debate. I pay tribute to their work respectively on the all-party group for the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative and the International Development Committee. I also add my thanks, as my hon. Friend did, to Lord Hague, Baroness Helic, the special envoy Angelina Jolie, Chloe Dalton, whose name sometimes gets dropped off the list but who is equally important, and Lord Ahmad, who is doing a sterling job as the Prime Minister's special representative, and also dual-hatting as a Minister of State, a really senior, high-level appointment. I can assure my hon. Friend that he makes sure that this matter receives the Foreign Secretary's time, my time, the full team's time and, indeed, the Prime Minister's time.

As others have said, this is a very timely debate given the event on Saturday—the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict—and it is very important that we raise these issues. Before I entered the Chamber, I was discussing with my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) her plans for her speech. She went through in great detail what was involved behind the PSVI. I will not repeat her horrific words, but I think it is important not to hide behind an acronym. We should call these things out, but given the brevity of the time available, I will not go through the list.

[James Duddridge]

This House should be proud of its record in speaking out against sexual violence, and we should be proud of the work that has been done since 2012 through to 2014 when there was a surge of activity under William Hague. In 2019, there was an additional surge in the run-up to the potential conference, to which we are still committed.

This issue has been very important to me. Back in 2006, I went with Christian Aid to Rwanda and saw for myself the horrific impacts of what was going on. I can remember speaking to people for an hour and, literally, after every sentence, the next sentence was even worse, more horrific than anything I could possibly imagine. Later on, I visited South Sudan. I sat in a tent with women and heard not just their horrific stories, but their optimism about moving forward from what had happened and their need to ensure that it did not happen to others. Only last November, I was in the Congo learning about the work that we do there, speaking to our agenda on the protection of individuals who work out there.

This whole issue remains vitally important. I can reassure my hon. Friend that that is the case. I particularly recall that, as Lord Hague was leaving, I remained as a Minister and in 2014, for the 69th session of the UN General Assembly, I co-hosted a conference on this issue with Zainab Bangura.

We should be proud of what we have done, notwithstanding the fact that the House wants us to do more. Many other countries have helped to move things forward. We should not see that as a criticism of the UK. It was the intention of the initiative to take others—particularly the Germans—with us. We wanted different countries leading in different areas. I note Germany's particular leadership in Ethiopia as a champion of the PSVI, even pre-dating the current conflict. I will come back to that as an issue.

We will focus on two aims: first, strengthening the pathway to justice for survivors and holding perpetrators to account; and, secondly, particularly on the back of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact report and the development report, improving support to survivors, including talking about the stigma they face and putting them at the centre of developments going forward.

Since the launch in 2012, we have put in more than £48 million. That has funded more than 85 projects across 29 countries. We have trained 17,000 police and military personnel around the world. Since 2012, there have been 90 deployments to a variety of countries. That has slowed down very recently, largely because of covid, but hopefully that will scale up again.

I spoke to Lord Ahmad only last night, and he reflected on his time in Cox's Bazar, where he spoke to a woman who had to repeat her story of rape many, many times over. He was very keen for that not to happen again. Speaking to survivors, and pursuing a survivor-centred and survivor-led approach, as the hon. Member for Rotherham suggests, clearly needs to be at the heart of what we do. That is why, last summer, we launched the Murad code, which serves to be the gold standard. Various other Members have mentioned it and have talked about how they have met the Nobel Laureate Nadia Murad.

Let me tell the House what that code does. It helps investigators, interpreters, policy makers, and politicians to respect the rights and needs of the individuals involved,

and also to make sure that investigations are safer, more ethical and more effective. In addition, Lord Ahmad launched a declaration of humanity by faith leaders and leaders of belief, which is really important. More than 50 organisations have signed up to the declaration, which recognises that children born as a result of sexual violence in conflict are often the most marginalised. They have a difficult legal status and struggle to get into education. It is really important that we recognise that, and we are pushing forward international action through the model framework for the wellbeing of children born of sexual violence. We will work through all international organisations—this debate particularly references the G7, although I shall not go through the list—in which that work will be embedded.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes specifically asked me about the international investigatory body. I must admit that I am more sceptical than he is about the efficacy of putting that body in place. For that to be achieved, a number of obstacles need to be overcome. Certainly, we need to overcome the duplication with existing international architecture. We will need to look at jurisdiction issues and limitations on accessing some sovereign states, particularly in periods of conflict in the middle.

To be frank, despite our efforts, there has been a lack of political will among partner organisations, including the UN and other states, although we were trying to get a band of support together. Also, there are, in the broadest sense, significant resource implications for partners and an opportunity cost to deploying in this way rather than supporting PSVI in a more traditional way. However, we did consult on this proposal, and I have perhaps given my hon. Friend an indication of the some of the things he needs to work on to build support and move things forward through the group.

A number of individuals mentioned Tigray, off the back of the urgent question. I can confirm that we will be deploying the resource in the next few weeks. Resource has been identified in a number of locations, and there are some logistical issues in getting it in the field, but the British Government have been in Tigray. There have been five delegations, our head of development has been there, our ambassador was there this week and the Prime Minister's envoy for famine was there, so there has been a lot of attention. Early on in the crisis, however, there was no access for humanitarian entities, let alone those involved in PSVI. We have directly helped 545 survivors in Tigray and 9,792 people we think are at risk, through partners. We have helped 643 children and provided specialist medical kits, through partners, and materials to 16,488, so while we are not there with the advisers at this time, we will be, and we are already providing support through partner organisations.

I can confirm that, in Lord Ahmad, the Foreign Secretary and me, we will remain champions of the prevention of sexual violence against women. I thank the House for raising this issue and holding the Government to account on this important subject.

4.57 pm

**Anthony Mangnall:** I thank the Minister for his response, because there was a great deal to cover from over the course of this debate. A whole host of issues have been raised by Members with great expertise in different

areas, and all the speeches have managed to inform the House of the severity of the issue and the fact that it is a crisis.

However, I would respectfully say that one of the problems we have when looking at other international organisations is that they have failed to achieve any meaningful prosecutions on this subject. If they are not working, we must try to take the steps forward to ensure that we can lead those prosecutions. It is no good our saying that there are other organisations that have objections, when we know that we can get 156 countries to sign a resolution and we know that we can get international support for what we have done in the past. We have the opportunity to take that leadership and create those new international bodies, because in the wake of every great conflict and crisis in the world, there have always been remarkable institutions and organisations set up in response. Let us be under no illusion: this is a crisis, and it will be a crisis in future conflicts unless we address it.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly said, the UK cannot respond to every single ill and evil in the world, but we stepped forward in 2012. I ask the House: what does it say about us if we do not deliver on the promises of the past to help for the future? That is what I want to see done.

The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), as ever, gave a splendid speech. I think the point about a survivor-led approach is right, and it is rightly reflected in the Murad code—the Minister is completely right—but the point is that the Murad code must be housed in an international organisation that sees that code of conduct deployed in every conflict area in the world but is also enforced by an organisation that can bring perpetrators to justice. Collecting evidence is only one of the pillars of what we must seek to achieve to be able to bring justice against perpetrators and to support survivors.

It has been said that, on Saturday, it is the UN's International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict. In this debate, we have raised a whole host of ideas and thoughts as to what we can do, and I look forward to seeing Members from across the House work with the Government and other Governments to get it right.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the UK's Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative and the G7.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I am now going to suspend the House for one minute, because I will be in trouble if we do not take the necessary precautions.

5 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Miscarriage Research: The Lancet

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

5.1 pm

**Olivia Blake** (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I would like to thank Mr Speaker, through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing parliamentary time on this important topic in this Adjournment debate on miscarriage. I wanted to bring to the Chamber's attention the recent series of papers published in *The Lancet* entitled "Miscarriage matters" and the petition by Tommy's on support for women after miscarriages. The petition currently has over 170,000 signatories.

I know that this topic is often one that is difficult to talk about, but I hope that by giving the Chamber an opportunity to hear some of the experiences and latest research, this debate can act as a catalyst for change for miscarriage services in the upcoming women's health strategy. For too long, miscarriage has been a taboo, and I was disappointed that while the press release on the women's health strategy call for evidence mentioned breaking taboos, it did not mention miscarriages directly—only pregnancy-related issues.

I am so pleased that prominent women, like Meghan Markle and Myleene Klass, have been brave enough to speak and break the taboo about their experiences. Miscarriage is little spoken about but incredibly common. One in four pregnancies is thought to end in miscarriage. The research suggests that 15% of recognised pregnancies around the world end in miscarriage—that is 23 million a year or 44 miscarriages a minute. Black mothers face a 40% higher relative risk than white mothers and the risk of miscarriages is lowest between the ages of 20 and 29, but goes up threefold by 40 and fivefold by 45. Unfortunately, I think that this commonality and the well-known challenges in women's health have meant that services are not always set up in the best interests of women. Miscarriages are often a symptom of an underlying health condition. They should not just be seen as a fact of life, and I am concerned that this attitude speaks to wider gendered inequalities in our society.

I shared my own experience in a Westminster Hall debate last year and I have been overwhelmed by families contacting me to share their experiences. I have heard from women who have never told anyone but their partners that they have experienced a miscarriage and women who have experienced this 30 years ago still carrying the hurt, and now, some are seeing their children going through exactly the same issues. Although I spoke of my loss to highlight the impact of the pandemic, what is clear to me is that, covid or not, there are some huge holes—sometimes voids—in the care provided. Some people are lucky enough to have access to fantastic services and early pregnancy units. Others attend their GPs and others end up at A&E. Unfortunately, some attitudes seem to be very, very prevalent both in society and in some health services.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): May I just say how moved I was—the hon. Lady knows this—by her contribution in Westminster Hall on that day? It moved me to tears. I congratulate her on securing this debate. We should change the way we handle support for miscarriages as a result of that debate. Does she not agree that the threshold of three miscarriages in a row

[Jim Shannon]

for NHS investigation must change, as every miscarriage is devastating and the estimation of an acceptable level of loss is abhorrent?

**Olivia Blake:** I absolutely agree and I will come on to the issue of how care is provided later in the debate.

There seems to be a general lack of understanding that while miscarriage is common it is also incredibly traumatic and can lead to mental health problems. *The Lancet* research series highlights that anxiety, depression and even suicide are strongly associated with going through a miscarriage. Partners are also likely to be affected and previous reports have highlighted links with post-traumatic stress disorder. Despite that, the loss associated with miscarriage can often be minimised with phrases such as, “It’s okay, you can just try again,” or “It just wasn’t meant to be this time.” After my miscarriage, I got into a cycle of blaming myself and obsessing over what went wrong—if I ate the wrong thing, lifted something too heavy and so many other ridiculous thoughts. I have had to have counselling to deal with my trauma, but it was not offered. It was something that I had to seek out myself.

The same cycle has been described back to me again and again and again by people who have experienced miscarriages. My brave constituent Lauren, who has allowed me to share her story today, has sadly suffered three miscarriages. She has never ever been offered any mental health support through the miscarriage pathway. In fact, even after she requested it, her miscarriages were not even recorded on her medical notes, leaving her to explain to five different healthcare professionals about her three miscarriages. On one occasion, a member of staff asked her when she had had her first child. That is clearly incredibly distressing, and why I support calls for better data collection and patient recording of miscarriages.

Women have also told me about suffering three, four and five miscarriages. The reasons found for them were underlying health conditions, such as blood clotting disorders, autoimmune diseases and thyroid disease. Since my miscarriage, I ended up in hospital again and was diagnosed with diabetes, an issue that may have been picked up if testing had been carried out at the time of my miscarriage. The information I have received since my diagnosis of diabetes about pregnancy has been very informative and helpful, and a really stark contrast to those who have to get information about miscarriage.

There are some excellent examples and many, many committed staff who often share the frustrations about the system, which has a hard cut-off of 24 weeks for some support services. We have seen a huge number of organisations stepping forward to fill the gaps in support and advice: Tommy’s, Sands, the Miscarriage Association and, locally in Sheffield, the Sheffield Maternity Cooperative. I spoke with Phoebe from the Cooperative, an experienced midwife who herself has gone through a miscarriage. She works with individuals and families across the city to provide timely, appropriate and sensitive care, after her own experiences were, unfortunately, the exact opposite of that.

So what shall we do? I hope today the Minister will respond to the key findings of *The Lancet* series and to these key asks. The first is that the three-miscarriages

rule has to end. The large number of people who signed the Tommy’s petition shows the strength of feeling on that. We would not expect someone to go through three heart attacks before we tried to find out what was wrong and treat them, so why do we expect women to go through three—in some cases preventable—losses before they are offered the answers and treatments they need? Instead, the research recommends a graded support system where people get information and support after their first miscarriage—we should not phrase it like that, though—tests after the second, and consultant-led care after the third.

The second key ask is 24/7 care and support being available. That care should be standardised to avoid a postcode lottery or the patchy provision currently available, and it should include follow-up mental health support to help to reduce mental illness post miscarriage.

Finally, we need to acknowledge that miscarriage matters and start collecting data on miscarriage, stillbirth and pre-term rates. I was shocked to find that no central data existed on the statistics and these estimates are based on very many different sources. We must break the taboo on miscarriage. I know from personal experience, and from many people who have contacted me, that we could do so, so much better. Will the Minister today commit to take forward these proposals and take a stand for women, individuals and families the system is failing? And will she meet me and campaigners to discuss this issue further?

5.10 pm

**The Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health (Ms Nadine Dorries):** First, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) for how brave she is. She moves everybody to tears when she talks about her story, because it is personally so touching. I responded to her debate the first time in Westminster Hall. So she has not elaborated on her own situation in the way she did then, but she is so incredibly brave to do what she does and to champion women who have suffered from miscarriages. I also want to say that I worked closely with her mother, Judith, at the beginning of the covid outbreak and her mother must be very proud of her. Her mother is a formidable lady, I have the hugest respect for her and I am sure she is incredibly proud of the hon. Lady today.

I thank everybody who has shown a particular interest in this subject, both in the Chamber and in the Westminster Hall debates that have been held. I also thank Tommy’s, in Coventry—for those who might think I am talking about a hospital over the bridge—a charity that does incredible work to support families through their pregnancy journey, including those who sadly miscarry, with funding research centres and specialist clinics to help us understand why pregnancy sometimes goes wrong and how we can prevent complications and loss, and to provide specialist care for those women who need it. Tommy’s petition to improve miscarriage care has drawn a huge amount of support, and I am glad this deeply important issue has the attention it deserves.

The three papers published in *The Lancet* provide an important insight into the prevalence, effects and costs of miscarriage, which is the most common complication of pregnancy, experienced by an estimated one in five women. We know that miscarriage can significantly impact the emotional and psychological wellbeing

of women and their families. It can be extremely isolating for women and their partners, with long-term complications.

Women who have suffered miscarriage are 3.8 times more likely to die by suicide, and it takes only one miscarriage to increase the likelihood of a suicide for a woman. Such difficult experiences should not be faced alone, which is why as part of the NHS long-term plan we are improving the access to and quality of perinatal mental healthcare for mothers and their partners affected by their maternity experience, including miscarriage.

Mental health services around England are being expanded to include new mental health hubs for new, expectant or bereaved mothers. The hubs will offer treatment to about 6,000 women in the first year for a range of mental health issues, from post-traumatic stress disorder after miscarrying or giving birth, to a fear of childbirth. The new hubs will also provide specialist training for midwives and other maternity staff, as well as reproductive health and bereavement services.

The series in *The Lancet* highlights the unacceptable inequalities in women's chances of having a miscarriage; for example, black women have a 40% increased relative risk of miscarriage compared with white women. It also provides evidence of the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle before conception and during pregnancy for all women, to reduce the risk of miscarriage. Women who smoke in the first trimester are 1.2 times more likely to have a miscarriage than non-smokers. Women with a low body mass index, under 18.5, are 1.6 times more likely to miscarry and those with a BMI of 30 are 1.9 times more likely to do so. This is the information that we know.

The NHS is open for all, and no woman should feel that they cannot seek help. The earlier women come forward during their pregnancy, the easier it is for the NHS to make sure that they receive the right support to reduce the risks. A pregnancy lasts about 40 weeks, but a lifetime approach is needed to address some of the reasons why some women are at more risk than others. Tackling health inequalities and levelling up society is a priority.

While there is still more to do, good progress has been made to improve maternity safety and achieve our national maternity safety ambition. Since 2010, the stillbirth rate has fallen by 25%. Some 98,000 women now receive care from the same midwife team throughout their maternity journey—so-called continuity of care—which is up from 10,000 women in March 2019, and this was throughout covid as well. This helps to reduce baby loss, pre-term births, hospital admissions and the need for intervention during labour, and to improve women's experiences. It is so important that the voices of women, including those who have suffered miscarriages, are heard. That is why I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, because here in this place she champions those voices.

In March, I announced that the Government are embarking on the first women's health strategy for England—something that I was absolutely committed to start and finish when I first became a Minister in the Department for Health. This strategy is first and foremost about listening to women's voices. The call for evidence recently closed, and we have seen an incredible response. Over 112,000 women from across the country came forward to share their experiences in the online survey. The call for evidence specifically asked about women's experiences with fertility, pregnancy and baby loss, which

is such an important area of women's health. We are analysing responses closely to make sure that the strategy reflects what women identify as their priorities, and we will consider the recommendations made in the *Lancet* series as part of this work.

I am looking forward to visiting Tommy's National Centre for Miscarriage Research in Coventry myself in the coming months. Its research into the causes of miscarriage and search for solutions and treatment are incredibly valuable. I look forward to meeting the authors of the *Lancet* papers and talking to some of the patients to hear about their experiences of miscarriage and miscarriage care. I would like to extend an offer to meet the hon. Lady so that we can discuss this issue further too. Every miscarriage is a tragedy and it is only right that parents are supported through difficult times.

The hon. Lady asked particularly about the recommendations that were made, so I will go through them and what I am doing about each one. Recommendation 1 was to

“ensure that designated miscarriage services are available 24/7 to all, taking into account local conditions and resources.”

I am including recommendation 1 in the women's health strategy as part of the work that we are doing specifically about those issues.

Recommendation 2 says:

“Treatment and care must be standardised and equitable. Appropriate care must be given to everyone after 1, 2 and 3 miscarriages in line with a ‘graded model’ of care.”

I am not putting that into the women's health strategy because, as a Minister and not an obstetrician or a gynaecologist, I do not decide what the guidelines or the recommendations are on miscarriage. We are politicians, so we look to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, which is reviewing the guidelines regarding recurrent miscarriages and is expected to publish that review later this year. I am sure that it will include the findings of the *Lancet* papers. I hope that the recommendations will also be taken into account in the review of the guidelines.

Recommendation 3 is:

“To acknowledge that miscarriage matters to parents and take steps to record every miscarriage in England.”

The story of the hon. Lady's friend was disturbing, and recording and data are so important, so I am putting that recommendation into the women's health strategy to be part of our review.

On the women's health strategy, the 112,000 responses was a huge number and it will take some time to get all those responses together and group them into the areas in which people have responded, and then in each of those areas take forward our policy recommendations. So I have asked for both those recommendations to go into the section on miscarriages, paternity, baby loss and pregnancy. I hope that the hon. Lady is happy with that. It is incredibly important that we get it right, and to get it right we need the recommendations to be fully evaluated. I look forward to going to Tommy's so that I can talk to people further about this.

The national bereavement care pathway was developed with this in mind, to improve bereavement care and reduce variation in the care that families receive after miscarriage. I believe that 63% of England's trusts are now fully signed up and all those that remain have formally expressed an interest in the project that Tommy's

*[Ms Nadine Dorries]*

has run. The hon. Lady is absolutely right in what she says about the response. I am really impressed with the 112,000 women who have taken the time to respond to our women's health strategy, and I believe that Tommy's must be equally impressed with the response that it has had from women. Women are really standing up and making their voices heard, because projects such as these are giving them the opportunity to do so.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to urge those women who have suffered a miscarriage: help the NHS to help you. Please do not suffer in silence. Please reach out and seek support, and the first place to do that is with your GP or in the hospital where you receive care.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I would like to thank the Minister for the sensitive way in which she has responded to the great courage that the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) has shown in bringing this subject to the Chamber. Most of us have never dared to raise these matters here because we know the reaction that we would previously have got, but now we have made a difference, and the hon. Lady and the Minister have made a big difference today in treating this matter with the seriousness it deserves here in this Chamber.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.21 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

Thursday 17 June 2021

[MRS SHERYLL MURRAY *in the Chair*]

## BACKBENCH BUSINESS

### Covid: Vitamin D

*Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 25 February).*

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

1.30 pm

**Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair):** I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in Westminster Hall to support the new hybrid arrangements. Timings of debates have been amended to allow technical arrangements to be made for the next debate. There will be a suspension between each debate. I remind Members participating, physically and virtually, that they must arrive for the start of a debate in Westminster Hall and are expected to remain for the entire debate.

I must remind Members participating virtually that they must leave their camera on for the duration of the debate and that they will be visible at all times, both to each other and to us in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email [westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk](mailto:westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk). Members attending physically should clean their spaces before using them and before leaving the room. I also remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall. There are no people in the Gallery. I call Jim Shannon.

1.31 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the value of vitamin D as a defence against covid-19 infection.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. As so often happens, this is one of the debates that I applied for ages ago, and then they all come. I have a debate next Tuesday as well, which has been around for some time, but it is always a pleasure to speak in Westminster Hall. I love Westminster Hall. I love this place and I love speaking in the Chamber. I love the ritual, the tradition, the history, and how things are done. It is great to be a part of it and I feel very privileged. I know other Members feel that as well.

I am pleased to see all my friends here. I have many friends in this place—at least, I hope I have. It is always good to see the Scottish National party and the Labour party's shadow spokespersons in their place. The hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) and I often debate here together. It is wonderful to see you in your place as well, Mrs Murray. I look forward to a constructive and good time.

I am pleased, as always, to see the Minister in her place. I say that every day, but that is not to say that I mean it any less. I genuinely look forward to her response and to what we can do. Other Members who I had hoped would be here have various other things to do, perhaps something to do with the by-election in Chesham and Amersham or whatever. People who perhaps had hoped to be here, unfortunately, are not, and we have to accept that and move ahead.

On this debate on vitamin D, other right hon. and hon. Members have a greater knowledge than I do, and perhaps if they had been available today their contributions would have greatly enhanced the debate and the conversation.

Vitamin D could well play a role in the immune response to respiratory viruses and could potentially mitigate the inflammatory response. I want to put that on the record at the beginning. I also want to declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for respiratory health, which I have a particular interest in. I have chaired it for some time and we did an inquiry last year. Hugh McKinney does the admin and helps me greatly in the job that I do and the role that I play in the inquiry, and in the launch of its results and conclusions. I look forward to the year ahead.

I also want to place on the record my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this debate. I also thank those who have met with me and written to me in recent months on this subject, all motivated by deep concern about the shocking toll that covid-19 has had on so many families, my own included. Right hon. and hon. Members will know that I lost my mother-in-law in October last year to covid-19. It came very quickly. I think very few families have not been touched by covid-19 and have not lost family members as a result. It has been in every corner of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The covid-19 pandemic sent shockwaves through societies around the world. As we gradually move towards life in a post-pandemic society, many questions will be asked as we consider the impacts of the disease on our communities and economies. Last night, I personally voted with the Government on the two motions that came before the House, because I believe—we have this saying, as I am sure you do, Mrs Murray—it is better to be safe than sorry. I think it is better for us to be more cautious and take the extra four weeks, and then I hope we can relax some of the regulations on 19 July and move out from there.

Some of the questions that will be asked will be difficult. What made the world so vulnerable, and why were so many people ill-prepared? I say people, but it was probably Governments that were ill-prepared. Predictability is one factor that was missing from this pandemic, and I understand that only too well. With previous outbreaks of swine and avian influenzas, there were key links to the ecologies of poultry and pig farming in certain nations, but nobody predicted the Ebola outbreak in west Africa in 2013 or indeed the Zika virus outbreak in South America in 2015.

I believe it can be said that covid-19 was the major global pandemic that the world expected to happen at some stage, and yet no country was prepared, ready or equipped to fight it as perhaps they could have been. I am ever mindful of the fact that this time last year—indeed, as far back as March last year—it was hard to know what was the right thing to do because of the uncertainty over how covid-19 would react and the number of people who were being diagnosed with, and dying from, the disease. It is always very difficult to find a strategy right away, but I think perhaps we should have been a wee bit more prepared to respond in a good way.

Many lessons have been learned, and I know that we are all learning. I am a great believer in the saying, "I learn something new every day." Anyone who is of an

[Jim Shannon]

inquisitive nature, as of course I am, wants to learn things so they can use them in the life they lead, as I do here as an MP, or when I deal with constituents back home in the office. Covid-19 first emerged from Wuhan in 2019, but it is important that we now focus on what needs to change in order to mitigate future harms, especially with respect to the most vulnerable, who have paid the biggest price in this pandemic.

I am greatly encouraged by the vaccine roll-out and the number of people who have taken advantage of it. It has been an absolute success story for our Government and for our Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi). Every region of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has benefited from the vaccine roll-out, and in Northern Ireland we are taking vast steps towards the inoculation of almost all the adult population with both doses. I had my last one in May, and my wife has had hers. My sons are 32, 30 and 28, and they and their wives have had theirs, so we are moving down into the younger category.

Robin Swann, the Northern Ireland Assembly Health Minister, is doing an absolutely superb job. The Secretary of State for Health often refers to the meetings that he has once, twice or three times a week with Robin Swann, and to their very close working relationship. I think we, as a nation, owe a debt to our Secretary of State for Health and to the Health Minister in Northern Ireland. There has also been co-operation with Scotland and Wales. We are better today because we have co-operated. I do not say that in a political way, but it really does show how the great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can work better together to deliver for everyone equally, wherever they may be.

Compared with February 2020, where we stand today with the treatment of covid-19 has completely changed thanks to fast-developing treatments resulting from the incredible work of scientific researchers who successfully uncovered the viral sequence of SARS-CoV-2 during the early stages of the outbreak in January 2020. Every one of us is overawed by our scientists' ability to find a vaccine. They worked hard at that, and our Government committed to buying the vaccine even before we knew it was going to be successful. That was visionary of the Government, and I am greatly impressed by their commitment. While the rest of Europe dallied and were not sure what to do, our Minister and our Government here were getting the vaccine and preparing for it.

Fewer people who go into hospital with the virus today are guaranteed to end up in an intensive care unit or on ventilation. The largest vaccination distribution programme in medical and scientific history has been developed in just one year. What a feat that has been for our scientists, the health service and the Government and Ministers here and across all the regions. That was no mean feat, when we consider that it took four years to develop the mumps vaccine. At that time, four years was considered a speedy process. That happened in my lifetime, and that was how long it took to make it happen. This vaccine was developed in six months—wow! Is that not an incredible feat of medical science? The scientists were able to do that, and our Government and Ministers worked alongside them, close together in partnership, to make it happen.

I pay tribute to all the scientists who began working on the vaccine as far back as February 2020, before the virus became a global pandemic, and to the clinical trial volunteers, who risked their own health—they were not sure—to take something that was only experimental for the benefit of others. I also pay tribute to our Government officials, who negotiated around the usual years-long red tape and bureaucratic processes involved with vaccine development to fast-track this life-saving vaccine without compromising public safety. I admire the people who became the guinea pigs—perhaps that is the way to put it—for the vaccine. They enabled us to receive it in the knowledge that it was safe. They have all shaped science in just over one year. That is an incredible result, for which we should give thanks.

We are gradually moving towards the post-pandemic world, but we know we are not completely in the clear yet, and it will take a while to get there. While the vaccine works its wonders around the world, we still rely on treatments for covid-19 that help to reduce the need for hospital admission and make the stay in hospital sooner and shorter for those who need to be admitted.

I believe in what the Minister, the vaccines Minister and the Prime Minister have said: we are not all safe until everyone has had the vaccine. The Government's duty is to our own people and our country, but they also have the duty to ensure vaccines are spread across the world. The Prime Minister said that yesterday at Prime Minister's questions, and the Government have committed to billions of vaccines. The G7 gave us an opportunity to reinforce that. I have no doubt that many other countries across the world, including the United States and other countries in Europe and the western world are committed to doing that.

The use of remdesivir and corticosteroids—dexamethasone and hydrocortisone—has become part of the standard treatment across the world and continues to improve patient recovery, but, as I have said, we need to mitigate future harms. One of the ways to do that could be through the use of vitamin D—as the title of this debate suggests—against the virus, and I want to raise awareness of that. Many of the people I have spoken to are clear that vitamin D could have a role. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) has been clear in his commitment to the plusses of vitamin D, and I think that is good.

At the start of this pandemic, a good friend of mine who has a nutritional degree warned staff in the office to start taking vitamin D, and I conveyed that to my own staff in my office. "Build yourselves up," he told us, "to give your body the chance to fight at its fittest," and he has been proven to be absolutely right. Vitamin D has several very important functions, the most vital of which is facilitating a normal and healthy immune system and resistance to certain diseases. Vitamin D was found by one particular study to be effective in regulating the mood and decreasing levels of anxiety and depression. We have had a very difficult year. The Minister responded to a debate yesterday, which I participated in as well, about the mental health of children and young people. She spoke very well in summing up. I think every one of us realises that high levels of anxiety and depression are prevalent among not just adults but children. Can vitamin D help with that? There is some evidence that it can, which is something that we should pursue.

The study found that people suffering from depression noted an improvement in their symptoms by taking vitamin D supplements, so it is easy to understand why it is often called the sunshine drug. It is not because the sun shines, but because it perhaps lifts the mood. Many of us feel that we're bit better every day when the sun shines. It gives our spirits a lift. By the looks of yourself, Mrs Murray, you have been getting a bit of sun down in your neck of the woods, and you will feel better for it.

As with any vitamin, however, it works most effectively when there is a deficiency. We get the most out of a vitamin if our body is deprived of it, and we will see the changes fairly early if we really need it, so if our body responds positively to vitamin D it is clearly of benefit. I was once told, "If your cup is full of tea and more tea is poured in, that isn't useful as the tea will of course pour over the edges." It is all about balance, and vitamin D gives that to those who need it, and gives them a lift.

Vitamin D deficiency is affecting an increasing number of people, mostly due to lifestyle and increased time spent indoors. My goodness, I am one of those who is not entirely convinced whether working from home is always the best. It is an opinion, and I try not to impress any of my opinions or thoughts upon other people, but I give that as an observation. The routine that we all need of going to work is probably good. If someone sits in a house all day that cannot be good. There is also the use of sunscreens, living in larger cities where sunlight is blocked, and having darker skin, because the higher the level of melanin the less vitamin D can be absorbed. I am very fortunate that I have lived in the countryside or small villages all my life. I have never had to live in the city. I do not mean this offensively to anybody who lives in London, but I have no wish to live in London or any of the big cities. I am very happy to be where I am.

Given our lifestyle over the past year, it would not be surprising to discover that a good number of us lost some level of vitamin D from our system, because if we do those things our vitamin D levels will be down and we will need to enhance them. We spent months living a very abnormal lifestyle as we heeded the message to stay at home and stay indoors, allowed only one session of exercise a day at the peak of the pandemic. Think back to those weeks and months between March and July last year and recall the empty streets, parks and beaches during the day because everyone was staying inside or around their house—our elderly folk in care homes even more so.

Our nature is to want to talk to each other; we are elected representatives because we want to engage with people, and we do so better when we are as close as we are now, or even closer over a cup of coffee, than when we are in a Zoom meeting. Zoom meetings had a role to play. They helped us to connect with people over the past 12 months in a way that I certainly never had before. Technologically I have probably advanced, but certainly not as far as my grandchildren, who are young. My level of capability is not very high. Zoom played its part, but it did not do all that we wanted.

Let us think back to those weeks and months between March and July last year. We all agree that that was not a normal way for us to live for any period of time, let alone for months. Because vitamin D is produced in the skin through exposure to the sun, it adds weight to the case that levels of anxiety and depression rose among people not just because of the impact of the pandemic

in other areas of our lives, but simply because we were spending so much time indoors, out of the sunlight, for such a long period of time.

Some people, like myself, were fortunate to live in the countryside, where they were able to go for a walk every night. We were lucky because we had some of the best weather we have had for such a long time between March and July.

Most of us have heard of the condition seasonal affective disorder, better known as SAD, where, during the winter months, reduced sunlight can lower our levels of serum 25(OH)D, causing depression-like symptoms in some people. Various studies have shown that taking vitamin D supplements can improve the symptoms of that disorder.

Some foresight was lacking at the beginning of lockdown in 2020. In hindsight, it would have been a good idea back then to suggest that people got as much sunlight as possible, whether that was sitting by an open window or out in the garden where possible, or took vitamin D supplements if those options were not available.

Although the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence reported that there was insufficient data to recommend the use of vitamin D or calcifediol as a defence against or treatment for covid-19 infection, several recent studies have produced evidence that offer more hopeful results. I want to give some of the evidential base today.

An observational study carried out from March to May 2020 at Hospital del Mar in Barcelona tested 838 patients admitted with covid-19, of which 447 were given 530 micrograms of vitamin D on day one and 266 micrograms on days three, seven, 15 and 30. The other 391 patients were not given that treatment on admission. Of the 447 patients treated with vitamin D when they were admitted to hospital, just 20 needed assistance from ICU, compared with 82 of the non-treated 391 patients. The findings go further, and report that just 21 out of 447 patients treated with vitamin D died from covid-19, compared with 62 of the 391 non-treated patients. I suggest that we have an evidential base, from the trials and tests that were done at Hospital del Mar in Barcelona, that proves the benefit of vitamin D. When patients with covid-19 infections were treated with vitamin D on admission, it significantly reduced the need for ICU admission and more of them survived.

Other research has shown that those who experienced acute respiratory failure with covid-19 had high rates of vitamin D deficiency. I am particularly interested in the subject. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on respiratory health, I take a deep interest in these issues. Although these are small, randomised studies, they provide a credible level of data and evidence showing that the lack of vitamin D is a factor in rates of ICU admission and mortalities. We need to look further for evidence that vitamin D deficiency plays a role in the mortality rate from covid-19 infection and consider sensitively why this virus has been so devastating for our black and minority ethnic communities here in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

A peer-reviewed article published in 2018 in BMC Pediatrics reported that vitamin D deficiency was on the rise almost exclusively among black, Asian and minority

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ethnic groups. A clear section of the community need help and support, and awareness needs to be raised on the need to take vitamin D.

The University of Birmingham supported the study, also reporting that the national diet and nutrition survey concluded that nearly half the UK's population were vitamin D-deficient, with BAME groups in Britain and throughout northern Europe observed to be most at risk due to the fact that darker skins produce far less vitamin D. Also—I say this most respectfully—the observance of cultural traditions that require the wearing of clothing from head to foot results in a lack of skin exposure to sunlight on a daily basis.

In Northern Ireland, and maybe in Scotland as well—the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) will speak shortly—we do not get much of the sun, and when it does come, we tend to take advantage of it to the point where we burn. The point I am making is that those with ginger hair might find that they are unable to accept the sun. We have the first grandchild I am aware of in our family who has ginger hair. I am not sure if any family member has been ginger-haired before, but we have one now, so we will have to protect Max more from the sunshine than the rest of us. It is always good to be ready.

I made the previous point out of sensitivity. If we are to recognise this health matter, it must be taken into account. The most important source of vitamin D is sunlight, because so little is contained in food. I am not sure whether this is something that can be done—I am sure we will understand that from the Minister's response—but it might be something to consider. The lack of vitamin D has a severe impact on children's growth, so will she acknowledge the findings of the national diet and nutritional survey, perhaps in conjunction with the Department for Education, and ensure that our children and adolescents receive vitamin D supplements every day?

One thing I remember from school—I remember many things, although it is quite a long time ago—is that we had a bottle of milk every morning when we were at school. That goes back to the '60s in my case. I remember it because it was important for us at that time to have the supplementation and the goodness that came in milk. Times have changed a wee bit, so we might now get the goodness, nourishment and benefit that comes out of vitamin D.

Where vitamin D is concerned, our supplementation policies and implementation strategies need to be updated urgently, especially now that rates of covid-19 infection have begun to increase with the delta variant. In yesterday evening's debate, the Minister for Health, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), said that

“we must learn to live with this disease”.—[*Official Report*, 16 June 2021; Vol. 697, c. 388.]

That is my opinion as well. I get the flu jab every September or October, because I am a diabetic, which is one of the chronic diseases. I will probably get the covid-19 booster jab at the same time as that next year. We have got to learn to live with such things. Over the next four weeks or so, with the delay to the relaxation moving to 19 July, we will see how well that works.

Vitamin D supplementation must be adopted through an evidence-based strategy, and we have sound evidence-based findings from the University College London Institute of Health Informatics. The information confirmed that the death rate from covid-19 was about two to three times higher for BAME groups in England than for the general population. We have a really big job to do to look after that section of the community. We must raise awareness, perhaps with a strategy, and sometimes we need to involve community leaders, whether those be leaders of churches or community groups. There are many good people out there who want to help. I believe that if we can get them all together, we can do something.

With those tragic figures to which the University of London referred, we can see the sense in vitamin D being an effective way to mitigate future harm to our BAME communities from covid-19 infection. Can we prevent further loss of life on such a scale by prescribing for those who have been most vulnerable to the virus a simple but effective programme of vitamin D supplementation? That might sound simplistic, but there is an evidential base for the benefit that could be gained.

If that is something that can be done at small cost, with great benefits—as I believe them to be—it should be done. Will the Minister who is present today look—as I know she has—at the evidential base and the research? Will her Department be prepared to look at raising awareness among those in the community, and the BAME community in particular, across the whole of the United Kingdom, where responsibility lies, and perhaps to commit to new funding or investment, or talking in partnership with those who are involved in further research into unlocking the benefits of vitamin D as a defence against covid-19 infection?

I will conclude by saying that I believe this research is necessary—indeed, absolutely crucial—if we are to determine whether vitamin D can play an effective role in the prevention and even the treatment of covid-19 infection on a broader scale. I say that because the Government have proven, working alongside all the regional Administrations across our United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, that if we work together, we can, first, be stronger together and, secondly, be effective together. As I say, when it comes to looking at the treatment of covid-19 infection on a broader scale, we need to do that. We should also be very aware of the issue of vitamin D deficiency in the community, and the consequences for those who are vulnerable.

I believe that my job, and the job of all of us as elected representatives, is to represent our people well. I believe that every MP does that job well and we have a responsibility to do it well. One of the things that I have always been willing to do, all my life, is to help people, and I am very fortunate that I have had some 35 or 36 years to do that. Although we are able to pull off some great things sometimes and have some wonderful success stories, there are some times that may not be as easy. However, I believe that here we have an example of what we can do to do things better, and it is something that we can do better together.

2.1 pm

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): As always, Mrs Murray, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair.

I congratulate, very warmly and sincerely, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing today's debate. As I have done in many of the debates about coronavirus, I pay tribute to the countless NHS doctors, nurses and staff for all their hard work throughout the pandemic. I also pay tribute to our Armed Forces, who have stepped up so magnificently during the vaccination programme, and in doing so I will also mention the many volunteers at vaccine centres. The huge success of the vaccination programme would not be possible without their dedication and hard work.

In Scotland, 64.6% of the entire population have had their first dose and 45.2% have had both doses. Indeed, in the past seven days alone 5.8% of Scotland has received a dose and we are currently administering an average of 45,000 new vaccinations per day. That is a tremendous feat by all involved and I am so thankful to everyone who has stepped up, booked their vaccination appointments, rolled up their sleeves and had their jab. If I may, I pay tribute to Ravia, who vaccinated me in Glasgow mosque just a few weeks ago.

The vaccination programme offers a light at the end of the tunnel. With more people being vaccinated every day, I think that we are nearing the end of an incredibly difficult period and I agree with the hon. Member for Strangford about how challenging it has been.

Various reports have outlined the importance of vitamin D in the immune response to respiratory viruses and suggested that potentially it can mitigate the inflammatory response. We know that vitamin D is important for our wider health, and that it helps to regulate the amount of calcium and phosphate in the body. Those nutrients are needed to keep bones, teeth and muscles healthy.

Across the UK, most people should receive sufficient vitamin D from sunlight between March and September. However, it is very common for people not to produce enough vitamin D between October and March. In addition, due to the various necessary lockdowns it is inevitable that many people have spent more time inside over the past year. As a result, they may be in need of additional vitamin D supplements.

In order for us to be as healthy as possible, which will help us all to fight covid, it is vital that everyone receives enough vitamin D. So, during the pandemic the Scottish Government offered everyone on the shielding list a free four-month supply of vitamin D from December 2020. Around 71,500 people opted to receive a supply, which was sent to their home from the week commencing 23 November.

However, the Scottish Government's recognition of the importance of vitamin D to everyone's health and wellbeing has not been confined to the pandemic. Indeed, the Scottish National party Government have recognised the significance of vitamin D for years. For example, since 2017 the Scottish Government have made vitamin D supplements available as part of the Healthy Start vitamins provided free of cost to all pregnant women. In addition, breastfeeding women and children under 12 months in Scotland can get free vitamin D supplements containing the recommended daily amount. The current advice in Scotland is clear that everyone should consider taking a daily supplement of vitamin D, particularly during the winter months.

The hon. Member for Strangford touched on the fact that perhaps we do not get the good weather. It is always a bit terrifying in Scotland when the good weather

appears and people adopt what we call the "taps off" approach. There is a balance to be sought between keeping a certain amount of clothing on in the good weather and the taps off approach. As someone whose daughter has ginger hair, I would certainly acknowledge the difficulties that those with ginger hair might have.

It is specifically recommended that groups at high risk of vitamin D deficiency take daily supplements all year round. That includes pregnant and breastfeeding women, infants and children under five, and people who have low or no exposure to the sun. The hon. Member for Strangford was right to touch on this. Particularly people from minority ethnic groups with darker skin require more sun exposure to make vitamin D.

The Scottish Government have recognised that vitamin D is hugely important to our health and wellbeing as a whole, which will in turn help us fight covid-19. It is vital that we take all necessary steps to combat the virus, from continuing to wear masks and taking the vaccine—once offered, obviously—to, if possible, increasing our vitamin D intake. It is also important for our health all year round. The significance of taking vitamin D supplements should not be confined to battling covid-19, but should be seen as part of a holistic view of our health and wellbeing. I think many of us underestimate the importance of vitamin D, particularly during the winter months, which might have an impact on our health. For that reason I support the Government's policies to provide free vitamin D supplements to pregnant and breastfeeding women, and children under 12.

The pandemic has made many of us reassess our own health and wellbeing, with many of us increasingly thankful that we ourselves and our loved ones are healthy. Vitamin D can play an important role in keeping ourselves and our loved ones healthy, particularly in battling coronavirus and other respiratory diseases. It has been my pleasure to be able to take part in this afternoon's debate.

2.7 pm

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Murray, for the second time today. Aren't you lucky to hear from me twice! I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate, and on the characteristically thoughtful argument that he set out. As he said, he and I do a lot of debates together, and as so often, I found myself agreeing with lots of what he said. However, the congratulations were not universal in my household as it is my wedding anniversary, and Emma was hoping I would be home sooner. So I congratulate him, but she reserves her congratulations, I am afraid.

I also want to congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his chairship of the all-party group for respiratory health. It is a really important issue, certainly for communities like mine, and for communities up and down the country it is right that we champion that in Parliament as best we can. He raised two points that stuck with me. The first was on pandemic preparation. As he said, we cannot predict the future—we wish that we could; it would be a lot easier—but the one thing we do know is that the best preparation for anything, certainly when it comes to significant global events that affect us so enormously, is good health, and vitamin D is an important part of that. Secondly, he spoke about

[Alex Norris]

therapeutics—when people end up in hospital, how can we best improve their outcomes? I will explore some of those points briefly myself.

It is a crucial task to evaluate all aspects of this awful pandemic to see what we can do best to tackle it. Some 128,000 of our countrymen and women have lost their lives, resulting in an awful lot of broken hearts, and we would do anything to stop there being any more. That is why debates such as this are so important. We should be cheered that the vaccination roll-out continues to be successful—80% of adults have had their first dose—but no vaccine ever provides 100% protection, so any other possible methods to protect or treat covid-19 should be considered.

It is striking that yesterday, exactly a year since low-dose steroid treatment was found to successfully combat the virus in some cases, another life-saving treatment was discovered, in the form of artificial antibodies—a treatment expected to save six lives for every 100 patients treated. The prospect of vitamin D as a preventive measure and a treatment should be duly considered, particularly as it is cheap and widely available.

The hon. Member for Strangford touched on the evidence base in his contribution. Last December, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence issued guidelines that said

“there was little evidence for using vitamin D supplements to prevent or treat COVID-19.”

In terms of prevention, NICE found that

“low vitamin D status was associated with more severe outcomes from COVID-19.”

For instance, in an audit of covid-19 patients in hospital in Newcastle, only one in five intensive care unit patients had vitamin D levels that would be considered adequate for overall health, contrasted with two in five non-ITU patients.

However, there is much still to understand about whether that is a genuinely causal relationship or a correlating one. In its assessment, the *British Medical Journal* said it may at least be partially due to correlations between vitamin D levels and other risk factors, such as age, genetics and obesity. Clearly, the evidence base is still developing. I would be interested to hear from the Minister about the latest information that she knows and how we might develop that evidence base going forward. For example, the Barcelona study that was mentioned was new to me, so I will certainly look that up.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) made strong points about the fact that, outside covid-19, vitamin D levels are an important area for us to focus on in this country. Vitamin D is important to keep bones, teeth and muscles healthy. We know that in this country the right levels of vitamin D are not being routinely met; I wonder if I might fall into that category. Some studies suggest that one in five Brits have vitamin D levels lower than in concentrations necessary for general health, but due to our climate—we all know this; we have enjoyed our one week of summer and it seems like it might be coming to an end—that rises to two in five in winter. In fact, we are one of the most vitamin D deficient countries in Europe. We should recognise that when considering general good health.

As colleagues have said, the deficiency is notably unequal and staggeringly high among certain communities. For instance, in the UK over 50% of those from an Asian background are severely vitamin D deficient, leaving them particularly vulnerable to musculoskeletal disorders. Since 2016, Public Health England has recommended that everyone over five takes a 10 mcg vitamin supplement in the winter months, but that does not seem to be gripping quite yet, either in its practice or its adherence, as the rise in Victorian diseases such as rickets confirms.

We should come together across the UK to do much more to boost vitamin D levels. I would be interested to hear the Government’s latest thinking on the idea of vitamin D fortification in the UK, a solution that would provide a boost to public health.

To conclude, much more research needs to be done on assessing the value of vitamin D as a defence against covid-19. We need every tool we can get, so that is the right thing to do. However, we know that the value of vitamin D more widely is significant and there is more we can do to ensure that that is a feature of our population’s health. That is something we could all come together to do.

2.13 pm

**The Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health (Ms Nadine Dorries):** It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray, I think for the first time. I offer my warm congratulations to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate. I am sure if he had not secured it, he would have contributed to another debate in here this afternoon. I intended to say this yesterday, but I did not get the chance: I would like to send my warm and best wishes to the hon. Gentleman’s mother. He will know why I am saying that. It is a delight to be here today to respond to him.

I will try to respond directly to all the points that were made today, if not specifically then more broadly, but I am always here if hon. Members want to ask me for more specific details. We consistently review the data and the latest information as it emerges on covid-19. Our objectives are to ensure that people are not made adversely ill by covid-19 and that as many people as possible stay out of hospital, off ventilators and improve as quickly as possible.

That includes the progress we have seen in treatments for those suffering with the virus, including longer-term preventive measures, such as our strategy to reduce obesity, which we know is one of the few modifiable factors of covid-19, and the implementation of the vaccination programme.

Some 78.9% of adults in the UK have now received the first dose of the covid-19 vaccine, and 56.6% have received the second dose. Everyone who has spoken, including the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), and the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), has congratulated volunteers and those who have run and operated the vaccine programme across the UK, and I add my congratulations. It has been phenomenal, and we have much to be thankful for. I am sure that everyone will join me in acknowledging the dedication of volunteers who have answered the clarion call and turned up. I think the hon. Member for Glasgow East said—it may

have been yesterday—that they have donned the vest and got out there, and they are still doing those jobs. That is just amazing.

Since the start of the pandemic, there have been reports that vitamin D may reduce the risk of coronavirus. I have to sound a note of caution here because, when looking at the data and the evidence, we cannot cherry-pick the odd report here and there. I am not accusing anyone of doing that, but we have to take a more robust view of the data and look at it in the round.

I will pick up on the points that the hon. Member for Strangford made about BAME communities. To date, the UK Biobank's most robust data on covid, vitamin D and ethnicity has not found a link between vitamin D concentration and ethnicity that could reduce covid-19 infections. There was no link, sadly. It would really be encouraging for us if the data showed that vitamin D prevented people from catching covid—that would be quite amazing—and we are certainly working on and searching for that data, but we do not have it yet.

On 14 January, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), responded to a debate on this matter, in which the hon. Member for Strangford also participated. I welcome the opportunity to debate it further and set out the measures that we are delivering. As my hon. Friend said:

“Several nutrients are involved in the normal functioning of the immune system; however, there is currently insufficient evidence that taking vitamin D will mitigate the effects of covid-19.”—[*Official Report*, 14 January 2021; Vol. 687, c. 597.]

Last December, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition, and Public Health England published rapid guidance in response to the queries that the hon. Member for Strangford and others have raised on vitamin D in relation to covid-19. The data was reviewed by an expert panel and included the best available scientific evidence published to date, including both randomised controlled trials and observational studies. The expert panel supported existing Government advice and the recommendation for everyone to take 10 mcg of vitamin D supplement throughout the autumn and winter to protect their bone and muscle health. However, the panel concluded that there is currently not enough evidence available to support taking vitamin D to prevent or treat covid-19.

There are still significant gaps in the current evidence, as was the case in January. To date, studies have not reached the high level of data quality required to revise the guidance. The current evidence base is mixed and dominated by low-quality studies, with substantial concerns around bias and confounding evidence. There are lots of studies out there, but some of them do not have the quality and the robustness of data and evidence that are required.

Currently, studies are unable to demonstrate a causal relationship between vitamin D and covid-19 for anyone. That is because many of the risk factors for severe covid-19 outcomes are the same as the risk factors for low vitamin D status. Owing to the lack of reliable evidence, the NICE guidance recommends that more research be conducted on the subject. Government guidance continues to stress the use of high-quality randomised control trials in future studies.

At present, more than 90 trials that are looking at the efficacy of vitamin D as an intervention for covid-19 across all stages of the disease are either under way or due to publish, either in the UK or internationally. Given that 90 trials are currently under way, possibly—hopefully—the evidence and data that we require will come our way soon. I would be really disappointed if those 90 trials do not give us the evidence we want. Let us hope that they do.

Some of the trials are of the high quality that we require to produce the data, and will answer key questions. NICE, PHE and the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition are monitoring new evidence from trials as it becomes available.

The long-standing Government advice is that, every year, between October and early March, everyone is advised to take a supplement containing 10 mcg—400 international units—of vitamin D a day. Vitamin D helps to regulate the amount of calcium and phosphate in the body and to protect bone and muscle health. In April and autumn 2020, PHE reiterated the advice and also ran a public awareness campaign throughout December 2020. That had a specific focus on BAME communities, where vitamin D supplementation is important.

Vitamin D is made in the skin when exposed to sunlight during the spring and summer months and the PHE advice to continue taking vitamin D supplements is therefore particularly important for those who were shielding, care home residents and prisoners, as well as those who choose to cover most of their skin when outdoors, as these groups are likely to have reduced sunlight exposure. Importantly, individuals with dark skin are more at risk of not having enough vitamin D and are advised to take the 10 mcg of vitamin D supplements all year round.

We have actively supported the uptake of the PHE recommendations. Over winter 2020-21, the Government provided a free four-month supply of daily vitamin D supplements to adults on the clinically extremely vulnerable list who had opted to receive the supplements, all residents in residential and nursing care homes in England, and the prison population, where Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service made supplements available across England and Wales.

The Government prioritised groups that were asked to stay indoors more than usual over spring and summer 2020 due to national restrictions. The supplements were provided to help support their general health and, in particular, bone and muscle health.

Recipients of the Healthy Start scheme are also offered supplements containing vitamin D by the Government. Guidance on vitamin D can be found online, and we encourage individuals to buy 10 mcg vitamin D supplements from retailers such as supermarkets, chemists and health food shops.

As research continues on the impact of vitamin D on covid-19, we will continue to monitor evidence as it is published. We have committed to keeping this under review and, as I have said, we are committed to keeping the 90 trials that are under way under review, some of which are high quality, producing robust information.

**Jim Shannon:** Does the Minister have any indication of when the trials will be completed and when the evidence will be sought and got?

**Ms Dorries:** I do not believe all the trials start at the same time or aim to finish at the same time and there are 90 different trials, so I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a concise answer to that question. I reassure him that we are in the same place. If the trials proved that vitamin D had an effect on covid-19, we would be the first to shout about the results. As soon as they report, we will be delighted to receive the information.

Public Health England and the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition and NICE will update further advice and the Government welcome any further studies into this emerging area. It may not just be 90 trials, as we may see even more.

We have been clear that our decisions are based on robust evidence. That position remains. I am sure hon. Members understand the importance of that and the reason why that has to be. We know that vaccines are the way out of this pandemic. Vaccines are the best way to protect people from covid-19 and they have saved many thousands of lives.

Looking to the future, we know that excess weight is one of the few modifiable factors for covid-19. It is a sad fact that obesity has played a large role in the impact on and outcomes for people who contract covid-19. Therefore, supporting people to achieve a healthier weight is crucial to keeping people fit and well as we move forward.

We launched “Tackling obesity: empowering adults and children to live healthier lives” in July 2020 and, as part of delivering the measures set out in our strategy, we confirmed in December 2020 our intention to legislate to stop the promotion of high fat, salt and sugar products by volume and prominent location, both online and in store, in England from April 2022. In the Queen’s Speech on 11 May, we confirmed our intention to introduce advertising restrictions for products high in fat, sugar and salt on TV before 9 pm and online. Currently, the House is debating legislation to introduce mandatory calorie labelling for large out-of-home food businesses such as restaurants, cafés and takeaways.

I hope that Members here today and Members from across the House will support the measures in their passage through Parliament, because we believe that they will be a key part of the tackling obesity campaign, which is so important in relation to covid-19. Helping people to achieve and maintain a healthy weight is one of the most important things that we can do to improve the nation’s health, and we are committed to meeting the challenge. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has been clear that

“we...must have a care for the health of our population and we will be happier and fitter and more resistant to diseases like Covid if we can tackle obesity.”

I will finish by saying that I think the objectives of everybody in the debate today are the same. I hope, along with other hon. Members, that we receive the robust data that we need; and if we do not, we continue with what we are doing, rolling out vaccines and dealing with the challenge of achieving a healthier nation via tackling obesity.

2.27 pm

**Jim Shannon:** I want to thank all those who took part in the debate. First, I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for his contribution. Many

things that the Scottish Parliament does on health issues interest me. He knows this, because I have said it to a health spokesperson for his party. I always listen intently to everyone, but in particular to the Scottish Members about how Scotland has done things, because it has done many things that I believe we could replicate across the whole United Kingdom.

One of the great things about these debates is that we can learn from one another and then, hopefully, take some of the good things from elsewhere and bring them in where we are, in the same way as we have done in Northern Ireland. The hon. Member for Glasgow East referred to what the Scottish Parliament is doing on vitamin D and to taking it all year round. It is perhaps a step ahead of us, so I thank him for describing that.

I am very pleased, as always, to have the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) here. My apologies to his wife; she can have him for the rest of the day—is that the way to put it? He has responsibilities here and has done well; I thank him for that. I also thank him for making, as always, an in-depth contribution, which lets us know where the Opposition, in the form of the Labour party, are and what they are doing.

We can probably all agree—I think the Minister is absolutely right, by the way—that we are here to support each other and the Minister. She outlined a very robust strategy for health—

**Ms Dorries:** I want to let the hon. Gentleman know that I have received a response on when the trials are due to conclude. Most are due to conclude this year.

**Jim Shannon:** Now, that was a quick answer! How many people get an answer to a question they asked 15 minutes ago? That is brilliant. That reinforces my comments about the strategy that the Minister referred to—the restrictions on adverts before 9 pm, the obesity and covid-19 death connection, and all the things the Minister referred to. Hopefully, some of the 90 trials—I never realised that there were that many trials going on—will produce high-quality data, which is what the Government needs to act upon.

I am hopeful, and I thank everyone for their participation. In particular, I thank the Minister for her excellent response and for reassuring me, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Glasgow East and those who were not able to come today but are watching the debate and would have wished to participate. Today, we have hope for the strategy. If the high-quality data is there, this can be a reality. I genuinely believe in my heart that this can benefit people, but we need the data to prove it. Our job, and the Minister’s job, is to receive that data and work on it. We have had that commitment. If the data is correct, we will have that.

Thank you for your chairmanship, Mrs Murray, as always. We do not always say that to the Chair, but thank you for chairing the debate well, as you always do. I also thank the staff, who work away in the background behind the screens. If we did not have them, this would not work at all.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the value of vitamin D as a defence against covid-19 infection.

2.31 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

## Royal Mail

[SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

3.15 pm

**Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair):** I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the new hybrid arrangements. Timings of debates have been amended to allow technical arrangements to be made for the next debate. There will also be suspensions between each debate.

I remind Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive for the start of debates in Westminster Hall. Members are expected to remain for the entire debate. I must also remind Members participating virtually that they must leave their camera on for the duration of the debate, and that they will be visible at all times, both to each other and to us in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks' email address, which is: [westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk](mailto:westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk).

Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and as they leave the room. I would also like to remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall.

3.16 pm

**David Johnston (Wantage) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the performance of Royal Mail.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McDonagh. In some ways, I wish this debate about the performance of Royal Mail was not necessary, and I want to be crystal clear at the outset that I do not think that the problems I will describe are the fault of Royal Mail's workers. I live in the Didcot area and I have experienced some of these problems, although not nearly as badly as some of my constituents have. I have also seen how hard Royal Mail staff have all been working in my area and right across the constituency. Indeed, when my constituents complain to me, they often say the same thing. They do not blame Royal Mail's workers, and they have huge admiration for them. However, I have had more complaints about Royal Mail than about any other company or organisation in my time as an MP, so I thought it was important to have this debate.

My constituents have been complaining since 10 August 2020; that was when I got my first complaint. My most recent complaint was on Monday just gone. During that time, my constituents complained about all sorts of post not arriving, and I will give some examples in a minute to illustrate the problem. I think it is right that we take that seriously, because what they have experienced has caused great distress. I naively hoped that when I called a meeting with Royal Mail headquarters towards the end of last year, that would resolve it. I had no idea how widespread the problem was and how many areas of the country were affected, albeit that it is not all areas.

To give a sense of what has been happening, the complaints in my constituency have been concentrated in the Didcot area, the Wantage and Grove area and some of the villages surrounding Wantage, and there have been bits in Cholsey and Wallingford, too. The very first complaint that I got on 10 August was from a

man called Sean, who lives in Didcot. He wrote to me because he has a two-year-old son who is deaf. Sean relies on the post because he regularly needs moulds that hold his two-year-old son's hearing aids. His family also have a series of hospital appointments that they need to attend, and he has found himself in the situation both of missing hospital appointments because the letters did not arrive on time, and of turning up at the hospital for appointments that were not happening, because he did not get the cancellation letters on time. We can understand how distressing that is, and it is having a knock-on effect on services such as the NHS.

My constituent Ann and her husband, who live in Wantage, did not get their 65th wedding anniversary cards. As I have said in the House before, anyone who gets to 65 years of marriage ought to be getting their anniversary cards on time. Much more sadly, my constituent Matthew's wife died last year and he did not receive the condolence cards or the death certificates on time.

I have constituents who have not had their insurance renewals, meaning they have ended up having to pay more for their insurance. One did not get his bank card, so he could not pay for anything when he was out and about, and had to go online each time he made a payment. Constituents have complained that they have not received mail for one, two or three weeks, and they sometimes go to the sorting office and are handed that mail. One recent complainant has still not had her Christmas post.

It is common for constituents to downplay such situations and say, "I suppose it's only trivial, you know. I haven't had my Christmas cards but it is only trivial." I do not think it is trivial at all. We all appreciate the importance of medical appointments arriving by post, but things such as magazine subscriptions really matter as well. They bring joy to people, and cards are also hugely important to mark occasions. A whole range of constituents have not had birthday cards arrive, often for significant birthdays.

This is clearly not happening in all areas of the country. Royal Mail's recently published official figures say that on their first class delivery target, which is 93%, they actually hit 74.7%. In the figures I have looked at, that is the lowest level for a considerable time. Covid is part of that, but I do not think it is only covid. I have given Royal Mail a right of reply, so I will come to what it feels the problems are later. Royal Mail's national complaint figures also show a huge spike in complaints.

I do not think covid is the only reason for that. When we look at the data, Royal Mail has not hit that first-class delivery figure in six of the last 10 years. It has not hit its delivery completion target in nine of the last 10 years. It is even the same with special delivery. We have all been to the post office and had that talk from the person behind the counter, who says, "Well, if you really want it to get there on time and if you really want to make sure that it gets there, you should go special delivery, although it is lot more expensive." However, Royal Mail has not hit that target in the past 10 years, although admittedly that is a much higher target to hit and it hits the target a high proportion of the time.

The experience of the past year is particularly frustrating as the Royal Mail has just recorded record profits. I was not eating cornflakes that I could choke on at the time, but I was surprised to open the newspaper and see the headline, "Royal Mail profits treble." The price of a

[David Johnston]

first-class stamp has gone up a third in the last five years, including a rise of 12% this year. The fall in service is difficult to reconcile with the increase in Royal Mail's profits.

I do not work for Royal Mail, so I cannot say exactly what the problem is, but I think part of it is to do with its prioritising parcels. When I met Royal Mail representatives last year, they said to me, "We have gone from being a letter service that delivers parcels, to a parcel service that delivers letters." They said that if I had been able to visit the sorting office, I would have seen things like washing machines and big screen TVs being delivered.

That is a business decision for them, but it is frustrating for constituents, who have reported to me that they have not had any mail for two or three weeks, but they have seen Royal Mail staff and vans delivering parcels and much bigger items. A number of them have spoken to their local postmen and women, and been told confidentially, off the record, that they have been told to prioritise parcels over other mail.

We have to work out what the problem is, and ensure that Royal Mail deals with it and that we do not just write it off as being something to do with covid. I contacted Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union to ask for their opinions. Royal Mail says that the issue is a combination of covid-related absences, the social distancing requirements—meaning that it cannot have as many people in its buildings—and the increase in the number of parcels. That increase has been of 32%, in part because everyone is at home and sending each other stuff, although that might in part be the Royal Mail business decision to develop that aspect of its work, no doubt contributing to its profitability in the past year. That cuts both ways.

I wanted to have this debate because my constituents often feel fobbed off when they complain to Royal Mail directly. They do not get something that answers the question. One constituent told me that one response it got amounted to, "We're trying but it's not our fault." I wanted the debate so that I can ensure that Ministers are aware of what is going on and of my constituents' experience. In my constituency alone, I would like Royal Mail to review the operation and perhaps invest some of its profits in it. Do we need more staff? Do we need bigger service centres? If parcels are taking up too much space, so they have to get them out, do they need bigger delivery centres? We certainly need to work out what is going wrong.

We could have a simpler process for compensating constituents, perhaps an automatic one—Royal Mail knows when it is delivering something very late, because it has to report on that figure. It should therefore know when those people ought to be compensated automatically. It is important that Ofcom does not allow that to be written off as, "Well, it's covid, don't worry about it." I understand why it has given a dispensation to Royal Mail this year to say that covid has imposed a particular burden, so it will not be held to that 93%" but some of my constituents would say that it had problems before covid. It is not good enough to write it off as covid.

In the end, Royal Mail has a near monopoly on that type of post. Our constituents cannot go anywhere else—they can with parcels, but not with the things involved in the problems they have been experiencing.

Again, I do not hold Royal Mail's workers responsible, but Royal Mail HQ—under pressure from the Government and Ofcom—needs to provide the service that our constituents are paying an increasing amount for all the time.

3.27 pm

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston) on securing this important debate.

I pay tribute to postal workers up and down the country for all that they have done throughout the coronavirus pandemic. Postal workers have been on the frontline. They have faced additional risks, and I know that the rate of coronavirus infection among postal workers has been significant. They have continued to provide vital delivery services and, more than that, have been a vital source of human contact for many people who have been self-isolating while living alone. Sometimes, they are the only person able to flag concerns about the health and wellbeing of residents. We all owe our postal workers a huge debt of gratitude.

It is worth noting how utterly inappropriate it was that, while Royal Mail's frontline staff were continuing to deliver for the public, the then chief executive was spending the lockdown in Switzerland. I know that Royal Mail has undergone a change of leadership in recent months, and that is certainly very welcome.

My constituents understand the severe difficulties presented by the pandemic for all our public services, and Royal Mail is no exception. They understood the suspension of the universal service obligation in order to enable Saturday deliveries to be paused. They even understood when deliveries in some areas took place every other day, rather than daily. There is a great deal of good will and support for our postal workers. However, the problems experienced in parts of my constituency have at times dropped well below even a basic level of reliability. That is the issue that I will focus on, as well as the significant problems I have encountered with the monitoring and regulation of Royal Mail.

My focus is on the severe problems in the SE22 area of my constituency. Although there have also been periods of significant problems in SE19 and SE27, my understanding is that those have been primarily due to sickness absence linked to the pandemic and were relatively quickly resolved. The problems in SE22 run much deeper.

In 2017, Royal Mail announced its intention to close the SE22 delivery office, which serves East Dulwich, part of Dulwich Village and part of Peckham Rye, and merge it with the SE15 delivery office in Peckham. The local community protested against the plan, concerned that the SE15 office was difficult to access and very remote from some parts of SE22, and that it would be difficult for postal workers to complete their rounds because of the long distances and hilly nature of the routes between SE15 and parts of SE22. Royal Mail pressed ahead with the merger anyway just before the Christmas period in 2018, leading to a disastrous level of service at that time and chaos for many months afterwards. All the warning signs were there that Royal Mail's arrangements for deliveries to SE22 lacked the resilience to cope with challenging circumstances.

At the start of the pandemic, delivery services in SE22 became completely unreliable, with residents on many different streets across the postcode area reporting that they were not receiving mail on a regular basis, sometimes for weeks at a time. That was a completely different scenario to pausing Saturday deliveries or even delivering only on alternate days, which residents would have understood completely.

The consequences for my constituents went way beyond inconvenience, though there was certainly plenty of inconvenience. The problems caused deep distress: older people living in isolation did not receive birthday cards and gifts; legal documents went missing; hospital appointments were missed; hospital appointments that had been cancelled due to the pandemic were still attended because the cancellation had not been received; death certificates went missing. One constituent had to attend court because she had not received a speeding fine in time to be able to pay it.

I have raised these issues with Royal Mail on behalf of every constituent who has been in touch with me. I have met Royal Mail on many occasions to seek answers and I visited the SE15 delivery office. It has been enormously frustrating that, although Royal Mail has responded to each individual query, it has never accepted the extent of problems with the service in SE22 or the impact on my constituents.

I have taken the matter to Ofcom, who also seemed powerless to intervene, largely due to the suspension of the universal service obligation. I hope the Minister will understand that there is a huge difference between pausing Saturday deliveries or delivering every other day and not providing any deliveries at all for weeks at a time. The accountability framework for a regulated service really should be able to account for that.

I have pieced together some of the problems and the action that Royal Mail could have been compelled to take if there had been more regulatory intervention. The first is not to have closed the SE22 delivery office in the first place, or to have been obliged to re-provide it in a more convenient location for SE22. There is currently no requirement for public consultation on the closure of delivery offices, and the requirement for the geographical coverage of delivery offices is too wide to protect an area such as SE22 from disastrous commercial decisions, and too wide, really, to be workable for an urban area such as London.

Once the severe problems became apparent last year, Royal Mail could have been required to explore temporary premises to alleviate the problems in the SE15 office, which were in part due to social distancing requirements, but it was not obliged to do so. It is also clear that over-reliance on vehicle sharing was a large part of the problem in SE22. Parts of SE22 are just too far away from the current delivery office to enable postal workers to set off by foot and complete their round within their shift.

Coronavirus meant that van sharing was no longer safe, but there was no requirement for Royal Mail to address that—as it did much later to good effect, by acquiring additional vehicles—apparently leaving large parts of SE22 unreachable for weeks at a time. It is also clear that staff sickness was a significant problem, as it was across many frontline services, but, again, there appeared to be no requirement on Royal Mail to take on additional staff to cover, despite the fact that it was responsible for a regulated service.

Finally, I want to flag immense problems with monitoring and accountability. Royal Mail has refused to provide me with performance data for the SE22 delivery office, despite problems over many months, which means that it is impossible to compare the experiences of my constituents against Royal Mail's actual performance. The information provided by Royal Mail has often been far too broad to be properly transparent or useful. Royal Mail only publishes performance data at the level of south-east London, which is a huge area and entirely masks the variation in performance within individual postcode districts.

Royal Mail has been through a challenging time in recent years, due to competition from private delivery companies, but its fortunes have significantly improved during the pandemic and it recently reported record profits. As things stand, it will not be compelled to spend any of its profits on investing to deliver effective, reliable services for my constituents in SE22.

Royal Mail provides a regulated service, which is absolutely vital for residents and businesses across the country, and it is important that it is effectively regulated. I ask the Minister to look again at the regulatory framework for Royal Mail, in order to introduce a requirement for meaningful public consultation on proposals to close or move delivery offices, to tighten the rules on the geographical coverage of delivery offices in urban areas, and to introduce new performance data requirements to enable Royal Mail to be held to account in a meaningful way at the level of individual postcode districts.

3.35 pm

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh, and to contribute to this debate, which the hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston) was so effective in securing.

It is also a pleasure to follow my excellent colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). Like her, I have carried out a number of visits to staff in the delivery and sorting offices in my constituency, and I have enormous respect and gratitude for the work that is being done to keep things going, particularly during covid, by staff, managers and everyone else at Royal Mail.

However, there are a number of concerns that I, too, have received correspondence about. In total, 130 constituents have written to me to report issues, particularly around the second and third waves of covid in the winter of 2020-21, and especially in the N4 and N8 postcode areas. As we have heard this afternoon, there have been a number of discrepancies that cannot be fully accounted for by the pandemic alone. For example, we have seen that the letter and parcel delivery that was supporting people who were shielding often fell short of what we would have expected. The delivery of invitation letters to the first few cohorts of people eligible for the vaccine was also reliant on the postal service and it sometimes failed. That highlights why the deterioration in services experienced in our constituencies is so frustrating, painful and potentially dangerous for residents.

My constituents have reported severe consequences resulting from the deterioration in Royal Mail services, such as fees for late payment of utility bills, when they

[Catherine West]

had not received the original letter bills; being fined for non-payment of penalty charge notices, when they had not yet received the original letter informing them of the PCN being issued; and late receipt of personal identity, medical and legal documents having an impact on their ability to submit in-time applications—for example, for self-assessed tax registration or to gain access to medical treatment sooner. There have also been issues with passport renewal services, legal appeals and delayed receipt of consumer goods and gifts, which was particularly upsetting around Christmas time, when we were separated from family members. There has also been anxiety about financial security because newly issued credit and debit cards went missing in the post. I hope that this situation can be rectified.

I would also be grateful if, in summing up, the Minister could assist my constituents and me with a particular issue. The delivery office opposite Hornsey railway station was closed during the coalition years. There has been an ongoing campaign, led by myself and our local ward councillors, to have it reopened. The original building is no longer available, but there must be a suitable building available somewhere locally. I know that there are a number of empty shops on the high street in Hornsey, which could be perfectly appropriate for a delivery office. It is much more efficient, from an energy point of view, to have people popping into a delivery office than endless parcel vans coming to people's doors.

Now that Royal Mail's finances have improved—indeed, it is enjoying record-breaking profits; I believe they have trebled—I also want to press the Minister for increased numbers of apprentices and staff to be taken on and paid competitive rates, so that we can make good on what has been a pretty dismal record in the last 15 months. I would also like to see increased training and support for staff, and of course, on weekends, an increase in the number of people delivering mail. We still have a youth unemployment problem in Hornsey and Wood Green, so I want young people to have job opportunities in the Royal Mail, which is a good employer normally. I hope that management will grab that issue with both hands.

I conclude simply by reminding the Minister of the specific request from my constituency, given that it has been particularly badly affected by the situation I described. We would like to see the return of a delivery office in the N8 area so that the Royal Mail can make good on its commitments and obligations. I would also be pleased to hear what further action can be taken by MPs and our staff when things go wrong, because I am concerned that our regulatory framework seems a mismatch for what is quite a desperate situation for many of our constituents?

3.40 pm

**Stephen Flynn** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston) for securing this important debate. He certainly got his points across to the Minister, and I certainly hope that the Minister will respond to them in full. Indeed, the points raised by all three speakers have been clear and substantive, and they have outlined the concerns that they and their constituents most definitely have in relation to the performance of Royal Mail.

I had a discussion last night with a colleague in and around the Royal Mail. It is not often that, as nationalists, we talk about British institutions that are perhaps more favourable in our eyes. Of course, in that regard, the Royal Mail is something that the public loves and has loved for many decades, if not centuries, in its previous guises. I think we actually compared it to Concorde, in terms of its being the only two British institutions that we were perhaps in favour of. That is probably the only time the Royal Mail has been compared to Concorde, but the wider point is that it is an institution that, across the UK, we all hold in extremely high regard. However, the Government betrayed that high regard in 2013 when they sought to privatise the Royal Mail—a disgraceful decision that has not, to the best of my knowledge, been mentioned in the debate so far today, which I think is remiss. In many ways, that could be the root of some of the problems for us as Members of Parliament and for the public in terms of influencing the direction of the Royal Mail's priorities.

As we can see and as we have heard, the Royal Mail's performance in meeting its targets for first-class deliveries, and second-class deliveries as well if I recall correctly, has not been up to scratch. The pandemic has obviously played a role, but Royal Mail was not meeting its targets in the years prior to that; it was close, but it did not meet them. We have heard the consequences of that for individual constituents from the three previous speakers. Indeed, I have been contacted by constituents as well, as I am sure all Members have, in relation to absolutely essential items that were not delivered.

Although we have seen Royal Mail struggle, we have the converse situation with its profits, which are at a record high—I believe it made a £762 million pre-tax profit, which is absolutely remarkable. The hon. Member for Wantage was absolutely right to highlight that in terms of what Royal Mail's priority is at this time. If it is parcels, it should be clear, open and transparent about that, and the public could determine whether that is a suitable priority for the organisation. At the risk of repeating myself, it would be more beneficial if this place had more of a say in that. Of course, it does not, because of decisions taken in previous years, but we are where we are.

The issues that have been highlighted are pertinent, and it would be remiss of me as a local Member in Aberdeen not to mention the closure of post office counters. I am of course very cognisant of the fact that the Royal Mail and the Post Office are separate, although the Government do have some control in relation to the Post Office. However, I should reflect on the fact that post office counters in Aberdeen are being closed, in Torry and in Kincorth in my constituency. That is deeply, deeply frustrating and will leave those communities behind, to the detriment of the people who live in them, just as the performance of Royal Mail will be to the detriment of the constituents from across the UK we have heard about.

I will bring my remarks to a close because I am conscious that much of what can be said has already been said, but I want to finish on an important point that the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) made at the outset of her remarks. We must pay tribute to the staff for the work they have done over the course of the pandemic. I cannot imagine how difficult it has been for them to manage the workload,

taking into account social distancing, their own pressures and the outbreaks that have undoubtedly happened in Royal Mail facilities, as they have everywhere else. I place on the record my thanks and tribute to them. I wish them well going forward.

3.45 pm

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston) on securing this important debate. This will be the first time that I have spoken as shadow Minister for postal affairs, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) for all her work on this critical service.

Every Member who has spoken has emphasised the importance of Royal Mail to communities and businesses across the UK, as seen most recently and indeed currently, during the pandemic. In the face of covid-19, our local posties stepped up as key workers, keeping us connected, enabling small businesses to continue trading, and playing a vital public health role. Royal Mail delivered and collected tens of millions of covid-19 tests, distributed 1.5 billion items of personal protective equipment to our frontline workers, and delivered more than 300 million vaccination letters. I thank Royal Mail staff for their commitment during the pandemic, and reassure them that, as this debate has shown, it has not gone unrecognised. I pay special tribute to the posties whose smile and cheery hello, despite their higher rate of covid as a consequence of their frontline work, was for many the only real human contact during the darkest days of lockdown.

Royal Mail traces its history back to 1516, when Henry VII introduced a master of the posts. Under state control, Royal Mail successfully established itself as a leading and innovative pioneer in postal services, achieving many global firsts, such as the first uniform postage rate in 1839, and the creation of the world's first stamp in 1840—my understanding is that that is why the UK is the only country that does not have its name on the stamp, but just the Queen's head. There was also the introduction of first and second-class letter services in 1968, and the launch of the UK's first digital stamp in 2004. Today, Royal Mail connects more than 30 million addresses across the UK, employing more than 160,000 staff.

In 2014, however, the Tory-led coalition chose to privatise the postal service. That mistake is estimated to have lost the taxpayer £1 billion, according to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. Labour fought against that, arguing that privatisation would prioritise profit over services. Unfortunately, that has become a reality, which is why Labour remains committed to supporting the public ownership of Royal Mail.

As many have pointed out, Royal Mail recorded record profits—the newly appointed CEO takes home £525,000 per year—but consumers and workers have paid the price with rising costs, longer delivery times and job losses. In the last year alone, there have been two above-inflation increases to stamp prices. In January, as the hon. Member for Wantage pointed out, the price of first-class stamps increased by 12% to 85p, while various operational changes, such as online stamp printing,

the reduction of opening times and the closure of sorting offices, saw 12,000 jobs lost by 2017. That is in addition to the loss of 2,000 managerial roles as a result of restructuring during the pandemic.

I am also the shadow Minister for digital, and I know all too well the impact of digital exclusion on the UK and how Royal Mail allows many excluded communities to remain connected. Between 2013 and 2017, the closure of 75 delivery offices disproportionately impacted those who rely on them most, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) emphasised. As delivery offices play the important role of ensuring that undelivered mail can be conveniently collected by the recipient, their closure often causes avoidable stress for individuals who are forced to travel further and owners whose businesses require the frequent collection of parcels, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) pointed out. Workers have also been collateral damage in Royal Mail's mission to maximise profits. In 2018, after months of disputes between Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union, a package covering pay, pensions and working conditions was agreed to. Despite union members voting overwhelmingly in favour of the deal, Royal Mail abandoned the agreement in 2019, leading to the biggest vote for national industrial action since the passing of the Trade Union Act 2016. The Communication Workers Union has worked hard to reach a new agreement. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that Royal Mail management has a better grasp of effective industrial relations and supports good jobs, as emphasised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green?

Royal Mail is the UK's sole designated universal service provider. That is an honour and a privilege, and means that it is so important to our communities. It remains the UK's largest postal operator: 75% of small and medium-sized businesses surveyed by Ofcom in 2020 cited Royal Mail as their main postal services provider. Although letter volumes declined by 25% during the pandemic, the demand for parcel delivery increased by 32% as consumer behaviour changed.

We heard from the hon. Member for Wantage anecdotal evidence of parcels being prioritised by Royal Mail. The UK parcel market is highly competitive. Although Royal Mail continues to hold the largest share, at 35%, other providers, such as Amazon and Hermes, are on the rise. What recent assessment has the Minister made of competition in this market? What impact does cross-subsidy, which is prevalent in Amazon's retail sector, have? What is the impact on the environment and our climate change commitments of charge-free delivery, which is associated with, for example, Amazon Prime, which encourages parcels to be ordered and delivered individually?

As we have heard, posties have worked tirelessly through the pandemic. We have also heard disturbing details about the service disruption resulting, at least in part, from higher levels of sickness absence. In 2021, Royal Mail missed the 93% target for first-class mail being delivered the next working day by eight percentage points. Members highlighted that, behind that statistic, there are particular areas of very low performance, which has had an unspeakable impact on our constituents' lives. That was particularly highlighted by my hon. Friends the Members for Dulwich and West Norwood and for Hornsey and Wood Green.

[Chi Onwurah]

Does the Minister think Royal Mail did all it could to inform people of service disruptions? How can we better hold Royal Mail to account for the impact of that disruption? Royal Mail was not penalised during the past year because of the pandemic, but in 2018-19, Ofcom fined it £50 million for failing to reach first-class delivery targets. As we have heard, it consistently failed to meet targets, particularly in relation to special delivery, in the three years prior to the pandemic.

To improve its performance, Royal Mail has invested approximately £2 billion in modernising operations since 2013. That is to be welcomed but, despite that, Ofcom's analysis of Royal Mail efficiency in 2020 found that it failed to meet its own productivity targets. Ofcom warned that, unless Royal Mail modernised its network to ensure that it served rural and urban spaces equally,

"the sustainability of the universal service could be at risk in the longer term."

What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the universal service delivery requirements are fit for purpose in relation to changing markets and consumer needs, and does Ofcom have the appropriate powers to monitor and enforce it, as Members have highlighted?

Before I close, I think it is worth mentioning the Horizon scandal, which was the largest miscarriage of justice in our history, with more than 900 false prosecutions, destroying lives, families and reputations. When the Horizon service was commissioned in 1999, the Post Office and Royal Mail were still operating under the same ownership and management structure. I hope that the Minister will confirm that Royal Mail is also learning the lessons of that scandal.

Finally, the Minister and I have discussed postcodes through parliamentary questions. In privatising Royal Mail, the Government also privatised our postcodes, and on the cheap. Royal Mail charges for access to the postcode address file even though much of the intellectual property comes from the local authorities who assign addresses. The Government's national data strategy says that we will encourage data sharing, opening up data; yet this remains a significant barrier to communication, location and innovation, so what steps will the Minister take to address that?

Royal Mail is a UK institution of which we have been proud for hundreds of years, but this Government have failed to treat it with respect or care. Despite its importance to communities and the economy, the Government are failing postal service users and communities, putting ideology above competence in their privatisation, and now their monitoring and accountability to maintain the quality of services. Unfortunately, that is a theme with this Government. We have become all too familiar with the privatisation of profit and the socialisation of risk. Labour is committed to supporting a better postal service under public ownership.

3.58 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) for securing today's important debate about the performance of Royal Mail.

I echo all the thanks and admiration of the important role that postal workers have played in serving customers and supporting local communities right across the UK, in normal times and, clearly, during the coronavirus pandemic. Their willingness to maintain deliveries and do their day-to-day work at a time of increased social isolation, when many people could not leave their homes, has been vital. The Government have relied on their continued service to keep people connected across the country, delivering the letters and parcels that are so important to everyday life and supporting the economy in these unprecedented times.

My hon. Friend talked about the importance of post, as did the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), whether it is cards for life events—celebrations, commiserations and condolences—or important issues around tax, insurance and hospital appointments. I hope that his constituents who celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary—please pass on my best wishes to them—got their cards in the end. I suspect, having reached their 65th wedding anniversary, they know how to practise patience and forgiveness, so I am sure that they were in good stead while waiting to get to that point.

I want to talk a bit about the situation of the service, and the context of where we are at the moment, before I answer some of the points that have been raised. Royal Mail has well-established contingency plans to mitigate disruption to postal services. As we have heard, those plans are overseen by Ofcom, which is the independent regulator. It is important to remember that it is an independent regulator, because that independence is key to ensuring that Ofcom keeps Royal Mail on its toes and does its job as an effective regulator.

Royal Mail has reassured the Government that it has been doing everything it can to maintain service levels during this period and that it continues to keep Ofcom informed, but as we have heard, there are issues that still need to be addressed. We will continue to challenge Royal Mail, and I will expect Ofcom to be doing exactly that under the framework, but I will talk a bit more about the regulatory framework in a second, in response to some of the questions that have been raised.

The changes made to Royal Mail's operations due to disruptions are an operational matter for Royal Mail. Therefore, it is up to Ofcom to monitor those service levels in the first instance. In November 2020, Ofcom published its user needs review of postal services. In that report, Ofcom noted that the majority of users are satisfied with the postal services that they receive from Royal Mail. Among residential users, overall satisfaction has remained over 80% in the past few years. Among SME users, overall satisfaction with the quality of services they receive has increased markedly since 2012. That is the important thing. I understand the ideological debate about privatisation, but studies of postal services around the world considered Royal Mail to be 40% less efficient than other national equivalents at that time. As the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) said, we have seen £2 billion invested since then, and an extra £1.8 billion has been promised for further investment.

In 2010, a mere 8% of post was sorted by machine, compared with 85% for leading EU operations. The figure is now 90%. Imagine having a nationalised Royal Mail at this point in time, when it is competing for the funds its needs against schools, hospitals and all the

other services that the public sector has to provide. The extra money that has come in for investment is clearly to be welcomed.

The regulatory conditions that require Royal Mail to deliver letters six days a week as part of the universal postal service also provide that Royal Mail is not required to sustain those services without interruption, suspension or restriction in the event of an emergency. Ofcom has acknowledged that, in the context of the covid-19 pandemic, it is indeed an emergency. As such, the regulatory framework allows Royal Mail to modify its obligations. That includes the temporary reduction in the frequency of the delivery of letters, which Royal Mail implemented for six weeks in 2020 without formal authorisation, because it considered it necessary to respond to the challenges faced in maintaining the postal services at the height of the pandemic. Ofcom published a statement on its website in April 2020, and a further statement in January this year, clarifying that the regulatory framework supported Royal Mail's actions.

Throughout the pandemic, Royal Mail has been transparent with the public about any changes to the services it provides, and the information can be found on the Royal Mail website. We have heard about the dangers of the digital deficit, and clearly there is always more that we can do to ensure the information gets to people, rather than people having to find it. We will always work on that, and it is incumbent on all of us, as elected leaders in our communities, to ensure that we get the information to colleagues across the House, so that we can help amplify those messages to our constituents. These are clearly areas that we can look at.

It should therefore come as no surprise that when Royal Mail published its quality of service results last month, it had not met the universal service obligation targets for the delivery of first and second-class mail. Royal Mail reported that that was due to high levels of covid-related absences and shielding; the introduction of social distancing in its operations, as we have heard; no shared vans; and the increase in parcel volumes, which went up an incredible 32%. As has been said, the change in postal services over the past few years is that parcels are driving profits among Royal Mail's competitors. Indeed, that is a main contributing factor to the financial performance of Royal Mail in recent months.

In light of all those factors, it acknowledges that at times its quality of service has not always been how it might have wished, especially in areas with higher levels of local covid infections. Despite that, clearly, postmen and women worked exceptionally hard to ensure that the delivery of covid-19 test kits were prioritised. Royal Mail implemented Sunday deliveries and collections, resulting in next-day delivery for covid-19 test kits exceeding 98%. In addition, it prioritised the delivery of NHS vaccination letters and election mailing, doing its best to ensure that service delays did not have an impact on those important communications.

Let me take some time to say something about the particular concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage about the delivery service in his constituency. I must admit that, in the lead-up to the debate, I spoke to my two-man focus group in Great Coxwell—my former parents-in-law—and they said they were sometimes a few days behind during covid. In general, it has been okay, and is now back to pre-covid levels. That goes to show that, even within a constituency, there are patches

where things are seemingly okay and clearly patches where there are still significant issues, as my hon. Friend eloquently highlighted, and we need to tackle them. We cannot look at one area in isolation, so he is right to drill down into those areas.

I have been informed by Royal Mail that the service in the Wantage area was disrupted due to sickness absence levels in some parts of the operation remaining higher than normal. That was exacerbated by necessary changes to the business operations and difficulty with additional recruitment. There are 10 postcode areas in Wantage and 10 delivery offices to service them. In the Wantage area itself, sick absences peaked at 15%. I am pleased to report that, as of last week, that absence rate has gone down significantly and is at levels that Royal Mail expects at this particular time of year.

To provide a snapshot of disrupted service levels and how far more Royal Mail has come to improve them, let me cover three areas quickly. Per day, the Wantage delivery office covers 29 delivery rounds. In December, on average, seven delivery rounds could not be completed per day; in April, that was at most one delivery round per day. The Didcot delivery office, which my hon. Friend mentioned, per day covers 38 delivery rounds. In December, on average, 10 delivery rounds could not be fully completed per day; in April, that was at most three delivery rounds. The Wallingford delivery office has 39 delivery rounds. In April, there was a high level of sick absence, and that clearly had an impact on mail deliveries and deliveries were rotational, happening every other day. As of May, however, mail deliveries have been taking place six days a week to all addresses served by all three of those delivery offices.

In addition, Royal Mail continues to use agency support, as well as to hire vehicles to alleviate any pressure on staff, so that it can maintain the best possible service. At the Wantage, Didcot and Wallingford delivery offices, 14 permanent roles have been created and, to date, six of those new recruits are in post. Clearly, however, when I asked those questions, Royal Mail also assured me that if for any reason an address does not receive a mail delivery one day, it will be a priority for the next working day.

Royal Mail is open to engaging with the public and, indeed, with all MPs about delivery services in their respective constituencies and across the UK. I enjoy going to my local delivery offices whenever I can in Sutton. I am pleased to hear that my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage is going on a site visit tomorrow in Didcot, so I hope that he finds that productive in following up this conversation and this discussion, because it is important that we scratch beneath the surface. Yes, we get the assurances, but it is only by going to see people with those further questions that I hope he will get the answers that he needs and that he will be able to put his constituents' views—as I know he will, admirably—to the managers in that delivery office.

The postmen and women who serve Wantage and across the UK have continued to dedicate themselves to providing a key public service. Royal Mail more broadly, has done its utmost to deliver on its universal service obligation, while observing health and safety advice. Royal Mail has been transparent about changes to its service, as I said, but it acknowledges some disruptions to delivery, mainly but not solely—as we heard—due to the extenuating circumstances generated by the pandemic.

[Paul Scully]

However, we have also seen changes in consumer behaviour, including the rise in online shopping. Royal Mail's financial report, published last month, highlighted that parcels represented 72% of its UK revenue in the previous financial year, increasing from 63% in the financial year 2019-20. That has largely been driven by changes in behaviour through the pandemic. Increases in e-commerce have further added to the demand for parcel delivery services: a study by Royal Mail found a 7% increase in company start-ups in March to July 2020, compared with the same period in 2019. Of 315,000 new companies, nearly 16,000 were e-commerce.

The pandemic is an emergency situation that has required Royal Mail to be flexible, make the necessary adjustments and respond effectively to demand. Royal Mail has clearly done its best to maintain service levels during a situation outside its control, but that is why the regulatory framework provides that flexibility to manage emergency situations, and why Ofcom indicated its support for the measures Royal Mail has taken to respond. Ofcom also noted that Royal Mail did not meet its quality of service standards in 2020, but that performance has improved considerably in recent months as covid impacts have started to recede. Ofcom considers that timings for a return to pre-covid performance standards are likely to align with further guidance on social distancing; indeed, I spoke to its chief executive about that just yesterday. Ofcom has reassured me that it continues to scrutinise performance closely, and that Royal Mail is actively implementing a recovery plan that includes operational changes and the use of additional frontline staff.

When looking at the future regulation framework, Ofcom clearly needs to ensure that postal regulation keeps pace with changes in the market and remains relevant, a point raised by the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). We last reviewed the regulatory framework for post in 2017, and agreed at the time that it should remain in place until 2022. Ofcom is now carrying out the review of the future regulatory framework for post, which it aims to complete in 2022. As part of that review, Ofcom will consider whether extra consumer protections may be required, and is seeking views on the future regulation of the parcels market: a call for inputs closed in May 2021. Ofcom will publish a full consultation on the future regulation of postal services later this year.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central talked about postcode data, which is something we have spoken about in the past. It is a really interesting point that we need to work on, because in the era of open data, we have to make sure that that open data is available, without one company seeking to profit from intellectual property that has been developed over a period of time. I am looking forward to continuing that discussion with her.

The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green raised issues about the N8 area, as she has done before. I know that people at Royal Mail—I was going to say “avidly read *Hansard*”, but that is a little bit much. [Laughter.] It is essential lockdown reading. However, I know that they look at the coverage and debates in this House, so they will have heard about the campaign that the hon. Lady has been running to make sure that her

constituents in the N8 area and the surrounding area are well served. I believe the last time we spoke about the SE22 area was in November 2020, when I participated in a debate led by the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood. It was interesting to hear the update about what is happening in that area with her constituents, and I know that the hon. Lady will continue to lobby and campaign on behalf of those constituents to make sure they get the service they deserve.

We know that the Royal Mail needs to continue to modernise as people are moving towards parcels, but we cannot forget those essential letters and that essential correspondence. Yes, fewer people are relying on them, but those who are relying on them are in many cases the most vulnerable in society and the most dependent on that social contact and social value, as well as the essential services that are still provided by post. Clearly, delays in postal service deliveries can be frustrating, and they can have serious consequences. We have heard some examples from those who are reliant on the post for important information, including for start-ups and small businesses, who are trying to build their businesses and develop a reliable, remote offer to their customers.

Following the debate we had here last week, I do not doubt the issues in the highlands and other remote areas about the cost of delivery for parcels. The service for letters must also remain, through the universal service obligation.

The past year and a half has presented exceptional challenges and has led to the disruption of services, but the postal system has continued to operate, and Royal Mail is able to resume service levels now that absence levels are closer to normal and the business has adjusted to operational changes. On behalf of the Government, I thank once again all the Royal Mail postal workers and Royal Mail itself for the dedication and commitment shown while providing continued service throughout the pandemic.

4.15 pm

**David Johnston:** I am grateful to everybody who has taken part in the debate this afternoon. It has been a good debate. The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) spoke for all of us when she said that we owe our postal workers a huge debt of gratitude for the work they have done during this period. She was quite right to say there is a difference between pausing deliveries on Saturdays and not delivering anything for weeks at a time, which has been the experience in Wantage and Didcot. I support her request for postcode-level data on deliveries.

The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) detailed very well the impact of delays and the sorts of things that have been delayed, from shielding letters to vaccination letters. It was a very good idea that Royal Mail should create more apprenticeship positions and support young people, thereby also improving the service.

I am grateful to the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn). He and I do not agree on the number of British institutions that are worthy of high regard—I am sure that is no surprise. We also do not agree on the privatisation, because there are some public services that I could complain about today, but where I do agree with him is, if Royal Mail's

priorities have changed to parcels, it is important that it is honest about that. That is what my constituents feel they can see, but it is not something that Royal Mail has admitted.

I am also grateful to the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah). She was exactly right about the important role that Royal Mail has played in the pandemic in delivering PPE and so on, and also—a point I do not think the rest of us made—that postal workers were often the only human contact for people who were shielding. She reminded me that people had hugely appreciated that, because it was often the only conversation they had with anybody during that period.

I am very grateful to the Minister for engaging with the issue seriously and for understanding the distress that it is causing and for providing the data that he did. He is right to say that Royal Mail did some Sunday services—it shocked constituents to get post on a Sunday—so it was trying. The Minister provided important delivery round data as well.

One of his most important points was that fewer people are relying on the service, but for those that do, it is incredibly important. That is the same debate as for

the use of cheques or the use of cash, or people who do not have smartphones. We forget sometimes—we think there is this relentless progress of technology, but it can leave people very vulnerable. People not receiving the things they should have been has been very difficult for them.

The Minister is quite right to say that tomorrow I am visiting one of the service centres, so I will be able to get under the skin of the issue. Royal Mail has told me that it has hired more staff and bought more vehicles, so the test will be whether it gets better this year. If it does not, I will be back on the Minister's case and on Royal Mail's case, because it is important that constituents get the service they are paying for.

Thank you very much, Ms McDonagh, for chairing the debate.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the performance of Royal Mail.

4.20 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Thursday 17 June 2021

## CABINET OFFICE

### Electoral Policy: Increasing Parliamentary Accountability

**The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith):** The public rightly expect effective and independent regulation of the electoral system. The Electoral Commission has a vital role to play in upholding the integrity of free and fair elections and public confidence in that integrity. As the independent regulatory body charged with such pivotal responsibilities, the Commission should be fully accountable to Parliament for the way it discharges its functions.

In recent years, some across the House have lost confidence in the work of the Commission and have questioned the adequacy of the existing accountability structures. We must reflect on the current structures charged with this important responsibility, enhance good practice and, where there is a need for change, be prepared to make it.

#### *Parliamentary accountability on electoral policy*

The Government are therefore announcing today that we will bring forward measures in the forthcoming Elections Bill to improve the Electoral Commission's accountability arrangements through the introduction of a strategy and policy statement that sets out guidance and principles to which the Commission must give regard in exercising its functions. It is commonplace for the Government and Parliament to set a policy framework by which independent regulators should work.

The statement will be subject to parliamentary approval and will provide an opportunity for Parliament to articulate its expectations of the Commission and enable greater visibility and scrutiny of its work. The statement will be developed through a statutory consultation with key stakeholders, including the Electoral Commission. It is likely to include the following:

A statement of priorities for the Electoral Commission, rooted in priorities already set out in law, such as: providing clear and high-quality guidance for campaigners, setting and monitoring robust performance standards for returning officers and electoral registration officers, and effectively enforcing the rules on political finance and election spending.

Executive and legislative priorities during this Parliament in relation to elections, such as the content of the Elections Bill once passed.

Principles for the Electoral Commission, such as: impartiality, accountability, value for money, proportionality and consistency.

An illustrative example of a statement and policy statement for the Electoral Commission will be published during the passage of the Elections Bill to aid parliamentarians. We will also be engaging with the Parliamentary Parties Panel and other interested parties on how a draft statement might be framed.

#### *Enhancing the remit of the Speaker's Committee*

The Speaker's Committee, to which the Commission reports, is not currently able to hold the Electoral Commission to account for its performance and delivery of general objectives.

Therefore in addition to the strategy and policy statement, measures in the Elections Bill will expand the function and powers of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission. These will include assessing the Commission's performance against objectives set in the strategy and policy statement, and allowing Parliament to better scrutinise the work of the Commission.

#### *Clarity on criminal prosecutions*

The Government are clear that the proper place for criminal investigations and prosecutions relating to electoral law is with the police and the Crown Prosecution Service (and the Public Prosecution Service in Northern Ireland) who are experts in this domain.

In recent years, the Electoral Commission has sought to develop the capability to bring criminal offences before the courts. This has never been agreed by the Government or Parliament. Having the Electoral Commission step into this space would risk wasting public money as well as present potential conflicts of interest for a body responsible for providing advice and guidance on electoral law to initiate proceedings which might depend on the very advice that was given.

We will therefore maintain the status quo by providing clarity in law that the Electoral Commission should not bring criminal prosecutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This measure will not apply in Scotland where there is already a single prosecutorial body. We are committed instead to supporting the existing independent and impartial police forces, prosecution services and courts as necessary to enforce electoral regulation fairly and effectively.

Such reforms do not seek to interfere or inappropriately influence the investigative, operational or enforcement decisions of the Electoral Commission. These planned reforms predate any current inquiries, and stem from work initiated following (the then) Sir Eric Pickles' independent review: "Securing the ballot: Report of Sir Eric Pickles' review into electoral fraud". The reforms would not in any way affect the ability of the Commission to undertake enforcement activity as it sees fit, but they will ensure greater accountability to Parliament on how the Electoral Commission discharges its wider functions.

This Government are taking forward a greater emphasis on the need to tackle and prevent electoral fraud, especially in light of the corruption that took place in Tower Hamlets in 2014, in light of the points made in the Pickles review. These measures also address the concerns and recommendations raised in the Pickles review on the role of the Electoral Commission and the current system of its oversight.

More broadly, the Committee on Standards in Public Life is undertaking a review into electoral regulation and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee is doing an inquiry into the work of the commission. We will carefully consider any proposals from these Committees in due course.

We are committed to protecting our democracy and maintaining public confidence in our electoral system. The measures in the Elections Bill will ensure that our democracy remains secure, modern, transparent and fair.

## Local Elections: EU Citizens Living in the UK

**The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith):** In June 2016, the British people voted to leave the European Union, and this Government were elected in December 2019 on a mandate to get Brexit done.

Now that the UK has left the EU, and with the ending of free movement and introduction of the new points-based immigration system in last year's Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Act, there should not be a continued, automatic right to vote and stand in local elections solely by virtue of being an EU citizen.

As I have previously explained to this House (for example, in response to PQ 66206 and PQ 175803 on 8 October 2018), the issue of local voting rights of EU citizens living in the UK needs to be considered alongside the rights and interests of British expatriates living abroad. This did not form part of the withdrawal agreement, as such matters are not within the competence of the European Union and local voting rights are a matter for individual member states. I noted how the Government intended to adopt reciprocal agreements with individual countries within the EU.

### *Policy position*

The Government propose that EU citizens who have been living in the UK prior to the end of the implementation period will maintain their local voting and candidacy rights in England and Northern Ireland, provided they retain lawful immigration status, which goes beyond our obligations in the withdrawal agreement. It also mirrors the stance taken on the EU settlement scheme, which protects the rights of EU citizens who were resident here by the end of the implementation period and provides them with the UK immigration status they need to continue to live, work and access benefits and services here. To 31 May 2021, over 5 million grants of status have been made under the scheme.

EU citizens, who have arrived since 1 January 2021, will move to a position whereby future local voting and candidacy rights are granted where there is an agreement with individual European Union member states to preserve these on a bilateral basis.

This will apply to local elections in England and Northern Ireland, elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, and police and crime commissioner elections in England and Wales. These measures also cover the polls in which EU citizens have been eligible to vote as part of the local franchise: local authority governance referendums, local council tax referendums, neighbourhood planning referendums and parish polls. Other local and devolved elections in Scotland and Wales are within the remit of the devolved Administrations.

The Government have already confirmed that resident EU citizens elected in the May 2021 local elections in England, and the police and crime commissioner elections in England and Wales will be able to serve their full term, and this will also apply to those elected before 2021. An EU citizen elected before these measures come into force, and who otherwise remains eligible, will be able to serve their full term.

Citizens of the Republic of Ireland will not be affected by these changes, as the voting rights of Irish citizens in the UK long predate EU membership. The rights of

qualifying Commonwealth citizens will also not be changed by these measures. As such, citizens of Malta and Cyprus—which are both EU member states and Commonwealth countries—will continue to hold voting and candidacy rights in local and national elections.

### *Voting and candidacy rights agreements*

Local voting and candidacy rights for EU citizens who arrived in the UK after 31 December 2020 will therefore rest on the principle of a mutual grant of rights, through agreements with EU member states. We have already secured such agreements with Spain, Portugal, Luxembourg and Poland.

The UK will continue to invite EU member states which are interested in entering into such agreements the opportunity to negotiate treaties.

These measures therefore ensure that British nationals living overseas in the EU benefit from the Government's approach.

### *Elections Bill*

The Government intend to legislate to deliver this policy through the forthcoming Elections Bill. This approach will reflect the fact that we have left the European Union, reflect the settlement arrangements for existing EU citizens resident in the UK, and maximise opportunities for British nationals living overseas.

The Elections Bill will also enfranchise more British citizens living overseas by abolishing the "15 year rule", supporting our vision for a truly global Britain.

### *Citizenship*

The right to vote in parliamentary elections and choose the next UK Government is already rightly restricted to British citizens and those with the closest historic links to our country. Should any EU citizen wish to gain full rights to participate in local and national elections, they may apply for British citizenship, depending on their circumstances.

[HCWS99]

## TREASURY

### UK Infrastructure Bank

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak):** The UK Infrastructure Bank has begun operating in an interim form and is open for business.

The bank, owned and backed by the taxpayer, will support and enable private and public investment in infrastructure, with core objectives to help tackle climate change, particularly meeting our net zero emissions target by 2050, and to support regional and local economic growth. The Government and the bank have also set out the institution's investment principles today which will guide how it delivers its objectives.

HM Treasury and the UK Infrastructure Bank have entered into a keep well agreement to ensure that the bank has sufficient funds to be able to meet its payment obligations in full as they fall due.

The UKIB will be headquartered in Leeds, and will operate across the whole of the UK, supporting projects in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Over the coming months, the bank will continue to build its capability and capacity as it establishes itself as an independent institution.

The Government are also publishing the bank's initial framework document, which sets out the institution's relationship to the Government.

A copy of the framework document, alongside an unexecuted copy of the "Keep Well Agreement", which has information redacted on the basis that it contains either commercially sensitive or personal data, will be placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS96]

## DEFENCE

### Vulcan Site at Dounreay: Defueling and Fuel Management

#### **The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin):**

On 25 March 2015, the then Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Sir Michael Fallon, made a statement about the findings of the Royal Navy nuclear reactor prototype review. At the time it was anticipated that defueling and fuel management activities would continue at the Vulcan naval reactor test establishment at Dounreay in Scotland until the end of 2022.

While I can confirm that the Ministry of Defence remains committed to the timely decommissioning of the Vulcan site, a recent review of the totality of fuel management activity has identified that the facilities used at Vulcan will now be required longer than originally planned. The Department will deliver its intent to remove fuel from the site as soon as is reasonably practicable and we will therefore pursue an effective balance of decommissioning delivery while meeting the need to support the extended scope of the operational work. It is not expected the decision to extend fuel management activity at the Vulcan site for up to three years will impact on the coherent approach being taken with the activity at the Dounreay civil site.

[HCWS101]

## DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### Cancellation Compensation for Event Organisers in Phase Two of the Events Research Programme

**The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden):** This statement is being tabled for the benefit of all Members of this House to bring to their attention the departmental minute issued today that provides the House with an update to a previous notice of a series of small contingent liabilities created by my Department. This is in relation to a policy to compensate event organisers participating in phase two of the events research programme in the event of their cancellation if public health concerns were to give rise.

The update is to extend the policy to provide cancellation compensation in full (capped at £300,000) to any event organiser putting on events specifically for the events research programme in phase two, should a pilot event be cancelled due to public health reasons. Previously this was limited to events in Liverpool only. The following text therefore provides an update to the previous statement on this issue on 26 May 2021.

The world-leading events research programme ran its first phase of nine pilots (with some running multiple events) in April and May to inform decisions around the safe removal of social distancing at step four of the roadmap. A second phase of events will continue to build on existing evidence and collect additional data to inform organisers and consumers on the logistical and practical considerations of reopening events safely. The pilots cover a range of settings, venues, and activities so that findings will support the full reopening of similar settings across multiple sectors.

The Government will provide compensation on a discretionary basis to event organisers should a pilot event be cancelled due to public health reasons.

This compensation will be capped at £300,000 per event and will cover costs incurred in relation to participation in the programme only (e.g. admission of spectators), recognising the fact that these events would have taken place in line with roadmap restrictions should the programme not exist. For events that have been put on specifically as part of the programme (i.e. would not otherwise have gone ahead), the Government will compensate organisers in full should an event be cancelled, but this will also be capped at £300,000.

The Government do not intend to cancel any event in the programme, however public safety comes first and therefore it is prudent to provide this assurance to the organisers assisting the Government in reopening the economy.

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

[HCWS102]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Making Vaccination a Condition of Deployment: Consultation Response

**The Minister for Care (Helen Whately):** On 14 April, we informed the House of our intention to consult on a proposal to amend regulations to require care home providers, with at least one resident over the age of 65, to deploy only those workers who have received both doses of their covid-19 vaccination (or have a legitimate medical exemption from vaccination).

An extensive six-week consultation, addressing both whether this change should be made and how, has now been completed. We have seen a substantial level of engagement with the consultation with care home staff, providers, wider stakeholders, residents and their families, in addition to the general public, making their views known. We have received over 13,500 responses to the consultation. We are very grateful to all those that took part. These contributions have been comprehensively analysed and carefully considered, and I now wish to inform the House of the Government's response.

The Social Care Working Group of the independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) has advised that a vaccine uptake rate of 80% in staff and 90% in residents, in each individual care home setting, would be needed to provide a minimum level of protection against outbreaks of covid-19.

The current overall figure of 84% for staff uptake and 95% for residents masks significant variation at a regional, local and individual care home level. As of 13 June, only 65% of care homes, with residents over 65, in England, are currently meeting this dual threshold for the first dose, and the proportion is lower in London with only 44% reaching the dual threshold. And—while the SAGE working group advice is specifically about first doses—it should be noted that, for second doses, only 41% of homes are reaching this 80% to 90% level of coverage, with London having furthest to travel on only 23%. Therefore, there is a strong case for introducing a new requirement, in order to make these very high-risk environments as safe as possible from the devastating effects of covid-19.

While a majority of respondents to the consultation did not support the proposal, the responses from the adult social care sector were mixed, with some groups (e.g. care home providers) supporting the proposed legislative change while others (e.g. members of the adult social care workforce) were opposed. While some of those who receive care and their relatives have expressed caution about vaccination as a condition of deployment, many have told us that they want themselves (or their relative) to be cared for by someone who is fully vaccinated.

We see a clear public health rationale for driving vaccination uptake in care homes. It should also be noted that significant parts of the adult social care sector (providers and workforce) do support the proposal. It is our view that the combination of consultation responses and public health evidence provides a strong foundation on which to proceed with the policy. This is based upon minimising transmission of covid-19 and protecting residents in high-risk settings who are most vulnerable to severe illness and death as a result of contracting the virus.

We will be making three key changes to the proposals set out in the original consultation document. These changes are in response to views expressed in the consultation and are made with the intention to best protect all care home residents who are clinically vulnerable to covid-19.

We will:

Extend the scope of the policy to all CQC-registered care homes in England providing accommodation for persons who require nursing or personal care, not just care homes which have at least one person over the age of 65 living in their home. This will bring into scope care homes for working age adults.

Extend the condition of deployment to include all persons working in a care home, regardless of their role (excluding residents of the care home; friends and family of residents; those entering to assist with an emergency; those undertaking urgent maintenance work; and those under the age of 18). The condition will apply, for example, to healthcare professionals, hairdressers, tradespeople and CQC inspectors. The requirement will not apply to the outdoor surrounding grounds of care home premises.

The initial proposals set out that individuals would be exempt from the requirement if they have an allergy or condition that the Green Book lists (chapter 14a, page 16) as a reason not to administer a vaccine. We will additionally provide exemptions for those under the age of 18; those who are clinical trial participants; and, in exceptional circumstances, where a person has a medical reason not to be vaccinated. Guidance will give more detail about exemptions, which will reflect the Green Book on immunisation against infectious disease (covid-19: the Green Book, chapter 14a) and clinical advice from the Joint Committee of Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

The Government's intention is to bring an amendment to the Health and Social Care Act 2008 (Regulated Activities) Regulations 2014 legislation to the House, at the earliest opportunity. If approved by Parliament, there will be a 16-week grace period from when the regulations are made to when they come into force, to enable staff who have not been vaccinated to take up the vaccine.

A copy of the Government's response to the consultation will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

*Intention to launch a wider consultation*

The responses to this consultation made a clear case for extending this policy beyond care homes to other settings where people vulnerable to covid-19 may also receive care.

We will therefore launch shortly a further public consultation on whether or not to make covid-19 vaccination a condition of deployment in healthcare and the wider social care sector, to help protect patients and the people they care for from becoming seriously ill or dying from the virus.

The consultation will also explore whether flu vaccination should be a condition of deployment in the health and social care sector. Flu is a serious illness for vulnerable cared-for people who may suffer serious complications from infection, including death. Outbreaks of flu in care settings are common most winters and it is important we explore this option to protect those at risk.

[HCWS98]

### **Medical Devices (Coronavirus Test Device Authorisations) (Amendment) Regulations 2021**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill):** Testing will remain important to controlling and containing the virus going forward. We will need a reliable supply of high quality tests available to give people and businesses the confidence to go about their usual activities.

Consumers should have clear comparable information so they can cut through any confusion in a rapidly growing market for covid-19 tests and buy with confidence. People need to know the tests they buy will be as good as those they would receive through the NHS and that they can trust the results they get in order to manage their behaviour accordingly.

The statutory instrument we are laying today will establish a regulatory regime by which this Government will ensure all tests on the UK market meet minimum standards of sensitivity and specificity. The regulations allow us to build a framework to validate all antigen and molecular tests sold in the UK market to the same high standards established for Government-procured tests.

We will establish a clear process for manufacturers to get their test on to the market as quickly and easily as possible, giving consumers assurance of test accuracy. We have set in these regulations performance thresholds that will provide robust criteria for industry to meet when putting their tests on the UK market.

We will publish a register of tests that have passed their validation along with other appropriate information about them. This will be set in a clear and comparable way for each test. Consequently, test users may thereafter be in a position to make prudent choices when buying kits and individual consumers are empowered.

We intend for this regime to recover its costs primarily from manufacturers rather than be supported by taxpayers. This point was agreed by the majority of respondents, during a public consultation. However, we are also conscious of concerns raised during the consultation that if fees are set too high, it could present a barrier to SME manufacturers entering the market. In response, we have included a discounted fee for such businesses so that they are not blocked from bringing new tests to market.

In order to balance the need to give industry reasonable time against the need to remedy market failure, the instrument includes a grace period to enable tests to continue to be supplied whilst they complete the validation process. This will mean any test already on the market will be able to remain so as long as their manufacturers adhere to the new requirements. They will have until 1 September to apply for the validation process. They will then have until 31 October to pass validation. A test that fails validation will need to be removed from the market.

We are confident this regulation is a proportionate and appropriate measure to ensure that all covid-19 tests available across the UK meet the standards this validation process will establish.

Protecting public health is my overriding concern. We have thus first and foremost considered what impacts potentially bringing a regulatory regime for validation of covid-19 tests will have on public health, as well as the safety of the tests themselves, their availability, and the likelihood of the UK being seen as a favourable place to carry out research on, develop and manufacture covid-19 tests. In all these regards we believe this regulation will have a positive impact on the quality, safety and supply of high quality covid-19 detection tests.

We will also place the draft of the guidance document for manufacturers in the Libraries of both Houses to support colleagues in their scrutiny of the statutory instrument. We will also lay before the debate the impact assessment to further support colleagues in their scrutiny function.

[HCWS97]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Manchester Arena Inquiry Report: Publication of Volume 1

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel):** Today the Manchester Arena inquiry has published volume 1 of its report, which has been laid before the House. The report can be found at [www.manchesterarenainquiry.org.uk](http://www.manchesterarenainquiry.org.uk) and on [gov.uk](http://gov.uk). Further volumes of the report will be published at a later date.

This report relates in particular to its investigation into the Manchester Arena complex and security arrangements. I am grateful for the strength and courage of the victims' families and the survivors, and the engagement of all those who have shared their experiences to ensure the inquiry can deliver its vital work.

Government will review this report and consider how to respond to its content in due course.

I would also like to thank Sir Jonathan Saunders for his ongoing work to uncover the lessons to be learned for the future from this tragic attack.

[HCWS103]



# Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 17 June 2021

## WORK AND PENSIONS

### Compensation (London Capital & Finance plc and Fraud Compensation Fund) Bill

*The following is an extract from proceedings in the second sitting of the Compensation (London Capital & Finance plc and Fraud Compensation Fund) Public Bill Committee on 15 June.*

**Guy Opperman:** I already meet NEST and the People's Pension regularly, and they have made a very good pitch for a reduced levy. It is already a reduced levy, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, and there is already a 0.75% cap, but of course I am looking forward to meeting them as part of the ongoing consultation.

*[Official Report, Compensation (London Capital & Finance plc and Fraud Compensation Fund) Public Bill Committee, 15 June 2021, c. 60.]*

*Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman):*

An error has been identified in my intervention on the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda).

The correct contribution should have been:

**Guy Opperman:** I already meet NEST and the People's Pension regularly, and they have made a very good pitch for a reduced levy. It is already a reduced levy, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, and there is already a **30p** cap, but of course I am looking forward to meeting them as part of the ongoing consultation.

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Topical Questions

*The following is an extract from Topical Questions to the Secretary of State for the Home Department on 7 June 2021.*

**Priti Patel:** Let us be clear that the Government are absolutely doing everything possible—I make no apology for this—within my powers, to meet our legal duties to provide shelter and accommodation to those in need during the exceptional times of this coronavirus pandemic. Of course, that is in line with the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993, and that also refers to the way in which we financially support and house asylum seekers.

*[Official Report, 7 June 2021, Vol. 696, c. 665.]*

*Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for the Home Department, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel).*

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald).

The correct response should have been:

**Priti Patel:** Let us be clear that the Government are absolutely doing everything possible—I make no apology for this—within my powers, to meet our legal duties to provide shelter and accommodation to those in need during the exceptional times of this coronavirus pandemic. Of course, that is in line with the **Asylum and Immigration Act 1999**, and that also refers to the way in which we financially support and house asylum seekers.

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Reform of the Mental Health Act: White Paper

*The following is an extract from the debate in Westminster Hall on 16 June 2021.*

**Ms Dorries:** On the next steps, public consultation on the White Paper has ended. I note that the hon. Lady said that she would like her comments to be considered, and they will be—they have been heard and duly noted. I reassure her that the stakeholders, many of whom represent her community and interface both with the Department of Health and Social Care and with other organisations and arm's length bodies, have been fully engaged in the White Paper for the reform of the 1983 Act and in the consultation. I stand to be corrected, but I think we have accepted 124 of Sir Simon Wessely's 127 recommendations. We meet him regularly to look at how we can enhance and implement those recommendations.

*[Official Report, 16 June 2021, Vol. 697, c. 129WH.]*

*Letter of correction from the Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health, the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries).*

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes).

The correct response should have been:

**Ms Dorries:** On the next steps, public consultation on the White Paper has ended. I note that the hon. Lady said that she would like her comments to be considered, and they will be—they have been heard and duly noted. I reassure her that the stakeholders, many of whom represent her community and interface both with the Department of Health and Social Care and with other organisations and arm's length bodies, have been fully engaged in the White Paper for the reform of the 1983 Act and in the consultation. I stand to be corrected, but I think we have accepted 124 of Sir Simon Wessely's **154** recommendations. We meet him regularly to look at how we can enhance and implement those recommendations.

## EDUCATION

### Ofsted Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges

*The following are extracts from the oral statement on 10 June 2021.*

**Vicky Ford:** We also introduced the new compulsory relationships and sex education and health education curriculum, largely as a result of the Women and Equalities

Committee's report. Of course, it took some time to make sure that the curriculum was right, because this is a highly sensitive issue. The curriculum was due to roll out compulsorily last September, but because of the pandemic it needed to be delayed until this September.

*[Official Report, 10 June 2021, Vol. 696, c. 1164.]*

*Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford).*

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) .

The correct response should have been:

**Vicky Ford:** We also introduced the new compulsory relationships and sex education and health education curriculum, largely as a result of the Women and Equalities Committee's report. Of course, it took some time to make sure that the curriculum was right, because this is a highly sensitive issue. The curriculum **became compulsory** last September, but because of the pandemic we expect **full roll-out to be completed** this September.

**Vicky Ford:** The sex education curriculum that we have had in the past has not been fit for purpose in a digital age, and that is precisely why we have gone through this exercise over the past few years, with deep consultation and many experts working on it, to bring the new RSHE curriculum into place. This will be compulsory from September.

*[Official Report, 10 June 2021, Vol. 696, c. 1167.]*

*Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford).*

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols).

The correct response should have been:

**Vicky Ford:** The sex education curriculum that we have had in the past has not been fit for purpose in a digital age, and that is precisely why we have gone through this exercise over the past few years, with deep consultation and many experts working on it, to bring the new RSHE curriculum into place. This **became compulsory last** September.

**Vicky Ford:** First, let me discuss the specific helpline that we have set up. We obviously fund many other helplines through the NSPCC, including the ChildLine number, at the moment. Since we set up the helpline, we have had 400 calls, so as long as it is being used, it is good. If we start to see it tailing away—I cannot comment post October.

*[Official Report, 10 June 2021, Vol. 696, c. 1169.]*

*Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford).*

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford)

The correct response should have been:

**Vicky Ford:** First, let me discuss the specific helpline that we have set up. We obviously fund many other helplines through the NSPCC, including the ChildLine number, at the moment. Since we set up the helpline, we have had **over** 400 calls, so as long as it is being used, it is good. If we start to see it tailing away—I cannot comment post October.

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