

**Tuesday
22 June 2021**

**Volume 697
No. 21**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 22 June 2021

House of Commons

Tuesday 22 June 2021

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Northern Ireland Protocol

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): What estimate he has made of the costs incurred by businesses trading between Great Britain and Northern Ireland as a result of the Northern Ireland Protocol. [901590]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): Top of the morning to you, Mr Speaker.

The protocol is explicit in its respect for the UK's territorial integrity, and the Government are committed to delivering it with as little impact on businesses and day-to-day lives as possible. The Government have set up the free-to-use trader support service to support businesses trading between Great Britain and Northern Ireland at a cost of £270 million and have made full use of provisions within the protocol to ensure that no tariffs are charged on internal UK trade.

Ian Paisley: I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Does the Minister accept that the protocol actually discriminates against British businesses trading between GB and Northern Ireland and between Northern Ireland and GB? It undermines trade, damages consumer opportunities and rights, and increases costs to both consumers and businesses on both sides of the channel. What action will the Government take, and indeed encourage others to take, to save British businesses and the economy from this economic discrimination? How long will businesses have to wait for a solution and what compensation has the Treasury calculated to cover the loss in trade, which, at present, is running at hundreds of millions of pounds?

Jesse Norman: I thank the hon. Member for his question. Of course, this follows a wide concern that he has put in front of the House on many previous occasions. I do not accept the characterisation that he has given of the situation in Northern Ireland, but I absolutely agree with him that the Government need to continue to press for the Northern Ireland protocol to be implemented in a proportionate and pragmatic way. That is an important goal of the Government. He talks about the schemes in place. Let me remind him that, so far, the trader support

service has processed something like, I think, 700,000 consignments, 59,000 traders have been registered, there is the Brexit support fund and there is the new movement assistance scheme, as he will know, for food and agriculture trade. We retain a focus on making those systems, rules and support work as effectively and as widely as possible.¹

Apprentices

Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage employers to take on more apprentices. [901591]

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage employers to take on more apprentices. [901595]

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage employers to take on more apprentices. [901596]

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage employers to take on more apprentices. [901598]

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage small and medium-sized businesses to take on more apprentices. [901605]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): We are encouraging employers of all sizes to take on new apprentices through our hiring incentive. Employers who hire a new apprentice of any age until the end of September will receive £3,000 per apprentice. We are also continuing to improve the apprenticeship system for employers by introducing more flexible trading options, making the transfer of unspent levy funds to small businesses easier, and supporting apprenticeships in industries with flexible working patterns through the launch of portable apprenticeships.

Mark Eastwood: The Government's £3,000 initiative incentive for businesses to employ apprentices is welcome, with several companies in my constituency looking to apply, including Shackletons in Dewsbury, and John Cotton and Alexander's Bar in Mirfield. There is no doubt that this initiative has been a great success in enabling young people to get on to the employment ladder. Therefore, will my right hon. Friend consider an extension in funding for the scheme beyond the 30 September deadline?

Rishi Sunak: I pay tribute to, I think it was Shackletons and John Cotton in my hon. Friend's constituency for the example that they are setting, which I hope is emulated by employers across our country. The scheme, as he says, has been a success. More than 50,000 incentive payments were claimed by employers, 80% of which were for young apprentices between 18 and 24. We will of course keep this very successful scheme under review.

Chris Clarkson: Apprenticeships are a fantastic way for people to learn, earn and realise their potential, so much so that I have just advertised this week for one to join my team via Hopwood Hall College in my Heywood and Middleton constituency. Does my right hon. Friend

1. [Official Report, 28 June 2021, Vol. 698, c. 2MC.]

agree that businesses big and small can play their part in turbocharging our post-covid recovery by offering these fantastic opportunities?

Rishi Sunak: I am delighted to hear that my hon. Friend is working with Hopwood Hall College in his constituency to hire an apprentice. Hopefully, I will get an opportunity to meet them in the future. He is right about the ability of this scheme to support all types of employers. Small businesses in particular should know that the £3,000 equates to about a 35% wage subsidy for young apprentices and the Government pay 95% of all training costs, so there has never been a better time for employers to do as he says to help turbocharge our recovery and to hire an apprentice.

Lucy Allan: As with every economic crisis, it is Telford's young people who have been hit hardest by the pandemic. Telford College is playing a vital role in working with employers across the region and securing 1,000 quality apprenticeships this year, helping young people to build their future. Will the Chancellor congratulate Telford College on its inspirational work, and will he commit to putting skills and opportunities for young people front and centre in his economic recovery plan?

Rishi Sunak: I am delighted to hear that news from my hon. Friend. I am happy to congratulate Telford College on a fantastic performance in creating new apprenticeships and working with its local employers to provide those opportunities. She is absolutely right: young people have borne the brunt economically of this crisis. They comprise the majority of the job losses, so it is right that they are front and centre of our minds as we think about the recovery. That is why, whether it is the kickstart scheme, tripling the number of traineeships or the new lifetime skills guarantee, we are focused on providing them with the opportunities and support that they need.

Edward Timpson: It is clear that the pandemic has hit the youngest the hardest. Alongside apprenticeships, many businesses in my Eddisbury constituency, including Safety Shield in Winsford, have used the kickstart scheme in order to bring more good jobs to young people as part of our economic recovery. To that end, will my right hon. Friend tell the House what impact the roll-out of the kickstart scheme is having, and how more businesses that want to, and could, join that scheme and invest in young talents in their area are able to do so?

Rishi Sunak: I congratulate Safety Shield in Winsford on embarking on taking on new kickstarters. This is central to our plan for the recovery in providing opportunity to young people in my hon. Friend's constituency and others. I am pleased to say that over 31,000 kickstarters have started their jobs, with 10,000 more to come in the coming weeks and months. I would say to employers who are looking to take on a kickstarter: go online, talk to your local business organisations, whether it is the Federation of Small Businesses or the chamber of commerce, or apply directly to the Department for Work and Pensions to be accredited so that you can give a young person a fantastic opportunity as we go through the stages of our recovery.

Laura Farris: Unemployment is now falling fast in west Berkshire, and that is in no small part thanks to the Treasury-backed apprenticeship scheme. However,

Newbury College, our principal training provider, says that it is still the large employers that take the bulk of young apprentices, when it is small and medium-sized enterprises that form the backbone of our local economy. Does my right hon. Friend think there is an opportunity to reallocate some of the surplus from the apprenticeship levy to encourage take-up among SMEs?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I am proud that she is working with Newbury College in her constituency. She is right that SMEs are the backbone of west Berkshire and other local communities across our economy. On her particular point, I am pleased to tell her that, from August of this year, employers who pay the levy but have unspent levy funds will be able to use a new bulk transfer service to send that money to SMEs, combined with a new SME match function so that they can find the SMEs that are most appropriate to their business, supply chain or local area. I hope that is helpful to her and Newbury College. The plan is for the Department for Education to have that up and running in August.

Personal Credit: Self-employed People

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): What assessment he has made of recent trends in personal credit availability for self-employed people. [901592]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government have put together an unprecedented package of support for the self-employed, including the self-employed income support scheme, the temporary £20 per week increase in the universal credit standard allowance, and temporarily suspending the minimum income floor. The self-employed are also able to access the restart grant, the recovery loan scheme and business rates relief.

Mr Perkins: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. However, my experience with some self-employed people in my constituency is that, having been self-employed for several years and accepted support from the self-employed scheme, if they then try to get credit, they are told that because they were on that scheme they are no longer eligible for credit, even though there is no reason to suspect that they will not be able to carry on being a guitar teacher, or whatever it is that they do, after the crisis is over. What can he say to the banks to ensure that they take a sensible approach to these people, who have perfectly sustainable businesses that have been suspended temporarily because of the Government's restrictions but are just as good a credit risk as they were three or four years ago?

John Glen: The hon. Gentleman makes a very sensible and worthwhile point on this matter. We are looking closely at the Financial Conduct Authority's "Financial Lives" survey, which indicates the degree of liquidity that exists. I work closely with the lenders on affordability assessments for the self-employed. I am happy to commit to continue to keep this matter under review and to receive further representations from him.

Covid-19: Support for Culture and Arts Sector

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the support provided to the culture and arts sector during the covid-19 outbreak. [901593]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay):

In March 2021, the Chancellor announced a further £300 million to build on the existing £1.57 billion of culture recovery fund support to protect our cultural sector. To date, more than £1.2 billion in grants has been paid.

Sir Robert Neill: The Minister is right, of course, to point out the unprecedented sums that have been given to the arts sector, and that is very welcome, but does he recognise that, particularly for the performing arts, the further four-week delay is crippling their future plans? As all the leading producers both in the west end and throughout the country point out, it takes months to get a show going, and uncertainty cripples that planning. Will he at least consider the calls from throughout the industry for a Government-backed insurance scheme to deal with cancellations if there is further uncertainty? There is a precedent in film and TV production that could readily be adapted. This is about getting them back working, which is actually what they want, rather than simply being subject to grants all the time. They want to get back on stage.

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the success of the film insurance scheme, which has protected over 45,000 jobs and £1.6 billion of spend. On the specific issue he raises, that is exactly why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced the additional £300 million of support at the Budget. He anticipated the fact, in going along with that support, that there would be the risk of further delays to the covid row-back, so that was part of the announcement of an additional £300 million that he set out at the Budget.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: The live events sector continues to be hard hit by covid-19. UK Music and We Make Events have called for additional financial support, an extension of the VAT reduction and Government-backed covid-19 cancellation insurance. Just now, it is impossible for those running concerts and festivals to plan, and some, including Kendal Calling, have had to postpone again until 2022. Can the Minister tell me why the UK Government have left this sector and the many thousands who work in it without the additional support they are calling for?

Steve Barclay: I fear that the question came before my previous answer. I had just mentioned the £300 million of additional support, over and above the £1.57 billion of support that has been announced. Indeed, the hon. Member frequently raises the plight of those individuals who have been hit, and again that is something we very much recognise. Again, however, that is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has set out the wider package of support, such as the time to pay arrangements, loans, business grants and the universal credit uplift. This is about looking at the totality of support within the £352 billion that my right hon. Friend has set out.

Business Investment

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to incentivise businesses to invest in new equipment or infrastructure. [901594]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak):

Stimulating business investment will be key for our economic recovery, and under the super deduction we announced at Budget 2021, for every £1 a company invests in qualifying plant and machinery, its taxes are cut by up to 25p. We have also just launched the UK Infrastructure Bank, which will partner with the private sector and local government, supporting more than £40 billion-worth of infrastructure investment overall.

Jane Stevenson [V]: My right hon. Friend will know that manufacturing and engineering companies are absolutely crucial to the economy in the Black Country and in Wolverhampton. Does he agree that companies feeling confident to make investments, with Government support and schemes like the super deduction, is key to really building back quickly and better, and to lowering unemployment in the Black Country?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of manufacturing in particular to the Black Country. I am pleased to have received the representations from organisations such as Make UK that led to the creation of the super deduction, which, let us be clear, is all about jobs. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: by companies investing and unlocking the cash that is sitting on their balance sheets, we will create jobs to help drive our recovery and drive up our productivity in the process. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight it.

Investment in Green Industries

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage investment in green industries. [901597]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch): The Prime Minister's 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution set out £12 billion of new investment in green industries and will crowd in three times as much private investment. Budget 2021 built on the 10-point plan by encouraging private investment, using the tax system and continuing with the direct Government support announced at the spending review. It also included announcements on offshore wind, energy innovation and hydrogen.

Jason McCartney: Does the Minister agree with me that it makes sense to help, support and incentivise people on low incomes and pensioner households to convert to heat pumps and to insulate their homes?

Kemi Badenoch: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Since June 2020, the Government have spent £1.5 billion on supporting low-income households to improve energy efficiency and install clean heat. A number of subsidy schemes for heat pumps are available and in development. The sector expects to install 67,000 heat pumps in 2021, which is up considerably from the 35,000 installed in 2019. At Budget 2020 we extended the renewable heat incentive, and announced the clean heat grant. That will provide grants for all homeowners towards the cost of heat pumps from 2022. Further funding decisions will be announced at the spending review.

Furloughed Employees

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): What recent estimate his Department has made of the number of furloughed employees moving back into work. [901602]

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): What recent estimate his Department has made of the number of furloughed employees moving back into work. [901604]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): Between the end of January and the end of April, 1.5 million people left the furlough scheme. The most recent business survey from the Office for National Statistics estimates that the number of employees furloughed continued to decline after that point, to approximately 2 million at the end of May, which is the lowest level reported by the survey since June last year. At the same time, the number of payrolled employees has increased for six consecutive months. I believe that the coronavirus job retention scheme is striking the right balance between supporting the economy as it opens up, continuing to provide support and protect incomes, and ensuring that incentives are in place to get people back to work as demand returns.

Nicola Richards: Does my right hon. Friend recall that at the start of the pandemic, many commentators feared that it would lead to unemployment on an unprecedented scale? Has he estimated that impact of his furlough scheme on protecting jobs?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The furlough scheme has supported more than 11.5 million jobs since the start of the pandemic, and she is right to say that at that point, forecasts suggested that unemployment would peak at around 12%. Those forecasts now show unemployment peaking at half that level, which means 2 million fewer people losing their jobs than previously feared. Our unemployment today is lower than that in Italy, France, Spain, Canada, the United States and Australia, and it shows that our plan for jobs is working.

Greg Smith: The figures my right hon. Friend gave in his earlier answers are encouraging, but some employers in my constituency with employees still on furlough tell me that they are desperate to get those employees back to work, but the uncertainty over when restrictions will finally be lifted is holding them back. For example, in the events supply chain, the unwillingness of customers to pay deposits is holding those firms back. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the way to get the economy moving and get those employees back to work is for restrictions to be lifted by 19 July?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is right, and my hope and expectation is that we lift those restrictions on 19 July. By that point, we will have done what we set out to do, which is to get extra jobs in more people's arms to provide us with that extra level of protection. My hon. Friend is right: the only sustainable way to protect those jobs is to reopen the economy so that people can return to work and provide for their families, and move on to bright new opportunities.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Independent experts have told the Government 12 times that the failure to provide adequate financial support to people self-isolating has contributed to the spread of covid, endangering lives and livelihoods. We now know that the Treasury instructed Government officials actively to suppress information about the furlough scheme that was to be used by employers to financially support people self-isolating. Will the Chancellor explain why that instruction was issued by the Treasury? Will he appear in front of the parliamentary Committee's inquiry into covid to explain why the Government chose not to improve self-isolation support, despite repeated warnings?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady is wrong, because the Government did no such thing. Indeed, guidance on usage of the furlough scheme was there in black and white—I am looking at it—and plain for everyone to see from the start. At the beginning of this crisis we improved the way that statutory sick pay works to deal with self-isolation. That was one of the earliest steps we took. We then introduced a rebate scheme for small and medium-sized businesses, to claim back the cost of statutory sick pay for isolating employees from the Government. We also introduced a £500 self-isolation payment, which once the isolation period reduced from 14 to 10 days increased in value by 30% and is now worth at least the national living wage to a worker, if not 20% or 30% more, depending on how many days they isolate for. That shows that the Government are supporting those who need to self-isolate. They did so at the beginning of this crisis, and they will continue to do so until the end.

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con) [V]: Given the rapid pace of our economic recovery and the plans for the further reopening of the economy, I support my right hon. Friend's decision to phase out furlough by the end of September. However, does he accept that a small number of sectors are likely to require yet further support after that time—not least the travel sector, whose revenues, according to evidence received by the Treasury Committee, have suffered a 90% fall during the crisis?

Rishi Sunak: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the difficult circumstances facing that sector, which is why I think in aggregate more than £7 billion of support has been provided to the sector through various means. He will know that there are some particularly large companies that talk to the Government on a bilateral basis. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on those conversations, but he will of course be aware of the support we have put in place, for example, for regional airports, the vast majority of which are paying no business rates for the first half of this year. As he would expect, we keep everything under review.

Financial Services Sector

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the financial services sector following the end of the transition period. [901600]

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to secure an agreement with the EU on financial services. [901609]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

The Chancellor set out the Government's strategy on financial services to the House in November—a vision of a sector that is more open, more technologically advanced and a world leader in the use of green finance, serving the communities and citizens of this country. Since then, we passed the Financial Services Act 2021 in April to begin the necessary reforms to our framework, and we have agreed text with the EU for a regulatory co-operation forum.

Sarah Atherton: There is no doubt that all should be done to support British businesses to export, no more so than in my constituency of Wrexham, which houses one of the largest trading estates in the UK. Businesses are keen to grasp these opportunities—none more so than Matclad, a specialist clay brick slip manufacturer, which is already reaping the benefits of exporting. Does my hon. Friend agree that schemes such as the parliamentary export programme, which I recently took part in, are an excellent opportunity?

John Glen: I am very happy to agree with my hon. Friend. I experienced that myself with my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray). The parliamentary export programme is an excellent way of getting that ambition to export out across the country, and it is just another example of this Government's commitment to grow exports. My hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) may also be interested to know that I shall be visiting Cardiff tomorrow to meet the first cohort of FinTech Wales's FinTech Foundry, a new accelerator programme that will support firms as they seek to build their footprint.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend knows of my concern about the protectionist attitude towards financial services that the European Union has shown over the past few months, and the risks to the City that result from it. We have President Macron hosting people from Wall Street next week, and we have the unlocking of travel in the European Union, which will help the financial services sector there. I hope that the Chancellor and the Minister will do everything they can to encourage ministerial colleagues to do the same here, but will the Minister take whatever responsible steps are necessary in modifying our regulations to ensure that the City and our financial services sector have a strong, competitive future regardless of the behaviour of the European Union?

John Glen: I thank my right hon. Friend for his representations on this matter, and I heartily agree with him. We are promoting the international role of the sector and developing ambitious trade and regulatory relationships with other jurisdictions. We keep all these matters under review. We have taken on board the work of the taskforce on innovation, growth and regulatory reform, and just after Question Time, the Chancellor and I will be meeting representatives of banks as we seek to work with them to make those interventions that our financial services sector needs.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Financial services were not even part of the Brexit agreement that the Government negotiated, because they never made them a priority. Equivalence arrangements are nowhere in sight, £1 trillion-worth of assets have

been moved abroad, and now food and drink exports to the EU have fallen by 47% in the first three months of the year. The Government estimate their new trade deal will add just 0.02% to our GDP. Is the sight of Ministers doing a lap of honour for that trade deal not the equivalent of asking our export industries to give thanks for losing a pound and finding a penny? When will the Government actually help our industries with the red tape that is baked into the agreement that they negotiated?

John Glen: I do not accept the right hon. Gentleman's characterisation of where we are. On financial services, as I hope he knows by now, we have deep dialogue across a number of jurisdictions. That is an ongoing process. If I think about the work we are doing with Brazil, India and China and the dialogues we are having with Switzerland, there is no end to this Government's ambition to improve our financial services' relationships and deepen the opportunities that Brexit has given us.

Plan for Growth Sector Visions

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): What industries his Department is planning to include in the sector visions set out in the Plan for Growth. [901601]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):

The details of the sector visions will be set out by the relevant Departments in the coming months. In developing the visions, the Government will consider the role of the state in supporting high-growth sectors that have the potential to build a globally competitive advantage, as well as how the sectors can also be used to support wider objectives, for example levelling up or enabling a transition to net zero.

Gavin Robinson: I am very grateful to the Financial Secretary for his response. He heard the Chairman of the Treasury Committee, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), mention the tourism and travel sectors, and I encourage him to look on them favourably, but from my perspective, aerospace remains the No. 1 private employer in my constituency and across Northern Ireland. It employs more than 6,500 people. Last year was a difficult year for aerospace and still it turned over £1.4 billion. It has high-end and high-level manufacturing skills that we cannot lose. I hope the sector will feature in the plans that are brought forward.

Jesse Norman: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the comments he makes. I share his view that aerospace is a very important strategic industry for the country as a whole and, of course, particularly for Northern Ireland and his constituency. Let me reassure him that the sector visions we are discussing will be guided by considerations of comparative advantage—we have a considerable comparative advantage in many areas of aerospace—and future growth potential—I do not think anyone doubts that that is an area. He will know that we are investing very heavily in supporting that sector in the transition to net zero, with green fuels and electric flights, and also supporting levelling up. Those all play into a very positive story for Northern Ireland as well as the rest of the UK.

Home Ownership

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage home ownership. [901603]

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage home ownership. [901608]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government are committed to helping people own their own home. Our new mortgage guarantee scheme is increasing the availability of mortgages for credit-worthy households who only have a 5% deposit, helping them realise their dream of home ownership. The lifetime ISA provides a bonus to those under 40 saving towards a home, worth up to £450,000.

Dr Lewis: I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Last week, *The Sunday Times* detailed the colossal sums imposed on ordinary people by rapacious freeholders and reckless developers. Why should anyone risk purchasing a lease on a residential flat if we fail as a Government to protect innocent leaseholders from bearing the costs of defective extra storeys or defective extra cladding forced on them by those who are actually responsible for such terrible defects?

John Glen: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. The Government are investing more than £5 billion in building safety, including an additional £3.5 billion announced this year for the remediation of unsafe cladding for all leaseholders living in high-rise residential buildings. We are also introducing a new tax on the UK residential property development sector and a new levy on developers of certain high-rise buildings to help pay for cladding remediation costs.

Jack Lopresti: Does my hon. Friend agree that the mortgage guarantee scheme has in a short time seen a dramatic increase in the availability of 95% mortgages, which will make home ownership a realistic goal for people aspiring to be homeowners?

John Glen: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Since the scheme has been up and running—as he says, it has been a matter of only a few weeks—we have seen the provision of 95% mortgages expand from just five to 192. This is a significant change, and I am grateful to the industry for the moves that it has made, with Government support.

Educational Catch-up Provision Funding

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): What assessment he has made with the Secretary of State for Education of the (a) effectiveness, (b) value for money and (c) adequacy of the funding allocated to educational catch-up provision announced on 2 June 2021. [901606]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): We are providing a further £1.4 billion over the next three academic years for education recovery. This is on top of the £1.7 billion provided for academic year 2020-21.

Mohammad Yasin [V]: It has been widely reported that it was the Chancellor who refused by a 90% margin to find the funding recommended by Sir Kevan Collins to help our nation's children to catch up on their education after the pandemic. The Chancellor has benefited from a first-class private education, so will he take this opportunity to apologise to the generation of children he is letting down as the Tories refuse to invest in our children's and our country's future?

Steve Barclay: There was a striking omission from that question. There was no reference at all to the additional £2.2 billion of core school funding, over and above which there is the £1.4 billion announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. Of course, the House would expect proposals to be evidence-led, deliverable and provide value for money, and we will work with Department for Education colleagues on that, but there was no mention in the hon. Gentleman's question of the additional £2.2 billion of core school spending uplift this year.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): The Institute for Fiscal Studies has estimated that the significant long-term cost to our economy from the Chancellor's failure to invest in our children and young people is as much as £350 billion in lost earnings. Has the Treasury done its own assessment and will the Minister have the decency to publish it?

Steve Barclay: As I said in my last answer, we will have a review to inform the question in terms of the impact on time. Most of the debates that we have had in this House have focused on teacher quality as the biggest driver of outcomes for children, so we need to see the evidence of it. For example, if we look at Finland, we see that Finland has a shorter school day but a higher PISA—programme for international student assessment—result. If we look at the USA, we see that it has a longer school day but a lower PISA result. So it is right that we look at the evidence, but teacher quality is usually seen as the bigger driver and that is why we have funded the tuition in the way that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has.

Bridget Phillipson: With this Government, it seems that it is a case of “don't know, don't care”. The reality is that the Chancellor's failure to invest in our children's future is the very definition of a false economy. The Chancellor recently said that he could not say yes to everyone. He seemed to have no problem saying yes to the friends and donors of the Conservative party, but it is a no to the children who urgently need support to catch up after the biggest disruption to their education for a generation. Is the Minister really proud of that?

Steve Barclay: I am very proud that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has committed an additional £7.1 billion over three years to increase the school uplift, with £2.2 billion this year alone. I am very proud that he announced £1.7 billion of additional recovery funding. I am proud that he announced a further £1.4 billion, but again, the hon. Lady appears to have written her question before hearing the answer. The answer was that we will of course look as part of our review at the effectiveness of the additional time. I have cited some of the international evidence that we will look at, but teacher quality is usually the bigger driver

and that is why we have focused on teacher training but also on the tuition programme, so that we are training an additional 500,000 teachers and rolling out 6 million tuition courses to get that targeted learning support to children across the country.

Freeports

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): What progress his Department has made in establishing freeports in England. [901607]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): I was pleased to announce the location of eight new English freeports at the Budget in March. The next phase of delivery for freeports is being led by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. It is working with the eight freeports to help them to establish the appropriate governance structures and develop their investment proposals. The Government will then review their proposals for investment and the deployment of the tax and customs reliefs later this year.

Mrs Murray: I welcome the news that we have a freeport in neighbouring Plymouth. Will the Chancellor's Department please work with the Department for Transport to ensure that we have quick, flowing transport links across the Tamar to make the most of these opportunities for my constituents?

Rishi Sunak: I am delighted for Plymouth and its surrounding communities that it has received freeport status. As my hon. Friend says, this is a fantastic opportunity to drive investment and create jobs. I will, of course, work with the Department for Transport on improving transport links across the south-west. She previously welcomed the £2.5 billion upgrade of vital road connections such as the A303, the A30 and the A358, as well as the replacement of the vital Dawlish sea wall, which will improve rail connectivity in the region.

Immigration: Sharing of Data between HMRC and Home Office

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): What his Department's policy is on the sharing of data between HMRC and the Home Office for immigration purposes. [901611]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs has a strict duty of confidentiality in relation to information it holds on taxpayers. HMRC will share information on individuals or employers with the Home Office for immigration purposes only where a clear legal basis exists, and it will share or disclose only the information that is necessary and proportionate to the intended purpose through strict adherence to data protection principles, including the UK general data protection regulation. Personal data that is disclosed is minimised where it can be and strictly governed and subject to audit.

Anne McLaughlin [V]: It is not necessary and proportionate in the cases I have been hearing about. In one case, someone who had been here as a highly skilled migrant for 10 years was refused the right to remain because he had miscalculated his tax by £1.20 years previously. What global talent does the Minister think will want to take the risk of uprooting their families to another country that may well kick them out for something HMRC previously said was a minor issue?

Jesse Norman: For reasons that I have described, I cannot comment on individual cases. However, the hon. Lady is welcome to raise them with HMRC on behalf of her constituents. I can tell her that legislation provides very specific, well-designed information-sharing gateways under an umbrella memorandum of understanding governing all data sharing between the two sides, and all of that is grounded in strict obedience with the law.

Gender Equality

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of his fiscal policies on gender equality. [901617]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch): The Treasury carefully considers the equality impact of both individual measures and fiscal events on those sharing protected characteristics, including gender, in line with both its legal obligations and its strong commitment to promoting fairness.

Kirsten Oswald [V]: I thank the Minister for that response, but there are glaring gaps. For instance, on women's pensions, my constituent Kay cannot understand why she has to suffer because of the accelerated timetable for increases in women's state pension age. What does the Minister say to her and to the Women Against State Pension Inequality who wonder why the Government have not undertaken an impact assessment of the detriment they have all faced?

Kemi Badenoch: The Treasury complies with its public sector equality duty and takes into account all sorts of circumstances that need to be considered before putting forward any policies. We have had numerous debates about WASPI pensions over the last four years, and I am afraid this issue is settled. If the hon. Lady has specific issues with a particular constituent, I encourage her to take those up with the Department for Work and Pensions.

Access to Cash

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to protect access to cash within local communities. [901622]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government recognise that cash is crucial to the daily lives of millions of individuals and businesses across the UK, and we have committed to legislate to protect access to cash. The Government made legislative changes to support the widespread offering of cashback without a purchase by shops and other businesses in the recent Financial Services Act 2021 and this summer we will consult on further legislative proposals for protecting cash for the long term.

Ronnie Cowan [V]: I welcome the announcement that there will be further consultation, but will the Minister confirm that any legislation introduced post consultation will include a requirement on banks to provide adequate access to cash withdrawals that are free at the point of service and meet the needs of local communities in both urban and rural areas?

John Glen: I can commit that we will look very carefully at the evidence on the best possible interventions to make. I am pleased that, as of March 2020, 98% of

the population could access free cash within 3 km, but we have to come to terms with the fact that from 2009, when 56% of transactions were by cash, we were down to 17% by last year. We have to come up with appropriate legislation to meet that change.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, Dame Meg Hillier.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

More than 1 million people still use only cash, and approximately 4 million use cash regularly, so it is vital that they have access to it. This is now the second consultation that the Treasury is going through, but as the PAC has seen, all the distribution of cash is in the hands of private providers. Can the Economic Secretary give any indication of the type of legislation that he can introduce to ensure that if people are very poor, they can get cash? That does not mean going to the supermarket and getting it out when they do not even know what is in their own account.

John Glen: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her recent elevation. I take her points on board, but this is a complex area. There will need to be a range of interventions from industry, working with regulators. The LINK scheme already has a £5 million fund to help areas of great deprivation and provide extra access points for cash, but we need to recognise that technology will have to play a significant role. We will also use the extensive network of 11,500 post offices to make good on our pledge to ensure that access to cash remains available across the country.

Topical Questions

[901650] **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): As we have reopened our economy since the last lockdown, we have continued to provide extensive support through our £400 billion plan for jobs, protecting businesses, families and individuals. I am pleased to say that the early data on household incomes, employment, corporate insolvencies and consumer and business confidence all show that our plan for jobs is working.

Margaret Ferrier [V]: Following the Treasury's announcement of compensation to cover up to 80% of the losses of holders of mini-bonds with London Capital & Finance, will the Chancellor now also act to provide full compensation to the victims of another scandal, the collapse of Equitable Life? The vast majority have received just 22% of their losses.

Rishi Sunak: I very much appreciate the hon. Lady's raising the issue. She will know that the matter has been extensively discussed and debated for many years. The matter, after review, has been concluded and closed and is final in all respects.

[901651] **Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): The mother town of Burslem in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke is blessed to be the home of the outstanding British brewer, the Titanic brewery, founded and run by Keith and Dave Bott. More than 80 Conservative colleagues and I have shown our support for the introduction of a lower draft beer duty on beer

sold in pubs from containers over 20 litres in size. Will my right hon. Friend assure us that the proposal is being considered as part of the alcohol duty review? Will he tell us when the review will conclude? Our pubs need urgent help today.

Rishi Sunak: I can assure not just my hon. Friend, but Keith and Dave from the Titanic brewery, that we have consulted industry on the prospect of such a lower rate as part of our ongoing alcohol duty review. The team and my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary are working closely with HMRC to further understand the practicalities and the cost of the proposals; we will provide further updates in due course. My hon. Friend is right about securing hospitality in the meantime. The temporary VAT cut, the business rates holiday and, indeed, freezing beer duty at the last two Budgets are all helping in the short term.

Mr Speaker: Let us welcome the shadow Chancellor to Treasury questions.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Whether on social care, on Northern Powerhouse Rail or on tackling climate breakdown, there is a growing gap with this Government between what is promised and what is actually delivered. The Treasury's response to the net zero review was first due to be published in autumn last year, yet it is nowhere to be seen. The COP26 climate summit begins in November. While the UK is hosting, the Government cannot lead with authority, because the fact is that we cannot have a climate strategy without a sustainable economic plan behind it. Will the Chancellor please tell the House on what date he will publish the final report of the net zero review?

Rishi Sunak: The net zero report will of course be published imminently, but the hon. Lady talked about last autumn. Last autumn, the Prime Minister published the green 10-point plan, perhaps the most comprehensive plan from any Government anywhere in the world, on how we will meet our net zero ambitions. Contained within that plan was £12 billion of new investment, creating probably a quarter of a million jobs when all is said and done, ensuring our leadership in industries such as offshore wind and creating jobs in places such as Teesside and Humberside, which is important to the future prosperity of this country, so I think we are doing a great job of getting on with meeting our climate ambitions and demonstrating leadership to the world.

Rachel Reeves: Then why not publish the net zero review, Chancellor? When it comes to this Government's net zero strategy, tomorrow never comes. There is no time to waste, because it is the responsibility of all of us to hand on to our children and grandchildren a more sustainable planet, creating new opportunities for our pioneering British industries and investing today in the jobs of the future, whether in hydrogen, tidal energy or electric vehicles, to ensure the fair and just transition that we need to see. So, as the Chancellor still cannot give a date, months after the event, for when he will publish his final report on the net zero review, will he commit to ensuring that our net zero carbon targets are hard-wired through the forthcoming spending review, as I would do as Chancellor?

Rishi Sunak: Meeting our climate ambitions is obviously at the heart of everything that the Government are doing. The hon. Lady talked about sectors where we should show leadership: I have just talked about offshore wind, and we can keep going, with electric vehicles. This country now has more rapid charging points per mile than any country in Europe other than Norway, and we are doing more.¹ She talked about showing leadership: as the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) reminds me, we recently published the Dasgupta review, which is a groundbreaking piece of work on tackling biodiversity. She talked about infrastructure: we launched the UK Infrastructure Bank just last week, not a million miles away from her in Leeds, the home of the infrastructure revolution. And at the G7 summit that I recently hosted, we reached a landmark global agreement to get the G7 to agree to mandatory climate disclosures, because, much as she would like us to, this Government alone cannot solve all these problems. The private sector will have to play its part, which is why climate disclosures across the world would help to unlock billions in private capital to help us to meet our climate ambitions.

[901652] **Andrew Griffith** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Businesses and local government alike will join me in welcoming the launch of the UK Infrastructure Bank last week. Its doors are now open for business and it is deploying capital. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is precisely the sort of intervention we need to deliver net zero?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I briefly pay tribute to him for his work last week on tech net zero. We launched the UK Infrastructure Bank last week in Leeds. Capitalised with £12 billion from the Government, it will unlock £40 billion of investment into tackling both levelling up and our net zero ambitions, and the team there are fantastic. I want to take this opportunity to say an enormous thank you to Chris Grigg for his superb leadership. It is brilliant that we can attract people of his calibre to lead these organisations, and I feel very confident about the UK Infrastructure Bank's future progress.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: Concerns have been raised that the narrow criteria of the Business Banking Resolution Service have left far too many ineligible, and also that not enough banks are participating in the scheme. With many businesses now at risk with covid-19 debt, can the Minister tell me what he intends to do about the situation?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady is right in the sense that many businesses have taken on debt to get through the crisis, which is why we have implemented something called Pay as You Grow. More than 1 million businesses took bounce back loans, and they now have the ability, at their option, to turn those loans instantly into 10-year loans, doubling the term and reducing their monthly payments by around half, and to take further six-months holidays or interest-only repayment periods. They can take any of those options and it will not have any impact on their credit score, because we recognise the burdens on cash flow and we want to do our bit to ease them and support our recovery.

[901655] **Dr Jamie Wallis** (Bridgend) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he will not introduce a tourism tax in England? Does he agree that if the Welsh Government were to do that in Wales, that tax bombshell would leave tourism businesses such as those in Porthcawl in my constituency at a distinct competitive disadvantage?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): Of course, local taxation in Wales is a matter for the Welsh Government. The UK Government's primary focus, as my hon. Friend will be aware, has been on supporting recovery from the pandemic, and we recognise that the tourism sector has been particularly hard hit. That is exactly why we have provided more than £7 billion so far through the reduced VAT rate for the hospitality, accommodation and attraction industries across the UK; it is why we have extended the reduced rate until 30 September 2021; and it is why we have put in place a much wider array of support as we come out and play it long in relation to the pandemic.

[901656] **Mark Eastwood** (Dewsbury) (Con): The youth investment fund remains an important manifesto commitment and will be valuable in supporting young people. Will my right hon. Friend inform me of its intended launch day and briefly outline the benefits it will bring to young people in Dewsbury, Mirfield, Kirkburton and Denby Dale once it is launched?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Steve Barclay): My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of the youth investment fund. It was a manifesto commitment and it is due to launch in the coming months. He will recall that at the spending review 2020 we allocated some funding to inform pilots, as we shape that launch.

[901654] **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): Almost every time that I, or others Members, have raised the plight of the millions of people excluded from covid support, Ministers reel off the various levels of support that have been made available to those who have access to it. Without again going through the list of supports that are available, will the Minister tell me when the Government are going to put in place some level of support for those who have had nothing so far, and when it will be backdated to?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman will know, as we have discussed it on many occasions, how we have absolutely bent over backwards to attempt to include as many people as possible and have leant into considerable discussion, both with excluded groups and with other related groups. As he will know, it is not a single picture; different groups are not included for different reasons. As a result, we have in part been able to evolve and extend the programmes, and he will be aware that we did so in the last iteration of the self-employed scheme.

[901658] **Angela Richardson** (Guildford) (Con): I welcome the launch of the national infrastructure bank. Road infrastructure projects are needed in my constituency to meet the additional 14,000 homes to be delivered in our local plan, which is why I am calling for the A3 to be tunnelled under Guildford to ease congestion. As we move towards our target of net zero and transition our vehicles to being electric and hydrogen-run, there will be a decrease in revenue raised

1. [Official Report, 28 June 2021, Vol. 698, c. 3MC.]

by fuel duty. Will my right hon. Friend outline what steps he is taking to replace that revenue and to help fund road infrastructure projects such as my tunnel?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the Government will need to ensure that revenue from motoring taxes keeps pace with the change away from petrol and diesel vehicles so that we can continue to fund infrastructure such as the A3, which she mentions. I am sure that colleagues in the Department for Transport can speak about her petition specifically, but I would like to reassure her and her constituents that this Government will continue to focus on record, unprecedented investment in the strategic roads network over this Parliament, through the £27.5 billion road investment strategy, which will deliver about 70 major upgrades.

[901657] **Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab) [V]: Does the Chancellor have confidence in the Financial Conduct Authority's ability to appropriately regulate and sanction companies that defraud their investors? Furthermore, does he believe that if it is found that the regulator has failed to prevent this fraudulent activity, the Government have a duty to compensate?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): It is absolutely clear that there are significant lessons for the FCA to learn from the Gloster review, and I have regular conversations, including just last week, with the new chief executive on the transformation programme. He has employed five new senior executives to drive that programme forward urgently, and I look forward to seeing the results of that intervention.

[901659] **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): The role of regulation has been in the spotlight recently in an independent report by the taskforce on innovation, growth and regulatory reform, which was welcomed by the Prime Minister. The report highlights that as the EU has expanded, its internal processes and regulation have become slower and more bureaucratic, impacting on economic competitiveness. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to reduce onerous regulation as regards UK Treasury matters to ensure that all such regulation reflects our national interest and ensures that the UK maximises its economic agility and competitiveness?

John Glen: My hon. Friend rightly recognises the value of the TIGRR report, which we received last week, and we will be looking very carefully at those recommendations. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor chairs the better regulation committee, which has been established to drive forward a new strategy to deliver better regulation outside the EU. There is a lot of work to be done, but progress is being made.

[901660] **Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab) [V]: My constituent is a travel counsellor who established her home-based business nine years ago. She has been excluded from Government support because she is not registered for business rates, and when she tried to register for business rates in 2020, she missed the deadline by six days because of delays at the Valuation Office. What financial support can the Treasury give her and others like her, who remain excluded from support?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady will be aware that the Government have made available to local authorities, initially at least, £1.5 billion and a further top-up sum, in order precisely to meet hard cases that may fall between the cracks of the very wide-ranging support that we have given otherwise. I strongly encourage her constituent to talk to her local authority about that funding.

[901661] **Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): On 3 March, when the Chancellor announced the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund, High Peak was designated one of the top priority areas, and the Government committed to giving more than £100,000 to the council to help it deliver a world-class bid. However, despite my urging, and having had nearly four months, I regret to inform the House that my Labour council has failed to submit a levelling-up fund bid in time. Can my right hon. Friend assure the House and my constituents that there will be a second round for further bids and that High Peak will still be considered a top priority area in any future rounds?

Steve Barclay: I understand my hon. Friend's frustration. He will know from the announcement at the Budget that the prospectus set out the process, the types of projects, and indeed how bids will be assessed. To reassure him, there will be further opportunities for local authorities to submit bids to the fund. One of the things that we are encouraging those local authorities to do is to work with elected Members of Parliament in the shaping of those bids, and I hope that they will now take the opportunity to do so.

[901666] **Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab) [V]: More than half a million young people are out of work and thousands are on furlough. The delay in easing restrictions without associated support for businesses is set to further increase unemployment by 300,000. In the event of a third wave that triggers further restrictions, will Ministers commit to extending the coronavirus job retention scheme and other support that has been vital for our constituents and businesses in our constituencies?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady talked about outcomes in the labour market. She will know that we have now had six consecutive months of more people in work, which is something to be celebrated. Vacancies are now running higher than they were at the start of the pandemic, which is a fantastic sign of things to come. The unemployment rate, as I highlighted earlier, is now half what was forecast: 2 million fewer people are forecast to lose their jobs, which is lower than most of our major competitor countries. She is right to highlight, as we have discussed previously, the plight of young people. Our interventions, such as the kickstart scheme and the apprenticeship incentive, will continue to provide opportunity for them up and down the country.

[901662] **Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): Elddis caravans and motorhomes—owned by Erwin Hymer—on Delves Lane, Consett, in my constituency, has benefited hugely from the Chancellor of the Exchequer's removal of the EU's motorhomes tax. It is now growing as a business and struggling to get

candidates to meet job vacancies. Will the Chancellor visit Elddis with me to meet the workforce and management and to see the impact that his tax cut has had? Will he also look at what more support can be provided for that vital manufacturing firm in my constituency?

Jesse Norman: I congratulate Elddis, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on giving Elddis profile, on fighting the campaign that he has, and on the outcome and its very successful results in this case. I have it on very good authority that the Chancellor would be delighted to

visit Elddis, so I am in a position to make a binding commitment from the Government side, and I am sure that he looks forward to it very much.

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

12.34 pm

Sitting suspended.

Events Research Programme

12.37 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the results of the events research programme.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): The world-leading events research programme has conducted 14 pilot events across two phases since April. The findings from these events will inform decisions around the safe removal of social distancing at step 4 of the road map. We committed to publishing the final report ahead of step 4 of the road map, and that is what we will do. The report will cover key findings and the operational approach of the research programme. The events research programme has studied some highly complex questions. The guidance for the sector that comes out of this work will, however, be practical, clear and simply set out.

Following the delay to step 4, the Government will now run a third phase of the events research programme. This phase will gather more data, consolidating our evidence base and helping in our aim of getting spectators back to live events in greater numbers. Phase 3 will include trialling the practical use of covid certification at a range of events, alongside other mitigations. Some of these pilot events will be permitted at full capacity, providing visitors demonstrate their covid status. The men's and women's finals at Wimbledon, for example, will be played with centre court at full capacity, and those matches will be the first major outdoor sporting events held at full capacity in the UK since the start of the pandemic. The events research programme is continuing live discussions with a number of theatres and cultural and business event organisers about their inclusion in the programme, which would see events taking place with larger capacities.

I am sure that the House recognises how vital this research is in supporting the reopening of venues and sectors that we and our constituents are so passionate about. However, it is important to recognise that public safety is the main priority. Although we are not yet in a position to publish the full report, I assure the House that post-event data is closely monitored and has not shown any evidence of the events causing outbreaks. If the events had, we would have communicated that information urgently. As the Prime Minister has stressed, the road map is driven by the data, not target dates.

Like everybody present, I know how important it is for spectators to return to live events in greater numbers. We are hopeful that the events research programme will enable us to work with the experts and the events sectors to allow reopening as planned in step 4 of the road map.

Jo Stevens: I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and the Minister for his response.

The terms of reference for the programme were published on 22 February; we are four months on and no results have been published. Last month, the Secretary of State said in a newspaper interview that 15 of the 58,000 ERP participants had tested positive for covid, but still no results have been published. I am afraid there was nothing in the Minister's response to explain the failure

to publish the results. What is the secret? Why will the Government not tell the public, the industry and us what the results are?

All those who have spent time and money on organising and hosting test events, and those who rely on the programme, would like to see the results. They wanted to see them in real time or, at the very least, at regular intervals over the past four months. Without seeing the results, how can they plan for the summer? How are the public to understand the Government's plan for the sector?

Organisations involved in the ERP have told me that a report with those good results was produced by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, but they were not allowed to see it. They also told me that No. 10 refused to allow the report to be published last week because it did not fit with the communications grid. Did No. 10 block publication of the report last week?

What evidence are the Government using to make decisions about pilot events? Why are some organisations getting the go-ahead to test events and not others? Andrew Lloyd Webber refused to join the programme because the rest of the industry was not being treated equally; do companies have to have the Prime Minister's mobile number to run a test event? Kendal Calling was cancelled yesterday because its application to participate in the third phase of the ERP was refused. Under what criteria was Wimbledon accepted as a pilot? When was that agreed? Will there be a fourth stage of the ERP if restrictions remain in place for the sector beyond 19 July? Finally, will the Minister just publish the ERP results today?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and agree with her that many people have been involved in the events research programme. We thank David Ross, Nick Hytner and all those involved—including hundreds of volunteers up and down the country—who have made the events so successful.

When we announced the programme, we outlined our intention to release the report prior to step 4 and that is exactly what we will do: we will release the report very soon. The ERP report is subject to a comprehensive and rigorous co-ordination and approval process across Departments; the academic institutions that have been involved in the programme, as the hon. Lady knows; and the ERP governance board.

The programmes have been selected in consultation with the science advisers on the events research programme science board. Those events involved in the latest phase, phase 3, have been approached based on the advice we received on the information we need to get out of the events research programme. They were approached on an equal basis. We will announce further ERP programmes shortly.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Chair of the Select Committee.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Many of the event organisers who took part in the pilots did so at a financial loss, purely to help their industry and the country more widely, so the delay in getting the vital data into the public domain is a huge let-down and is undoubtedly leading to cancellations, with Kendal Calling festival being the latest example just yesterday.

Will my hon. Friend commit to releasing all available data as a matter of urgency and writing to the Select Committee with what we know to date? Does he recognise that the clear failure to do so adds to a growing impression that some decision makers are being swayed by unaccountable scientists without the proper and relevant data being put before them? After all, we are a democracy, not some sort of scientocracy.

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend, who chairs the Select Committee, highlights the importance of making sure that information is correct and data is accurate, because it will help inform decisions about opening up. We will also be using the events research programme to provide guidance to the sector. We are well aware that it needs that guidance as far in advance as possible in order to help with events and logistical arrangements when they open. My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I completely agree. We want to get the information and data out very soon. We will be doing so before the next phase, as we stated at the beginning of the programme.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: The events and live music sector has been calling for Government covid insurance help for months, as have the SNP and many Tory MPs, including members of the Select Committee. Why are Ministers not listening to their colleagues on this issue? What are the arguments against offering insurance help for this vital sector, which desperately needs it?

Nigel Huddleston: I should say that we very much appreciate the work that has been happening with the devolved Administrations, co-operating with information sharing relating to the events research programme. As the Secretary of State made clear at the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee on Thursday 13 May, the Government are very aware of the wide concerns about securing indemnity for the live events sector. We continue to assess options to provide further support to the sector within the public health context. These are live considerations.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): The work that DCMS has done in getting cash to businesses in the arts sector in my constituency and beyond has been great, but getting people into venues is now what is required, as highlighted to me last weekend when I visited the Empire theatre in Consett, and at a national level, by great organisations such as UK Music. I welcome the events research programme and what it is doing to look at reopening. It sounds like it is good news. Publishing it soon will be vital for the sector, so that they can get on with planning to reopen. If it is good news, it is also going to be vital for public confidence in booking. Will the Minister commit to publishing the findings as soon as possible, so that theatres, nightclubs and other venues in my constituency can get on with planning to reopen?

Nigel Huddleston: As my hon. Friend says, the purpose of the events research programme was precisely for those goals—to help inform decision making around the opening of public events and large events on a scale that we have not been able to experience over the last few months. We will be publishing the information shortly, as well as guidance to help events open.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab) [V]: My constituency is home to internationally-known theatre and music venues and exhibition centres. They tell me they are still waiting for promised Government funds, an insurance scheme that gives them certainty on reopening and, specifically, the publication of the events research programme report. One industry source told me today that failure to publish

“is both creating confusion and eroding confidence across the events industry.”

What should I tell them, their customers and their staff?

Nigel Huddleston: As I mentioned, we are considering the indemnity issues. The sector has had support through, for example, the culture recovery fund, which is a £2 billion fund, as well as other support from Government. The whole purpose of the events research programme was and is to enable the sectors to open as soon as possible.

It is important to stress as well that under step 3 of the road map, indoor events of up to 1,000 people and outdoor events of up to 4,000 people or, in some cases, 10,000 people, can happen. We have not gone back—that is still possible under step 3 of the road map. Many events are taking place right across the country precisely because of that.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): In my constituency and others, many events over the summer, such as highland games, agricultural shows and the rest, have been cancelled for a second year in a row. Was there ever an expression of interest from the Scottish Government to hold any test events north of the border? Should any event organisers in mine or any other Scottish constituency approach DCMS for permission to be made a test event, would the Minister consider that?

Nigel Huddleston: We are co-operating with the devolved Administrations, as I mentioned. They run separate programmes. The programme held in England is the largest that we are aware of in the world, and the most comprehensive and broadest. We will be sharing information and data. The spirit of co-operation is there across the nations, but there are no plans for the English-based ERP programme to consume the Scottish programme at this moment in time. We need to co-operate.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I trust that I am always consistent in what I say—what I am about to ask will come as no surprise to either the Minister or the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight). If the Government were to underwrite insurance for events and festivals, it would be a real boost and would really get them going again. There is a precedent, when it comes to terrorism. Her Majesty's Government do rather well out of that—they make a profit on the deal. Will the Government think again?

Nigel Huddleston: As I said previously, we are aware of the wider concerns about the sector, including the insurance and the indemnity issues. We are considering options, and we are taking those issues very seriously.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): First, may I thank the Minister for his personal visit to my constituency and to the fantastic Puzzlewood attraction? I know that he had a fantastic time and helped to sell the benefits of

[Mr Mark Harper]

my constituency more widely. On this particular subject, though, I am a little confused. When the Government do not publish something, it is normally because it is bad news and they are trying to hide it away. I have a very strong suspicion that this set of data is fantastically positive. It must be ready for publication because it must have been prepared for last week when step 4 was due to be announced. My fear is that it demonstrated the opposite of the decision that the Prime Minister announced last week and that we could have opened safely on 21 June. That is the real reason it has not been published. Why does the Minister not publish it today and put our minds at rest?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my right hon. Friend for his initial comments. I very much enjoyed meeting his constituents and visiting his constituency. I am afraid that I would not buy into some of his conspiracy theories around this. We have said already that, if there were major concerns, we would have made sure that that information was in the public arena. That would be the responsible thing to do. Some of the initial data points were already announced by the Secretary of State back in May. The report needs to be comprehensive and it needs to be reviewed by a large number of stakeholders in Government. We will be releasing it very soon.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The live events sector, musicians and the creative industries have been severely hit during this pandemic, with many excluded from Government support schemes. They deserve clarity, but instead of transparency, the Government have been busy trying to hide information, including the findings from the events research programme, which should have been published last month as initially promised. Can the Minister confirm whether the Prime Minister had access to the events research programme and used the findings to inform his decisions about extending lockdown restrictions? If seeing that information was important enough for him, why is it not good enough for this Parliament and for people who are desperately trying to plan to reopen their businesses?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, I am afraid that I do not buy into some of the conspiracy theories circulating around here. Clearly, the goal of the Government—the goal of the whole House—is to open up sectors as soon as we can in a responsible way. The events research programme is providing vital and pivotal information to enable us to do so. We will be providing additional guidance to the events sector, and we have been providing further support for these vital sectors—[*Interruption.*] I agreed with the hon. Gentleman's first comment. These are pivotal sectors for the economy and for our livelihood and we want to provide them with support.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Is not the example of Israel, where a high level of vaccination among the general population acted as a means to avoid any restrictions on events, one for the Government to follow? If my hon. Friend were to publish this report, he most certainly would not be damned.

Nigel Huddleston: I am not sure how to read that, but I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I think he makes an important point about the correlation between

opening up and the vaccination programme. We would not be where we are, even with some of the smaller events that we have already enabled to open up or with the events research programme, were it not for the incredibly successful vaccination programme to date. I thank everyone involved in that, because that is what is enabling these sectors to open up, with all the economic and mental health benefits that come with these major events taking place.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The delay in the publication of this ERP data is not without real-world consequences, particularly for us in north Lancashire and south Cumbria where we saw the cancellation yesterday of the Kendal Calling festival. That is a festival that has received no support from the culture recovery fund, and it has been cancelled now for a second year. That will have real-world economic consequences in my local area. I have listened very carefully to what the Minister has said, but he has failed to give any credible reason for the delay in publishing this data. Can he try once to give one credible reason for the delay in publishing this data?

Nigel Huddleston: We will be announcing phase 3 of the culture recovery fund very shortly, and I am sure that it will be received as positively across the whole House as the previous phases. It is important to be very clear that we are unable to get to step 4 of the road map not because of the delay in the release of this document but because of increases in infection rates, concerns about the variants of concern, and the inability to meet the tests required to get to phase 4. That is why we are not able to open all the events programmes as we would like to at this moment in time. It is responsible for us to continue with the events research programme so as to be in the best possible position to take full advantage when we are able to open.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con) [V]: I welcome the work that has been done through the events research programme. However, does my hon. Friend agree that even when step 4 is reached, the events sector will need some confidence that it can plan for future events knowing that they are either considered to be safe because of the work of the events research programme or because there is sufficient insurance in place to protect them in case new restrictions come, and that without that confidence it will be very difficult for events organisations to plan for the future?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend, who has a lot of credibility and experience in this area, makes absolutely the right points. Even when we can open, there will be a need to build confidence in the public arena, and some of these sectors have been hit so hard that it will take several years for them to recover. We will be continuing to support them through the next phase of the CRF and other support measures. We will publish guidance along with the report that will also help these sectors to open up.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Does he agree that mixed messages are being sent about safety outdoors, with schools still making parents and children carry on wearing masks, yet they can walk from school to the

playground without a mask? Will he undertake to clarify the requirements for outdoor activities as a whole and not be limited to the pilot schemes for large-scale events so that all Government Departments can send the same message across all Departments and all regions, particularly the Northern Ireland Assembly? All information can then be shared equally, and there can be the same policy across all the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Nigel Huddleston: I would not want to step into some of the devolved issues or indeed some of the concerns being expressed. However, to be fair, most of the devolved Administrations, as well as the UK Government, are setting clear guidance about when facemasks are required. The events research programme has been trialling events without social distancing and without facemasks precisely to look at where we can open up further, which I think is the point the hon. Gentleman is trying to make.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The events and conferences sector has such a positive impact on our economy, not least because it showcases the UK around the world, provides a platform for businesses to export and attracts inward investment, yet it is on its knees as one of the last sectors still to be almost shut down because of the covid emergency. Will the Minister publish this data? He has acknowledged that the pilot events have not led to increased infection rates. Is it not time to give the events and conferences sector a clear timetable for reopening?

Nigel Huddleston: I could not agree more about the sector's pivotal role and its absolutely pivotal importance to our economic wellbeing, as a lot of sales go on at business events, conferences and so on right across the country. It is a major part of our economy and we want to get it open as soon as possible. We have had a business event as part of the ERP programme and we are hoping to have another one as well. It is a sector that I pay close attention to, as it is a pivotal part of the economy, and I will be happy to work with my right hon. Friend to promote it in the long term. It was mentioned in the tourism recovery plan last week as a major part of our potential growth.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: It is good to see the success of events such as the Download festival pilot, which gives us all a glimpse of a post-covid restriction life that might be possible. However, it is only possible for these events to go ahead with Government underwriting. Can the Minister not see the necessity of extending events insurance if more events like this one are to go ahead?

Nigel Huddleston: Indeed, the event last weekend—a little bit of rain did not put off a lot of people from attending—was very successful and provides key learning. As I have said, we are looking at indemnity options.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): I am incredibly heartened to hear the Minister say that the reinsurance scheme is under active consideration. I am further heartened that he accepted the point made by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) that the last time we did this kind of thing it made the Exchequer money—we got the planes

off the ground after 9/11 and made a profit for the Treasury. Does the Minister agree that the industry, which is worth £84 billion a year, really deserves the confidence of a reinsurance scheme, and that it is a vote of confidence in global Britain and in our vaccine scheme?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a hugely important sector to our economy; it employs 1.5 million people right up and down the country, and there are whole households that rely on it. That is exactly why we have the events research programme: to try to build confidence so that we can get the sector up and running again. We will be looking at alternative ways in which we can continue to support the sector, including indemnity.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Organisers have done their side of the bargain and so have people attending these testers, but now the Government's lack of communication is threatening a summer's worth of events. Industry experts such as Tysers and the Association of Independent Festivals are clear that a Government-backed insurance scheme would protect events and unlock a potential £9 billion boost to our economy, but what we have heard today from the Minister is equivocation about plans that might come forward in the future. It is already the middle of June, so will he meet the moment now and give people the definitive answer that they are all waiting for?

Nigel Huddleston: At the risk of repeating myself, it is really important that we recognise that the whole point of the events research programme is to do exactly what the hon. Gentleman is asking for: to provide confidence that these events can go ahead. As I have said—this is important, because there has been a lack of clarity about this and some misinformation being spread—events of a certain size can go ahead already, including indoor events of up to 1,000 people and outdoor events of 4,000, or in exceptional cases up to 10,000. Many events can go ahead. The major events will be sharing the learnings from the events research programme very soon, which will be pivotal to helping those major events take place.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It was great to see thousands of people enjoying the Download festival this weekend: it reminded us all of the more normal times that we all crave and gave hope to all those who are hoping to attend Boardmasters in Newquay this summer. Boardmasters brings £45 million into our local economy and supports more than 400 jobs. Can the Minister confirm that, provided that we take step 4 on 19 July, with the continued successful roll-out of the pilot scheme, we have every hope that Boardmasters will go ahead in August? Will he ensure that those who run Boardmasters are provided with the guidance that they need in a timely manner so that they can make the necessary preparations to run the event safely?

Nigel Huddleston: I know what a huge supporter of the sector my hon. Friend is. Boardmasters sounds like a very exciting event; I know that there have been some problems in the past with being able to hold it, but we want to ensure that that event and others planned for

[Nigel Huddleston]

later in the summer get guidance. We are working on that guidance at this moment in time. The events research programme learnings will provide information going into that guidance, which we hope to be able to release prior to the announcement of step 4. My hon. Friend makes the really important point that the organisers need to plan ahead and plan the logistics. We want to help them with that.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Kendal Calling, in a statement on its website cancelling this year's event, says:

"Our understanding is that...DCMS...are keen to publish the ERP findings and guidance, but that it now does not fit around No. 10's communications plan. This is insulting to our entire industry, who have been awaiting the results of a pilot event that took place almost 2 months ago to inform our approach to staging events safely this summer."

If it is reasonable for the Government to use that data, and if the data is in a fit state for the Government to use to make decisions, is it not reasonable to make it available to businesses to allow them to plan?

Nigel Huddleston: As I have said repeatedly, we will be releasing the information and data very soon. I will have to repeat this, because it has obviously not been understood: the reason that we were not able to get to step 4 and that events cannot take place at this moment in time at a scale that we would all desire is not that the release of the report has not happened, but that there has been an increase in infection rates and that there are concerns around the delta variant. That is the reason for the delay in step 4.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): If, when the Minister looks at the results, he does not find any differentiation between the sporting arenas that are largely seated and those that are largely not seated, will he look to equalise the allowable crowd capacities at the two types of venue? The latter will suffer an awful lot during the next four weeks.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for his comments. I know how passionate he is about this sector, in particular racing. I have had conversations with the sector about this. We can increase capacity up to 10,000 where there is a seated capacity of over 16,000. However, we still have some concerns about events where there is the potential for mingling and, taking public health advice, we have been unable to allow further opening at this moment in time. I am aware of the impact that has had on certain sectors, in particular racing, and that is exactly why we want to get the events research programme moving and all these sectors open as soon as possible.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Many businesses in my constituency of Blaydon are involved in the events industry and have suffered. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of this latest lockdown on the events industry?

Nigel Huddleston: Indeed, this is a hugely important sector up and down the country; it is a major employer and makes a major contribution to our economy. That is precisely why a variety of schemes, including the

Government's general support measures and the culture recovery fund, have been pivotal in helping the events sector. Importantly, we are also encouraging those in the supply chain to apply for the additional restriction grant, and we are encouraging councils up and down the country to be sympathetic to applications to that programme from events supply chain businesses.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): The events research programme has been an invaluable lifeline for many flagship events. The British Grand Prix at Silverstone, due to be held between 15 and 18 July, is the UK's largest annual sporting event, with more than 140,000 in attendance. It contributes more than £100 million to the local economy in my constituency and neighbouring areas, sitting in the heart of "motorsport valley", supporting 40,000 UK jobs. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is essential that the Formula 1 British Grand Prix goes ahead as part of this programme, as a fully attended spectator event?

Nigel Huddleston: It does not surprise me at all that my hon. Friend raises this issue; we have had many conversations about the importance of the motorsport sector. We continue to work very closely with our partners in Formula 1 and elsewhere in Government to deliver this year's Silverstone grand prix with as many fans as possible. Plans are progressing very well, the discussions are constructive, and we hope to be able to set out further details shortly.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: As 2017 UK city of culture, we in Hull know how vital the arts and cultural events sector is for keeping existing jobs and generating new ones. Creative Hull, the Humber Street Sesh and the Freedom festival have all made preparations, based on Government guidance, to be covid-safe and secure, and have invested time and money. Should they be able to become pilot events if they so wish?

Nigel Huddleston: Of course, we cannot involve every single event, worthy though many of them are, in the ERP. We have had conversations, or are currently in conversations, with those entities that are in the consideration set at the moment. I am afraid that we will not be able to include all those we would like to, but I encourage events to take place to the greatest extent that they are able within current step 3 guidance if they cannot be part of the current phase 3 of the events research programme.

Robert Lorgan (High Peak) (Con): I am excited to tell the House that the world-famous Buxton International festival will be going ahead from 8 July, as will the fantastic Buxton Fringe alongside it, and Eat in the Park later in the year. Unfortunately, not all events locally are as fortunate. The fantastic Hope show, one of the UK's biggest and best agricultural shows, has already had to be cancelled, and it is still uncertain whether the Y Not festival, which is due to take place at the end of July, can go ahead. These incredibly important local events are the lifeblood of our local economy, but they take a long time to plan, with large up-front costs. I urge the Minister to pull out all the stops to restore confidence in the events sector, including looking at an indemnity scheme, so that we can look forward to a great British summer of events.

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend is clearly passionate about the events sector and has a large number of events planned in his constituency, which is fantastic. Some of them are able to go ahead—that is great; I encourage them to do so, obviously within existing guidance and by talking to local public health. Later in the year—as soon as we possibly can—it is absolutely our ambition to open up far more events at much greater scale, and we will provide guidance that will help enable them to do that.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): In March, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's report said:

"The hospitality and entertainment sectors have not seen sufficient data to underpin decisions relating to their industry...building trust with these sectors is absolutely essential and the level of transparency has not been sufficient."

The test events seem to have gone well. In Liverpool, apparently only 11 of 13,000 people tested positive and the local director of public health said the event caused "no detectable spread" of the virus. However, we know that only from the press reports, because the data has not been published for that event or any other. The Minister has still not explained properly why that is. Does he think that is an acceptable way to rebuild trust and transparency with these businesses?

Nigel Huddleston: As everybody knows, a huge amount of information and data at a local level about infection rates is available weekly online; in fact, it is updated daily. As I said at the beginning, if there were a major outbreak, we would inform the House and others about it. We will publish the information in due course, but it is vital that we do so sensibly. The report is pretty comprehensive, and we must go through due process before releasing it.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the 1.5 million people who work in the events industry are largely self-employed and thus often miss out on furlough payments, so reopening events and conferences is crucial to their and their families' welfare?

Nigel Huddleston: I agree with my right hon. Friend that this is a hugely important part of our economy. Many have been able to access some—but, admittedly, not all—of the support programmes offered by the Government. There are additional discretionary schemes available through local government for some of the smaller suppliers. In particular, as I have mentioned previously in the House, we want the events supply chain to benefit from the additional restrictions grants; I appealed to local authorities to be very generous with such applicants.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) [V]: I think that everybody who organises these events understands that during a pandemic there can be unforeseen circumstances beyond anyone's control that mean an event has to be cancelled or significantly reduced. However, the uncertainty about event insurance underwritten by the Government is due entirely to the Government's refusal to answer the question already asked numerous times this afternoon. When should the events sector expect to know whether Government support for covid cancellation insurance will ever be forthcoming?

Nigel Huddleston: As I have said previously, we are well aware of the sector's concerns and the uncertainty with which it is living. That is precisely why we are trying to get as much open as soon as possible. The sector needs to have confidence to reopen and do what it does best: getting out there, entertaining people and enabling people to enjoy themselves at sporting events and so many other things. The Secretary of State did say to the Select Committee that we are aware of the concerns about indemnity and looking at options.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Thanks to the brilliant events research programme, thousands of people have been able to enjoy events including the FA cup final and Euro 2020 fixtures at Wembley. Following the programme's success, does my hon. Friend agree that there is no reason why we should not be able to open up football stadiums at full capacity from the start of the new season in August?

Nigel Huddleston: I absolutely share my hon. Friend's hope and aspiration. That is precisely why we conducted the programme. Despite the cynicism we have heard from Opposition Members, the events research programme is important not just for its scientific learnings but in helping to lift the mood of the nation. The fact that we have been able to watch football with crowds in stadiums again has been fantastic. We will shortly see other events such as Wimbledon, with centre court again at full capacity. Life is getting back to normal, and that is something we should be celebrating.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Following on from what my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) said earlier, has the Minister actually read what the Kendal Calling festival said about the reason it cancelled? It stated that, crucially, it was the Government's failure to publish the research from the events research programme, and with it safety guidance. That is why it had to cancel, even though the festival fell beyond the reopening dates. The Society of London Theatre said that research from the Crucible theatre and the snooker world championship showed no difference—a negligible difference—between 25% and 100% capacity. Why are the Government hiding this information from the public, to the detriment of our theatres, our venues and our festivals?

Nigel Huddleston: I am very disheartened to hear that events are cancelling, but we need to be clear: events could not necessarily take place under step 3 of the road map. We need to be in step 4 before many of these events can open. So the hon. Gentleman is confusing the release of the publication of a report with the rules and regulations regarding the steps in the road map. They are two different things.

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): I thank the Minister and his Department for allowing thousands of cricketing fans like me and others to go to Edgbaston to watch the recent England and New Zealand test match. The thrill of being back in the stadium is a great thing, even if the cricket was a bit sketchy. I also welcome the inclusion of the England versus Pakistan one-day international on 13 July. Does he agree that the public accept the cautious nature of what the Government are doing, and appreciate the careful consideration of all the data to ensure that we approach step 4 properly?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and I agree with him completely. As I said, a huge amount of work and effort has been done by event organisers, as well as by those involved in the events research programme, including the chairs, Nick Hytner and David Ross, for whom we have extreme appreciation. Such events are very valuable and are lifting our spirits in the way described by my hon. Friend.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: The pilot scheme means that, although some events are going ahead at full capacity, other events cannot continue at all. Contradictions in Government guidance mean that amateur choirs cannot even rehearse indoors with protective measures in place, despite other non-professional activities, such as amateur orchestras, brass bands, theatre and grassroots team sports being allowed indoors. Can the Minister explain why choirs have been singled out from other similar risk activities? Will the Government update guidance to allow non-professional choirs to resume their valuable activities, or do they have to apply to be pilot events to be allowed to rehearse and perform?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Lady is correct in highlighting the difference between professional and non-professional choirs. In accordance with performing arts guidance, non-professional groups of up to six people can now sing indoors. They can also perform or rehearse in groups of up to 30 outdoors, or in multiple groups of 30 outdoors, provided that the groups are kept separate. Those limits do not apply to commercial activities. We all know from our mail bags that this is an area of importance to our constituents, and we want to get choirs up and running again in all formats as soon as possible.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I fear there is a two-tier system when it comes to data. The data tends to exist for football, motor racing, tennis and horse racing, yet there is no data to support outdoor events in my constituency. The Black Deer festival takes place in Eridge park. It is a music event. It is completely covid-safe, with track and trace and a covid manager in an outdoor area, yet it had to cancel, which has knocked our local economy and is undermining local jobs. What advice and support can the Minister give to Gill, who has unfortunately had to cancel the Black Deer festival, which was hoping to host around 10,000 people in an arena fit for 40,000?

Nigel Huddleston: I was very sorry to hear that the Black Deer festival has been unable to take place this year. I know that is enormously disappointing to many of my hon. Friend's constituents and indeed to her, because I have spoken to her about this. She has lobbied very effectively on behalf of the festival and all the stakeholders, including Gill, who has also been in contact with the Department. I am afraid we have not been able to make every event, including many incredibly worthy events, ERP events, even in phase 3. But I must say to my hon. Friend that it is not true they are all sporting events; a wide variety of events—indoor, outdoor events, music events, business events and so on—are all part of the events research programme, because we want to get learnings across multiple sectors.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab) [V]: Like many Warringtonians, and indeed a number of other hon. Members who I know plan to attend, I am massively

looking forward to Warrington's Neighbourhood Weekender festival, which has been rescheduled for September. Naturally, news that the Kendal Calling festival has been cancelled has caused huge concern to the events sector, as has the lack of publication of the events research programme. Festivals cannot plan ahead on a vague promise of "very soon" from the Minister, so what recent discussions has the Minister had with festivals across the country that need to make imminent decisions impacting on jobs, livelihoods and events of cultural significance to ensure they can go ahead?

Nigel Huddleston: I can assure the hon. Lady that I, other Ministers and officials in the Department are in frequent contact with stakeholders across the variety of sectors that are reliant on the results of the events research programme, and also the guidance she mentions, beforehand. So it is absolutely the intent to release the report prior to step 4. We also want to make sure that the events sector has the relevant guidance so that it can help events to open as effectively and efficiently as possible as soon as they are able to do so.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in praising the events sector, especially those businesses and organisations in Stoke-on-Trent, for the measures they have put in place and taken to cautiously begin reopening in line with restrictions over the past few months, and does he agree that the events research programme will play a crucial role in supporting the sector to be able to bring back much larger events over the coming months?

Nigel Huddleston: I agree with my hon. Friend. As I have said, this is a hugely important sector at both a local and a national level in terms of the economic impact, and I thank those in the sector for their incredibly constructive engagement throughout the process. That engagement will continue, because we all want to see numbers increase over time so that they can get back to doing the things that they love and we love them doing.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I really feel for the Minister, who has clearly been sent here to say as little as possible in an hour, and in that he has largely succeeded, but it does a real disservice to the creative arts, the exhibition and the events sector, which want to be able to plan ahead. He says, "data, not dates", and I agree with him. Where is the data to allow these companies and organisations to be able to plan ahead? Get on with it, cut the waffle and publish the data.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his constructive advice. I can absolutely share that. I sense the frustration in the Chamber. Believe me, we all have the same goal here. We want the events sector to open as soon as possible as safely as possible and to get back to doing the things that we love it doing. Absolutely, we all recognise that. But Opposition Members did vote with the Government last week on the step 4 programme. One of the points of that is in terms of the timing of being able to open events. We listen, we look at the data and see what is appropriate to open at the appropriate time. As I have said, before we are able to open the broader sector under step 4, we will be releasing the report and we will be releasing guidance to achieve the goals that he and I both want to achieve.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Reopening sports, live music and theatre is obviously very important. Many companies, such as Stage Audio Services in Dudley South, rely on community events, and business events and conferences as well. Will my hon. Friend make sure that the next phase does include such business events, so that we can bring people back safely to the full range of events and all of the jobs that rely on them?

Nigel Huddleston: First, I have to say that that is a fantastic tie. In terms of the events sector, my hon. Friend knows as well as I do, as a west midlands MP, that he is making a really important point. As for the per capita contribution, the business events sector is greatest in the west midlands. We have major, fantastic, world-class events facilities and we want to get them back up and running as soon as possible. I look forward to working with him, because he is a fantastic champion for his constituents, to make sure that we can do so as soon as possible. I hope that we will have—we are planning on having—a business event in the latest programme as well. The final details, which have yet to be concluded on, will be announced soon.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab) [V]: The cancellation of Kendal Calling in the north of England has been devastating to the whole region. In the statement that Kendal Calling issued, it said that its understanding was that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport had the information from the events research programme and could release it, but that No. 10 did not want it released. That is staggering if true. What assessment has the Minister made of the economic impact on the livelihoods of people working in this area in the north of England specifically, because many of the events being mentioned here are in the south? There seems to be a huge lack of recognition of the hugely important work done in the north and the number of people's jobs that rely on the industry.

Nigel Huddleston: I can absolutely assure the hon. Lady that we recognise the importance of these sectors right across the country. If she remembers, phase 1 of the events research programme had a particular focus on Liverpool because of its ability to work with and focus with us. I recognise that some of the events that have been announced recently are particularly focused in the south. We will announce more events right across the country. She makes a really important point: these sectors thrive in the right conditions right across the country, and I want to work with them to do so again. They are hugely important to all our constituencies.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The excellent Minister has talked about publication being in due course, shortly, very soon, as soon as possible. I was going to ask: what does that mean in English? Does it mean this week or next week? But I want to ask him something more important, bearing in mind that this was sort of agreed with the Secretary of State in the Chamber a week or so ago. Would the Minister consider making this House of Commons a pilot event for one Wednesday before recess, ripping out these stupid barriers, getting the public back in and voting in the Lobbies to see what happens?

Mr Speaker: I am not sure that that is the Minister's decision; it is mine. But come on, Minister.

Nigel Huddleston: I dare not step on anybody's toes in answering this one. I am sure that the appropriate authorities have heard my hon. Friend's question, and it is an intriguing one.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Throughout this pandemic, transparency is key, and while, on the one hand, we can understand how circumstances have changed with the delta variant, it makes no sense in ensuring public trust and business trust that the data is not presented now so that we can get a sense of, for example, outdoor versus indoors and seated versus mingling. There will be broad-brush conclusions that can be drawn from the data as seen. Why will the Government not treat people like grown-ups, and why will they not release the data and then let us have a debate about what happens next?

Nigel Huddleston: As I have said repeatedly, we will be releasing the information and data. If there were major concerns, we would have released that information already, but it is a report that has comprehensive information. There are many stakeholders involved in gathering it together and producing it and we need to go through due process before releasing it. We have said all along that we will release it before step 4. That is exactly what we will be doing.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I am extremely proud that my constituency is home to the world-renowned theatreland in the west end. Sadly, the latest figures from the Society of London Theatre and UK Theatre suggest that, this year, theatres will return to only 67% of 2019 levels and 66% of that is planned for stage 4. While the theatre sector is keen to provide as much data as possible to prove that its environments are safe, will my hon. Friend confirm that the reopening of theatres at stage 4 will not be delayed to analyse data from the events research programme?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend is a passionate supporter of all DCMS sectors, particularly in London, and she makes really important points. We are seeing a strong recovery in domestic tourism, arts, sports and so on, but London has some particular issues. That is precisely why we focused on London and the cities as part of the tourism recovery plan. She will be seeing an appeal for people to visit cities, and to spend money and time in cities, as part of the Escape the Everyday campaign. We will be releasing further information in due course and I will be happy to have a follow-up conversation with her.

Mr Speaker: Don't forget to look after Rugby League either, Minister.

I have received a report from the Tellers in the Aye Lobby for the Division at 7.30 pm yesterday on the Opposition day motion on local involvement in planning decisions. The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) has informed me that the number of aye votes was erroneously reported as 231, rather than 212. I will direct the Clerk to correct the numbers in the *Journal* accordingly. The ayes were 212 and the noes were none. The names were correctly recorded in *Hansard*.

Points of Order

1.30 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last night I objected to the motion on the adjournments for the conference, November and Christmas recesses, which will now be determined by a deferred Division tomorrow. I did so on the basis that, unlike the Labour party conference, it is not yet possible to book tickets for the Conservative party conference, which is due to be held in Manchester from 3 to 6 October. Given that we have been assured that covid restrictions will now end by 19 July, it seems a little strange that the party of government is unable to give the events, hotel and hospitality sectors the certainty that not only will its party conference go ahead, but that other such events will be able to proceed. Forgive me for being suspicious, Mr Speaker, but we are at risk of being strung along. I ask you, Mr Speaker, what means I have at my disposal to draw this matter to the attention of the House. How might we be reassured that the conference recess will be used for its intended purpose, rather than simply as a means to keep Back Benchers away from this House asking awkward questions?

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It is important that, before the House is asked to take decisions on important matters, such as its being in recess for three weeks, it has available the essential information. If we are not to have an in-person Conservative party conference, we will not need to be in recess for that period. It therefore seems not unreasonable to ask the Government, in the person of the Prime Minister as leader of our party, to set that out before we are asked to vote tomorrow. That is not just important for us. As we have just heard in the urgent question, thousands of businesses across the country depend on conferences and events. If the governing party is not able to set out with confidence that an event scheduled for October can take place, the sector will draw its own conclusions, which will be very damaging to many thousands of businesses and hundreds of thousands of employees.

Mr Speaker: First of all, I thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for giving me notice of his point of order. On booking tickets, he need not worry as he lives in Greater Manchester, so I think I can overcome that little difficulty for him. *[Laughter.]* I cannot comment on the arrangements that parties make for their conferences. I can confirm that the motion on yesterday's Order Paper was objected to and will therefore be subject to a deferred Division tomorrow—I am sure the Whips are really pleased with him about that. If it is agreed to, the House will adjourn for the days indicated on the motion.

In fairness, there is a genuine concern. There are jobs at stake; it is an industry that really does matter. This matter is beyond me, but at least, if nothing else, the hon. Gentleman's point is on the record. The Whips will definitely want a word with him, so he will be able to pass on his concerns directly to the Chief Whip.

I will now suspend the House in order for the necessary arrangements to be made for the next business.

1.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill

[Relevant documents: Second Report of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, Session 2019-21, New Decade, New Approach Agreement, HC 160, and the Government response, HC 792.]

Second Reading

1.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Brandon Lewis): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

If you will allow me, Madam Deputy Speaker, before I talk about the Bill I wish to congratulate our parliamentary colleague the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on becoming the leader of his political party. I look forward to working with him in the period ahead. I also hope, as I am sure all colleagues do, that he has a very enjoyable week, not just with the introduction to becoming leader-elect of his party, but with the very big family event, a wedding, with which we all wish him well.

The United Kingdom is a family of nations and a Union of people. We share cultural, social and economic ties that bring us together, and make us more prosperous and secure. This Government believe in upholding the constitutional integrity of this great nation. Our Union is strongest when its institutions work well, work together and deliver real change on the issues that matter. In Northern Ireland, that means we need properly functioning institutions, both in Stormont and in Westminster.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Brandon Lewis: I will make a bit of progress, then I will give way to colleagues.

In this centenary year for Northern Ireland, today marks exactly 100 years since the opening of the first Northern Ireland Parliament, at Belfast city hall, by King George V and Queen Mary. This momentous occasion saw locally elected politicians for the first time, following the first Northern Ireland general election, so it is fitting that this Bill has its Second Reading today, of all days. The Bill will strengthen the democratic institutions of Northern Ireland and serve to build the people of Northern Ireland's faith in their locally elected representatives in the Northern Ireland Assembly. As this House knows, the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly were restored on 11 January 2020 when all five of Northern Ireland's main political parties came together under the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I wish to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) and the hon. Members for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) and for North Down (Stephen Farry) for their dedication and persistence, with others, in pursuing this deal, which was a great achievement after three years of impasse.

Prior to the restoration of the institutions, there had been no functioning Executive since January 2017. The absence of a devolved Government for such an extended period had a detrimental effect on the people of Northern Ireland. We saw the first strike in the 103-year history of the Royal College of Nursing over pay and staffing levels. There was ongoing action by teaching unions, and schools were not co-operating with the inspections

in a dispute over teacher pay and workload. Essential infrastructure projects, including the York Street interchange and investment in waste water infrastructure, which was at capacity in many places across Northern Ireland, could not be progressed.

I think we can all agree that a pandemic with no Executive would have been unthinkable. I was pleased therefore to see the First Minister and Deputy First Minister nominated last Thursday, following this Government's intensive engagement with the party leaders. However, the events of last week also highlight how important it is for everyone to deliver on their commitments under the New Decade, New Approach agreement. It is disappointing to see that a way forward has not yet been found to implement all of the parts in full, which is why the Government have, for example, promised to deliver the balanced culture package that was agreed in NDNA through Parliament if it has not been taken forward by the Northern Ireland Executive by the end of September. I wish to reiterate and be very clear that our strong preference and desire is for this to be delivered in the appropriate place by the devolved institutions.

Sammy Wilson: I am sure that people back home will be amazed at the honeyed words of the Secretary of State. He talks about the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom and the importance of the devolved Administration and devolved institutions, and yet he has interfered, and has just announced that he is prepared to interfere once again, in the institutions in Northern Ireland in a way in which no Secretary of State would dare to do in Scotland or Wales. Does he not accept that, for the Unionist community, this continual interference in the institutions at Stormont at the behest of Sinn Féin is not an annoyance but something that enrages people?

Brandon Lewis: I have to say that I do not recognise the principle on which the right hon. Gentleman outlines his point. The reality is that the UK Government are the Government of the United Kingdom. The UK Government are a co-guarantor of and signatory to the New Decade, New Approach agreement, which the parties themselves negotiated and agreed. For example, the parties agreed between themselves the cultural package, which has had a lot of attention in the past week. We have a duty to ensure that, for all the people of Northern Ireland, these things are delivered in a way that is set out and agreed by the parties. I would much rather see that delivered by the institution itself. That is why we have given time and space for the institution to be able to move things forward. It is also right that, on a range of issues, including women's healthcare, women in Northern Ireland have access to the same good-quality healthcare as women across the United Kingdom. I make no apologies for making sure that we the United Kingdom Government are representing people across the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. He has referred to the position across the United Kingdom. Obviously, like him I am a strong Unionist, but there is one thing that I am concerned about. I heard this morning that the outgoing leader of the Democratic Unionist party, Mr Edwin Poots, has said in a number of media interviews that he has received assurances from the Secretary of State about changes to the Northern

Ireland protocol. I know that that is now a story. Is the Secretary of State able to say anything to the House about whether that is true or not? Obviously, it will be of great interest to people not just across Northern Ireland but in constituencies such as mine, which have understandable problems with shipping goods across our United Kingdom.

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. There are two points. First, at the end of last week some of Edwin Poots's colleagues commented about an announcement. Actually, the announcement was not really an announcement; it just confirmed that we had requested from the European Union an extension to the grace period, particularly for chilled meats from 1 July. I said on the Floor of this House last week, and I am very happy to reconfirm it today, that, as the Prime Minister himself has outlined, we do have issues with the Northern Ireland protocol. Like others across this House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) has, quite rightly, outlined an example of those challenges for consumers and businesses in Northern Ireland. We are not going to allow that to continue. We want to get this corrected so that consumers and businesses in Northern Ireland can continue to function as a full and integral part of the United Kingdom.

As I said at this Dispatch Box just last Wednesday, and as the Prime Minister has said both publicly and at the Dispatch Box, we will do what we need to do to make sure that we deliver for the people of Northern Ireland, and we will take nothing off the table in that regard. Obviously, we will wait to hear from the EU, and we want to work this through with it with regard to the request we made last week.

The Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill will deliver elements of the New Decade, New Approach deal relating to the governance of the Executive and within the competence of this House. That includes reforms to sustainability of institutions, updating the ministerial code of conduct and reforming the petition of concern mechanism. The UK Government and this Parliament have a duty to ensure good and functional governance in Northern Ireland. Today, through this Bill, we discharge that duty by bringing forward measures that will help continue to enhance the public's confidence in the Northern Ireland institutions through increased transparency and improved governance arrangements. Those measures will ensure that the institutions will be more sustainable, more resilient and for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland.

Let me turn briefly to the contents of the Bill. In short, we are legislating, first, to provide up to four six-week periods for the appointing of new Northern Ireland Ministers, including the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, after an election; secondly, to provide up to four six-week periods for the appointing of a First Minister and Deputy First Minister after they cease to hold office—for instance, in the case of one of them resigning; thirdly, to provide, if the First Minister and Deputy First Minister cease to hold office, that other Northern Ireland Ministers remain in office for a maximum period of 48 weeks after the First Minister and Deputy First Minister ceased to hold office, or for 24 weeks following any subsequent election, whichever is the shortest, unless the Secretary of State triggers the sufficient representation provisions.

[Brandon Lewis]

The Bill will implement reforms to the petition of concern mechanism in the Assembly, including a new 14-day consideration period before a valid petition can be confirmed; it will require petitioners to come from more than one Northern Ireland political party; prevent the mechanism from being used for matters that concern the conduct of a Member and for Second Reading votes on a Bill; and it will update the code of conduct for Northern Ireland Ministers in accordance with a request from the Northern Ireland Executive and in line with the New Decade, New Approach transparency and accountability recommendations.

Mr Harper: The Secretary of State has rightly set out the scope of the Bill. May I press him on another matter that was referred to in the New Decade, New Approach agreement? He knows that the prosecutions of soldiers as part of the legacy of the troubles in Northern Ireland is of great concern. I shall not press him on the content of the legislation, because I know that work is under way, but may I press him a little on the timing? Many Members are eager for that work to proceed at pace so that we can resolve these issues, and many are keen for that to happen before the House rises for the summer. Is the Secretary of State able to give the House any indication today of the Government's latest thinking on when they may be able to bring that legislation—if, indeed, it is separate legislation—before the House?

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend asks a fair question—that is part of New Decade, New Approach, so it is a fair point. I outlined, I think in February or March this year, my ambition to bring something before the House before the summer recess; I still have that ambition, but I should also say clearly that we are determined to do what we have always said we would do, which is to engage with our partners—not only the Irish Government but the parties in Northern Ireland and victims' groups, because whatever we bring forward has to have victims absolutely at its heart. We have to deal with information recovery and truth and reconciliation, because whatever we bring forward has to work properly for the people of Northern Ireland, so it is right that we take the time to do that properly and methodically, which I am looking forward to doing. We will do that and we are still absolutely committed to ensuring that we deliver on our manifesto pledge to the veterans community. I will touch on that a little more in a few moments.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): Will the Secretary of State explain very carefully for some people in this House who do not seem to understand that, if an amnesty is given to anybody—for example, if an amnesty is given to soldiers who maybe committed murder on the streets of Derry, Belfast or anywhere else—an amnesty would have to be given to everyone, including IRA members, Ulster Volunteer Force members and Ulster Defence Association members?

Brandon Lewis: As I said before, we want to ensure that we put forward a package that works for all of Northern Ireland and genuinely allows it a chance to move forward. One thing that we have heard consistently from civic society is a desire to move forward. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that whatever we

do has to be balanced across the whole community. As I say, I will come back to that in separate legislation in due course—we are not dealing with legacy legislation today.

Sammy Wilson: Just so that no one is misled by the previous intervention, will the Secretary of State confirm that no one has sought an amnesty for soldiers? All that has been asked for is that soldiers who have already had cases investigated—some up to three times—should not be trailed through the courts again for political reasons by those who are attempting to rewrite the history of the troubles.

Brandon Lewis: As I say, we are not dealing with legacy today, so I will resist the urge to go too much into that, but I will say that the right hon. Gentleman is correct in the sense that we have been clear that we are committed to ending the cycle of re-investigations. We also have to accept that, as we have all seen recently, the current situation is not serving anybody. It cannot be right that, as we saw in the Ballymurphy case, it has taken 50 years for people to get information. Equally, it is inappropriate and wrong to see people go through a cycle of investigations. We have committed to end that and we will do that.

Let me turn to the specifics of the Bill before the House. Clause 1 amends the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to extend the period of time available to appoint a First Minister and Deputy First Minister after the resignation of either or after the first meeting of the Assembly following an Assembly election. Currently, the period for ministerial appointments is only 14 days from the first meeting of the Assembly after an election, and seven days after the First Minister or Deputy First Minister ceases to hold office. The Bill will extend the period for filling ministerial offices to a six-week period that is automatically renewed—unless the Assembly resolves otherwise on a cross-community basis—for a maximum of three times, up to a total of 24 weeks.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): It will not have lost anyone's attention that we are discussing the extension of the sustainability mechanisms at a time when there is huge instability in the Assembly, when we have had First Minister resignations and changes and multiple seven-day cliff edges potentially emerging. Can the Secretary of State take this opportunity to stress that all parties in Northern Ireland should act responsibly in relation to the institutions, not make any threats to collapse them, and should work to deliver on the core issues of health, education and jobs, on which people urgently need action over the coming months?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Our focus, for all of us, as I have outlined over the last week or two, should be on making sure that we have stable institutions that can deliver on issues such as health, education and infrastructure, among other things, for the people of Northern Ireland. That is what I believe the people of Northern Ireland want to see, and it is why I was so pleased that, to be fair, the parties in Northern Ireland were able to resolve this issue within three days and have stability, with a First Minister and Deputy First Minister having been nominated.

By extending those periods, the Bill will allow more time for discussions between the parties and for the Secretary of State to facilitate a resolution before they

come under an election duty. It also allows for Northern Ireland Ministers to remain in post after an election until the end of the period for appointing new Ministers. That change will again allow for greater continuity in decision making.

Under clause 2, Ministers will no longer cease to hold office after the election of a new Assembly. It provides for up to a maximum of 24 weeks after an election or a maximum of 48 weeks since a functioning Executive was in place—whichever is the shorter—in which Ministers may continue to hold office, subject to those offices otherwise being filled or if a Minister is not returned as a Member of the Assembly. The measure will ensure that institutions become more sustainable and more resilient. Currently, the Secretary of State is required to propose a date for an Assembly election where the Assembly resolves to dissolve itself, or where the period for appointing Northern Ireland Ministers or a First Minister and Deputy First Minister expires without those offices being filled.

Clause 3 allows the Secretary of State to certify or call an Assembly election at any point after the first six weeks in the period for filling ministerial offices if the Secretary of State considers that there is not sufficient representation among Ministers to secure cross-community confidence in the Assembly.

Clause 4 substitutes a revised ministerial code of conduct that sets out expectations for the behaviour of Ministers, including provisions around the treatment of the Northern Ireland civil service, public appointments and the use of official resources and information management. Those updates are in the reserved or excepted space and are unable to be progressed through the Assembly. The UK Government are bringing those changes forward at the request of the then First Minister and Deputy First Minister on the agreement of the Executive.

Clause 5 reforms the petition of concern mechanism to reduce its use and to return it to its intended purpose as set out under the Belfast/Good Friday agreement—a safeguard to ensure that all sections of the community can participate and work together successfully in the operation of the Northern Ireland institutions and are protected when the Assembly legislates, and to prevent one party from blocking measures or business. The mechanism, which was given effect in the Northern Ireland Act 1998, allows MLAs to lodge a petition against a matter that the Assembly is voting in, providing that they can gather at least 30 signatures.

A successful petition means that the relevant matter is to be passed on a cross-community basis rather than on a simple majority basis. The Bill will require the petitions to be signed and confirmed 14 days later by at least 30 MLAs from two or more political parties, which will prevent one party from being able to block measures or business that would otherwise have cross-community consensus. These specific changes and commitments from the Northern Ireland parties aim to reduce the use of the mechanism to the most exceptional circumstances and as a last resort only, having exhausted every other available mechanism.

The Government are bringing forward those changes through Westminster legislation as they are excepted matters. Separate legislation seeking to make provision for legacy commitments made in the New Decade, New Approach deal—to go back to the comment made absolutely correctly by my right hon. Friend the Member

for Forest of Dean—will be introduced separately. This Bill will implement aspects of the New Decade, New Approach deal, which the parties agreed to in January 2020. The provisions in the Bill seek to reform the sustainability of the institutions, update the ministerial code of conduct and reform the petition of concern mechanism.

We will always be steadfast in maintaining the importance of Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom. We are working closely with the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government to progress the delivery of all the commitments in the New Decade, New Approach deal.

By introducing this Bill now, we are delivering on those promises, but it is ultimately up to the parties to come together. Both the Irish Government and the UK Government will continue to stand together and stand ready to support them, as we did in bringing about the package of measures under New Decade, New Approach. Until then, the Bill is a reminder that the UK Government will always uphold our responsibilities for political stability and good governance in Northern Ireland. I commend it to the House.

1.55 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I join the Secretary of State in congratulating the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on his appointment as leader of the DUP and I also look forward to working with him. I thank the Secretary of State for setting out the measures in the Bill and for the regular updates he and the Minister have provided to me and my office over the past few weeks.

The instability in recent months has been unsettling for all of us who cherish the Good Friday agreement and who believe that its institutions and the principles that underpin it represent the best way forward for Northern Ireland, but, as ever, that instability has been most keenly felt by the people of Northern Ireland. They need a stable, functioning Executive to meet the enormous health and economic challenges facing Northern Ireland—a third of the entire population languishing on health waiting lists; nearly 300 children without a post-primary place for next year's term; and, of course, recovery from covid. For all political leaders in Northern Ireland, that must be the priority in the coming days and weeks. It is partly for that reason that the Labour party supports the Bill before the House today.

We welcome attempts to safeguard power sharing and improve the sustainability of the Executive and the Assembly. Although we will suggest amendments to tighten up provisions in the Bill, the lessons from the past should offer a clear warning to all of us. Institutions are much easier to collapse than they are to get back up and running. Recent events could scarcely have provided a clearer example of why the provisions contained in the Bill are necessary.

Precisely because we support the provisions in the Bill, which were agreed through New Decade, New Approach more than 18 months ago by the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), I want to make clear the mistake I believe the Secretary of State has made in leaving it until now for this crucial piece of legislation to be considered. It is simply not credible that this was the first moment that parliamentary time allowed for the Bill to be considered, and it is unclear why we are debating these measures only now, in the midst of political turmoil in Northern Ireland.

[*Louise Haigh*]

The instability we have seen in recent months, which the Bill in part attempts to address, has not emerged out of thin air. I fear the delay in bringing forward the Bill is symptomatic of the Government's approach to Northern Ireland.

Too often over the past decade, Northern Ireland has been an afterthought here. As the consequences of decisions taken by Ministers have played out in Northern Ireland, the Government have frequently behaved as though they have found themselves at the scene of an accident entirely beyond their control. Too often, Northern Ireland has been overlooked and the work to deliver on the promise of peace allowed to stall.

Nowhere is that more striking than in the Prime Minister's actions. He was repeatedly warned of the consequences for the fragile peace process of his Brexit deal and he chose to ignore those warnings. There is a direct line from his dishonesty over the deal to the instability we see in the institutions today.

It would be foolish to assume that the provisions of the Bill alone can guarantee stability. They cannot. To do that, Ministers must address the effects of their own actions, which have shaken faith in Northern Ireland. Progress has stalled and instability has grown. The Belfast/Good Friday agreement has been treated as a crisis management tool rather than as the vehicle through which lives and communities can be transformed.

Although Labour supports the Bill, we believe there are several missed opportunities for the Government to refocus on delivering on the promise of peace, which they have allowed to stall. We will seek to bring amendments to push for the full implementation of the Government's commitments under the New Decade, New Approach agreement, which, like the Bill, have been delayed for too long.

The same principle is true of the undelivered promises of the Good Friday agreement on a Bill of Rights, integrated education and housing, women's rights and giving communities a real say in decision making. They were the essence of the Good Friday agreement and the shared future that it imagined, but progress on them has been virtually non-existent over the past decade. We do not believe that the instability that we see can be separated from the failure to deliver on such commitments. Above all, the way to guarantee stability is to demonstrate that commitments made will be honoured and that Westminster is still prepared to step up and honour our side of the bargain.

We will further seek to tighten up the provisions on the caretaker institutions to prevent misuse and promote good governance. With that in mind, we have concerns about what might be described as some of the constructive ambiguities in the Bill and some of the unintended consequences that may follow. Our concerns fall into two categories: those relating to a caretaker Executive and those relating to the vetoes available within the Executive.

First, on the provisions allowing for a caretaker Administration following an Assembly election or the resignation of the First Minister or Deputy First Minister, the scope of statutory powers was recently significantly expanded. Although the Government talk about caretaker Ministers being able to operate only "within well-defined limits", those limits are in no way outlined. That leaves

open a broad statutory remit and does not provide the necessary safety catch to prevent caretaker Ministers from exercising powers not envisaged in the Bill. I would be grateful if the Minister responded to that point or if we could address it in Committee.

Secondly, the Bill deals with the petition of concern and its use and misuse. We absolutely support this limited reform, which will return the mechanism to its original intention, but the Bill is silent on the other effective vetoes that have been used to block agenda items from reaching the Executive or to prevent discussion on cross-community issues of concern. If the petition of concern reform was intended to prevent it from being misused by a single party to block progress, it would be a mistake to allow other vetoes to persist that allow for much the same outcome.

Finally, we hope to see some movement from the Government on dual mandates to allow for greater flexibility, potentially on a short-term basis. I reiterate our support for the limited measures in the Bill, but I make it clear that this is only a start. There is much, much more work to do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now go to the Chair of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs.

2.1 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con) [V]: I welcome the speech made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I particularly echo his welcome and congratulations to the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on his assuming the office of leader of the Democratic Unionist party at what we know is a very difficult time for the politics of Northern Ireland. I know that the House will wish him well as he begins that task.

I also welcome the fact—probably overlooked, but long called for by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee—that this is not emergency legislation. It is nice to have a Northern Irish Bill being dealt with in normal parliamentary time. That is important, and I think that it says quite a lot about how we are dealing with these issues. It also provides an opportunity to remind ourselves that the Good Friday agreement is a process, not a monolithic event or structure that is beyond change or tampering. It was supposed to be an iterative, organic process; it is important that we remind ourselves of that.

It is sad, I suppose, but we need to remind this and future generations of the importance of peace and of the horror before the Good Friday agreement was brought into being. I hope that the Secretary of State, the Government and those who are serving in Stormont refocus as they move forward on ensuring that, within the prosperity agenda of the Good Friday agreement, peace is the bedrock and the widest possible delivery of the benefits of prosperity are felt throughout the communities of Northern Ireland.

I also welcome what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in response to an intervention about legacy. I welcome his affirmation that he will take a victim-centric approach, and I was encouraged to hear him talk about the need to ensure that the Republic and those in the north are taken along in the process rather than having an impost made on them. I know that the timetable is tight and that there is a lot in his in-tray, but

I encourage him to follow and adhere to the commitment that he made to me some months ago on the Floor of the House that we will see what he is proposing before the House rises for the summer recess and possibly have the opportunity to debate it.

Devolution, in its operation, is not a political equivalent of a Woolworths pick and mix. It will not and cannot work if those who are charged with its care and delivery duck difficult decisions and abdicate responsibilities. In part, this Bill is there to address that, as quite a lot of the New Decade, New Approach process is supposed to as well.

I echo those who have said—I think my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said this pretty clearly—that if there ever is a time to collapse the Executive, although I am never convinced that there is, now is most certainly not it. I say that not least because it would let down the people of Northern Ireland who were so badly harmed by a three-year interregnum and a pressing of the pause button on the delivery of public service reform and better services for those who rely on them. Now is not the time to embark on political blackmail—“Do this or we will”, or “Don’t do that and we won’t.” In reference to the pretty gruesome statement made by the Loyalist Communities Council at the tail end of last week, I also say that now is not the time for those who are unelected and who have never faced the tests and trials of the ballot box to start issuing ultimatums to those who do take up the baton of public service and try to deliver a better life for the communities of Northern Ireland.

I welcome the Bill, I think. I say “I think” because we have here four six-week periods, and then another four six-week periods. These elongated timeframes are understandable, but I occasionally worry that we will just feed the beast of instability by putting in place longer and longer periods and opportunities for people to “play around”, which we would not see with regard to the operation of devolution in Cardiff or Edinburgh, and at some point we will have to wrestle with that. If we are to make devolution a normal thing in Northern Ireland that can deliver, we need to try to weed out and cut away all the props that allow people to pause and think and so on. None the less, we are where we are. We understand the tensions and we understand the history, which is why I shall support the Bill.

The changes to the petition of concern process are to be hugely welcomed, and that has been recognised across the House in speeches made by those on the two Front Benches. Again, that process was a good intention initially, but it got played. When a system gets played, and it does not look right and it does not smell right, then it needs to be changed, and I congratulate the Secretary of State on wrestling with that.

I share the Secretary of State’s hope that it will be a fully functioning and vibrant Stormont that can deliver the cultural package that everybody signed up to in New Decade, New Approach. If it does not or cannot, or if that becomes another insurmountable obstacle to the delivery of other issues, then the Government are absolutely right to take up the mantle and to legislate for it here in the House of Commons. I hope and pray that we do not have to and that it is dealt with by those charged to do so in a devolved environment, but if not, the Government are right to do it. If one of the by-products of that is taking off the table a nut that nobody was prepared to crack in Northern Ireland because one or

another thought it was too difficult, that would be a good thing because it would remove another reason for somebody to take their ball home and not play.

This is an important Bill, but we should not just view it in isolation. There is a lot from which it flows, and there is a lot that flows from New Decade, New Approach, which is not addressed in this Bill. None the less, we know that the Secretary of State is up for the task. There are huge issues ahead. We have to deal in a proactive and sensible way with this protocol.

Let me close by making an observation to those on my party’s Front Bench. We are asking the parties that have signed up to New Decade, New Approach to adhere to it in full—not to cherry-pick or to do the things that are more pleasant or easier first, but to take it as an entire package and to deliver and implement it. Why can we make that legitimate demand of them? Because they signed up to it and they agreed to it. When the Government perhaps do not play as fixedly to that rule vis-à-vis the protocol, with some of the things that some Ministers have been saying, it should be of no surprise if those who want to try to wriggle off the commitment hook pray in aid some of those observations of Ministers as their defence and their cover.

I wish the Bill well. All of us are very conscious of the environment in which we are holding this debate and of what is going on across Northern Ireland, with so many big issues. Let us all, coming from different traditions, different strands of thought, different histories and different communities, recommit to the golden thread of motivation in political life, which is public service. We are here to serve the people who send us to this place, just as those who are elected to Stormont are there to serve the community of Northern Ireland. At this crucial moment, let nobody dodge that. Let us hope that we can all rise to the occasion and meet the needs and aspirations of the people we serve.

2.11 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Let me begin by offering my congratulations and those of my party to the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on his elevation to be leader of the Democratic Unionist party.

This is a very important Bill in the sense that it is required to deliver on aspects of the New Decade, New Approach commitments. There are parts of that agreement that can and, I would argue, should be delivered by the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly themselves. I am sure that other speakers will begin to go over that ground in more detail, but I do not intend to do so myself. I will seek to confine my remarks to the measures in the Bill that can only be implemented by this place.

Before I do, I would like to offer a perspective from Scotland. There has been much comment about devolution. The Chair of the Select Committee said that devolution is not a pick and mix; neither is it a picnic. The Prime Minister, who clearly regards himself as a success, has notoriously described devolution as a failure. I think that most people in Scotland, and indeed further afield, would feel that the Prime Minister has got these things the wrong way round altogether.

Nevertheless, as with all Governments, there have been times when devolved Administrations, including the Governments in Scotland, of whatever political stripe, have acquitted themselves well and times when

[Richard Thomson]

they have not—times when people have been left wondering why some things were not being done or, in some cases, why they were being done at all. There have been occasions when Parliaments have failed to pass budgets or when Governments have unexpectedly found themselves in a minority on an issue, sometimes within the Parliament and sometimes outside it. Occasionally, in the early days of devolution, there were also crises on education policy, aspects of social policy and even matters of personality and who held office, which left the institution somewhat battered and exposed in the harsh glare of the media and, at times, in its public standing. While I do not pretend that there is any scale of comparability, I would hope, viewing the situation from Scotland, that we can look at the progress that is being made in Northern Ireland with some kind of insight into the politics that goes on.

Over that time, there were strong opinions, deeply felt and sometimes trenchantly expressed, within, between and beyond political parties, some of which, as I say, led people to question the value of the institutions themselves. However, across the piece, politicians did what they had to do, which was not to ignore differences or try to come together on a false consensus, but instead to talk, to listen, to understand, to take responsibility and ultimately to move forward and start finding the much-vaunted Scottish solutions to Scottish problems instead of always looking to this place to have them sorted out for us by Governments who, very often, we did not elect. It is important that politics continues, and sometimes in order for politics to continue, all that is required is to give politicians the political space they need to be able to have the discussions they need to have with colleagues, to negotiate inside and outside the parties and between the parties, and sometimes even to reflect more broadly on whether public opinion on some issues is really where it has always been assumed to be. Who takes the decisions, and where and why, is obviously hugely important, but it is still important that the decisions that need to be taken are taken.

It is telling that in the opening of the “New Decade, New Approach” document, so much space was taken up with bread-and-butter issues such as resolving the long-standing issues around the delivery of healthcare and healthcare entitlements, around reforms to the education system and around the need to press ahead with capital expenditure and infrastructure, all of which had backed up during the absence of self-government. So, while I hope I do not underestimate for a single moment the sensitivities involved in a climate of power sharing, or the importance of being in a position to match words with deeds, I believe that the Bill will enhance the transparency and accountability of the institutions and that it is significant for what it sets out to do.

Politics may abhor a vacuum, but there is no question but that trying to bring matters to a head too quickly in the face of short and sometimes artificial and meaningless deadlines can lead to problems all of their own. For that reason, I believe that allowing an extended period, as the Bill seeks to do, for the appointment of a First Minister and Deputy First Minister, whether in the event of their ceasing to hold office or in the aftermath of an election, is an important step. Similarly, allowing Ministers to remain in office after an election to allow

for some limited but necessary political direction to be provided over that period is an important mechanism for ensuring continued normalcy, not only to ensure the continuity of government but to assist the political process in the formation of new Governments. Similarly, while the petition of concern process has been an important consociational mechanism, the time is surely right to begin to narrow the scope of its potential usage while broadening the support required in order for it to be brought to bear. Also, I believe that an updating of the code of conduct for Ministers to enshrine the Nolan principles will be opportune.

As I have said, this is an important Bill. The people of Northern Ireland deserve stability and, with it, the ability to have decisions taken on their behalf by the Assembly that they elect and by the Executive who are there to govern on their behalf, and so long as these proposals enjoy the broad support of the people of Northern Ireland and the parties of Northern Ireland, they will have our support too.

2.17 pm

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I rise to support the Bill, and I would like to pay tribute to the MLAs and to the Northern Ireland Executive for the role that they have played during the coronavirus crisis. There were lots of reasons why I was delighted that the Executive and the Assembly got up and running last January, but that was before we knew about covid. To have had no Government during this period does not bear thinking about, and all my thoughts are with the families and friends of those who have lost loved ones across Northern Ireland as a result of these tragic 18 months.

It is worth pointing out that one of the exciting things in the restoration was the fact that all five parties engaged with it. Nichola Mallon, Conor Murphy, Robin Swann, Naomi Long, Michelle O'Neill, Arlene Foster and all the other members of the Executive got stuck in during this period, and that has been really important. I would also like to pay tribute to Diane Dodds, Peter Weir and Gordon Lyons, who left the previous Executive. Let us see whether they will be in for just a short period on the Back Benches; they—or one of them—could well be back very soon. I also join colleagues who have sent congratulations to the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on his election as DUP leader. As well as dealing with the covid crisis, the Northern Ireland Executive have done positive work over the past 18 months on infrastructure, on city deals, on climate change and on getting the finances under control—the Fiscal Commission and the Fiscal Council have been set up—so although the last year has been very bumpy at times, much has been achieved by this group of people.

This Bill does not contain components of NDNA that have been in the media recently—namely, the cultural package and the protocol. While I understand there are parties here that want to propose amendments to the Bill to enact the cultural components of NDNA, it is in my view important that that should be the final resort. The cultural components of NDNA are clearly a matter for the Assembly. While I would support a vote here in extremis, I believe that, following the agreement between the two main parties and the Secretary of State last week, we should encourage the new Executive and the Assembly to enact those themselves.

Many hours and days were spent agreeing these and the other provisions of the NDNA agreement, and I would make two broad points. First, it is wrong for some to claim or to report that there is an Irish language Act in the NDNA agreement; there is not. Negotiators wanting an Irish language provision won important language provisions, but not the all-encompassing Act that was their initial goal. Much time was spent by negotiators on the other side of the argument who wanted to balance and to limit the scope of the provisions both in legislative terms and in practical terms, particularly for signage and public signs. I make no comment on the merits or otherwise of this, but there is no Irish language Act in the New Decade, New Approach agreement—rather a series of carefully nuanced cultural provisions to reflect and represent all communities in Northern Ireland.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Member for giving way, and it is good to highlight that. Unfortunately, the media and many political pundits keep peddling this line, and very little has been done in relation to giving confidence to the Unionist community. In fact, many within the Unionist community believe that devolution is dead. Those who have driven around Northern Ireland will have seen the many banners hanging around lampposts telling us that devolution is dead and the Belfast agreement is null and void. The messages that have come forward from this Government in the last year and a half have not given any confidence to the Unionist community. I am glad to hear the right hon. Member making mention of the issue of no Irish language Act being included in NDNA.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): That was a long intervention.

Julian Smith: Well, I confirm that it is not there.

Colum Eastwood: We will keep checking back as to what actually happened during those talks with the right hon. Member, who committed an awful lot of time and did an awful lot of good work to ensure that we actually got devolution back. Can I just ask him, because we have had confirmation that Sinn Féin did not actually negotiate an Irish language Act, despite what the claims have been, to confirm to me that this legislation going through the House today was actually a demand of the DUP, so the DUP did get some stuff out of NDNA?

Julian Smith: I would argue that all parties got a lot, and all parties negotiated hard, including the hon. Member's own, and of course the DUP.

The second item that is not part of this Bill is the Northern Ireland protocol. I note that the Government have now asked for an extension of the grace period, and I am pleased to see that the EU response looks positive. I called last year for the Government to negotiate a grace period for the whole of 2021, and I believe now that they should cut a deal around the offer by the EU of a veterinary zone—a temporary veterinary zone. I would encourage a compromise on both sides to meet halfway and to ease the many practical complaints from Northern Ireland business. I am pleased that the rhetoric is easing, and I would encourage everyone to continue to dial it down.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Indeed, in the interests of dialling it down, as the right hon. Member quite rightly says, does he regret that he made a commitment to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in October 2019, when he made it clear that the protocol would be “light touch”? Does he agree now that that was not the case, and that in fact the heavy-handed approach of the protocol now, in the words of the new Economy Minister, concerns him because of the “commercial discrimination” that now appears to exist in Northern Ireland?

Julian Smith: I strongly believe that the protocol can be light touch, but it does require significant amounts of practical working behind the scenes and not politicising every particular issue. I strongly believe that can happen, and I believe it will happen. I would urge both the EU and the UK Government to continue a positive, practical dialogue through the Joint Committee.

The Bill provides for a number of important and practical measures. It ensures more time to work through the creation of an Executive should there be Dissolution after an election. The 24 weeks for things to be worked out in a positive way is important, because we must avoid the three-year impasse that we have had before. The petition of concern provisions came from hard-fought negotiations by the Alliance, the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists, to ensure that both the major parties did not continue to abuse the veto mechanism, as had historically happened. Although provisions in the Bill do not go as far as those parties had hoped, they contain practical and positive improvements that make the petition of concern more difficult to abuse. The UK Government have also agreed in the overall agreement to review the usage of the petition of concern, and lay a report before Parliament every six months.

Finally, the Bill will ensure stricter adherence by Ministers to the Nolan principles and to higher standards in public life, following various scandals such as the renewable heat initiative scandal, and others, and address the misuse of public money and the need to maintain high standards in ministerial office.

We have heard reference to the significant tension in the politics of Northern Ireland over the past weeks and months regarding the protocol, language, leadership putches and leadership contests. There have been burning buses, marches and demonstrations. The headlines of the past few months do not represent my experience of Northern Ireland. Whether as a result of what people have been through, its contested status, or the beauty of its land and the skills, capabilities and intelligence of its people, Northern Ireland is a unique part of the world. It is a great place to live, an exciting place to do business, and it is full of positivity and dynamism.

There has been much talk about a new Ireland, a united Ireland, and threats to the Union in recent weeks, but the high probability is that the Good Friday agreement will maintain the status quo for many years to come. Successive UK Governments have said that they will respect that agreement, and that the provisions in it, particularly those on the Executive and the Assembly that we are discussing, will have ongoing support from this House. As they have shown during this covid crisis, this Government will continue to do that for the foreseeable future.

If that is the case, the noise and headlines of the past few months risk leading many people down paths that will not come to pass, and missing the massive opportunities

[Julian Smith]

that the GFA hybrid situation provides, such as all-Ireland opportunities for infrastructure and climate change, east-west opportunities for work and progress on health and other issues, and huge opportunities to maximise Northern Ireland's position coming out of the pandemic. It also risks missing the opportunities provided by the protocol, and not maximising the big opportunities of power sharing, and how that can deliver on the issues that matter most to the majority of Northern Ireland citizens, such as improving waiting lists, inward investment and jobs, education, coming out of the pandemic and enhancing incomes and life chances. There is the first Northern Ireland Youth Assembly in years, and a fantastic new head of the Northern Ireland civil service, whose obsession is innovation and how to make Northern Ireland more competitive globally, given its position on the cusp of the EU and UK, is about to take power at Stormont.

The UK Government cannot guarantee a Unionist First Minister for ever more, and they cannot change the fact that they signed an international agreement to exit the EU, which contains issues that need to be resolved. We in this House must be clear and honest about those facts. However, the Government can and will support the Assembly and Executive in supporting and developing this important and unique part of the UK, and in doing so they create the best possible protection of the Union. The Bill contains important technical amendments to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, to ensure that the best vehicle for doing that, the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly, continues to prosper. It also reconfirms today that the Good Friday agreement remains the only show in town.

2.29 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): First, let me make it clear from the outset that the Democratic Unionist party will be supporting the Bill's Second Reading. That is not because, as the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) seemed to suggest, the Bill is somehow or other a Unionist game and an exclusively Unionist demand. There are provisions in the Bill that seek to ensure that the Assembly cannot be torn down by those who want to see instability in Northern Ireland. Indeed, for three years they ensured that there was instability and no Assembly. We wanted those changes to ensure that that could not happen again, not for the benefit of the DUP or the Unionist community, but for the benefit of the whole of the community. I want to make that clear at the outset.

This is not a Unionist game. This is not a Unionist Bill. This is not a Unionist demand. This is an attempt by the parties in Northern Ireland, led by us in the negotiations, to ensure that we could not have three years without a Government in Northern Ireland. Incidentally, because the Government here in Westminster were afraid to take on Sinn Féin, they sat on their hands and refused to do anything to try to get a situation going in which devolution was restored in Northern Ireland.

Secondly, there is a certain irony. We had the Secretary of State standing here today, and we heard his honeyed words that the Bill is all about the Government's commitment to the constitutional integrity of the United

Kingdom and that parties should not be making threats to bring down devolution. Yet, in the same breath, he described how, once again, he intends if necessary to cast devolution aside and take on the responsibilities of the devolved Administration in Northern Ireland to satisfy the threats of one party and one party alone: Sinn Féin.

Of course, the impasse and fears we had in Northern Ireland were because Sinn Féin was threatening not to appoint a Deputy First Minister if it did not get the cultural aspects of New Decade, New Approach delivered on the timetable it demanded. I must say that while my party has signed up to the cultural aspects, many people—including, I suspect, Sinn Féin voters in Northern Ireland—really are questioning why, at a time when we are coming out of covid, with hospital waiting lists at about 350,000, with lots of children in schools having missed out on their education and in need of catch-up and with unemployment having doubled as a result of the covid restrictions, the main concern, and the threat to devolution again, is, "If you do not do the cultural aspects of New Decade, New Approach and allocate resources, Assembly time and political capital to it, we will not allow devolution to be set up again." Pathetically, the Secretary of State caved in to those threats again with the commitment he made to Sinn Féin that if it is not done in the Assembly by the end of September, he will take the devolution powers and do it in Westminster.

Either the Secretary of State wants parties in Northern Ireland to work together or he does not. Either he wants to try to take the poison out of the system in Northern Ireland or he does not. I can tell this House one thing: if this one-sided pandering to Sinn Féin—setting aside the devolved powers—continues, all he is doing is allowing Sinn Féin to come back time and again. This is the irony: this is a party that refuses to take its seats in this House and wants to see Northern Ireland divorced from the rest of the United Kingdom, but when it cannot get its own way, where is the first place that it goes scurrying to? A British Secretary of State, the British House of Commons—"Please do these things for us because we can't persuade people in Northern Ireland to do them."

I think the Secretary of State should think very carefully about the way he undermines devolution. The Bill is meant to be all about sustaining devolution—to try to make devolution stronger, to try to stop it being hijacked by any one party, to try to stop the disruption that we had in the past—and yet, at the same time as the Bill is going through, we have the Secretary of State once again giving the green light to a party that does not want to see stability in Northern Ireland, that does not really care whether there is stability in Northern Ireland, and that gives priority to its niche demands over the main concerns of people in Northern Ireland, whether they are Unionist or nationalist, which are to get money spent and time devoted to dealing with the essential, day-to-day issues.

I listened to the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who endorsed this approach. I have to say, the kind of condescending, patronising attitude that we get from the Chair of the Select Committee does not go down very well in Northern Ireland—this kind of condescending attitude: "If the natives can't get it together, then let's do it here". He was talking like some 19th-century colonial ruler. Of course, there are difficult situations

and difficult decisions to be made in Northern Ireland. I served as a Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive for five years; I served as Finance Minister. None of the parties ever accused the DUP at that stage of being one-sided in the way in which it dealt with the finances across Departments. My own party actually complained more about not getting the money for certain things than some of the other parties did, because that is just the job, and if we do not have enough money, we cannot give everyone everything they ask for. But no one ever accused us of being biased. We worked our way through difficult issues including, during that period, the most difficult issue of the devolution of policing and justice. For any Member of this House to suggest that the natives cannot work their way through these things, so we have to take things over occasionally—all it does is ensure that those who wish to be intransigent will continue to be intransigent because they know that they have the safety valve of running to the Secretary of State's door, and he will sort it all out for them rather than them sorting it out for themselves.

I know that this is not part of the Bill, but the Secretary of State mentioned it and he mentioned his intention in the House today. I give warning to him that if he wants to find a way of undermining devolution and of making it difficult for parties to work together, let him continue down this road of giving in to people because they threaten. Or, maybe it is because the Government fear that Sinn Féin has more of a threat than any other party in the Executive and therefore it has to be pandered to. This does not augur well for devolution.

Let me turn to the terms of the Bill itself and the period of up to 24 weeks for reflection and attempts to try and overcome the difficulties that there are. Sometimes there are issues that parties do not see eye to eye on, which they cannot agree on and which are important to them. There would be that 24-week period with Ministers in place, but I take the point made by the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), about what powers those Ministers should have. That is a very fine balance. Do we have 24 weeks in which Ministers have full power without accountability? Do we have 24 weeks in which Ministers have no power other than to administer issues and therefore are not able to deal with serious issues that come up? I do not have an easy answer to that, but she posed an important question.

There may be occasions when that elongated period is necessary. If we are going to have it, we have to be very clear what Ministers can do during that time. If they are simply there as lame ducks, there is no point in having them, yet if they are able to do everything that they would normally be able to do with Assembly scrutiny, I think that there would be grave concerns about that. I hope that some of those issues will be teased out in Committee. I do not know whether it is easy to codify that or put it in the terms of the Bill, but certainly it is not an issue that can be ignored.

On the changes to the petition of concern, I note again what the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon said. He said that the changes are necessary to stop the abuses of the petition of concern by the large parties. First, let me make something clear. The Belfast agreement did not put any limitations on the petition of concern. It can be used for whatever purpose. Incidentally, that was not drafted by Sinn Féin or the DUP. We were

not the largest parties when the Good Friday agreement was negotiated. It was drafted in that form by the Social Democratic and Labour party and the Ulster Unionist party, who thought that they would be the ones who would be able to exercise the petition of concern. It is very significant that, now that Unionists no longer have a majority in the Assembly, those who clamoured for the petition of concern because they said it was necessary to protect minorities are the ones who wish to see it watered down.

There were not abuses of the petition of concern. Indeed, it was not even used all that often. When it was used, all parties used it, and the time that it was used and abused the most was by the SDLP when it came to welfare reform. I am sure we will get some lectures about the petition of concern when the SDLP speakers get up to speak, but all I can say about the changes is that, incidentally, no one party now would have 30 Members to exclusively put forward a petition of concern, and the petition of concern was one of the safety mechanisms in the agreement, for use when there were divisive issues and one bloc tried to impose those issues on others.

Incidentally—this is significant, again, as an example of the Government's interference—there is nothing more divisive in Northern Ireland than the Northern Ireland protocol, yet the safety measures in the Belfast agreement for issues such as the protocol have been totally removed. They were totally removed when the protocol and the withdrawal agreement were brought here to the House of Commons. As a result, we now have the protocol being able to be pushed through without any real say by the people who are most affected by it, although, as Members have pointed out today, it is beginning to affect some of their constituents too, because they cannot even trade in Northern Ireland. It is another example of where, in order to attain certain objectives, the Government have cherry-picked parts of the safeguards built into the constitutional structure of Northern Ireland. What angers many people in Northern Ireland is that that seems to be done on issues that most affect the Unionist community. I am sure some of my colleagues will have something to say on some of those other issues.

We will be supporting the Bill tonight, but if the Government want to sustain devolution and see it prosper, it will require more than just this Bill. It will require them to show the same respect to devolution in Northern Ireland as they would show in Scotland and Wales. I guarantee that no Secretary of State for either Scotland or Wales would dare interfere in the devolved settlements in those two countries in the way in which this Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and this Government have done with devolution in Northern Ireland.

2.45 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): It has been a great pleasure to listen to the speeches so far, in particular the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith). His remarks about the future, innovation and the opportunities for Northern Ireland struck a chord with me. They took me back a decade to when I visited Northern Ireland as the Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform. I remember very clearly meeting youngsters at a local school and talking predominantly about the future. I was keen to understand how young people viewed the future. When we talk about Northern Ireland we spend

[Mr Mark Harper]

a long time, for understandable reasons, talking about the past. I went away from that meeting incredibly optimistic, because they were very keen to focus on what united them and on the opportunities for the future. Those young people who were then in the sixth form will now be in their late 20s. They will be in careers, building businesses and building families. I was very optimistic about that and I echo what my right hon. Friend, a former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, said about the opportunities for Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom.

I add my congratulations to the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on his successful election as the leader of the Democratic Unionist party at what, I suspect, will be a challenging time in Northern Ireland politics. I wish him all success in that role, and in the role he will play in ensuring the devolved institutions remain in being and are able to be successful in helping to govern what is a beautiful part of the United Kingdom.

On the Bill, a lot of the press comment over the past week about the future of the institutions has been rather feverish. It is worth reflecting on something the Chairman of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) said about the timetable. We are considering this proposed legislation in the normal way and I think that is a good thing. It is clear from the programme motion that the Bill will be considered in a Public Bill Committee until July. It will then come back on to the Floor of the House and make its way to the other place to be debated there. Looking at the commencement details, there is a further two-month period before it comes into force. It is therefore worth all the parties in Northern Ireland reflecting over the coming days and weeks that if anything were to happen to the institutions at the moment, the rules governing events are the current rules, which obviously have some very challenging timescales attached to them. It is worth all the parties reflecting that, as we debate the Bill, the rules in force at the moment will be those in force for a considerable period of time.

I support the measures in the Bill, but the Chairman of the Select Committee made a good point—I think it was also touched on by others, including the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson)—about time periods. Although I accept that the current time periods are very tight, there is a danger in extending them too far, whereby we lose the focus we get from the results of democratic elections. The danger is that we allow the results of elections not to be put into place, we do not concentrate people's minds appropriately and we get drift and indecision; although it may be uncomfortable, we sometimes need deadlines and uncomfortable consequences to enable people to make what are often difficult decisions, to ensure that there are functioning institutions. Although I support what is in the Bill, it is worth our reflecting on whether we are perhaps going too far; it is worth bearing in mind that there is a balance to be struck.

I will briefly touch on what is not in the legislation—I trust I will not tempt you to intervene, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I think we are allowed to touch on this briefly on Second Reading. I wish to reflect on the exchanges I had with the Secretary of State and the exchange involving the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum

Eastwood) and the right hon. Member for East Antrim on the forthcoming legislation on legacy prosecutions. To make it absolutely clear to the hon. Member for Foyle, I certainly do not advocate an amnesty, and I do not believe those in my party who advocate for a better settlement and fairer treatment of veterans have ever argued for one. One important factor in the reputation of the British Army around the world is that our armed forces are bound by the rule of law and if they transgress it, they deserve to suffer the consequences. What we are talking about here is a situation where a due process has been undertaken and vexatious attempts are then made to prosecute people where there has been a proper investigation. This is about how we get that balance right—not through having an amnesty but reflecting that there have been some injustices. That is what we are trying to achieve, and I think the right hon. Member for East Antrim put that point well when he intervened. I will leave that there for now, because it is not covered in this Bill—it will come in separate legislation and I know the Government are considering carefully the right content, to reflect the points made by Members on both sides of the House.

The Secretary of State touched on the final couple of points that I want to make when he talked about where it was right for this House to legislate—the right hon. Member for East Antrim and the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon also mentioned this—and where matters are properly devolved and the Assembly would be able to deal with them. I have had slight differences with the Government on this point in the past. For example, although I very much support same-sex marriage and voted for it in England, my view was that that was a devolved matter that the Northern Ireland institutions should have resolved. I know the former Secretary of State took great pleasure in putting it into force, but I did not agree that it was right for him or the Government to do so—it should have been for the devolved institutions to do so. I raise that because of the debate we had on the cultural aspects of the New Decade, New Approach agreement, which the former Secretary of State touched on. I have been following the debate that has been taking place in Northern Ireland. The understanding that has been set out in the media—which of course is not necessarily completely representative of the facts—is that under the deal that appears to have precipitated the end of the former leader of the Democrat Unionist party, Mr Poots, there had been an agreement that if the cultural aspects of the deal were not dealt with in the Assembly, they would be legislated for here. My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon has said that his view is that they should be done locally. He is prepared, in extremis, to countenance their being done here. When the Minister of State winds up the debate, could he set out a little of the Government's thinking about when the devolved aspects should be dealt with by the devolved institutions, and about what the Government's tests are for when they should be legislated for here?

I would perhaps put it a little less loudly than the right hon. Member for East Antrim, but I broadly support his sentiments that if we have devolved matters, they should be ones for the devolved institutions. As in other parts of the United Kingdom where there are devolved governance mechanisms, we do not have to agree with the decisions of the devolved Administrations

in order to accept that they are the right people to be making them. The test for me is not whether I agree with what the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government or the Northern Ireland Executive do; if a matter is devolved, the decision is for them, and it does not matter whether I, the Government or this House like it. The decision is for the institutions to take, and for them to justify to the people who elect them. That is the essence of democratic accountability.

There is an important point here: if those who were elected in Northern Ireland to govern Northern Ireland do not make those decisions and are not held accountable, we damage the entire drive to enable properly functioning democratic institutions. It will not be sustainable if every time something very difficult challenges the ability of those institutions to make decisions, somebody else sorts it out for them, for whatever reason. Whether it is for good motives or not, that will not be helpful in the long term. A little thinking about how the Government approach these matters would be helpful.

The final point, which the right hon. Member for East Antrim and my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon touched on, is about the powers of Northern Ireland Ministers in the extended periods when they are able to remain in post but there is no functioning combination of a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister. I think that the Bill is still an improvement on where we are today because, as I understand it, when we were in the long period of having no functioning Government, officials were in the very difficult position of having to manage Departments. For rather obvious reasons, they are incredibly constrained in the decisions that they can take; they are not accountable to anybody, and regardless of their actual powers, they are very constrained in what they are able to do.

I am not clear from having read the Bill and the explanatory notes quite what the legislation envisages, for example about the extent of the powers in the 48-week period with Ministers taking decisions. However, I still think that even if they are having to take quite important or big decisions, they have the benefit of being accountable. They are able to appear before the Assembly and have questions asked of them; that provides better accountability, which is an improvement on having those decisions made by officials.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): This point has now been raised on three occasions. It is probably worth reflecting for the benefit of the House—perhaps the Minister will pick up on it later—that during the negotiations that led to this provision, it was recognised and remains the case that no Minister can act on a significant cross-cutting issue without recourse to the Executive. That also applies if the issue is controversial. In those circumstances, the Executive will not be sitting, because there will not be a First Minister or a Deputy First Minister, so the Minister will have full competence in their range of departmental responsibilities—but should any issue be significant, cross-cutting or controversial and require recourse to the Executive, it should not proceed.

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. I had in mind what happened during the extensive period in which officials were having to manage these things, when really important issues built up in the national health service in Northern Ireland and there were important decisions to be made about pay, conditions

and funding. My understanding, having looked into it, is that there were serious deteriorations in the quality of care provided. I do not think that that raises issues of the sort that the hon. Gentleman raises, but it is obviously helpful if Ministers can take decisions. Even if Ministers are taking decisions that may not have been envisaged when the legislation was set out, at least they have the benefit of being accountable, having to set out both in the Assembly and publicly what they have done and why they have done it and, at some point, being accountable at the ballot box. I think that is an improvement. If the Minister can, in winding up, say anything about the extent of those powers or decision taking that is not currently set out in either of the documents before us, that would be helpful to the House.

I hope that the Bill progresses to Committee after we have concluded our remarks.

3 pm

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): It really is a new experience to be sitting in between the two wings of the DUP. If they need any help to bring themselves back together again, we have a bit of experience in that.

Before I continue, I will deal with some of the points made by the previous speaker, the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper). He talked about devolution, and I absolutely agree with him that this place should not be encroaching on the devolution settlement. Those are points that we made during the debate on the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020. There is not as much support coming from some quarters of this House to oppose what is very clearly a power grab in all the devolved spaces right across the different policy areas. There is not as much support coming from certain sections of this House for that.

One of the issues that had to be legislated for in this House that could not be legislated for in the Northern Ireland Assembly was marriage equality. In other words, two people who love each other could not get married just because politicians said so. The right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) talks about politicians being unable to deal with things in a devolved context. I remember being the person who proposed the motion that got majority support for marriage equality in the Northern Ireland Assembly. That was the will of the House, and it was the will of the people, but we were blocked by the petition of concern that the right hon. Gentleman talks about. The petition of concern, despite what he might say, was there to protect minorities. It was abused time and again, including to stop people who loved each other getting married. So this is all connected.

The right hon. Member for East Antrim accused us of using the petition of concern on welfare reform. Absolutely we did, because welfare reform brought through by the Conservative party and supported, surprisingly, by some of the parties in Northern Ireland, was there to attack the most vulnerable in our communities—communities that have been let down and abused over many decades. The people who suffered the most as a result of the troubles in Northern Ireland were being abused again by Governments. I would sign a petition of concern any day of the week to stop that.

The right hon. Member for East Antrim also talked about legacy. I get that it is not his or many other people's intention to bring about an amnesty, but let me

[*Colum Eastwood*]

tell him this; we are talking to the British Government every day of the week about this. An amnesty is what you are going to get, because if you say to people, “In the early days of the troubles, your case was properly investigated”—well, it absolutely was not. That is why we are having to go through this process.

Who is going to come with me to see a Bloody Sunday family, or somebody who was shot by the IRA in any year during the conflict, to tell them that they are not entitled to go through the justice process like everybody else? Come with me and do that any day of the week—I will take you to those victims. If you follow what this British Government intend to do, you will be saying not just to veterans, but to IRA people, UVF people, everyone, that they are entitled to walk the streets free, and that the people who were murdered, and their family members who have been left behind, who have suffered the most and have been left out of this peace process, will just have to wait because once again, we are going to let them down.

That is the road that this British Government are on. It flies absolutely in the face of the New Decade, New Approach agreement; it flies in the face of the Stormont House agreement; and it flies in the face of common decency, but that is what you will be supporting. You will be supporting an amnesty for everybody if you support the intentions of this British Government.

On why we are here, I think it is important to remember. I really wish we did not have to be here putting in legislation to stop people walking out of government. It should never be the case that, in the 21st century, any political party should be threatening or walking out of government. We are here because Sinn Féin brought down the institutions for three years. It started with the renewable heat incentive scandal and has ended up with the Irish language and God knows what else. The reality is that we had three years of no Government. The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) will know of the long, tortuous hours of negotiating and discussing and going through every one of these issues. I am not a massive fan of much of this Bill, but we will support it because we did not win the argument in the New Decade, New Approach discussions.

Will we all take the same approach—that whatever was agreed in the New Decade, New Approach negotiations should be implemented? That is not happening today. I note that DUP Members are saying that we should not be going over the heads of the devolved space and the Assembly and implementing things that were not agreed. But it was agreed—you have all accepted it.

The Irish language Act that I wanted did not come to pass as part of those negotiations. This Bill’s provisions for language and culture are nowhere near enough. People should be prepared and able to continue to argue for better support for the Irish language, but that is not what was delivered in that agreement. I have to accept that. However, when you are in government in Northern Ireland, you have to implement it. I do not want this place legislating at all in the devolved space, but if parties like the DUP and Sinn Féin cannot deliver in government, this is what is going to keep happening time and again. If you want to stop Westminster going over the heads of the devolved Government, do the things that you agreed to do in the first place, and then we will not be in this situation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) and I were prepared table amendments to the Bill to deal with the issues of language and culture. We would not have changed one single word that was agreed in the NDNA discussions—the legislation that was published at that time by the Government. Actually, I think that the Government have badly mishandled this last week and we have ended up on the brink of another collapse of our institutions.

Mr Harper: I just want to pick the hon. Gentleman up on his last point. I take his point that the parties agreed on things in New Decade, New Approach, but he has just said that, if the parties in the Assembly cannot sort things out, things will get done here. That is exactly the problem. My argument would be that it is for the public in Northern Ireland to look at how the parties are dealing with commitments they have made and to then reach appropriate decisions at subsequent elections. If the decisions are just taken here, whatever we think about a particular issue, that would effectively let the parties in Northern Ireland off the hook on delivering on their commitments and promises, and it would not end up leading to a robust devolved institution. That is the argument that I would make, countering slightly the point the hon. Gentleman is making.

Colum Eastwood: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He has a very optimistic view of how politics in Northern Ireland works. I have absolutely no interest in things being done here that should be done at home, but people have to live up to the things that they committed to and deliver them.

The reality is, though, that there are a lot of things in New Decade, New Approach. The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon will know that I talked about this every single time we met during the negotiations. I am the representative for the city of Derry, and for 57 years we have been denied a full-scale university. It is in New Decade, New Approach. What are the Northern Ireland Executive doing about that? We had to fight like mad to get them to implement the support for the medical school at Magee. What are the Northern Ireland Executive and the British Government, who will need to support this, doing about waiting lists? Again, that is in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. What are the Executive doing about making housing a stand-alone priority in the programme for government?

I very much welcome today’s elevation of the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), and I phoned him earlier to congratulate him. I was disappointed, though, to hear him say in his first statement as leader of the party that his No. 1 priority will be the protocol. Last week, we heard from Sinn Féin, whose No. 1 priority was the Irish language Act. I want to take this opportunity to make it absolutely clear that the SDLP’s No. 1 priority is the 350,00 people languishing on waiting lists, in pain, today, because the Executive have not got round to dealing with that crisis. The waiting lists in Northern Ireland would make a third world country blush. Yet, last week, Sinn Féin threatened to bring down the very edifice of government over the Irish language Act—it is a very important issue, but not the most important issue that we should be dealing with today. This week, the DUP is threatening to bring down the very edifice of government on the protocol.

Would it not be better if we actually sat down together, worked these issues out, worked together, recommitted to the institutions of the Good Friday agreement, and, more importantly, the spirit of the Good Friday agreement and began to deal with the issues that are the real priorities of the people of Northern Ireland—nationalist, Unionist or other?

Sammy Wilson: Will the hon. Member agree then that, since we already spend about £200 million on the Irish language, whether it is in relation to education, broadcasting, street names and a whole lot of other things in Northern Ireland, he would not give priority to further cultural issues when a huge amount of money is needed to deal with the waiting lists he described?

Colum Eastwood: I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention. He gave a fantastic oration earlier on in support of devolution and the Good Friday agreement. It was fantastic to hear him talking about the Good Friday agreement in such glowing terms. I was 14 or 15 when that was signed. Maybe my memory is not quite serving me right, but I just cannot remember how exactly the DUP voted on the issue of the Good Friday agreement. But if he has now become a convert to the Good Friday agreement and all things power sharing, I welcome him on to the pitch. I am delighted to see it.

The point about the Irish language issue, and all the cultural issues—remember, it was not just the Irish language that was dealt with in the NDNA agreement—is that you can do two things at once; you can do many things at once when you are in government. I would go much further, by the way: I believe absolutely that the language and cultural legislation needs to happen and has to happen as quickly as possible. Do I think we should be threatening the very edifice of government and power sharing over that issue? No, I do not. Equally, do I think we should be threatening the very edifice of government and devolution and power sharing and the Good Friday agreement institutions over the protocol? No, I do not.

That is the problem. We have two parties in control in Northern Ireland—in charge for the last 14 or so years—that are absolutely and totally obsessed with themselves and their own self-interest, with nowhere near enough effort put into dealing with the problems and crises that are evolving, in our collapsing health service and in our education system, which is in real trouble. Why do we not focus our efforts on that, instead of constantly having culture wars and constantly dragging ourselves to the brink of collapse? I will tell hon. Members why: because it suits those two political parties and the system we have created and the bastardisation of the Good Friday agreement that happened at St Andrews to keep having this culture war: “Let’s build both sides up against each other; let’s build the walls higher and higher.”

Why not break down some of the walls? Why do we not realise that the people’s priorities are the health service, access to decent education and a job for the young people? When I walk around the city of Derry, it is a city that has been starved of investment for many a decade, and a city that still does not have—this was in New Decade, New Approach, as the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon will know, as I helped write

some of the words in that document—the full-scale university that it desperately needs. Derry needs that university to stem the tide of our young people leaving—hundreds of them every year, never coming back.

They are the issues we should deal with. They are not Unionist priorities. They are not nationalist priorities. They are priorities for every single one of our citizens. For God’s sake, can we not start dealing with those, instead of bringing ourselves to the brink of collapse every single time?

3.14 pm

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): The Secretary of State made reference to the fact that this Bill coincidentally—or perhaps by design—coincides with the 100th anniversary of the official opening of the Northern Ireland Parliament. It is worth my referring to the words of King George V at the official opening, when he appealed to those listening to do their utmost

“to stretch out the hand of forbearance and conciliation, to forgive and to forget, and to join in making for the land which they love a new era of peace, contentment, and goodwill.”

If we perhaps leave aside some of the historical context, it is none the less worth noting how relevant those words are to the situation in which we in Northern Ireland find ourselves today. We need to be very conscious that if things go wrong and people push and push and push, we could see a situation in which Northern Ireland and the future of power sharing and devolution are in real trouble.

There is a certain irony, particularly in respect of the sustainability aspects of the legislation, that this debate is happening at a time when, under the outgoing rules on the seven-day window, there is so much turmoil in Northern Ireland, some parties are playing fast and loose with those rules and putting demands on the table, and, if things go wrong, we could potentially see Northern Ireland going for an early election. An election would see the fall of a lot of legislation that is currently in works, including an important justice Bill, and would further delay the urgent reforms that are required for our health and education systems and the process of job creation. Elections are, of course, always important for democratic renewal, but it is none the less important that politicians fulfil their mandates and do the job they are required to do on behalf of the people.

I will certainly support the Bill today. It is about putting into practice some of the governance aspects of the New Decade, New Approach agreement that fall to Westminster, and there may well be some aspects on which we can go further and perhaps clarify some ambiguities that were left in that agreement. I mean no disrespect to the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), who did an absolutely marvellous job in his leadership on negotiating the agreement, but there are things that could be clarified. In some areas of the agreement, we could go further in building on the reforms that are offered.

It is important to recognise that, ultimately, rules can take us only so far in terms of any structures. Any society has to work on the basis of trust, conventions and respect among the various political actors—those norms of democracy. In the context of Northern Ireland in particular, that relates to partnership and power sharing. At times, we see trust and mutual respect

[Stephen Farry]

pushed to the very limits. The boundaries of what is necessary to maintain the integrity of devolution are frequently being breached. We cannot see that as sustainable.

Two particular aspects are currently focusing minds: the first relates to the protocol and the second to the language and cultural package. First, on the protocol, it is important that we remind ourselves why the protocol is here: it is the outworking of Brexit and, in particular, the decisions on the very nature of Brexit that were taken by the Government and, indeed, this Parliament. The protocol is a response to decisions taken elsewhere.

At times, the current situation is seen very much through the lens of Unionist discontent with the situation. However, it is important to bear in mind that there is a wider community in Northern Ireland and most people in Northern Ireland recognise why the protocol is there. They do not see it as a breach of the Good Friday agreement or of the constitutional settlement—the principle of consent is written in stone in respect of the various withdrawal agreement documents—and they want to see a situation in which the problems are resolved and we end up with genuine political stability and, indeed, stability for businesses in terms of investment. That means not scrapping the protocol or taking us to or over brink, but finding practical solutions.

I was pleased to hear the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon make reference to doing even a temporary veterinary agreement. That is of fundamental importance in addressing the checks across the Irish sea. If such an agreement were implemented, we could see the removal of 80% of those checks. If all parties in Northern Ireland pushed in that direction, I think the UK Government would listen a lot more in that regard. The Government need to be very conscious of the choices they make—whether they want to pursue a very pure Brexit or to be pragmatic—for the sake of Northern Ireland and stability.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman talks about the commercial impact of the protocol. As his party has Members in the Northern Ireland Assembly, has he no concerns that, as a result of the protocol, many of the things that are devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and many of the laws and regulations that were made in the Northern Ireland Assembly will and can no longer be made there, but will be made in Brussels?

Stephen Farry: When we were part of the European Union, certain laws were made in Brussels, but, of course, we had democratic representation at the time. This is all about the pooling of sovereignty, which means that we gain much greater benefits through being part of a much bigger enterprise. While the right hon. Gentleman is perhaps correct to point to the fact that there is now that democratic deficit, there are things that can be done in terms of what happens to the UK representation through, for example, the Joint Consultative Working Group. The European Union is also being innovative in trying to find space for voices from Northern Ireland to address some of these issues. None the less, it is far from perfect, which is one of the many reasons why we were opposed to Brexit in the first place.

The language and culture aspects of the current situation were very much part of the New Decade, New Approach agreement. It is fair to say that the language

and culture issues were the most fundamental and, indeed, intractable part of what was almost a three-year interregnum of the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is natural that there is a focus on getting those issues delivered in a timely way. Indeed, the document itself refers to its happening within 100 days. In theory, if it were not for covid, the Assembly would have acted by now.

I appreciate that comments have been made about this issue being something for the Northern Ireland Assembly to sort out and for democratic politicians to work through, but there are two things to say in response to that. First, it has not happened. I very much wish that it had happened in the Northern Ireland Assembly, but it has not. If need be, Westminster may have to intervene to address it. Secondly, this is not an ordinary democratic issue that comes along from time to time that politicians have to address. All five parties in the Northern Ireland Executive are back in office due to the New Decade, New Approach agreement. If we find a situation in which we do not honour the agreements that we make around the integrity of devolution, then devolution will collapse. That is the reality, and that is why this is seen in that very particular light.

There are those who point to a much sadder situation where, time after time, we are seeing agreements made and breached. In particular, aspects in relation to rights on equality do not seem to move through the Northern Ireland Assembly for one reason or another. That is a source not just of frustration for many, but of despair for those who depend on those rights. That moves beyond simply issues around the culture and language aspects and into areas around marriage equality and women's reproductive rights, on which the Minister of State is working very keenly.

I want to focus on the three different sections of the Bill. The first is the sustainability of the institutions. Again, rather than having just seven days following the collapse of the institutions, it may well be necessary to have a little more breathing space, but that does bring a downside, which some Members have very ably drawn out today. There are also some wider issues around sustainability, which is how the institutions evolve to meet the needs of an evolving society.

Northern Ireland is a very diverse society, but if we go back to 1998, there was this working assumption that the world was divided into two camps—the Unionist camp and the nationalist camp—and there were a small number of people in between who were either “others” or “neithers”. They were perhaps a slightly awkward group that could be put to one side because they were not that many, but, over time, that centre ground bloc, or those who were designated as “others”, has grown dramatically in the Assembly. Indeed, after the next Assembly election, who knows, they could represent more than 20% of the Members of the Assembly.

In that context, the nature of designations becomes ever more untenable. They are fundamentally anti-democratic; they are about dividing Northern Ireland and sending out a message that Northern Ireland is fundamentally divided and will be so perpetually, which is not how many people, particularly young people, wish to see the future of their society. It is entirely possible to have power-sharing in different ways, through weighted majorities and so on, where we do not need the system of designations.

The same applies to how we form Governments in Northern Ireland through what was a mandatory coalition, with the built-in vetoes that caused so much damage. There are other ways in which power-sharing can be done with different models of associational democracy. The hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) referred to an associational model. It is important that the Government are conscious that in the very near future some of the fundamental rules of the Assembly, particularly the assumption that the First Minister and Deputy First Minister will always be a Unionist or a nationalist, may come under pressure through electoral demographic change and we could see a major crisis of legitimacy of the institutions. It is important that the Government act ahead of that rather than in response to yet another crisis that may emerge.

The ministerial code has perhaps not had the same amount of attention in this debate as other matters. It is very welcome that we strengthen the standard to which Ministers are required to keep in Northern Ireland. In doing so, however, it is worth referencing that what is proposed on paper for Northern Ireland now goes further than what is the norm for the UK Government in their operations. Obviously in recent months there has been a lot of controversy in Whitehall over the ministerial code and how it is enforced. That rather prompts the question: if it is good enough for Northern Ireland to have a strengthened ministerial code with independent enforcement and oversight, then why not Whitehall as well? In Northern Ireland the ministerial code is frequently breached by Ministers from a number of parties on a regular basis, so simply having an improved code on paper does not always mean that we see an improvement in practice.

On petitions of concern, there has been a long-standing demand for reform from my party and indeed many others. There have been particular frustrations over recent years where petitions of concern have been used, and indeed abused, to block the delivery of rights and equality issues in Northern Ireland. In effect, it gives a party that previously had over 30 seats the ability to have the net equivalent of 55 or 56 seats and to block anything that it does not like. That is not democratic. It moves us away from the original intent in the Good Friday agreement: the petition of concern was to protect the vital interests of different sections of the community, not to enable rights that cut across the entire community to be blocked. I welcome what has been negotiated in New Decade, New Approach, which will hopefully be placed into law, although I am still slightly sceptical as to whether it goes far enough. We may need to revise and review it in future if it proves not to be workable. None the less, it is good to see it on paper.

Alongside that, it is worth stressing that the petition of concern in the Assembly is only one feature of the vetoes. There are also the hidden vetoes that operate inside the Northern Ireland Executive: not only the vetoes tabled by the Executive, where a number of Ministers can block an issue; but because the two largest parties control the agenda of the Executive and either party can prevent an issue from even coming to the Executive table. Those areas also need to be addressed if we are to have a proper functioning democracy.

My final point is about legacy. I will hopefully come back to this if and when a Bill is produced by the Government in due course. While it is welcome that the

Government are being faithful to the governance aspects of New Decade, New Approach, it is worth stressing that in terms of legacy they are not. The chapter on legacy in New Decade, New Approach refers directly to Stormont House; in fact, that is its actual title. It could not be more clear that the intention in that document is to deliver the previous agreement that was made between the UK and Irish Governments and a number of the other parties back in 2014.

However, we have seen a major U-turn away from the principles of Stormont House and, indeed, the content of Stormont House. I concur with what other Members have said, including particularly the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood), in that what we are likely to see is a de facto amnesty. We cannot do what Parliament wants to do in relation to members and veterans of the armed forces, and not do the same in relation to those people who were involved in terrorist organisations. It has to be uniform, and the Government know that is the legal advice they have been given.

It is worth stressing that what may be coming down the tracks on legacy does not have the support, at least in public, of any political party in Northern Ireland, it does not have the support of any of the victims groups right across the community and it is something that may well be imposed over the heads of those in Northern Ireland. Right around the world, whenever we see different forms of transitional justice, even those that may well have a statute of limitations or indeed an amnesty, they are part of a wider peace agreement and they have legitimacy whenever parties across the political spectrum buy into them. That is not the case with what may be happening in Northern Ireland. That point stands apart from the fact that what may well be coming from the Government is not likely to comply with article 2 of the European convention on human rights, and what is proposed will eventually be struck down in the courts. We will wait and see what emerges, but for today I am happy to support the Second Reading of this Bill.

3.31 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a genuine pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) and indeed, before him, the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood). It is at moments when the House has to debate matters relating to Northern Ireland and to Northern Ireland alone that the somewhat asymmetric nature of the Union that makes up the United Kingdom is most apparent. I think it assists the House enormously that we are able to hear now a variety—a multiplicity—of views coming from Northern Ireland. I thank those hon. Members, and indeed all hon. Members from Northern Ireland who have made their contribution to this debate today.

I also place on record my congratulations and the congratulations of my party to the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on assuming the leadership of his party. He does so at a difficult and challenging time, and I am sure that he has the good wishes of all parts of the House in taking on the task that he has undertaken.

My party, like those represented by everybody else who has spoken today, will support the measures in this Bill. I think it is perhaps worth reflecting parenthetically that, in a debate that has generated a fair amount of

[*Mr Alistair Carmichael*]

disagreement, the one thing in respect of which there has been universal agreement is that we all support the Bill. That just makes me wonder whether the measures in the Bill are the equal of the political situation that it purports to deal with.

I think the political context is important here. Let us not ignore the fact that much of the political instability to which others have referred is a consequence of the Brexit deal that was done by the Prime Minister and of the Northern Ireland protocol. I suggest that the Prime Minister and his party have for the most part, with a few honourable exceptions such as the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), been careless in the custody of their duties under the Good Friday agreement. I have always felt that they never really understood the genuinely fragile nature of the peace that was created by the Good Friday agreement, and that it becomes acute at a moment like this as a consequence. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Down just said, the most obvious and sensible thing that could be done at the moment is the negotiation of a temporary veterinary agreement in relation to Northern Ireland. It would, I think, be something not that difficult to construct, but for reasons of dogma as much as anything else, the Government seem incapable of doing that.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you and I were both in this House in 2003 when it was necessary to cancel elections to the then Northern Ireland Assembly. That was a difficult and painful time. It led to the suspension of the Assembly and to business and legislation relating to Northern Ireland being conducted directly from this Parliament. It was a disgrace. I remember whole Bills going through in Committee Rooms upstairs in 90 minutes for all stages. The idea that there was any democratic scrutiny or accountability as part of that process is nonsensical. Therefore, at the very least, I welcome the fact that we are managing not to return to that. However, as I look around the Chamber, there are not many hon. Members who were here in 2003, so I remind them of what it was like under direct rule when the Assembly collapsed previously. It would not be in their constituents' best interests to return to that.

As the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), the Chair of the Select Committee, said, this is not emergency legislation. Of course, in the technical, parliamentary sense of the term, it is not, but I suggest that it is still urgent. He also said that the Good Friday agreement was a process, and he was correct in that as well. However, as somebody who has observed and participated in the conduct of Northern Ireland business in this House for some time, I think that it is a process that we might have hoped would bring us further and faster than it has done. It established a framework for the people of Northern Ireland to deal with problems for themselves through politics rather than through violence. Although it sounds modest to say that now, it was a significant achievement. The process started actually under Margaret Thatcher and went through the Governments of John Major and Tony Blair.

In the course of the debate, many people, including the right hon. Members for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) and the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood), have reflected on the different ways in which devolution works, and unfavourable comparisons have been made about its

operation in Scotland and Wales compared to Northern Ireland. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, I was part of the process that saw the set-up of the Scottish Parliament. The Liberal Democrats were an active participant, along with the Labour party, the local authorities, Churches and other parts of civic Scotland, in the constitutional convention that constructed the blueprint for the Scottish Parliament. Those were the roots of devolution in Scotland, and we did that out of a concern that Scottish institutions and Scots law would be better protected and promoted through a devolved Parliament.

Devolution in Scotland and Wales was the product not of a peace process but of an aspiration to make democracy work better and make democratic politics work better for Scotland and Northern Ireland. To suggest now that a comparison can be made is, I am afraid, misleading. It is rooted in a misunderstanding of the process that has brought us to this point. An understanding of the process that brought us to devolution is important, because that reminds us of the consequences should we allow devolution—the democratic institutions in Northern Ireland—to fail.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Down spoke about designations and the difficulties now with the model of government set up under the Good Friday agreement. He is absolutely right. So much in that agreement created institutions that were never intended to be as enduring as they have been. The purpose of power sharing was to provide an environment in which the communities could work together eventually to achieve what we in the rest of the UK would regard as normal politics, where it would not be necessary to have an Executive constituted in the way that they are, where, in effect, everybody is in government and nobody is in opposition. That is why the one tiny point of disagreement I have with the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon is when he says we should be seeking to maintain the status quo. The status quo was never meant to be maintained, and I do not believe that in the long term it is sustainable as a democratic exercise. We need to be more ambitious than that, and for those in this House there must come a point when we decide whether we help the progress towards normal democratic politics in Northern Ireland by continuing to “help out” or whether eventually we will have to say that that is a problem for the Northern Ireland institutions themselves to resolve. For today, on Second Reading, this Bill has my support, but I want it to be clearly understood that in as much as it does sustain a status quo, it can do that only to create stability to ensure further progress. Otherwise, it is always going to be a waste of time.

3.41 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The New Decade, New Approach agreement certainly paved the way for the return of the Northern Ireland Assembly in January 2020, and this was welcomed by everyone. It is therefore ironic that the backdrop to today's Second Reading debate is a decision of this Government to threaten to usurp the role of the Northern Ireland Assembly in the exercise of its newly restored powers, not to prioritise the promises and pledges on health, the economy and education but to prioritise a cultural package. Mention has already been made of this, but I need to reiterate that the three-year long crisis and absence of devolution in Northern Ireland was precipitated by Sinn Féin's refusal to share power unless and until its demands were

met. In doing so, it held to ransom not just the other political parties in Northern Ireland but every person on the health service waiting lists, as they spiralled out of control.

Somewhere along the line, the fact that the sustainability provisions in this Bill are actually needed as a direct result of the behaviour of Sinn Féin would seem to have been forgotten. A former Member of this House for the Foyle constituency used to say, “What gets rewarded gets repeated”, and that is never more true than today. Last week, Sinn Féin played the same old trick again and, surprise, surprise, was richly rewarded by this Government. That is the message that will have been heard loud and clear across Northern Ireland. The precedent has been set. If Sinn Féin was prepared to use such tactics to speed up the delivery of a cultural package, many in my community would ask why Unionists would not adopt the same approach when the constitutional status of Northern Ireland within the UK is at stake, under the guise of the protocol.

At its heart, this Bill is about the sustainability of the political institutions in Northern Ireland, yet the delay in introducing this legislation has contributed to the lack of political stability in the Province. Had the Government introduced this legislation sooner, they might have avoided the ransom politics of Sinn Féin, who were prepared to hold the political institutions hostage over the timing of a cultural package set out in NDNA. Having spent three years working to secure the return of powers at Stormont, Sinn Féin wasted no time in giving back control to Westminster, not because the DUP refused to implement the cultural aspects of NDNA, but because it would not do so ahead of other priorities within that agreement. As a Unionist, I suppose the fact that Sinn Féin has changed its message from “Brits out” to “Brits in” should be regarded as progress. However, the fact that the Government are prepared to pass legislation without the consent of the Northern Ireland Assembly on matters that are entirely within the devolved arena at the behest of a party that does not even take its seats in this House is beyond parody.

The last time the Government breached the Sewel convention, with regard to abortion and same-sex marriage, they did so under the cover of the absence of the Northern Ireland Assembly, much to my frustration and despair. Today, no such pretence or pretext exists. Instead, a new exception to the Sewel convention has been created. In the light of this background, the fact that elements of this Bill will not achieve the desired objectives seems almost irrelevant. Let us take just one example. When the First Minister or Deputy First Minister resigns, as happened last week, there can now be a period of up to 24 weeks to replace them without the need for a fresh election, but there are no arrangements in place to allow the institutions to function credibly during this period. In the absence of a First Minister or Deputy First Minister, no Executive can meet and Ministers are unable to take significant or controversial decisions. That is not a sustainable way to do business, and I hope that those arrangements can be looked at again in light of recent experience.

My party signed up to New Decade, New Approach in its entirety, not because we welcomed every dot and comma but because we believe in devolution and we believed that the agreement was a pathway forward for the devolved institutions. It was by no means a deal

without fault, but with waiting lists spiralling out of control, with the challenges posed by Brexit, with the need to address educational underachievement, with welfare reform mitigations coming to an end and with so many other issues pressing on people's lives, we engaged with other parties to stop the harm that Sinn Féin's boycott was doing to ordinary people in Northern Ireland.

However, NDNA is about more than the cultural provisions on which there is considerable focus. It also deals with the reform of public services, policing resources, infrastructure investment and so much more, yet on much of this there has been no progress and nothing said. The voices on these Benches from within the Government and the Opposition that are so exercised by the Irish language question are silent on the worst waiting lists in the whole of the United Kingdom.

The Bill is designed to address the sustainability of the political institutions in Northern Ireland, yet in the final analysis the Assembly will be sustainable only if the devolution settlement in Northern Ireland is respected. My party is prepared to lend its support to the Bill tonight, but I have very real concerns that the Bill is too little, too late. Through their actions in recent days, the Government have damaged the devolved settlement in Northern Ireland in a way that they would never countenance doing in Scotland or Wales. The real challenge for this Government in the coming weeks will be to address their commitments in New Decade, New Approach in relation to the UK's internal market. I trust that, in that endeavour, we can count on those in this House who supported the Government's approach to the culture package to display the same enthusiasm in that regard.

3.48 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the excellent contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart). I guess I also need to reflect on the points made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). He made two points, and I substantially agree with the first, which was about the range of voices from Northern Ireland in this debate and the positive aspect that that brings to our deliberations in this House. I say that acutely knowing that I am following a colleague of mine and that people will be thinking, “For goodness’ sake, we’ve just had six minutes of that, and now we’re going to get another 15 or 20 from the big lad.” I promise I will try to give an alternative reflection.

The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland is right, and I too believe that the 2017 to 2019 Parliament was greatly inhibited by the curtailed voices. There was no range of voices from Northern Ireland save for that of Sylvia Hermon, the former hon. Member for North Down. That is not to say that I agree with everything that is said or with other contributions, but I think this House benefits from a range of reflections. I also make the point, since there are now a range of voices from Northern Ireland in Parliament, that it is still important that the other parties engage with us. It would be a shame for anyone to think that they now have a buddy or a mate in Parliament, so there is no need to broaden their own horizons; that would similarly be a foolhardy mistake. I look forward to continued engagement with the right hon. Gentleman.

[Gavin Robinson]

The fact that there is widespread critical agreement on the progress of the Bill through Second Reading highlights the point that it is probably not that significant an advancement. Its provisions take us so far and make some changes, but they are not significant in and of themselves. It is appropriate, however, that there are advancements to New Decade, New Approach, and in a legislative sense it is appropriate that those aspects are before us today.

It is right that we reflect that this is non-emergency legislation. That is nice for me as a Member of Parliament who has been here for six years and seen hugely significant issues that affect the people of Northern Ireland rushed through this Chamber in a three or four-hour process of Second Reading, Committee and Third Reading. None of that is appropriate. It is important to recognise how this is progressing and is intended to progress over the months to come.

We benefited not only from the contribution that the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) made earlier, but from his time as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I remember the engagement that we had at Stormont House on the discussions about New Decade, New Approach, and the personal determination that he had at the time to make sure that politics worked; I sometimes feel that that is lacking now. I hear time and again from community voices, sectoral support, business and public servants in Northern Ireland, all of which still have good contact with the right hon. Member and still hugely value the contribution that he made to our society in Northern Ireland. That energy and drive was predicated on Northern Ireland people working for Northern Ireland people on supporting devolution in Northern Ireland, on making it work no matter how difficult or intractable the problems appeared, on highlighting, recognising and dealing with the continual difficulties in our society, and on supporting us collectively across the political spectrum to deal with those issues in Northern Ireland.

That is why I think that the commitment made last week was so retrograde. We know that there are challenges—they have been reflected in this debate—but do not turn around and give the impression that “If you just can’t do it, we’ll do it for you.” I said to the Minister of State two weeks ago, “Do not make the commitment that you will legislate on any aspect of NDNA without political consent, because the political party that you are going to do it for still needs to work with other political parties in Northern Ireland.”

The only way that devolution will be successful in our Province—the only way that we will continue on the pathway from troubles to peace—is if we work with one another, trust one another and build a relationship based on shared values and a shared outlook on how we grow as a society. If the British Government, the Irish Government or the American Government step in at every turn and say, “Come on, now, I’ll hold your hand and take you down this certain path, because that’s where you want to go,” it will not work.

The short-term gain of what was agreed last week is futile and fundamentally injurious to devolution in Northern Ireland. I say at this stage—it is not part of the Bill, but it is intrinsic to all that has gone before—that the Government need to recognise that continuing along

the path that they have outlined would be hugely detrimental to progress in Northern Ireland. I say that with no joy—none whatever.

The protocol was mentioned. It is a hugely symbolic and genuinely difficult issue affecting all strands and strata of our society. We hear voices at one side saying, “It’s all a disaster and it’s all been imposed upon us,” and we hear others saying, “Well, you brought it upon yourselves.” None of that actually matters at the end of the day for the ordinary consumer, the ordinary businessman or the ordinary member of our community who is striving for the best but sees the barriers ahead of them.

I heard the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood)—I am glad that he is back in the Chamber as he gets a mention—say that he was surprised that the protocol featured in the statements made today; “Why not the priority of the health service?” We first need to recognise the difficulties. We need to highlight the problems and work to resolve them. But make no mistake about it: there was a suggestion that a focus on veterinary agreement would be significant in relation to the protocol; it is but one aspect.

We recognise the challenges in the health service. How do we deal with the challenges in the health service if we do not deal with the grace period on medicines that is going to expire? Was it not the European Union, three months ago, that sought to trigger article 16 to prevent the export of vaccines to Northern Ireland? It was. We saw cancer drugs get approval by our UK medical agency in the last month, but the European medical agency had not yet quite made the approval, so those cancer drugs were not being made available in Northern Ireland, a part of this country—a constitutionally integral part of this country, enshrined under the Good Friday agreement that we all seek to protect.

Let us not suggest that veterinary issues alone will solve the protocol. They will deal with the significant impediment of barriers for food and animal products, but they will not deal with the totality of it.

Stephen Farry: I appreciate what the hon. Member says about medicines. It is important that we have a resolution in that regard, and I believe that some very good work is being done by both the European Commission and, let me say, the UK Government in that regard. But on the veterinary agreement, although I appreciate that it is only one part of the equation, would his party join all other parties in Northern Ireland in making a common call to the Government in that very particular respect? I appreciate that it does not address all the issues, but surely, if all five parties were to make a common pitch on that one topic, it would make a huge difference, and I would expect the Government to listen to that.

Gavin Robinson: I understand why the hon. Member puts forward that proposition, but he is falling into the same trap. That alone will not solve it. If we go collectively as five parties and say, “Sort out veterinary,” the Government will, but does that solve all the problems impacting Northern Ireland on the protocol? No, it does not. Does it solve the medicines issue? No, it does not.

There was a clamour months ago about steel, and a resolution was found for the importation of steel into Northern Ireland, with a Her Majesty’s Revenue and

Customs fix. Did it do anything for aluminium? No, it did not. Does that impact aerospace, the largest private employer in my constituency and a huge employer in the hon. Member's constituency—something we recognise that, despite the problems last year with coronavirus, had £1.4 billion-worth of economic benefit to Northern Ireland and still employs 6,500 people? Is that on the table for resolution? I can tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, of my disappointment and anger when I got a message back from the Northern Ireland Office indicating, "Well, actually, the letter was sent to Mr Šefčovič, and it's not going to be added to the agenda." There has been little change since.

That is before we touch on the constitutional aspects and before we touch on the democratic deficit associated with the protocol. I am not saying that we should not collaborate on veterinary checks, but let us not go down the rabbit hole of focusing solely on one singular issue when the issues are many, deep and broad and they need to be resolved.

I shall conclude on this, Mr Deputy Speaker. There are challenges in society in Northern Ireland. There have been concerns around the stability of our institutions in Northern Ireland and the opportunity for progress. Although I recognise them all, I will not lose my passion for progress in Northern Ireland—for all of us, irrespective of our differences, working together in Northern Ireland. It costs me nothing to say I believe and agree that commitments that were entered into shall and will be honoured, but we cannot ignore the huge and damaging impact that the protocol has brought to society in Northern Ireland and the unease that abounds throughout my community and many others, and we have to buckle down and deliver, and solve it.

3.59 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson). We served together as Belfast city councillors and his voice and his views are always worth hearing. I believe that if they were the values and views projected by his party we would be in a much better position. While not seeking to put him on the spot, I think that was a very important point to make about the fact that if we, as five parties, went to the Government—if I am hearing him correctly—and spoke about how much a veterinary agreement would solve many of the problems facing us in Northern Ireland, he believes the Government would listen. I hope that that is the case, because he, like me, will know that there is progress to be made and fixes to be done on medicines. He will know that there is not a person in Northern Ireland who has been denied cancer drugs as a result of Brexit or anything else, but that constructive spirit would take us very far indeed and I would like to endorse the proposal.

January 2020, before covid and Brexit, might feel like a completely different place and time politically, but the politics of the past fortnight have been a reminder of the culture of crisis, stand-off, side deal and repeat that dogged devolution and the operation of the Good Friday institutions, and preceded the 2017 to 2020 collapse and the New Decade, New Approach deal that followed it. That came after three years in which Northern Ireland was a governance black hole. While the whole world was talking about the Good Friday agreement, its institutions were lying empty. Because of that, the agreement

spans very many issues, including waiting lists, support for victims of the troubles, third-level education and childcare. Those were the preoccupations of the SDLP during the negotiations and I think they better reflect the preoccupations of the electorate as well.

It is worth reminding Members that it was not the deep desire of the power parties that restored Stormont, but the message sent by the electorate in December 2019—my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) and the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) were elected in that election—and the message sent by striking healthcare workers. Credit for getting power back to the Good Friday institutions goes to them, along with, it must be said, the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), who by all accounts and all regards is the best Northern Ireland Secretary we have had in a generation. His commitment was matched by the then Tánaiste Simon Coveney. They, and particularly the healthcare workers and the striking nurses in Northern Ireland, deserve credit. They and other people voted for a break in the stalemate, but they expect and need a lot more than just the absence of stalemate. They want delivery on all the policy commitments in New Decade, New Approach and in terms of change to the governing culture.

There is no doubt that covid has been an immense drain on political and legislative time, and there is no doubt that Brexit has been a drain on good will and political energy, but neither of those explains or excuses the paralysis that has beset many of the commitments in New Decade, New Approach. Culture and language fall into that category. They are not, in fact, among the most complex and challenging issues. The New Decade, New Approach commitment endorses a three-dimensional legislative compact that was drawn up by the Office of the Legislative Counsel in Northern Ireland, so it was not one-sided or maximalist. It means that many of those who for many years and in good faith campaigned strongly and honourably for an Irish language Act will see that the legislative guarantees are not as free-standing or as far-reaching as they wished to see.

That should have meant that those who opposed the Act would be encouraged to recognise that its nature, balance and thrust were not in one direction and not out of proportion in terms of purported cost or unwanted impact on anybody. Edwin Poots himself, as he was departing, said that one of Unionism's faults is that it plays up the wins of others and plays down its own achievements. This is a very good example of that. This was an opportunity for the DUP to agree to a balanced package and I regret that it seems to be rejecting it. The Assembly has passed other legislation since its resumption last January, so there is no reason it could not pass this "Blue Peter" "Here's one we made earlier" Bill. The only reason it has not passed it is resistance and reluctance. The former First Minister Arlene Foster waited until her resignation statement to commend the package, but that was a proportionate perspective that could have been used, in partnership with her fellow First Minister, to bring forward the Bill that would have been a significant part of an honourable legacy for her, a meaningful gesture towards a shared future and a signal that the DUP is willing and able to share power.

Like the hon. Member for North Down, the King George V speech has caught my attention today as well. There is a lot in it that is worth quoting. I am not

[Claire Hanna]

usually given to quoting monarchs, but perhaps some of my DUP colleagues will take it more from a former king than they will from their neighbours. As well as the points that the hon. Member outlined, he talked about a Parliament for Northern Ireland being

“an instrument of happiness and good government for all parts of the community”.

He talked about

“moderation, with fairness and due regard to every faith and interest”

and about bringing forward

“a new era of peace, contentment, and good will”

upon

“sure foundations of mutual justice and respect.”

I say, 100 years on: please can we have another crack at doing that? The words ring very true.

If the issue is the UK Government legislating over your head on the Irish language, the opportunity still exists to send a signal to your neighbours that you are prepared to do it on their behalf. Withholding legislation on language as a worn-down bargaining chip is not a basis for meaningful sharing—neither, though, is Sinn Féin’s tactic of withholding the whole of devolution to achieve it. Sinn Féin criticised the DUP for withholding its nomination and the DUP criticised Sinn Féin the week before for withholding its nomination, with each party righteously condemning the mirror-image tactic from the other and each instalment draining away belief and faith in power sharing among the general population.

Over recent weeks, against the backdrop of no movement on bringing forward these legislative terms, the SDLP, as an honourable party to New Decade, New Approach, explored with the Secretary of State whether those pre-published legislative terms could be included by amendment to this Bill, which is, of course, a vehicle for advancing those aspects. Although he rested the onus us to design the relevant amendments that might be scoped, we established that the Government were not opposed in principle or practice to Westminster legislating for that, on the basis that it had been signed off by all five parties. We are grateful for the assistance of Clerks and drafters in navigating those possibilities.

We had proposed to table specifically and faithfully the legislative drafts that were agreed by all those parties and drafted by the Office of the Legislative Counsel—no more and no less were we going to do—and, in draft format, those amendments run to only 23 pages, so they would be even fewer in Bill form. Now that the Government have declared in public what they had agreed in private, the obvious question occurs: why not now with the means available to us with this Bill? There is a real argument, we believe, that it would be better to incorporate this package into this miscellaneous approach to New Decade, New Approach rather than leaving it until October when other factors might be at play. We have seen slippiness and slipperiness when it comes to previous commitments. As others have outlined, we are grossly overdue legislation relating to victims and New Decade, New Approach, so we do not and cannot have blind faith in how the Government will discharge that commitment, or what concession or other factor they will read into it in the autumn. We hope that the people

of Northern Ireland and the Gaeligeoirs of Northern Ireland do not look back in a few months on this as a missed opportunity.

This tale of the last few weeks of bad faith and foot dragging are the last 14 years of stop-start governance in microcosm. For all that the letter and spirit of the agreement are used as an amulet for people for or against Brexit, the spirit of power sharing and working the common ground, and of building trust through mutual endeavour, are quite absent from the Assembly. Watching that daily in the media drains away those feelings in the public. We are now very far off the vision that in 1998 created infrastructure and architecture to manage differences and to be able to realise a better future in Northern Ireland.

There are other issues on which we will table amendments, and we will not resile from New Decade, New Approach, but we will put forward ways that would strengthen the provisions in that and correct some of the divergence from the concepts of the Good Friday agreement—on, for example, restoring the joint nature of the First Minister’s office, which has been distorted by St Andrews. That was a centrepiece of strand 1, and although we hear a lot of waxing about parallel consent, that was the part of the Good Friday agreement that spoke about parallel consent and about the Assembly collectively nominating the First Ministers who would then be accountable to it. That foundation that would embed those concepts in the Assembly as an act of leadership from the top down was stripped out by the DUP and Sinn Féin at St Andrews.

Similar corrections to the petitions of concern are sensible and valid. It was, as my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle outlined, a mechanism designed to protect minorities, but instead it is used to thwart them. In fact, it is now thought of as a byword for veto, and that extends to the vetoholic tendencies of the DUP in the Executive and other corruptions of the agreement inserted at St Andrews. The three-Minister provision is causing absolute logjam in the Executive office and prevents Ministers from bringing forward progressive and productive legislation because they know that it will be thwarted at the Executive.

There are a number of other good points to be made and discussed around the issue of designation, which runs the risk, when it is wielded as it is by the larger parties, of locking in and embedding some of the sectarianism that the Good Friday agreement was designed to phase out. We look forward to discussing some of those issues.

Stability and sustainability ultimately will not come from rules and procedures; they will come from people believing, understanding and accepting that sharing power with their neighbours is the right thing to do, and not just sharing that power because the law tells them that they cannot make decisions without it. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) made a number of good points about how devolution is not just about preventing conflict, because if we look at Scotland and Wales, it is of course about local power being in local hands, and about people being able to realise opportunities that those elected close to the ground will understand.

The hon. Member for Belfast East about spoke about common grounds and shared values. They are what we all want; they unite people of all backgrounds in south

Belfast and in Northern Ireland as a whole, but they are currently absent from the top the Assembly. They would be displayed if the DUP were willing to advance all the aspects of the New Decade, New Approach deal, and if they were, legislation would not be required from this House.

4.12 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I want to give the perspective of those in the Unionist community who are very disillusioned and have great concerns, which I will express at some length in the time that I have been allocated.

As a Northern Ireland MP, a Unionist and a resident of Northern Ireland, I must express my great concern about the work and movement of this House, not in the Bill, which has been introduced in an appropriate manner and by the correct mechanism, but on Northern Ireland issues, which the Minister has not deigned to lay before Members of the House or indeed answer to in the House. I very much look forward to the Minister's reply to what I and other Members have said from all perspectives across the House, however.

It is very fitting that the Bill is before the House because the fractious state of emotions in Northern Ireland could well see an election called shortly. Indeed, it could be called before the Bill has managed to make its way through the due process. I am not saying that that will happen or that I want that to happen, but it could happen because of where we are. I have often taken due process for granted, but it is absolutely missed when it is not in place.

I was beyond shocked last Thursday to hear that a deal had been done—it was promoted as such on TV—with Sinn Féin to deliver on the Irish language aspect of the New Decade, New Approach deal, especially when so many life-changing aspects have been left behind. The Bill brings in aspects of the new deal, yet I do not see the Irish language aspect anywhere, as my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) said. It really does make me angry and annoyed whenever we look at these things. Perhaps when the Minister replies he can explain why there is an intention to bring proposals before this House, perhaps by September this year, if there is not some sort of arrangement or deal, yet promises have been made and I, as the representative for Strangford, have no idea what they contain. Why is it that we should be made aware of this via the TV news at a half past seven on a Thursday morning? Why are these deals done behind backs?

To be frank, the irony of this Bill coming before us today, after the backroom dealings of last week, is not lost. The Bill has been brought in, ostensibly, to firm up democracy—a process by which we are all here in the House and in which we all believe, and to create a path forward—yet the actions of last week, in tandem with the Northern Ireland protocol, have angered and upset people and made them question the very fact of their being as British as those in Finchley. Are we as British as those in Staffordshire, London and elsewhere?

The protocol has left the people of Northern Ireland shaken in the ties that bind to this place. There is a feeling of anything goes for one community: “Have your thousand-strong funeral, your two-tier policing

and your Irish language brought in by stealth—sure, you have your cake and then you can have my cake as well.” That is how some people feel. The anger is palatable and can be cut with a knife in Northern Ireland at this time. It really concerns me to see the republicans making a quick call to have the Irish language circumnavigate the process of devolution, when they refuse to come here and take their seats in this place to bring such a measure forward democratically, if they felt they could do that. It would be laughable were it not so serious and were tensions in my community not at boiling point at this moment in time.

I will never condone the actions of some who burn buses and destroy property, but I absolutely understand the frustration behind that—frustration inflamed by the Secretary of State just last week, when he annoyed many people to an extent that I am not quite sure he understands. There are those who will never burn a bus or step out of line, and I thank God for those people. Everyone in this House and on this side of the Chamber would be among those people, but there are many others who will never resort to that either. There are those who have signed the petitions against the protocol and lawfully waited to see the democratic process at work, and those who have contacted my office and other offices with issues to do with keeping their businesses afloat—they do it all appropriately and according to the legislation, following it religiously—then see the background dealings and threats and wonder why they continue to do the right thing only to be done over again. Some of the strongest Unionists I know have told me that they question why it is that they cling to their Britishness when their Government are content to step in for things that are important to the republicans but avoid the things that have mattered over the years for us.

I have great concerns. During the last collapse of Stormont, I came to this House repeatedly, and I am probably one of those who have spoken more on the Northern Ireland protocol over the last period of time than most other MPs. I have repeatedly asked the Government to step in and act for education, for our health service and for our veterans, yet the answer is always the same: “We cannot overstep the democratic process.” Well, they can if it suits them, but not if we ask for some things that are really important. One constituent suggested to me—indeed, it has been suggested by many constituents—that not overstepping the democratic process is only the case if the normal person is asking: representatives of unapologetic terrorism can have every whim satisfied and looked after. I find myself unable to dispute that assertion from my constituent and many others.

The action taken by the Government to go above the Assembly to implement any form—any form—of Irish language measure will of course mean that every aspect of the New Decade, New Approach agreement must be administered and wholly funded by the Government. It is not simply about the electoral forms presented today and on which the Minister will speak shortly. How much funding has been sourced to implement the other aspects of the deal? Others have referred to health, as will I, because I am my party's health spokesperson in this place and I am well aware of the precarious position of the health sector in Northern Ireland. Some 300,000 people are on the list waiting for their examinations

[Jim Shannon]

and surgical operations. People are waiting for knee replacements, for hip replacements, for their tonsils to be removed, for cataracts—the whole thing is enormous. People are waiting to settle the ongoing pay dispute for our nurses.

When I see and hear about the Irish language, I just ask myself, “What’s the priority?” I ask my constituents what the priority is, and even some of those of a different political persuasion from me in relation to Unionism say, “The most important thing is health, education, policing, roads.” They want to see the money spent on those things, not spent on an Irish language that only 5% of the people of the Province actually speak.

We need to introduce a new action plan on waiting times and deliver the reforms on health and social care set out in the Bengoa report. I become intensely frustrated when I see the numbers of people who come to me and my office with issues about getting operations. Today a guy told me that he has been waiting a number of years for an operation on his knee, and some of those waiting for cancer operations have unfortunately not been able to have their operation because they are no longer here. When I see the waiting lists, and the need for such operations, I think that is where we should be spending the money.

On education, the Executive should urgently resolve the current teachers’ industrial dispute, and address resourcing pressures in schools. A number of schools have contacted me about their funding and the money available for maintenance, and every school must have access to a sustainable core budget to deliver quality education. The Executive should establish an expert group and propose an action plan to address links between persistent educational under-achievement and socio-economic background, including the longstanding issues facing working-class Protestant boys. My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East and I know a number of young Protestant boys who have under-achieved.

Today in the press the Chair of the Education Committee referred to under-achievement by young white boys and men on the mainland. We have had that in Northern Ireland for a while, but what is being done to address it? It is a massive issue for my constituents, and when it comes to spending money, we should spend it on those things, not on something that is unnecessary at this time. The Executive should also deliver a new special educational needs framework to support young people with special needs to achieve their full potential. We must consider the mental health of our children and look at these massive issues.

On security, the Executive need to increase police numbers to 7,500. Ask my constituents what they want to spend the money on. Should we spend it on the Irish language, or on recruiting new police officers to protect those in their homes, stop antisocial behaviour, and have a more obvious platform. This is the tip of the iceberg, and I would welcome hearing from the Secretary of State how such measures will be implemented. How much funding outside the Barnett consequential has been set aside to deliver on the things that are important to people—health and education—as opposed to those things important to the Sinn Féin agenda, to the detriment of health and education?

This deal was published in January 2020, and we have spent the last 18 months being battered by coronavirus and decimated by the Northern Ireland protocol. It frustrates me greatly, and there is the threat of worse to come under full implementation of the protocol. The person on the street is praying that their business will see it through so that they can keep their job and staff. People are concerned about whether their loved one who has been diagnosed with cancer can be treated quickly, or they are waiting four years—or longer—for knee surgery. Parents wonder whether they can get a funded nursery place for their child in their town, yet it seems that the republican agenda comes before life and before quality of life. Hon. Members will understand the frustration I am expressing on behalf of my constituents, who have told me how angry they are.

To do anything less than implement all the agreement is tantamount to the Government admitting that they are yet again bowing the knee to the republican agenda against the process of democracy. I am a democrat and I have always believed in the democratic process. I want to see it working. When the democratic process works, it calms people, and they see it can work. If it does not work, people say, “Well then, something else will have to work.” To go against that democratic process is abhorrent to every right thinking person in the Province, and it should also be abhorrent in this place. If the Minister of State, and others, can appreciate my annoyance and the abhorrence felt by me and those I represent, we will have made a step in the right direction.

Yet again we have been strong-armed by the thirst for a new historical narrative, and a new attack from Sinn Féin’s never-ending litany of ways to take from the British Government without improving the quality of life of even one person in Northern Ireland. Indeed, many of its supporters would like issues such as health, education, policing and roads to be prioritised.

It is up to the Assembly democratically to outline the form of any language changes, not this House. This is a sensitive issue and, as with the issues of abortion and the Northern Ireland protocol, our democracy has again been overruled. Whether there is a vote today is not the issue. The voice of the people of Strangford matters, and I hope I have expressed it on their behalf today. They have elected me to do a job, and I want to ensure that their viewpoint is heard in the Chamber. Those people, of all persuasions, matter to me. Their right to devolution matters to me. They have a right to see their taxes pay for more operations, smaller classes in education, greater help for special needs, and an adequate, fully funded and numerically strong police force. All of those things matter to them a lot more than whether a sign is in a language that they do or do not understand and have little desire to understand.

This House did the people of the Province a disservice last week when this was announced. There is time to correct it, to do the right thing and to remind the people of the Province why we are better off together, instead of making all of those who have treasured their British identity all their lives wonder why they have treasured it and whether the blood of their loved ones was shed in vain.

4.25 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I place on record my congratulations to the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on his

appointment as the leader of his party. I also thank the Members who have spoken in this afternoon's debate, adding their rich and in many cases first-hand experiences of previous political difficulties in Northern Ireland, to enhance and improve the legislation as it stands. That point has already been far more eloquently delivered by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson).

Today we have heard from the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) and the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), about the benefits of using this Bill to strengthen the ministerial code and the promotion of the Nolan principles of public life. If I may echo the words of the hon. Member for North Down, this House and the Government could benefit from such a provision, given the issues we have seen over previous weeks.

We have also heard the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), the right hon. Members for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), and the hon. Members for Foyle (Colum Eastwood), for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart), for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) make passionate cases for the benefits of devolution. This is an area extremely close to my heart, as an MP from a devolved nation. I believe that it was the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who stated that devolution should not be treated like a Woolworths pick'n'mix, and I wholeheartedly agree.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) has outlined, as well as delivering devolution, the Belfast/Good Friday agreement remains one of Labour's proudest achievements in office. We have made it clear that we welcome these attempts to safeguard power sharing and improve the sustainability of the Executive, the Assembly and the institutions and decision making within it. The provisions in the Bill are a sensible and necessary evolution of the post-Belfast/Good Friday agreement landscape and should promote greater stability and good governance. It is for that reason that we will support the Bill as it makes its way through the House.

However, as we have heard this afternoon, it is unfortunate that due to the prolonged delay in introducing this legislation, many months after the agreement was signed, its crucial provisions will now be utterly redundant in the current political crisis. The unfortunate lack of urgency from Ministers means that the provisions of the Bill are highly unlikely to come into force until winter. Will the Minister therefore explain why the commencement provision is for two months after the legislation receives Royal Assent, and not immediately?

While ensuring necessary scrutiny, the Opposition will do what we can to ensure that the important provisions of the Bill are in place as quickly as possible. The current situation clearly demands it. Nevertheless, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley has made clear, we will, working with colleagues from Northern Ireland and across the House, seek to tighten up the provisions of the Bill.

On the caretaker Executive, we will seek to bring much greater clarity to the powers that Ministers are entitled to exercise during a caretaker period; to probe what constitutes a caretaker Executive with sufficient cross-community support; to guarantee the sustainability

of decision making; and to ensure the proper consideration of equality duties and good governance. On the petition of concern, while we welcome amendments in and for themselves, we also encourage Ministers to look at the other effective vetoes, which are being used in much the same way as the petition of concern. Without careful scrutiny, there is a danger that much-needed reform of the petition of concern will simply displace veto activity elsewhere without addressing the problem itself.

Speaking more broadly, what is not in the Bill is as significant as what is in it. Twenty-three years on from the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, progress has undoubtedly stalled over the past decade. The unmet promise of the Good Friday agreement, including the Bill of Rights, integrated education and housing, and a civic forum to give citizens a proper say in the functioning of the Government, has been held back for far too long.

Take the Bill of Rights, for instance—a Westminster responsibility. Decades on from the Good Friday agreement, it has still not been implemented. Does the Secretary of State agree that if provisions designed to underpin the rights of all communities are not delivered, confidence in the agreement itself is diminished? Does the failure to bring that forward in this Bill not represent a real missed opportunity to properly bolster the Good Friday agreement?

The same can, of course, be said of the Civic Forum, which was established under the Good Friday agreement and was supposed to give communities a real stake and a say in decisions made about them. Given the real need for communities to see the Assembly working for them, do Ministers back its reintroduction?

Furthermore, the New Decade, New Approach agreement was agreed 18 months ago, yet the Government have held just one meeting on its implementation and many of the commitments remain unmet. Is it not time that the Government delivered on the promises made and demonstrated clearly to communities in Northern Ireland that the deal to restart power sharing is working for them?

Labour look forward to offering the careful scrutiny this Bill demands as it passes through both Houses of Parliament. Although we support the technical provisions within the Bill, we believe that, with ambition and vision, the Bill could and should go much further and do much more to secure the foundation of the Good Friday agreement and build on its promise.

4.30 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Robin Walker): It is a great pleasure to respond to such a well-informed debate and I pay tribute to all the Members who have taken time to speak this afternoon. As the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) said, Members from across the House have spoken with real passion and experience.

I am very grateful for the support we have heard from all parties for the Second Reading of the Bill. I recognise that there are a number of issues that people will want to explore in Committee. I look forward to those debates and hope they can be as well informed as this debate has been.

I add my congratulations to the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) on his election as leader of the DUP. I very much look forward to working with him in the months to come.

[Mr Robin Walker]

As we have heard, the Bill being debated today will implement aspects of the New Decade, New Approach deal, which the parties agreed to in January 2020. We will reform the sustainability of the institutions, updating the ministerial code of conduct and reforming the petition of concern mechanism. These measures were all agreed by the main political parties in Northern Ireland upon restoring the Executive. It was a pleasure to hear from my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), the former Secretary of State, who did so much to reach that agreement.

We heard from a number of Members in today's debate who played a crucial role in securing that deal. I pass on my congratulations to all of them for getting there. We have heard many passionate speeches from all sides, and from all sides of the debate in Northern Ireland, about the importance of devolution. It was the achievement of the deal to restore devolution.

We have made good progress on the delivery of the commitments that the UK Government made under the New Decade, New Approach agreement, which helped to bring that about. We will continue to support the delivery of those commitments. I draw the House's attention to a few examples beyond the scope of the Bill, such as our support for the resolution of the nurses' pay dispute by securing an advanced drawdown of funding; the release of £556 million of the £2 billion-worth of funding agreed in the deal; the revision of the immigration rules governing how people in Northern Ireland bring their family members to the UK, which took effect from August 2020; the appointment of a Veterans Commissioner in September 2020; the launch of the programme for the centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021, supported by £1 million from the shared history fund; the establishment of an independent fiscal council; and regulations to bring Union flag flying days in line with guidance for the rest of the UK.

The hon. Member for Pontypridd referred to the Secretary of State's meetings. He has been meeting regularly with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in the Executive. There have also been two formal meetings including the Irish Government over that time. Those will continue.

I thank everybody for the contributions we have heard. I will not be able to respond to all of them because I have been asked to keep my remarks to a reasonably short period of time, but I did want to respond to the point that the hon. Member for Pontypridd made about so-called caretaker Ministers, a point that was also reflected on by the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper).

As part of NDNA, Ministers will remain in office in a caretaker capacity to allow for greater continuity in decision making, but those Ministers will be required to act, as the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) made very clear, within well-defined limits, including as set out in the ministerial code and in accordance with the requirement for an Executive Committee to consider any decisions that are significant, controversial and cross-cutting. The hon. Gentleman made the point well; in the case that the Executive Committee is not there, Ministers cannot go beyond their brief. As was also demonstrated by that exchange, there are important decisions that could be taken, which is a much better

position than we saw during the period that the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) described as a black hole in governance—during the absence of the devolved institutions. I am sure we can explore the point further in Committee, but there are clearly defined limits on the role of those Ministers.

On the issue of language, we heard many passionate points. This is not, as we all accept, part of the Bill before us today. The hon. Lady asked a fair question: why not, and why not now? I think there is a simple answer to that question, which we have heard a lot about in the debate today, and I think everyone actually agrees that this would be best dealt with in the devolved space. I have met both the Ulster Scots Agency and Conradh na Gaeilge in the last few weeks; apologies if my pronunciation is not right there. I have met some of the key bodies on both sides arguing for progress on the cultural issues, and what they are saying very clearly is that they want to see this delivered by the devolved institutions. We want to give the devolved institutions every chance to do that, and we do not therefore want to legislate on this issue at this time.

Colum Eastwood: I appreciate what the Minister says, and of course this would be better done in the Assembly, but I do not know where he has been, because I have heard very clearly today that the DUP will not support it going through the Assembly on a quick timeframe, so why not now—why wait?

Mr Walker: I have made the point that we want to give every opportunity for that to happen. The Secretary of State has also made this clear, and he did so in a written ministerial statement. I accept the frustration and the anger that the hon. Gentleman expresses on behalf of many of his constituents, but there was a clear written ministerial statement that set out the approach we are taking, and if there is not progress by September, then we have agreed that this House would step in.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean asked a crucial question on this point, and I think it is a very important one about where we do this. The answer should be that we never want to be doing it and we never want to have to do it. The Government believe in empowering and supporting the devolution settlement in Northern Ireland and across the UK. That is why we are bringing forward this Bill to strengthen the stability of the devolution settlement in Northern Ireland. We do not take lightly any decision to intervene in legislation for Northern Ireland, and would only ever do so on devolved issues as a last resort. I agree with my right hon. Friend that it is incumbent on us to support the Executive and the Assembly to legislate for themselves. However, I am sure he would also agree that, as co-guarantors of the NDNA agreement, it is incumbent on us to deliver the package it promises, if necessary, to ensure that can be delivered. The point of the intervention was to get the devolved institutions restored and to get Ministers nominated so that we could have an Executive in place.

Sammy Wilson: I have a list the length of my arm of other issues contained in the New Decade, New Approach document that are not being delivered on. Why does the Minister feel that these cultural issues are a greater priority than dealing with the reforms in the health service and dealing with the waiting list of 350,000 in the health service? Why is he not stepping in to deal with that as a priority, rather than these cultural issues?

Mr Walker: Actually, I very much welcome the fact that the Health Minister has set out the approach to dealing with those issues. As I have said, we have already provided some of the up-front funding to unblock some of the health issues that Northern Ireland was facing in the absence of the Executive, but of course there is more to do on that front.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman, from whom I will take an intervention—he is always a very courteous intervener—has made the point very powerfully about the priorities of his constituents on these issues. These are all devolved issues that we want an Assembly and an Executive in place to deliver on.

Jim Shannon: The Minister is most generous in giving way, and I thank him for that. Does he accept that 100% of the people of Northern Ireland want the health issue sorted out, 100% of the people of Northern Ireland want education sorted out, 100% of the people want police recruited and in place, 100% of the people want the roads issue sorted out as well, and only 5% of those in Northern Ireland actually speak the Irish language? Put it in order of priority. The priorities are health, education and policing, not the Irish language.

Mr Walker: I recognise the point the hon. Gentleman is making, but I think the issue is that these were the areas agreed in NDNA. They were hard-fought, and they were negotiated, as we have heard, very strenuously between the parties. No one got precisely what they wanted, but at the end of the day these were the compromises that were agreed and we need to move forward with them. It is crucial that the Executive are in place to deliver on those issues.

This Bill will help to deliver greater stability and transparency to governance in Northern Ireland.

Mr Harper: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: I will have to press on, I am afraid. I am under instructions, which my right hon. Friend will understand, from the Whips to get on.

We are looking forward to talking further about the NDNA agreement with the Irish Government during the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference later this week. I do want to commend this Bill to the House, and I do want to thank those from all sides of this House for the profound case we have heard for having strong devolved institutions in place. That is what all of us want to get on with, and this Bill will help to take that forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

NORTHERN IRELAND (MINISTERS, ELECTIONS AND PETITIONS OF CONCERN) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 8 July 2021.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

CLIMATE CHANGE

That the draft Carbon Budget Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 21 April, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

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

FOOD

That the draft Calorie Labelling (Out of Home Sector) (England) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 13 May, be approved.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

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

PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

That the draft Public Procurement (International Trade Agreements) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 13 May, be approved.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

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

DANGEROUS DRUGS

That the draft Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Amendment) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 25 March, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

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

NATIONALITY

That the draft British Nationality Act 1981 (Immigration Rules Appendix EU) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 29 April, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

McVitie's Tollcross Factory

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Scott Mann.)

4.41 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It has been several weeks since we learned of the proposal put forward by Pladis, the company behind the McVitie's biscuit brand, to close its long-standing factory in my Glasgow East constituency. In that time, I have raised the matter at every opportunity, both outside and on the Floor of the House. This evening's debate, however, gives me much more time to expand on the situation and I want to take this opportunity to thank Mr Speaker for very graciously allowing me to hold this Adjournment debate. As you can probably understand, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am currently battling laryngitis, but nothing and no one would hold me back from being in the House to represent my constituents tonight. That said, should my voice give way, I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) might want to make the points on my behalf, but let us hope it does not come to that.

Before I begin my speech, I wish to remember Andy Millar, a long-serving employee at the McVitie's factory in Tollcross who recently died. Andy had worked at the factory for 37 years—his entire adult working life. His dedication and loyalty to McVitie's was undeniable, and I want to extend my heartfelt condolences to his family, friends and colleagues. I also want to thank the Minister for taking the time to listen to what I have to say this evening, because this is not just a factory closure—not for me, not for the workers at the factory, nor for my constituents. I will come on to talk more about the history of the Tollcross site, but suffice it to say that having been in operation for almost a century, McVitie's is firmly embedded in the DNA of the east end of Glasgow.

I recently attended the socially distanced rally in Tollcross Park which was organised by the GMB trade union, where hundreds of McVitie's employees and their families had gathered to protest against the closure of the factory. One image that stuck in my head was of a young girl holding a handmade sign that read, "Save our mums and dads jobs." I want to provide the Minister with some context here. For many kids in the area, their household income either comes largely or completely from the factory. I know from speaking with factory staff that there are a large number of households where either the sole breadwinner or both parents work at the factory, and in many instances there will be a huge impact on the extended family network. Employment at the factory is intergenerational and there were kids at that protest who will not only have parents, but aunts, uncles and grandparents all working there simultaneously. That is the crux of the issue.

It is no exaggeration when I say that the closure of the Tollcross McVitie's factory would be devastating for the local community. I have said before in this Chamber that the closure would be the equivalent of economic Armageddon for the east end, and I truly mean that. With a shared history as rich and vibrant as that of McVitie's at Tollcross, it would be impossible for the company to turn its back with no consequences.

McVitie's has become synonymous with Scotland. The UK's biggest biscuit brand has had a presence in Scotland since 1830, born out of a bakery in Rose Street in Edinburgh. The factory in Tollcross was built almost 100 years later and has operated continually to the present day. I have visited the factory many times. It is a building with an incredible amount of history, which is shared and recounted by the proud workforce. I have lost count of the number of people who have told me colourful stories of their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents who have worked there. Those generations of families in the east end of Glasgow helped to propel the McVitie's brand to its contemporary dominance over the domestic biscuit market. A huge part of that success, and the reason why McVitie's outsells the next seven biggest biscuit brands combined, is because the business is very much a family business. This proposal, however, changes all of that.

The McVitie's brand stands on the shoulders of its dedicated Tollcross workforce—generations of families past and present—and today's workforce does not deserve to be abandoned. I do not use that word lightly, but that is exactly what Pladis would be doing: abandoning its loyal employees. Over the past 15 months, the world has been turned upside down, yet throughout the pandemic the Tollcross factory workers continued to serve McVitie's diligently as key workers. While millions of others worked safely from home, they come into work day in, day out, to keep the UK fed. How are those Tollcross factory employees being rewarded for being key workers during the pandemic and contributing to a "bumper" sales year for McVitie's? They are being rewarded with the threat of closure and redundancies.

I have already made my feelings abundantly clear to David Murray, the managing director of Pladis UK and Ireland, about how the staff have been treated, but to say that it is a complete kick in the teeth is a huge understatement. The dedication of the workforce at Tollcross helped McVitie's towards its record high sales throughout 2020, but their dedication has been met with cold and callous thanklessness.

In Pladis's annual biscuit review, it outlines its successes during 2020. The report highlights that Britain's biscuit market grew by 7.2% last year, equivalent to an extra £212 million in sales. UK biscuit retail sales were worth £2.96 billion in 2020, and they were bought by 99.5% of all UK households. By way of rationale for the proposed closure, Pladis insists that the UK biscuit market is "mature", yet in the report Scott Snell, vice-president of customer at Pladis, states:

"as the number one biscuit supplier, since almost a quarter of biscuits purchased (24.6%) are pladis brands, we believe there is yet more growth to be tapped into."

I therefore do not believe that the rhetoric is matched by reality. The stated reasoning behind axing 468 jobs and the complete abandonment of Scotland is weak to say the least. I can see that, the trade unions can see that and, most importantly, the workers at the Tollcross factory can see that. That is why we are not giving in without a fight.

The local community, employees at the factory, trade unions, local elected representatives, Clyde Gateway, Scottish Enterprise, Glasgow City Council and the Scottish Government have rallied to the cause and are working hard to prevent the closure. I also want to put party and constitutional politics aside and place on record my

thanks to the UK Government for working with me and playing their part in the efforts to keep the factory in the east end of Glasgow. Whether it is the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Scotland Office—I see the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), on the Treasury Bench tonight—or the Prime Minister himself, I have found a genuine willingness to work constructively together across traditional party and constitutional lines to save these jobs in my constituency. The campaign, though, is fundamentally a grassroots one. A petition organised by workers at the factory is currently sitting at more than 64,100 signatures, and, at this juncture, I wish to pay tribute to Paul Smith who works at the factory.

In addition, on behalf of my Glasgow East constituents, I presented a petition in this Chamber in which I outlined their concerns and the public opposition to the proposed closure. Hundreds of factory workers and their families attended a rally protesting against the factory closure. It was organised by GMB, which has also been working incredibly hard to protect local jobs, as has Unite the Union.

Glasgow City Council passed an emergency motion, which was brought forward by my SNP colleague and Shettleston ward councillor, Laura Doherty. The unanimous passing of this motion gave the full support of all party groups to the leader of the council to take all appropriate steps to assist in preventing the loss of these jobs, and to explore ways to secure a sustainable future for the site.

That motion also allowed for the formation of an action group, chaired by the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy, Kate Forbes, and Councillor Aitken. The group has brought together representatives, officials, trade union representatives and stakeholders to encourage an open dialogue with Pladis ultimately to try to find a solution—any solution—to keep the Tollcross factory open.

Despite this enormous collective effort, last Friday, Pladis officially issued its HR1 notice signalling advance notification of potential redundancies. The 45-day consultation process began on Friday, and, over the weekend, the worst fears of hundreds of families became a reality. At this juncture, may I say that my thoughts are very much with the families and the factory workers who now face an incredibly uncertain time? Far too often, even in this House, we lose sight of the fact that people are worrying about how they will pay their car loan, how they will pay their rent and how they will pay their mortgage. I do not believe that the factory closure is a foregone conclusion, and I will continue to work around the clock to play my part in finding a solution.

I know that David Murray and other senior Pladis executives will be watching this debate intently this evening. Indeed, they spend an absolute fortune on public relations and spin, so, as a result, all the lobbyists will be watching this debate. On behalf of the trade unions and the staff at the factory, I want to say this directly to David Murray and Salmin Amin: "The proposal to close the factory cannot go ahead. It would completely devastate the local area and create an economic scar that would remain for many, many years to come."

My message to David Murray is clear: "Your staff do not deserve to be treated with contempt. They have been instrumental in your success. Their parents and

their grandparents built your business. And, yes, to you, this is business, but to us this is deeply personal. The McVitie's brand is cherished because of its history, not in spite of it. McVitie's is as much a part of the east end of Glasgow as we are a part of it. Please work with us. Please engage with the action group. Listen to the reasonable propositions being put forward. Have the good sense to change course and to continue our mutual success."

There is a genuine and collective will to prevent the factory being shuttered and to protect local jobs. I will continue to play my part and I look forward to the Minister's response this evening.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I congratulate Mr Linden who is battling laryngitis on completing the speech. His voice was heard loud and clear. Whether that is down to the biscuits, something in the whisky or something in the water, I do not know.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): All of them together.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you. I call the Minister.

4.53 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing and indeed completing today's important debate. I had feared that we were going to have one of Parliament's longest ever interventions by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) should that not have been the case. As Mr Deputy Speaker has said, we are here to be the voice of our constituents and I am glad that the hon. Gentleman's voice is being heard at full volume here today, as he brings this really important issue to the attention of the House.

I also pay tribute to Kate Forbes, the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy, for all the work that she is doing with Susan Aitken, the leader of Glasgow City Council, the unions and other agencies to secure a positive outcome for the site and its 468 employees, and I know that their message will be heard loud and clear today.

I, too, join the hon. Gentleman in remembering Andy Millar. I pay my sincere condolences to his family, friends and colleagues. This is such a reminder of the human nature of these issues. These decisions are not just about spreadsheets; there is a human cost. It is so, so important that we remember what is at stake here. Unfortunately, the stakes are incredibly high and I pay tribute to Andy Millar.

The employees and their families are central to the debate and we must continue to focus our efforts on them to secure a positive future. As we have heard, it is the employees who have made the McVitie's brand so successful. Some belong to families who have worked at Tollcross for generations, and they should rightly be proud to be part of the century-long history of making the famous biscuits that have been household names in Britain for decades and are enjoyed by people all over the world. The petition that the hon. Gentleman referred to, which has attracted more than 54,000 signatures, demonstrates that that is a widely held view.

[*Paul Scully*]

I therefore pay tribute to the workers who have continued to work through the pandemic, like many other factory workers, to ensure that the nation can continue to enjoy its favourite products. I sympathise with all those who will be affected by the company's decision to close the Tollcross site factory, which is so important to the local community and the wider local economy. I say to them that we will do all we can, working with the Scottish Government, to ensure that they can access the support that they need.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that, although we are disappointed that Pladis has taken this decision and issued the redundancy notices, it is a commercial decision for the company. Although the Government have no role in the strategic direction or management of private companies, we stand ready to support anyone affected by the redundancies.

Gavin Newlands: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; I had not given him an indication that I would intervene. May I ask what the Government have done thus far? I take him at his word on his sincerity on the issue, but when I secured a debate on the hundreds of jobs that were going to go at Rolls-Royce at Inchinnan, the then Minister—the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi)—essentially said that the workers should be grateful that they had been offered voluntary redundancy. Can the present Minister tell us, and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) and the workers at Tollcross, what the Government are actually doing about it?

Paul Scully: Yes, I will outline a few of the issues that my colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions will be standing up as a result. I do recognise that this is a worrying time for those Pladis employees. We will do all we can to support each of the workers affected, including through the Department for Work and Pensions, Jobcentre Plus and the support that they can access through Partnership Action for Continuing Employment in Scotland. People will also be able to access redundancy help and job search advice through the Department for Work and Pensions' [jobhelp.campaign.gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk/jobhelp) website.

There is also information on [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) and updated information packs provided to employers to help them to signpost employees to the support that is available. That support includes connecting people to jobs in the local labour market; help with job searches, including CV writing, interview skills, where to find jobs and how to apply for them; and help to identify transferable skills and skills gaps linked to the local labour market, along with advice on what benefits they may get and how to claim. Additionally, the Government's plan for jobs is helping to support businesses to recover from the pandemic and create more jobs, with measures such as VAT cuts, business rates relief and cash grants for the sectors most affected.

David Linden: By virtue of shadowing it, I take as much interest as anybody in this House in the role of the Department for Work and Pensions, but as I have discussed with the Under-Secretary of State, there is another Department in this Government that has a crucial role to play: the Foreign Office. Pladis is, of course, a Turkish-owned company. Will the Minister

give a commitment at the Dispatch Box that every single bit of machinery in the UK Government, including in Her Majesty's Foreign Office, will be engaged to try to put as much pressure as possible on the Turkish owner, Salman Amin, to ensure that Pladis does not take a decision that would lead to work for the Department for Work and Pensions? Instead, will the Government use the global Britain brand? I am not, perhaps, as much a fan of it as the Minister, but if the global Britain brand is to be taken at its word, will that pressure be brought to bear on Salman Amin in Turkey?

Paul Scully: It is frustrating, because it is clearly a commercial decision for Pladis, but we want to make sure that we work with Pladis and other companies to keep and increase investment within the UK and show them the opportunities. Indeed, should the factory end up closing, perhaps it might be repurposed for other areas of productive work that could re-engage the workforce. These are conversations that I am sure will continue in partnership with the Scottish Government, the hon. Gentleman, unions and other agencies in the local area.

Let me turn to a slightly wider point. I know how important manufacturing is to the local area, to Scotland and to the whole of Britain. As the largest of the manufacturing sectors, food and beverage manufacturing contributed £31 billion of gross value added to the UK economy in 2019 and directly employed more than 450,000 people across every region of the UK. It provided £4.8 billion to Scotland's economy in 2019. The importance of manufacturing to Scotland's industrial history is well known, and today Scotland has a high-tech, high-value offer in other areas as well, including leading sectors such as space, aerospace, defence, and marine and life sciences.

Manufacturing is so often the economic anchor in local communities, providing good jobs, and the Tollcross site is no exception, so we must work together to ensure that Glasgow and other local areas in Scotland continue to provide an attractive offer to manufacturing firms and to all investors, both domestic and foreign-owned. That is how we will ensure the future of the 190,000 manufacturing jobs in Scotland and the 2.7 million across the UK.

We will continue to support UK manufacturing capability in its transition to net zero through significant investment in research, development and innovation, so that it is globally competitive and can continue to provide the products demanded across the world and the jobs that are so important to local communities. The Prime Minister's 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution mobilises more than £12 billion to create more than 250,000 high-skilled jobs across the UK.

Scotland and other industrial heartlands are central to this blueprint for building industries of the future and decarbonising existing ones. Scotland's clean energy and high-tech manufacturing capability, together with Glasgow's aspirations to be a net zero city, have made it the obvious place to host COP26 later this year. That is going to showcase the city's sustainable industrial credentials. The offshore wind manufacturing investment fund will have particularly strong benefits in Scotland and, due to geographical factors, we expect much of the UK's future floating wind deployment to be in Scottish and Welsh waters. There is significant growth potential there, and that can ultimately deliver new and disruptive local

supply-chain content to support the future floating offshore wind projects in Scotland. That could lead to the creation of new high-value jobs in a sustainable growth industry.

I want to assure the hon. Member for Glasgow East that my officials are in regular dialogue with officials in the Scottish Government and with colleagues in Scottish Enterprise, and we will continue to work with them to support not only the Scottish Government's efforts to help those affected but the broader manufacturing industry and economy in Scotland. As we build back from the pandemic, we should be pulling together more than ever to strengthen our United Kingdom and learning from one another to try to achieve the best outcomes for our great nation. We will continue to deliver for people across Scotland as part of a strong United Kingdom, and I am not saying that to make a partisan point or to show up political differences. I just think that when we look at the human cost, it is so important to realise that we are a collection of communities as well as of nations together.

The United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 provides the opportunity for the UK Government to complement and strengthen the support that is already given to citizens, businesses and communities across Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. For the first time in decades, we will be able to provide direct financial support to regenerate town centres and high streets together, to improve local transport links and infrastructure together, and to invest in cultural, sporting and economic development that will level up the whole of the UK.

We are going to boost funding for communities with the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund to support local infrastructure and with £220 million to invest in local areas, ahead of launching the UK shared prosperity fund in 2022. That is in addition to the £1 billion Glasgow city deal that supports tens of thousands of new jobs through infrastructure and also through innovative industries including high-tech manufacturing, life sciences

and advanced design. Scotland will clearly continue to benefit from our £352 billion package of covid-19 support, which has protected one in three Scottish jobs.

Glasgow and East Kilbride will benefit from new jobs and investment from the Government, with the Cabinet Office and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office moving hundreds of civil service roles to Scotland. That will create new opportunities for brilliant Scottish public servants to join UK efforts to tackle joint domestic and international challenges. We will continue to work for every citizen, every community and every business across Britain to improve quality of life and access to opportunity by harnessing local economic strengths.

Coming back to Tollcross, I know that this will be a deeply worrying time for the workers and families affected by the recent announcement from Pladis on 17 June that it was going to issue the HR1 redundancy notice. We have to work together to do everything we can to ensure a bright future for these workers so that their skills can continue to be used to benefit the local economy in Glasgow and more widely. I join the hon. Member for Glasgow East to encourage Pladis to work in a responsible and compassionate way for its employees. My ministerial colleagues and officials stand ready to work with the Scottish Government and the hon. Gentleman to do all we can to assist the employees affected so that they have access to all available support. We must work together to make sure that manufacturing continues to grow and provide skilled, well-paid jobs in Glasgow and Scotland. The proud history of Glasgow's manufacturing sectors, together with its achievements in sustainability and aspirations to be the UK's first zero-carbon city, provide a firm and enduring foundation for future jobs and great opportunities.

Question put and agreed to.

5.5 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 22 June 2021

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

Covid-19: Religious and Ethnic Minority Communities

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 25 February).

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

9.25 am

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Before I call the Member who will move the motion, let me say that yesterday the House of Commons Commission said that Members who are not on the Westminster Hall call list but who are physically present will now be able to come along and make interventions. Today, we do not seem to have Members who wish to make interventions, despite their being able to see on the Order Paper that there is only one Back Bencher on the call list beyond the hon. Gentleman whose debate this is. This is a very important subject, so I just want to make it clear to those observing from outside the House that I am sure there would be a lot more participation but for the constraints and inflexibility of the rules, which do not allow Members who have not given advance notice and are not on the call list to come along and participate by making speeches. I do not think that the message from yesterday's meeting of the Commission that they can at least come along and make interventions has got through.

I would also like to say that this is a one-and-a-half-hour debate, this is an important subject and the Chairman of Ways and Means made it clear, when the Chairmen's Panel last had a meeting with her, that she thought it desirable, in a debate in which there was not that much participation but a lot of time, that the Minister should be willing to take as many interventions as there are, rather than feeling constrained to refuse interventions. I just mention that because I know that the Minister we have today is assiduous in taking interventions, so I hope that today he will be able to set an example to some of his colleagues.

9.27 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on religious and ethnic minority communities throughout the world.

As you rightly say, Sir Christopher, this subject matter is of the utmost importance, to me but to others as well. I know that it is a matter that the Minister is greatly taxed about, and I am pleased to see him in his place. As always, I am sure that the response to the debate will encourage those of us who have a burden in our heart for this issue.

I want to make an apology, if I may, on behalf of the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who, unfortunately for this debate, has a meeting every Tuesday at this time with, I think, officials from Downing Street. She sent me a wee text message to tell me that, because

she would love to have been here. Her heart, like mine, has a burden for this issue, but unfortunately she cannot be here, and she wanted me to record that.

There are others who cannot be here. It is a pity that I had not known about the current situation, because not everybody can come to be here. For instance, I am the only one of my party colleagues who is over here in Westminster this week. The daughter of my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) is getting married on Thursday, so he has other things to be involved in. Of course, he has also put his name forward for the leadership of our party, so he has a lot on his plate at the moment. Otherwise, he would have been here to participate.

Why is this issue important? I often say this when I have these debates, but the fact that I say it often does not lessen its importance. This is a chance to be a voice for the voiceless, to speak up in this place for those who perhaps have no voice, and to ensure that the issue is looked at thoroughly. The motion says it all: the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on religious and ethnic minority groups throughout the world. I will illustrate in my contribution shortly just how important this is and what is happening across the world. I will give a large number of examples to illustrate that it is not specific to one religious or ethnic group, but affects many groups across the world. In particular, I will be speaking of those with a Christian faith, but I will speak for Muslims and others as well.

As covid-19 swept across the globe in 2020, people's lives almost everywhere were fully upended. Almost overnight the way we live and interact was completely overhauled, thriving economies were suddenly shuttered, our social interactions outlawed and our most basic movements curtailed. Although the pandemic has served as a reminder of the oneness of humanity and of the interdependence and interconnected nature of the world that we live in, there have been immense inequalities in our experiences of the crisis, as I will illustrate shortly, and I know others will do the same.

Here in the United Kingdom, some of our freedoms were restricted to ensure that our collective right to life was prioritised and protected. It is an unfortunate reality that in many other parts of the world the pandemic has been used as a smokescreen to further restrict marginalised and repressed minority groups. At this point I should declare my interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. We speak up for those of a Christian faith, other faiths and no faith. I genuinely believe in the Lord and Saviour that I serve, so I speak up for all religious and ethnic groups across the world.

Many religious and belief groups have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. The spread of covid-19 has exacerbated pre-existing prejudice globally. Some groups have experienced outright violence and hostility, while others have been subjected to discriminatory restrictions imposed by the state. Many more have also suffered disproportionately owing to a range of structural factors that often place religious and belief minorities in the more vulnerable segments of society that more often lack access to social justice.

As chair of the APPG, I am very aware of where in the world those of a Christian faith and other groups find that they are always at the end of the queue when it comes to help for covid-19, and at the end of the queue

[Jim Shannon]

when it comes to the aid handouts as well. The charity Aid to the Church in Need estimates that in 2020 oppression against vulnerable faith communities increased in 25 of the 26 countries that it identifies as the most oppressive against such groups, so they have oppression to start with and even more oppression because of covid-19. Other religious groups then blame the small religious and ethnic groups for what takes place.

I want to outline the ways in which faith and belief groups have been unfairly impacted by covid-19 and the consequent financial crisis, and will examine the open hostilities, secondary effects and systematic challenges. I implore Her Majesty's Government and the Minister to commit to using their extensive knowledge and resources to foster a more equitable environment globally.

Minorities are at greater risk of becoming infected with coronavirus and of dying from it if they become infected. As marginalised and more vulnerable segments of society, minority groups often do not have the same level of access to medical treatment as is available to most of the population. The charities and non-governmental organisations warn of the unequal access to medical care within states, both through outright discrimination and service delivery to minority groups and because of entrenched disparities in wealth between groups. For example, in Pakistan, which I have a particular burden in my heart for, and an interest in, we find that when it comes to the allocation of jobs, those of a Christian belief get the more menial jobs. They do the street cleaning, look after latrines and can be in bondage work in factories. Some of these groups are perhaps not educated, but they do not have the ability to rise out of that either, and that happens to a large extent in Pakistan and in other countries as well.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Thank you, Sir Christopher, for reminding us about interventions. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for highlighting the plight of Christians, particularly minority Christians, during the pandemic, and the inequality that has been wrought. I hope that we will continue to scrutinise the level of vaccinations so that they are given out equally to everyone, because everyone should be equal under the aid and medical support that we give during covid. I hope that we will do that in a very fair and even-handed way, and remember all the repressed minorities, particularly the Christians, who have suffered greatly during the pandemic in many places throughout the world, especially in the middle east and Pakistan, as well as remembering autonomous regions that perhaps are not prioritising certain groups as quickly as others because of their religious background.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight that. It is very obvious in my contribution, and I am pretty sure that it will be obvious in the contributions of others and in the Minister's response, that there are many examples of Christians being at the end of the line when it comes to the vaccine roll-out and the health systems that are needed. I hope that in our aid structures across the world we would want to see equality and parity in the roll-out.

Minorities are at greater risk both of becoming infected with coronavirus and of dying from it if they become infected. Being marginalised and more vulnerable, these

minority groups do not have the same access to medical treatment. We are getting some examples from charities and NGOs, who warn of the unequal access to medical care within states, including through outright discrimination. In other words, if someone is a Christian, they are at the back of the queue or maybe just ignored in service delivery to minority groups, and because of entrenched disparities in wealth.

Overt discrimination on the part of some medical practitioners has been documented in a number of states throughout the pandemic, whereby those belonging to specific religious groups have been refused medical treatment on the grounds of their faith. In India, just to give another example, it is not only Christians who are affected; there have also been widespread reports of Muslims being denied medical attention throughout the pandemic. We are hearing many examples of that coming through. They include claims that some hospitals were denying treatment to Muslims until they received a negative coronavirus test. That requirement is not being placed on non-Muslims in India, so why is it being placed on Muslims there?

This is not only a problem in healthcare provision; NGOs in Pakistan have also reportedly denied food and emergency handouts to Christians and Hindus during the pandemic. Members of religious and belief minority groups have also been subjected to verbal abuse, death threats and physical attacks when attempting to access public services. So it is not just verbal abuse; there is also physical abuse.

More commonly, this inequity of access to medical care is closely correlated to economic disparities; being more economically vulnerable, members of minority groups may not have the resources needed to seek treatment. They may also be more adversely impacted by measures to contain covid-19 and the stopping of economic activity. The World Bank estimates that the number of covid-induced new poor rose by 119 million to 124 million in 2020, and may increase to between 143 million and 163 million this year. That is worrying for me, because if someone does not have a job to feed their wife and children and to keep their head above water, the impact of covid will be greater.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees warns that the pandemic is a force multiplier, amplifying the needs of people of concern, and increasing unemployment and poverty within communities that are already marginalised, for example those in Pakistan that I referred to earlier. It is these systematic economic disparities that are thought to put religious or belief minorities at greater risk of contracting covid-19 in the first place.

Overcrowded housing, poor sanitation, unregulated workplaces and the need to continue to operate in high-risk environments out of economic necessity are all contributing factors. If someone has to work and abide by the conditions of that work because they need the money to survive, when it comes to safety and other issues they perhaps have not focused on them in the way that they normally would.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has noted that these factors cause marginalised communities to be over-exposed to the virus, adding that these precarious work patterns and overcrowding ensure that such groups are less able to self-isolate if they become infected. For example, refugees who have

fled religious-based violence and now live in overcrowded refugee camps with unhygienic living conditions have become particularly vulnerable to the virus.

I can think of many such groups. The Rohingyas are a supreme example, but there are many others in Syria and across the middle east, as the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) mentioned, for whom issues of hygiene are really important. They live in crowded conditions in small areas, and every day the risk of disease is very real to them. Minority groups may also be geographically isolated from state services, after years of underfunding of services in areas that are home to ethnic and religious minorities.

More research is needed on the reasons why these stark inequalities have manifested in a number of wholly different states. The magnitude of the problem can be totally overwhelming—both in my prayer time and in preparing for this debate, I have been very aware of how massive the task is. I know that our Government, and the Minister in particular, have been very responsive and reactive to that, which I appreciate. That is why this debate was requested, and why I look to the Minister and to our Government for a response.

Even within the UK, the Equality and Human Rights Commission has warned of the disproportionate impact of coronavirus on different ethnic minority communities, and made recommendations to the UK Government to lessen those inequalities of experience. While it is right that Her Majesty's Government research the myriad impacts of the pandemic on British citizens within the UK—the Government's priorities are still at home first—the devastating consequences for many communities around the globe should not be overlooked.

Many of us in this House have been very keen to ensure that other countries have the same opportunities when it comes to the vaccine roll-out. Rather than ensuring that UK aid is delivered in a manner blind to religion, Her Majesty's Government should ensure that aid is prioritised for marginalised faith and belief communities to lessen these inequalities of access experienced within states. I would ask the Minister how we can ensure that the aid we give actually gets to the religious groups and small ethnic minority groups so that they have equality in the vaccine roll-out and the healthcare that they need.

Misinformation about the virus, its origins and methods of contagion, alongside entrenched distrust between many communities around the world, has led to mass discrimination against peoples on grounds of ethnicity and religion. The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, has warned that faith communities have suffered a tsunami of hate and xenophobia during the pandemic, and the evidence points to that—real, factual evidence—in many countries across the world. One of the most shocking ways that belief communities have been targeted has been by being falsely blamed for spreading the virus. How disheartening that must be, for any religious or ethnic group to find themselves being blamed for the spread of the virus when they are affected by it just as much as other groups.

In a number of western countries, the Jewish community came under attack during the first wave after claims that their religious practices were fuelling the spread of the virus. In Iran and Turkey, there were widespread claims that covid-19 was a Jewish conspiracy, while

Jewish Orthodox communities in Europe, the United States and the Middle East saw police operations against worshippers.

In Turkey, an Armenian church was set alight over claims that Armenians were responsible for bringing the coronavirus. Christian Solidarity Worldwide, one of those excellent charities that work on behalf of Christians and others across the world, noted a sudden and significant increase in online hostility towards Christians in China after allegations that the January 2021 coronavirus outbreak in Hebei province originated in a church. China is not far behind North Korea when it comes to human rights abuses and suppression of religious beliefs. Online hostility is easy to follow, and anyone online could find themselves on the frontline.

The UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, condemned the flare-ups and existing religious intolerance in many countries, including the scapegoating of religious or belief communities, as experienced by Christians, Jews and Muslims. In parts of India, coronavirus is widely believed to be an Islamic conspiracy, with Muslims being beaten, prevented from entering certain districts and having their businesses boycotted. Hateful rhetoric, including from Indian Government officials themselves, targets religious minorities, encouraging—if not inciting—intimidation, harassment and violence. It is always important that we, as elected representatives, choose our words with care. It is also important that those in other parts of the world, such as India, pick their words carefully and ensure that they do not inflame the situation.

The Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Daegu in South Korea reports some 4,000 cases of injustice against its congregants since a local outbreak was traced back to the church. These reportedly include termination of employment and domestic persecution, as the church's parishioners face blame for the covid-19 cases in the country. It is grossly unfair that that should happen—again, it is direct discrimination against those people, who just want to worship their God and their church. Human Rights Watch has called on Governments to work to combat such stigma, and it has said that the virus recognises no distinctions of race, ethnicity, religion or nationality. How true that is, and everybody should realise that that is the case. Covid-19 struck across the world wherever it had the opportunity, and it did not matter what country people were in, what religion they were, or whether they were old, young, male or female. It went everywhere.

The UK Government have committed to counter the spread of hateful misinformation campaigns that have caused, at best, escalating inter-community tensions and, at worst, open conflict, which has been evidenced in some places in India, China, Pakistan and elsewhere in the world. Will Her Majesty's Government prioritise putting processes in place to tackle such misinformation before it leads to inter-community conflict?

Under the guise of tracking and containing coronavirus outbreaks around the world, a number of already stigmatised groups have been further marginalised from societies and seen disproportionate controls imposed on their lives. Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Jews have found that their religious beliefs put them in a different category. During the imposition of coronavirus restrictions, some religious and belief minorities who had been blamed for the spread of covid-19 had their

[Jim Shannon]

movements and activities placed under stricter control than those of majority groups. I thank the Lord that we in this country are able to go and worship wherever we like on a Sunday. Nobody is taking our car registration numbers, seeing who is going into the church or sitting in the church and noting what people are saying, but there are parts of the world where that happens all the time.

In Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, Government authorities indicated that Shi'a religious communities were responsible for the spread of coronavirus and subjected some neighbourhoods and localities to stricter lockdown measures. Again, that is disproportionate and over the top, and it directly affects those of religious and ethnic minority groups. The Saudi Government imposed a lockdown on the majority Shi'a province of Qatif, and the Hazara community in Pakistan also had their movements and work restricted in one region before any wider regional lockdown was introduced. The Pakistan Government's failure to address hate speech and to promote religious harmony is said to have contributed to violence, with attempted mob lynchings in September 2020. It is not hard to incite a mob of people whenever they are minded to do that. Therefore, it is really important that those in positions of power in government at all levels, be they MPs, councillors or community leaders, are there to protect everyone.

As further barriers to international travel were put in place, access to regions was reduced for journalists, international officials and aid organisations. That had a cooling effect on access to information, so we may not know the whole story. We are probably getting parts of it at this moment in time. It may have led to the under-reporting of abuses perpetrated against minority communities. News about the violence in Tigray in Ethiopia—we spoke about this in the main Chamber last week—was slow to reach international attention, and aid groups normally present in the region were unable to confirm the reports of mass killings and widespread rape against Tigray women and children, which began in late 2020.

In the debate on sexual violence in the main Chamber last Thursday, many of us believed that the reports that we were getting downplayed what was actually taking place. In a meeting last week, an official from the Eritrean embassy refuted the claims that atrocities were proved to have taken place. How out of touch are they? The evidence is there and coming from various people, and the numbers are particularly worrying. I personally find it difficult to speak of that because I can almost feel the pain of those who have been abused. It bothers me greatly and it bothers many others. Notwithstanding what the Eritrean embassy said, due to covid-19 restrictions, no outside observers have been allowed to travel to the region. The feedback about what is happening is therefore restricted to those who contact family members outside the region.

Restrictions have also affected the functioning of law and order globally, as police forces redirect resources to managing containment. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has highlighted reports of numerous anti-Hindu incidents in Bangladesh

occurring with impunity during coronavirus lockdowns. Again, it is worrying if Governments stand by and do not step in.

The pandemic is said to have created a perfect storm for land rights abuses. I have spoken about that in relation to the Baha'is in Iran. I do not know whether you, Sir Christopher, have had the chance to meet people from the Baha'i faith. I have had the opportunity over the years to meet quite a few. They are the gentlest, nicest, kindest, most well-mannered people I have met. They are certainly not aggressive or abusive. They are just so gentle, yet their gentleness seems to be trampled on by people in Iran. I am not sure whether I can use the clear terminology that has been used in the press in the past few days to refer to the new leader in Iran. I worry greatly that, given that that person is in charge, the abuse against the Baha'is will escalate. They have experienced forced evictions and land confiscation.

The UK Government previously said that they will use UK aid to support protections against forcible evictions and claimed that they were deeply troubled by the deterioration in the land rights of religious minorities in Iran. That burdens my heart, and I know that it burdens the Minister's heart and the hearts of other speakers. Is there still such a commitment from Her Majesty's Government, given the extensive cuts to official development assistance? I do not want to harp on about the aid cut because it is not fair to keep at it all the time, but I want to make sure that the aid that goes through gets to the right people.

Measures to stop the spread of covid-19 have included severely limiting religious gatherings around the world, profoundly impacting individuals' and communities' ability to manifest their religion or belief. For much of the pandemic, the right to health and freedom of religion or belief have been deemed almost mutually exclusive. Where activities have been allowed to resume, some regions have continued to restrict particular religious activities under the auspices of preventing the spread of covid-19, even when other comparable activities have been allowed to resume.

The Algerian Government, for example, granted mosques and Catholic churches permission to reopen last August, but the evangelical churches remained closed throughout the remainder of 2020. Why that disparity? Why was it okay for one group but not for the others? I do not understand that.

In Malaysia, Hindu temples and Christian churches face different reopening schedules from mosques. Last year, Malaysian officials temporarily banned refugees and migrants from mosques as they reopened. The imbalance and the inequality of treatment is real.

Alongside particular faith and belief groups being subjected to additional restrictions, seemingly equal policies have violated freedom of religion or belief. For example, in Sri Lanka, authorities insisted on the cremation of all those who died from covid-19, including Muslims, despite the fact that the practice is prohibited under Islam. We welcome the fact that the requirement was lifted in early 2021, due to the pressure that our Government and our Minister exerted and also to raising awareness of the issue across the globe.

As I said earlier, as a result of the pandemic, many faith and belief groups have moved their worship online. For those with internet access, that could have enabled greater engagement with religious services, particularly

for those who are geographically isolated, those with disabilities or those with age issues. That rapid move to online worship in many parts of the globe has also led to growing concern that hostile state authorities might use this technology, because it is easier to get that, for increased surveillance and monitoring of minority religious communities. The rise in surveillance has been documented against religious groups across China, where unfortunately everything seems to be under the control of Government and suppression of human rights and religious beliefs is rampant.

With much of the world now just beginning their national vaccination programmes, it is important that we learn from the inequalities in access that the covid-19 crisis has exposed and work to lessen those disparities going forward. By doing that, we can work to ensure that local roll-out is distributed justly and that the human rights of minority groups are upheld in the process. How important it is to get that.

The same problems in accessing healthcare have proved to be the very same barriers to minority groups in accessing covid-19 vaccines. I have implored the UK Government to take a multi-pronged approach to tackling those inequalities, both to prevent outright discrimination against religious and belief groups and to support aid programmes that work to tackle the systematic marginalisation of those communities globally.

I welcome the UK Government's allocation of healthcare as a key aid priority in the integrated review. That is good news. However, having heard many of the specific and distinct ways in which religious and belief communities are affected by the crisis in mine and others' contributions today, will the Minister agree to ensure that such programmes, specifically access and the needs of religious and belief minorities, are being prioritised, redistributing such aid to lessen the inequalities? If our Government and our Minister could do that or give that assurance, that would help a great deal. Can the Minister also tell us how the cuts to official development assistance are predicted to affect Her Majesty's Government's commitment to global health? Again, knowing what is going on would give us that reassurance, not only for covid-19 and the vaccination roll-out, but for all the other health issues.

Joy Morrissey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important debate. On the issue of making sure that healthcare is available for all, I also think the issue of detention of minority groups is important, not only because of the quality of healthcare but because their human rights are being violated. I thank the Government for the things they have done to work with international partners to investigate those matters, and even going further on how we can prevent human rights abuses from happening to minority groups, whether they be Muslim or Christian, but specifically Muslim minority groups where there have been accounts of them being detained and used for vaccine testing. There are some quite alarming human rights abuses being reported. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising those concerns and the Government for what they have done to work with international partners to make sure we are raising those concerns, both with the United Nations and in our covid vaccine roll-out across the world.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Again, they are very wise words and I wholeheartedly agree with what she has said. We are impressed by what

the Government have done so far. We are highlighting some of the issues across the world where there are anomalies and where we need to focus. That is what we wish to do. We in the western world have a responsibility to reach out for those who have no one to speak for them. We will probably never meet some of the people the hon. Member for Beaconsfield has referred to, and of whom I shall speak today, in this world, but perhaps we will speak to them in the next.

Finally, I also want to use this opportunity to congratulate the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I also want to put on record all its work in implementing the recommendations made by the Bishop of Truro's report in the independent review of the FCO's work to support persecuted Christians. I have been greatly heartened by that. I have also been greatly heartened by the hon. Member for Congleton, who has been made the special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. We had a chance just a few weeks ago to hear her speak at the annual general meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, and it was not just her smiling face but her words that encouraged us all. The hon. Lady is a good person with a passionate belief and interest in the issue. I do not believe there is anyone better to champion it at that level.

As we approach the deadline for an independent review of how the 22 recommendations have been carried out, I ask the Minister, what plans have been put in place for the review to be conducted? Would he consider asking the Foreign Affairs Committee to conduct that review? This time next year or thereabouts, there will be an international conference that coincides with that. I know that some of those recommendations have already been secured, and some have yet to be secured. This time next year, we will have the chance to review all of them. Perhaps at that stage we will be able to look honestly and truthfully at what we have achieved and what we need to achieve in the next period.

I have said quite a lot, because I need to have it on the record for all those who have contacted us. As I said earlier, as chair of the APPG for international freedom of religious belief, I speak up for those with Christian faith, those with other faiths and those with no faith. Today has been an opportunity to speak for those of all faiths and no faith, and those with Christian belief as well, which is very close to my heart. I have put the case for them across the world, so that our Government can focus their attention on helping those people where we can. Covid-19 has been horrific for the whole world. It has been horrific for those who are probably well off and have a good standard of living, but for those with Christian belief who are ethnic minorities across the world, the effect has been disastrous. Today we highlight that for those people across the world. I look forward to other contributions, and to the Minister's response in particular, as I always do.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): There are no Back-Bench speakers, as the only person on the list has withdrawn, so I call the SNP spokesman.

10.2 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, and I think this is the first time I have spoken in the

[Patrick Grady]

Boothroyd Room version of Westminster Hall. I thank all the staff, Clerks and officials who are keeping us safe and covid secure, so that we can enjoy the kind of securities, practices and safety that, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted, so many people around the world have not been able to throughout the pandemic.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He does not secure these 90-minute debates by accident; it has to be demonstrated that there are other Back Benchers and cross-party support across the House for the topic, so even if some colleagues have not been able to make it here today, for unavoidable reasons, he is undoubtedly representing a consensus across the House on the importance of these issues. He has given us a comprehensive demonstration of his own tireless commitment to freedom of religion and belief around the world.

The hon. Gentleman is right in particular to highlight the work of the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is the Prime Minister's new envoy on these matters. All of us in his APPG warmly welcome that appointment; she met with us recently and we look forward to going forward. The APPG has produced a detailed report on the state of freedom of religion and belief around the world, which includes a chapter specifically on the impact of covid. Although she was unable to catch your eye to make a speech, Sir Christopher, the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) made a number of valuable points, particularly about the detention of minorities and the importance of access to healthcare.

The debate has been an important opportunity to recognise what the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights described as the "disproportionate toll of covid-19" on marginalised and discriminated against groups around the world. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, the high commissioner described covid as a "force multiplier" of existing inequalities and discriminations. The pandemic seems to be having a dual effect, exacerbating existing inequalities, which are also exacerbating the impact of the pandemic among minority communities.

In the limited time available, I want to look at the covid challenges facing religious groups and ethnic minorities and at how existing discriminations are being exacerbated. As the debate is about religious and ethnic minority communities throughout the world, that includes this country, and I want to make a few brief comments about the domestic situation of those communities.

Throughout the world, including here at home, ethnic minority groups have been hit the hardest by the pandemic. Minority groups have experienced higher rates of infection and mortality and deeper and more difficult impacts from all the challenges that have come with the pandemic. Those include the financial impacts and the barriers caused by illness, as well as the difficult choices that those people have to make. People who are a part of a minority group and who are already living in difficult financial circumstances have to make incredibly difficult choices about whether to self-isolate or to continue to go to their places of work to make an income and support their families. That increases the risks to their families and communities. The hon. Member spoke

about people living in overcrowded situations in different parts of the world, which of course has an impact on transmission.

A related issue is access to vaccines. There are accounts throughout the world, which are highlighted in some of the reports that the hon. Member referred to, of Governments—particularly, oppressive regimes—prioritising some groups over others for access to vaccines. As we know, there is also vaccine hesitancy here at home among some minority groups, for a whole range of reasons. Faith and community leaders and faith-based organisations have an important role in helping to address those challenges and perhaps misunderstandings over vaccines. Where faith leaders around the world have stepped up to speak about the importance of vaccines, it has encouraged people to get one where they can.

Access to worship, and particularly funeral rituals, has been a challenge. The hon. Member spoke about the situation in Sri Lanka, where Muslim communities were forced to take part in cremations, which will have been particularly distressing. I remember being in this room more than a year ago, when we discussed the very early stages of the Coronavirus Act 2020 and the issue of cremations and how, even in our own domestic law, we could respect religions that require the dead to be buried rather than cremated. These have been very difficult and challenging decisions for Governments around the world to make.

One of the biggest challenges that the hon. Member spoke of was scapegoating and blame, when dominant groups blame minorities. He highlighted that in some countries the majority religion is blaming the minority one, and in another country, where that minority and majority are reversed, the blame goes in the other direction. He gave the example of Muslims being blamed in Cambodia. Sadly, we also see the ugly head of antisemitism appearing on social media and elsewhere, and that always has to be challenged and called out. As he said, the virus does not recognise borders or boundaries, or ethnic groups or religions. We are all human beings—we all carry the same kind of blood, and we all breathe the same air—and that is how the virus is transmitted, not because of someone's particular ethnic background or religious belief.

That scapegoating is also an example of how covid has acted as an exacerbating factor of existing discriminations, and the hon. Member was right to highlight how Governments and oppressive regimes around the world have been using the cover of covid restrictions and the distractions of the pandemic to increase persecution or discrimination. He quoted statistics from Aid to the Church in Need—I pay tribute to its important work around the world—from Open Doors' World Watch List 2021, which highlights religious discrimination, and from the report by his APPG for international freedom of religion or belief, which referenced the expression from the UN Secretary-General that covid is fuelling a "tsunami" of xenophobia, with all the disastrous consequences that come with that.

Oppressive practices have continued even when restrictions should be in place—whether that is the destruction of Uyghur mosques and shrines by the Chinese Government or of Hindu temples in Pakistan, the eviction of the Baha'i communities in Iran, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, or the growing ethnic

and regional conflict in the horn of Africa. All are being exacerbated by the pandemic and, in many cases, the pandemic is being used by Governments as an excuse or a distraction. We cannot turn a blind eye. Even if this debate is not the busiest that Westminster Hall has been recently, it is an important opportunity to speak out and draw attention to such matters. The hon. Member spoke of the Eritrean embassy, for example, and we know that Governments around the world pay attention to what is said in this place. Hopefully the Minister will join others in calling out such behaviours when he responds.

There has been a particular impact on refugees and displaced peoples around the world. The refugee and displacement crisis has been growing over many years, and the pandemic is serving only to exacerbate it. It does not take a lot of imagination to understand the impact of overcrowded accommodation in refugee camps on the increased risk of transmission and then, if someone does contract covid, the impact of a lack of healthcare facilities, such as ventilators, and access to treatment—things we take for granted in this part of the world. Uganda is named in the House of Commons Library's exceptional briefing for this debate as a country in which people need identity cards to access healthcare services, and a displaced person or a migrant who has come across the border will not have an identity card and cannot access the healthcare system, further exacerbating the challenges.

Domestically, in my own city of Glasgow, refugees and asylum seekers were forced out of apartments and other residential accommodation and into hotels under some guise that few of us could understand, with all the attendant impacts on both physical and mental health. I will touch briefly on a few domestic considerations, because these global problems are reflected to a greater or lesser extent in some of the challenges we experience at home. For example, we know that rates of transmission and mortality are higher among black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, particularly among refugees and asylum seekers.

The restrictions on worship have been particularly difficult. It has been a challenge both around the world and here at home. Funerals and farewells have not been possible in the usual way under these challenging circumstances. Even in our community here we have lost good friends and colleagues. I think of Jimmy Gordon, Lord Gordon of Strathblane, who was a very good friend to the APPG and faith communities. He succumbed very early, and I suspect that, in normal times, his funeral would have been standing room only, with people outside the packed church. The late Archbishop of Glasgow, Philip Tartaglia, led the way in some respects in Glasgow, celebrating mass livestreamed from his empty cathedral by himself every Sunday of the pandemic after the churches were closed, until he himself succumbed to covid and his own funeral had to be livestreamed with no more than 20 or 30 people in the cathedral. It has been a very painful and difficult experience for a lot of friends and families and all those who have lost loved ones. I want pay tribute to them and to everyone who has, sadly, lost their life to this disease.

Worship is not something that can always be replicated online. There have been many fruits of these changes, and religious communities have been able to take part in religious services around the world. Last year, I took part in Easter services live from the Vatican from the comfort of home. But that is not the same as a community

or in-person worship, and that was recognised in the judgment of Lord Braid in the Court of Session in Scotland in response to a case brought by Christian ministers, including my friend, Canon Thomas White, who is the parish priest of St Mary's, in Calton, Glasgow. That was an important judgment, which Governments will have to take account of if we find ourselves in similar situations in the future.

The Scottish Government have recognised the impact of the difficult decision to close places of worship. Everyone who has an interest in these matters welcomes the return to greater numbers and participation as we move forward, and that includes, potentially, singing, although not everyone's communal singing is to be welcomed in the same way.

In conclusion, the UK Government have an important responsibility in challenging and tackling the discriminations and inequalities faced by religious communities and ethnic minorities, and particularly those that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. They can start here, at home, by looking at the root causes of increased transmission and of vaccine hesitancy among black, Asian, and minority ethnic communities and by supporting faith-based organisations and faith communities. But they also have to lead and support international initiatives to massively scale up access to healthcare, vaccines, personal protective equipment and to take action against violence and discrimination by all the different oppressive regimes that we have heard about in this debate.

Joy Morrissey: I want to highlight the excellent work of another person from Scotland, the investigator of prisons and detention centres, who has been working for the Council of Europe tirelessly throughout this pandemic. He has been visiting prisons and detention centres across Europe and the world to make sure they are treating their prisoners with respect and decency and not allowing the spread of covid.

Will the Government give further explanations of the work they are doing to investigate the abuse of ethnic and religious minority groups in prisons and detention centres during this pandemic? What are they doing to investigate these claims? There have also been claims of certain Muslim minority groups being forced to participate in unethical vaccine trials. It would be helpful if the Minister could provide further clarification of those claims.

Patrick Grady: I thank the hon. Lady for that. That clarification would be helpful; the thought of people being forced into vaccination trials is abhorrent. We warmly welcome everyone who has volunteered—tens of thousands of people volunteered around the world, and that has helped to keep us incredibly safe, but it has to be a free choice. It is incredibly distressing to hear what the hon. Lady describes. I am sure the Minister has heard it and will respond shortly.

We welcome the work of all these different envoys and inspectorates—the Government's envoys on freedom of religion and belief and on girls' education, as I think the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned. Tackling all these issues and building a safer and more secure world will help us in the future. It might help us to avoid future pandemics and future spread if everybody is brought up to the standard envisaged by the sustainable development goals.

Jim Shannon: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if we can raise the educational standards and abilities of young people we will give them the aspiration to do better? For instance, if they gained the educational standards to start with, they could be teachers or nurses or go into many other jobs. That is why, when it comes to addressing covid-19 and its effect on religious minorities, there is a greater plan, and education is part of that plan. With that, people are given the chance to do better.

Patrick Grady: I agree entirely. That is what the global agenda of sustainable development goals is for. We can raise standards around the world on education, health, access to water and sanitation, and gender equality, in particular. If we can do those things, the world will be much more resilient to all these challenges, whether pandemics, natural disasters or the likelihood of oppression and discrimination.

Some of those factors are the root causes: poverty and a lack of understanding and education are among the root causes of the challenges that we face. If we can tackle them, we are building that resilience. That is why we cannot just let go the point about 0.7% and the Government's commitment to aid. That was world leading; now we are the only G7 country that is cutting our aid budget. The Government have to recognise that. Perhaps the Minister can say when the Government envisage restoring that target, as they have pledged to do.

The Government also need to end arms sales to any regime where there is doubt about how those arms are being used. If arms manufactured and sold from the UK are being used to oppress people and abuse their human rights, that is very dubious under international law, and the Government need to set the highest possible standards.

This comes back to all the global issues that we are not unused to discussing in Westminster Hall. If the Government take the attitude I have described and show leadership, recipient countries and the organisations that deliver aid and support can meet their commitments and plan effectively for the future.

In the context of the pandemic, we often say that nobody is safe until everybody is safe. That safety includes respect for freedom of religious belief and the rights to worship and to practise a faith. As we have said, the virus does not recognise boundaries or religions. We should recognise everyone's right to identify with and be part of their communities and to practise their religion and belief. I welcome the opportunity we have had to highlight that today.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): At this stage, we would normally hear from the spokesperson from the official Opposition. We received notice that the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) would be here physically today. In her absence, and without any explanation of why she is not here, I have no alternative but to move straight to the Minister for his response.

10.23 am

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): I think we have done rather well, Sir Christopher. Three of us have managed to fill an hour so far. It has been wonderful to hear from hon. Members today, and I thank my hon. Friend

the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for not only securing the debate but continuing with his long-standing commitment to freedom of religion or belief for all. He stressed that he is passionate about this subject, including when it comes to those of no faith, which is important to recognise.

We have heard today that the pandemic continues to have a huge impact on countries and communities around the world. Not one of us remains unaffected. My hon. Friend was spot on when he said that the virus does not recognise race, religion, ethnicity, gender or borders. It has put a terrible strain on the enjoyment of the full spectrum of human rights, including the right freely to practise a religion or belief.

I take this opportunity to reaffirm the Government's unwavering commitment to freedom of religion or belief, to championing that right around the world, and to promoting respect between religious and non-religious communities. I am pleased that my noble Friend and fellow Minister, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, continues to champion this cause in his capacity as the Minister for Human Rights, but I will continue to stand in for him, given the fact that he is not allowed to address this House. I am thrilled that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion and belief, is working closely with my noble Friend to ensure that no one suffers discrimination, violence or persecution because of their faith or belief, or for not following a faith.

We believe that at least three actions can mitigate the effects of covid-19 on the most vulnerable members of society, irrespective of race, religion and ethnicity. The first is working together through multilateralism. The second is strengthening the evidence base on the effects of covid-19. The third, to which all hon. Members present have referred, is equitable access to vaccines.

Let me turn to the impact of the pandemic on freedom of religion or belief specifically. As we have heard from the hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Strangford, we are aware of the potential for crises to reinforce already marginalised positions in society, which increases discrimination, violence and stigma. Like the hon. Gentlemen and my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), I remain deeply concerned about the incidence of hate speech and conspiracy theories that suggest certain faiths or beliefs are to blame for the pandemic. I am alarmed by reports of attacks aimed at Shi'a Muslims and Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, and by the worrying rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in Sri Lanka; the rise of antisemitism and other forms of discrimination in the wake of covid-19 is also deeply troubling.

Such incidents of hatred are completely unacceptable, so we will continue to stand up for those whose right to belief or religious practice is curtailed. To ensure that we continue to challenge hatred in the most challenging of times, we have stepped up our engagement with the UN and other multilateral organisations to protect the rights of members of religious and ethnic minority communities. Last week I was in Geneva and met a number of organisations, including the UNHRC, to see what more the United Kingdom can do to assist international bodies in ensuring that the impact on the most vulnerable is mitigated as far as possible. Lord Ahmad has also urged member states to mitigate the impact of covid-19 on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged

members of society, including ethnic and belief minorities. That work took place at the 44th session of the UN Human Rights Council.

In November, we demonstrated our concern about the rise of another form of discrimination, antisemitism, in the wake of covid-19 in a statement to the UN General Assembly. Building on that, in the same month, Lord Ahmad attended the ministerial conference to advance freedom of religion or belief, which was held in Warsaw, where he reaffirmed our commitment to this issue, particularly during the pandemic.

When faced with global challenges, we need a global response, so I am especially pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton will be speaking about the exact issues raised today at a UN Human Rights Council side event taking place tomorrow. I welcome her ongoing work and engagement. The event tomorrow will further demonstrate the need to work together and with civil society to confront the challenges that have been created by this dreadful pandemic.

As a complement to our ongoing multilateral work, the Government have kept threats to these freedoms under review around the world, including in west Africa and south Asia. Members of religious minorities living in poverty in the shadow of covid-19 experience intersecting vulnerabilities, and those have worsened during the pandemic—an example is the position of women in religious communities in west Africa. A key response to that is to prioritise girls' education. I am pleased that, through our programmes and advocacy, we have already helped more girls to access education this year, including in Nigeria. Educating girls is one of the best investments that we can make to lift people out of poverty, save lives and—to coin a phrase—"build back better" from covid-19. I am also pleased that the United Kingdom and G7 partners will invest £10 billion in development finance over the next two years to help women in developing countries to build resilient businesses and recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

Our work in south Asia shows the need for international actors to protect women and encourage them to voice their concerns about domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse, which, sadly, have increased during lockdown. It is deeply saddening that religious justifications for these abuses still persist. Because of this, the United Kingdom ensures that our human rights policies consider the intersectionality of human rights—for example, the importance of addressing the specific issues, such as gender-based violence, experienced by women from religious minority communities. No one should suffer because of their conscience, and no one should suffer twice because of their conscience and their gender.

My hon. Friends the Members for Strangford and for Beaconsfield and the hon. Member for Glasgow North all mentioned the very important issue of equitable access to vaccine programmes. On top of working multilaterally and strengthening our evidence base, we believe that equitable access to vaccines will address some of the effects that have been raised here today. I am pleased that through the G7 we recently pledged 870 million covid-19 vaccine doses, of which at least half are to be delivered by the end of this year. An equitable roll-out across the world will help to ensure that no one is left at risk or left behind, irrespective of their religion, race, ethnicity or gender. That is why the UK was one of the earliest and the largest donors to the

COVAX advance market commitment, launched at the global vaccine summit more than a year ago. As a country, we have provided more than half a billion pounds to that programme, which has now delivered more than 87 million doses across six continents.

Patrick Grady: You encouraged us to intervene on the Minister, Sir Christopher, and I am sure he is delighted that I am doing so, although he might not have the answer to my question immediately to hand.

It is great that the Government are doing these things—increasing their funding to COVAX and the supplies of ventilators to India, for example, and personal protective equipment to other countries—but how is that affecting the overall aid budget? Can the Minister be clear that any of these donations that are being made will be additional? Otherwise, if the Government are going from 0.7% to 0.5% and counting all these commitments for the unforeseen pandemic, that could in effect constitute a diminution of the overall pot that had been available anyway—the 0.5% of GNI. Have the Government started to figure out how these extra contributions of aid will fit in with the overall reduction in official development assistance?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman raises a very good point, and I thank him for his support for the COVAX commitments that we have already made, which are critical to distribution of the vaccines. More than 130 countries will benefit.

In terms of the broader ODA budget, if we have already committed such big sums as part of the vaccine programme, that potentially would have an impact on ODA, but I will confirm with the hon. Gentleman in writing whether that sits outside the ODA budget, which, as he knows, is temporarily reduced. I am sure he will be pleased to hear that, based on OECD data for 2020, the United Kingdom will still be the third-largest donor as a percentage of gross national income in the G7.

The hon. Members for Glasgow North and for Strangford raised other points that I will try to address. I am conscious that I have to give the hon. Member for Strangford two or three minutes at the end, but I think we might be all right in that regard and might be able to pad it out, although we are not paid for the time spent speaking. It is good to be able to address some of the issues raised during the debate.

The issue of cremations in Sri Lanka was raised by many of the Sri Lankan diaspora who got in touch with right hon. and hon. Members. Lord Ahmad spoke on numerous occasions to the Sri Lankan authorities and the high commissioner, and I am pleased that the cremations are no longer going ahead. It is absolutely the case that we need to respect everyone's beliefs during the pandemic, but I am aware that that process has now stopped in Sri Lanka. We were pleased to be able to raise that bilaterally with the Sri Lankan authorities.

The hon. Member for Strangford spoke about the plight of the Baha'is in Iran. We are particularly concerned about the continuing systematic discrimination and targeting and harassment of the Baha'i community. He has met some of them, as have I. We regularly raise human rights at all levels with the Iranians, and with our international partners we continue to press Iran to improve its incredibly poor record on human rights.

[Nigel Adams]

That includes every opportunity we get at the ongoing UN General Assembly session. The continuing restrictions on freedom of religion or belief are deeply worrying, as is any discrimination against any religious minority.

The hon. Gentleman rightly raised the Bishop of Truro's review. We are committed to implementing the 22 recommendations in full. The work to implement them continues in a way that can bring real improvement in the lives of those who are persecuted because of their faith or belief. Some 18 recommendations have already been or are in the process of being implemented, and we will implement all of them by July 2022, three years from the publication of the report. Also, our mission at the UN in New York is working to determine the best approach to achieve Council support.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for giving way. He says that the recommendations in the Bishop of Truro's report will be implemented by July next year. At that stage, would it be possible to review how those recommendations have been carried out and whether they have been successful? It is important that we look to see whether they have achieved the goals that we hoped they would.

Nigel Adams: I am more than happy to have my ministerial colleague, Lord Ahmad, write to the hon. Gentleman, or he is always welcome to come to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to sit down with him and his team. We are more than happy to lay out where we have got to and what we believe the impact of the recommendations is.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned his concern about persecution of Christians in Pakistan. We continue to urge Pakistan to guarantee the rights of all people in the country, particularly the most vulnerable, including women, minorities and children. That is actually laid down in the constitution of Pakistan and is also in accordance with international standards. It is vital that Pakistan guarantees the rights of all its citizens. Also, we regularly raise at senior level our concerns about the human rights situation with the Government of Pakistan.

Jim Shannon: Regarding Pakistan in particular, one of the things that I have a great concern about—I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) has the same concern—is the misuse of the blasphemy laws. I am ever mindful that we are not in the business of telling countries what they should do with the law of their land, but we want to raise awareness that the blasphemy laws are being used adversely and maliciously against the Christian minority and certain ethnic groups. Has there been an opportunity, through Lord Ahmad or whoever, to raise this issue?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Member is right to raise this issue. We regularly raise the issue of blasphemy laws with the authorities in Pakistan at a senior level. These laws have been used to target Muslims and non-Muslims. The United Kingdom Government condemns any instance where the content or application of blasphemy legislation encourages or justifies violence or discrimination, or causes a violation of a person's human rights. He is right to raise this issue and, as I say, we regularly raise it with the Pakistani authorities.

I will begin to work towards a conclusion. We will continue to champion this work. I am absolutely delighted that the hon. Member for Strangford has brought this subject to the House again. The effects of this pandemic have been incredibly extensive. Many of us have had the virus and been affected that way, and many of us know people who, sadly, lost their lives to it, but just imagine the situation of someone who has to contend with this virus and is living in a camp for internally displaced persons or refugees. The effects of this virus on humanitarian work are horrific, but we are committed to do what we can as a country to help the most vulnerable in those sorts of situations, and coronavirus will have an effect on our lives for some time to come.

As a champion of human rights, the UK has a duty to promote and defend equality, inclusion and respect, at home and abroad, for everyone, so I assure the House that the Government will do just that. Whatever obstacles may lie in our path, we will continue to raise awareness wherever people are persecuted for what they believe in. We will continue to stand up for the rights of minority communities around the world and we will defend the right to freedom of religion or belief for everyone everywhere.

10.43 am

Jim Shannon: First of all, I thank all those who have participated in this debate. The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) made a very valuable contribution, for which I thank her. It is good to have those types of intervention, Sir Christopher. We used to have them in Westminster Hall, and hopefully, we will have them again when we return there.

I also thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for his contribution. In all the debates that either one of us has, we are usually side by side, saying the same things, promoting the same ideals and principles, and making the same requests. He referred to minority groups and their higher rates of mortality. I think that is the point of this debate—covid-19 has adversely affected Christians and ethnic minority groups across the world, with greater impact than it has had on others; in addition, there has been a financial impact. All these things are factors, as is the particular role that faith-based groups matters play.

The hon. Gentleman referred to access to vaccines and to problems in the horn of Africa, including in Eritrea, and Uganda, where there are refugees and displaced people. The lack of medical care and treatment for the Baha'is in Iran was referred to by all of us, including the Minister. These are global problems, some of which have been replicated at home, albeit on a smaller scale; there are also painful issues such as restrictions on funerals.

In outlining a number of instances of violence by oppressive regimes across the world, I probably just scraped the surface. There are many countries where this can be seen, and I referred to action against such violence. Had the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) been here, she would have contributed a vast amount of knowledge. While she may not have been here in person, she was here in spirit, and I am very confident that her contribution was here in our thoughts, if not in words.

I especially thank the Minister. I do not say this lightly, but I believe we are very fortunate to have a Minister who has a really deep interest in this subject and who comes here with the belief to give a response that we all wish to hear. The commitment from the Minister and his Department to religious freedom for all people around the world is important. He outlined the role of Lord Ahmed, and those of us who have had the chance to speak to Lord Ahmed know how important his role is. I think we are fortunate to have the right Ministers in the right place at the right time to convey the spirit and the requests from this debate to the Government. When it comes to equitable access to vaccines, no one should be left behind.

The hon. Members for Glasgow North and for Beaconsfield and I are all interested in girls' education. We all want to see education standards lifted. The Minister referred to the amount of money set aside for that purpose. There are more girls being educated this year than there have been for many, many years. That is good news, and it is the sort of response we were seeking. The people who ask us to do these things are very conscious of that as well.

I welcome the Minister's action to stop what was happening with Muslim cremations in Sri Lanka. That was also good news. He always speaks up for the Baha'is, which is very important.

We discussed Pakistan's blasphemy laws and at how they are being used in a malicious and misinformed way against Christians and those of other religious beliefs. I very much welcome the fact that the UK is a champion of human rights across the world, because I do believe that we all have a role to play—our Ministers; our Government; our influence through our ambassadors, embassies and staff; our commitment to training staff so that they can respond better and influence countries where there has been an abuse of religious and ethnic groups, so that we can speak for them.

I always finish with a text from scripture. I think it is important to do so, and I think the Minister and all Members present would expect me to. I have chosen a piece that is appropriate for this debate, for the Minister, for our Government and for all of us here, Proverbs 3:27:

“Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to act.”

Today, we have the power to act. Our Minister and our Government have the power to act. I believe that we should not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in our power to do just that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on religious and ethnic minority communities throughout the world.

10.49 am

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19: Recovery of Central London Businesses

11 am

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster)
(Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the recovery of businesses in central London from the covid-19 outbreak.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I am delighted to have secured this extremely important debate on business recovery in central London following the covid-19 pandemic. It has been very clear from my weekly meetings with business representatives from across Cities of London and Westminster that businesses, restaurants, shops and hotels are all part of a larger ecosystem, which also relies on the huge cultural offer that my constituency provides. Covid has proven that if we take one part of that ecosystem away, for example by not allowing theatres to open to their full capacity, there is a vast knock-on effect on all surrounding hospitality businesses, as well as on other cultural offers such as museums and galleries. I am confident that London will bounce back, but the Government have a choice on how quickly that happens.

Cities of London and Westminster is home to the monarch, to the Head of Government and to Parliament. It is also home to the nation's high street, Oxford Street, and to the cultural and entertainment powerhouses of Soho and Covent Garden. On the one hand, Westminster's businesses supported in excess of 715,000 jobs and contributed £53.6 billion annually to the national economic output, the highest contribution of any local authority in the United Kingdom. To put that into context, before the pandemic the Oxford Street district alone generated £13 billion of gross value added—25% of the entirety of Wales's GVA. On the other hand, the UK's world-class financial sector, based in the square mile in my constituency, is the underlying strength of our international trade and total services exports. The City of London has the largest financial services cluster in the world, with nearly 60,000 companies and hundreds of thousands of jobs for workers commuting in, pre-pandemic.

A key concern regarding the London recovery is business rates. The system, born in the 16th century, is wildly out of step with the modern digital age. Even before the covid-19 pandemic, it was not working—it was not fit for purpose. Empty retail space was on the rise, footfall was in decline and the sector was grappling with systemic shifts in customer behaviour. The pandemic has only accelerated that. It has also laid bare the urgent need to create a fairer and more sustainable tax system that relies less on property and that does not go only one way—up.

Without action on rate reform, the viability of much of the retail sector and the substantial taxes that it generates will hang in the balance. Specifically for central London, it would be useful if the Minister considered whether the business rates relief cap of £2 million could be temporarily removed so that businesses can secure the relief that they need right now. The cap effectively means that many mid-sized chain businesses, which typically pay well above £2 million in business rates, face bills that, according to UKHospitality, could force them

“to prioritise paying tax over paying wages.”

[Nickie Aiken]

The large hotels and event spaces that depend on business conferences and meetings will be particularly hit by the cap and will be paying business rates in full by the end of July, with no realistic prospect of an uptick in income until at least the autumn. That is simply not good enough.

Covid-19 has created new challenges for the business rates system. I know that the Government have called for its review and for fundamentally reforming business rates, but we need that to be accelerated and temporary relief in the short term to be announced as soon as possible. There is no doubt that that reform is a crucial part of the puzzle as our economy recovers from the impact of the pandemic.

That leads me to my third point. The beating heart of the west end is our significant cultural offer.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Member agree that major tourist attractions in her constituency and in mine, such as the London Eye, rely on visitors and tourism from across the world? Does she agree that the Government need to consider business rates relief, additional employer contributions on furlough and flexible loan repayments, all of which need to be in place over the summer to help businesses once lockdown restrictions are eased?

Nickie Aiken: The hon. Lady makes the clear point that tourist attractions in central London, whether in her constituency or in mine, are suffering due to the lack of international visitors.

Theatres in particular have a significant multiplier effect for the local economy. It is estimated that people who buy theatre tickets will spend up to five or six times more in the local economy, whether in restaurants, hotels or wherever. To remedy the situation, we should urgently address several areas in our recovery from covid-19, which will no doubt have a significant impact on the central London ecosystem.

First, and in light of recent decisions, I ask the Government to give due consideration to a Government-backed insurance scheme to help event organisers plan for the risk of covid-19-related cancellations. Indeed, UK Theatre's May 2021 survey of members' planned economic activity up until June next year on productions, both planned and currently running, was 67% of 2019 levels. Of that, 66% was planned for stage 4, which has now been delayed. Without a Government insurance package, theatres expect that proportion to fall to around 35% to 50%, which will be a devastating hit to both the sector and those who rely on its influence to draw in consumers.

Secondly, UK Music noted that extending the 5% VAT freeze on cultural tickets until the end of the financial year 2021-22 would go a long way to incentivise activity in the capital and support investment. Indeed, by keeping VAT low the Government will be allowing more money to be invested into venues, recapitalising and paying off pandemic debt—we know how much pandemic debt many of these companies have.

On another note, I am glad that the Government's tourist recovery plan, launched this month, acknowledges that London is the gateway for international tourism and, as such, is an integral part of the wider UK

levelling-up agenda. Support and investment for central London must reflect that and help mitigate its reliance on high-volume footfall from tourists and workers. In central London, international visitors account for 50% of all spending, even though they make up only 25% of visitors. With the international travel market not likely to start growing again until early next year—possibly into spring next year—shops will open with the return of all the costs that entails, such as business rates, rents and employee costs, but they will not yet have the major customer footfall spending money in their premises. That will put new pressure on businesses that have already exhausted their reserves.

How can we mitigate that? It could be as simple as allowing Sunday trading hours to be extended from 6 pm to 8 pm in the international centres of the west end and Knightsbridge in order to accommodate new patterns of opening hours. I raise this now because, prior to the pandemic, few theatre productions ran a Sunday matinee, for example. Now, however, theatres are increasingly looking at scheduling Sunday matinees and it is likely that Sundays could become as busy as Saturdays, and with that comes increased need for the consumer.

With most other global international centres—New York, Dubai, Tokyo, Beijing, Hong Kong and even Edinburgh—having no restrictions, we are at a competitive disadvantage in London. Allowing longer Sunday trading in an international centre would have a localised impact of up to £290 million net in additional sales, and 2,000 full-time jobs. That is not to be sniffed at. The support measures would cost the Government nothing but could mean the world to businesses in London.

I also urge the Government to work with businesses to seek new ideas and encourage more visitors, especially high-spending ones, to our areas. Most experts estimate that international tourism will not return to 2019 levels until 2023 at the earliest. The Government should do all they can to accelerate tourists' safe return, with plans to promote London globally as a place to visit and do business.

On a similar note, how office workers react post pandemic will be important for business recovery in the capital. The Government need to do all in their power to stimulate a safe return to the office. Right now, only about 10% of office workers have returned to full-time work in central London, which is woeful. Business representatives from across my constituency, and from multiple sectors, all concur that they do not expect to see any big return until at least September—that is three months from now, and costs will be increasing from next week.

What I find most concerning about this situation is that the shortfall in workers returning to the office is due to a distinct lack of confidence in public transport and changing work practices. As we emerge from the pandemic, the Government must help by encouraging the return to work and encouraging confidence in the safe use of public transport. It is imperative for Government Ministers to encourage civil servants in their Departments to lead the charge and to come back to their desks. I appreciate that we will not see the same volume of office workers over the summer and into the autumn, but even seeing a return of working on a flexible basis—say, two or three days or week while we recover in the short term—would have a huge impact on the economy of

central London. For that reason, I welcome this week's announcement by the Government of the new flexible season tickets. Within London, we need a robust transport system that commuters are confident to use again, with the Mayor working constructively with the Government to ensure that is the case.

I will leave it there for now, because I am confident that London will recover from the covid-19 pandemic, as it has recovered from previous shocks, be they plagues, fires or world wars. I want to see London getting some recognition from central Government for the key role that it plays in supporting the UK's economy, and we need that recognition to be married to a clear vision for business recovery in central London.

11.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) on securing this really important debate. I thank her for all the work that she is doing to engage with businesses and ensure that their voices are heard in this place and across London through the Mayor, the Greater London Authority and all the boroughs. It is so important that, as she says, we work together really constructively in this area, because that is the only way we will bounce back.

As my hon. Friend says, London normally bounces back every time. It normally leads the charge in the UK for bouncing back from adversity and every recession. I have no doubt that the same will be true this time, but rather than leading the way, it is clear from the feedback we are getting from the cultural and hospitality sectors that London is lagging behind, and my hon. Friend outlined some of the reasons why.

London is three times the size of the next biggest European city, never mind UK cities, so it has a centre of gravity that is mainly based on public transport. We must give people the confidence to come back in, as my hon. Friend says, and enjoy the benefits of being in the workplace and what London has to offer. It goes beyond confidence: I describe it as confidence and joy. We can get people back in the first time, but if things are too onerous and difficult in hospitality terms, they will perhaps go back and rely on a ready meal and a bottle of wine in their back garden. That might be great every now and again, but it is the last thing we want if we are to help London's recovery and ensure that it remains the greatest city in the world in which to live, work and bring up a family, and to really enjoy.

I have lived on the outskirts of London for the best part of 30 years, and the greatest thing about it is that I can enjoy the green spaces and schools in outer London, and raise a family there, but I have London on my doorstep. As well as the benefits of the suburbs, I have the benefits of the city—the theatres, the London Eye, as the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) said, and the restaurants that rival anything available elsewhere in the world. We can go around the world within the few square miles of Greater London. That is so important.

When we talk to business that are encouraging people—or not, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster said—back into their workplaces, we have to remind them that London

and the businesses that serve people in their workplaces cannot sit there and wait. They cannot survive on fresh air. They cannot be there for people if people do not come back and use them. That is why it is important that we encourage people to come back into London. London generates 25% of the GDP of the entire country, and the west end generates 4% of the country's gross value added—that is before we get to the City and Canary Wharf. That is testament to the work of my hon. Friend and all the people she engages with; it is important that we celebrate and showcase it.

My hon. Friend talked about business rates. Clearly, London has a particular issue because of the cost of property here, and the business rates that follow. She will be aware—she referenced this—that we have a fundamental review, which is due to report back in October. I hope it is as fundamental as it suggests. My hon. Friend is right that, due to property costs, business rates particularly affect London.

One of the things that I discovered as I was working through the covid support measures that we were putting in place is that the grant system—seemingly the easiest system to deliver—still had its challenges. It was seemingly the easiest because local authorities across the country knew exactly who qualified, because in the first tranche of grants they knew which retailers, who in the hospitality sector and which small businesses were getting small business rates relief. However, they did not have the bank account details or know who to pay it to. The challenges were about fundamental things such as that. Sometimes the local authority's relationship with its local businesses was not quite as close as it might have liked and expected. We have had to work through all those unintended consequences at pace over the past year, which led to me speaking to something like 112 local authorities across the country to see what more we could do to help them along.

In London, there was the grant scheme. I am pleased that with all these schemes, we were able to flex, following representations from colleagues such as my hon. Friend, to iron out some of the unintended consequences. Indeed, the early discretionary grants were based on the residents living in those areas. That obviously affected my hon. Friend's constituency. There are not that many people living in the City of London, but there are a lot of businesses. That was an unintended consequence that we were able to correct in later iterations of the discretionary grants. That is testament to the fact that we have been able to flex and work in what were, frankly, completely unprecedented times. We have had to work at pace to change and develop the support accordingly, and we will continue to do that.

We have put in £352 billion to date—it is £407 billion when the various types of fiscal support are included, with the following year to come. As a small-government, free-market Conservative, having just made one of the biggest interventions since the second world war, that gives me 407 billion reasons why we have to get the next bit right. Having protected those jobs, businesses and the spirit of London, we have to make sure that we keep those gains.

Florence Eshalomi: I thank the Minister for giving way and for his crucial point on jobs and opportunities. Obviously, today we celebrate the 73rd anniversary of Windrush Day and the contributions of so many people

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

who came to the UK to rebuild our country on the back of the war. Does the Minister agree that many people who work in businesses in his constituency and mine, and in that of the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), rely on people from a diverse range of backgrounds? What more assurance can he give to struggling businesses that want to help Londoners get back to work, but that are struggling financially?

Paul Scully: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. My father came over not on Windrush, but from the other direction—from Burma—in the 1950s, at around the same time. He completed his apprenticeship here in the UK, having started it in Rangoon, as it was, after the war. At the time, he had that shared experience of helping Britain to recover through his engineering work. The interesting point that she raises about how we support that particular section of the workforce is crucial—I talked about the spirit of London—in making sure that we get the recovery right for everybody.

I have talked about the Mayor of London, and my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster is absolutely right that we have to work constructively together. Now we have the London elections out of the way, although we will always do party politics and the ding-dong, we have to make sure that we collaborate closely together.

My fear has always been that he wanted to have the title of Mayor, but did not work out which city he wanted to be Mayor of. It is important that he is the Mayor for all London; otherwise, we will have a Gotham City scenario. Frankly, I do not think he would mind it if he was the mayor of Gotham City. What do I mean by that? In Gotham City in the Batman movies—“Joker” and so on—there is the holistic city that has the ultra-rich, who can be insulated from all these sorts of things, because they have the money to be able to support it. There are then the lowest-paid in society—the people who service all the workforces and workplaces, and who have to travel into the middle of town. There are then those in the middle, who live in areas like mine on the suburbs and outskirts, who can opt out. They can sit in their back gardens with their ready meal and a bottle of wine, and shop locally in their outer London high streets, which are starting to bounce back quite well.

That leaves a massive gap in the city centre—in the central activity zone, as it has slightly unromantically been titled over the last few years. Essentially, that is the west end, the City of London, Canary Wharf and those areas that people around the world know so well. People look to London, invest in London and want to travel to London because they know those areas. Those are the areas we see in the films and tourism brochures.

We then get to the question: how do we attract international visitors to go into those areas and beyond, across the UK? That is why the tourism recovery strategy is so important in making sure that we start that slow burn, because we know that it will take time to get international visitors back to the UK. However, we must do it.

We also have to get domestic tourists to London. That is why I absolutely agree with the Mayor that his campaign, Let's Do London, is a far better campaign

than we have had in previous re-openings after lockdown. It is a real call to action. If one looks around London, whether at the London Eye, the Tower of London—which I had the privilege of going to the other day—the Museum of London, the British Museum or the Royal Opera House, there are no queues. People who live in the south-east and who walk past those areas on their way to work or when they are in the workplace should go to them, because they will not have another chance to do so with no international tourists and without having to queue up for half an hour. They can see some of the best places, the best cultural buildings and the best institutions in the world right on their doorstep. That is what Let's Do London is all about—getting people to rediscover the spirit of London.

There are two more types of people we want to encourage back, as we start to reopen. One is students. There are 40 universities in London—a massive chunk of organisations that attract young people who will want to spend more time in London after their studies. They will get jobs and fill some of the roles in the City and elsewhere that my hon. Friend spoke about. We also want to get people back into their workplaces.

The Prime Minister rightly wrangled with the decision over when to reach stage 4 of the road map. He did not make that decision easily because there were so many factors to consider, but it was the right one to take when making the argument that we want to ensure that we are moving in only one direction. The big lesson of last year is not to chase the virus and not to have the stop-start, because that costs businesses even more. A cautious reopening, put back a few weeks, is the right thing to do.

However, one of the unintended consequences of moving the reopening to July is that that leads quickly to August, which tends to be a quiet month for London. We want to ensure that we are working with big employers now, and looking at what more we can do to be flexible and encourage people back to their workplaces.

I am glad that my hon. Friend welcomed the flexible season ticket. We are demonstrating—not just doing it—that Transport for London has never cleaned the tube network as many times before. The problem is that that is being done at 2 o'clock in the morning, so we need to show people what is being done. Public transport is safe. I have been taking it most days for the past year and I have never worried about it. I encourage people to try it and see for themselves. They should spread their journeys out beyond rush hour to maintain space, because hands, face, space and fresh air are still important. We are not going to kill the virus in one day when we reopen and get to step 4. This is not like a thriller where the baddie is killed and the credits roll. We are going to be living with this for some time, but that is no reason to stay closed.

Finally, my hon. Friend talked about Sunday trading. I have been speaking to the Heart of London Business Alliance and the New West End Company about that. It is a tough one. We have looked at it time and again in Parliament, and it has always been incredibly controversial. Although she talks about international centres for it, it still needs primary legislation. We will keep it under review and work with colleagues to see what the objections are and get the balance right.

We will continue to look at what we can do with business rates. My hon. Friend talked about VAT. Something like £27 billion of support has gone into the

VAT reduction. The Chancellor needs to look at measures in the round and holistically, just as she talked about looking at London holistically.

London is an ecosystem. People do not stay in a hotel in London just to sleep in another bed; they do it because of the theatres, the restaurants and all the other things London has to offer. That is what we have to protect. We will continue to try to do that, working together with the Mayor, the boroughs, this place, and our businesses and communities.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Welsh Rural Economy

[JUDITH CUMMINS *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Judith Cummins (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 debates. 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 also remind Members participating virtually that they must leave their cameras 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. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and before they leave the room. I also remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall.

2.31 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the Welsh rural economy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I am honoured to lead today's debate on the future of the Welsh rural economy, itself an integral and culturally vital component of the very identity of Wales. This year, 2021, has been one of extraordinary challenges for the Welsh rural economy. Agriculture is awakening to the cold long dawning of a new restrictive trading agreement with our largest export market, the European Union, while tourism and hospitality are enduring the sudden deep freeze and slow defrosting of covid-19 restrictions.

Our communities are facing a series of interlinked crises and interwoven threads of inequalities. There is an environmental and climate change crisis, there is a public health crisis and there is an economic crisis. More than a decade of Tory austerity casts a shadow over our communities' capacity to respond and to develop resilience. Communities such as mine in Dwyfor Meirionnydd suffer from youth depopulation, while the young people who wish to stay can no longer afford to get on the housing ladder. Wages are among the lowest in the UK. Meanwhile, former family homes become luxury second properties or investment holiday rentals in a febrile market.

Today's debate is therefore a timely opportunity to consider how the political tectonic shifts of the last five years are changing the Welsh economic landscape, even as their legacy becomes intertwined with the unprecedented and thus unpredictable social and economic results of a global pandemic in a world dependent on global trade. I hope that all of us here will be able to take just a step back and consider what success looks like and to have the humility to recognise that, mere politicians as we are, we will have failed in our duty to our constituencies in the here and now, and to the future children of Wales, if we are satisfied with short-term glories that leave no lasting legacy while failing to remedy the evident injustices of the present.

[Liz Saville Roberts]

The Welsh rural economy plays a pivotal role in the wider Welsh economy, accounting for 28% of the economic output across Wales in 2019. It is the heartland of key export industries, including Wales's highly successful food and drink sector. Yet such economic successes have failed to translate into real economic gains for rural communities or attention by both UK and Welsh policy makers. If this is trickle-down economics in action, we are experiencing a drought. The gross value added per capita of Welsh rural areas was just £18,000 in 2019, significantly below the Welsh average of £21,295 in 2019, and also far behind the UK average of £29,599. That is reflected in low pay, with my home county of Gwynedd a rural area where 31.4% of employees—the highest proportion in Wales—earn below the real living wage.

Disturbingly, this is being translated into worse life outcomes for our youth. The spectre of child poverty, which has risen in 20 of Wales's 22 local authorities, is particularly acute in rural areas such as Pembrokeshire, Ceredigion, Powys and Carmarthenshire, and a recent report by the Rural Youth Project suggested that 68% of Welsh rural youths struggle to find work in their local communities. We do our communities a deep disservice if we just shrug our metaphorical shoulders and say, "Well, that's how it has always been"—that somehow we in Wales should be resigned to our children leaving, because all the glittering prizes have always been elsewhere, and that we had better knuckle down and accept that, to Westminster, some places are just more deserving than others.

As I have already mentioned, the combined disruption of Brexit and the covid-19 pandemic has hit key sectors of the Welsh rural economy disproportionately hard. In my role as a commissioner on the UK Trade and Business Commission, I have heard at first hand how Welsh small and medium-sized enterprises located in rural communities have lost market share, and whole export markets in some cases, due to the trade disruption caused by Brexit. Equally, the pandemic has caused untold hardship for hospitality businesses across the UK, but especially in rural areas such as Dwyfor Meirionnydd, where hospitality and accommodation employ 27% of the total local workforce.

Policy makers therefore have a key role to play in ensuring that the Welsh rural economy is at the forefront of Wales's economic recovery. Plaid Cymru local authorities, such as Carmarthenshire County Council, have led in that regard, implementing clear strategies such as furthering business scale-ups and improving transport links and access to housing. However, the UK Government are hampering our efforts to develop a more vibrant and sustainable rural economy. Time and again, Plaid Cymru has tabled amendments to Finance Bills, asking the Treasury to consider how to channel investment into Wales and its rural economy more effectively and coherently and, perhaps most importantly, with a long-term vision. Instead, the UK Government have replaced the needs-based funding investment formula adopted by the EU, which was formerly a significant investor in the Welsh rural economy, with competitive UK-wide schemes that ignore rural need and disadvantage Wales. Such schemes not only fail to honour Conservative manifesto promises to Wales, but lack a collaborative and future-focused strategy to further Welsh economic development.

Let us go back to the word "competitive", because it is a word that the Tories like—winner-takes-all, macho stuff to make headlines. Let us unpick the meaning of "competitive" in this context. It is setting communities against each other—winners and losers in a political popularity contest—and does not begin to recognise need. This is about the Tories wanting to have their cake and eat it—every last crumb. Adding to the injury is the fundamentally flawed United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, which acts as a vortex deliberately set in motion to dismember the principle of subsidiarity. It is a terribly long word, but it means pulling apart the integrity of Welsh devolution, which the people have supported again and again whenever they have had the opportunity. After vesting Westminster with powers that previously were clearly and exclusively at the disposal of our Parliament, we now even see limitations on how Welsh public bodies can purchase from local Welsh companies, removing a key pillar of support from local Welsh food producers and hospitality businesses.

The Conservatives' austerity has indirectly resulted in local authority budgets in Wales shrinking by 17% and led to the loss of public services that are so central to our communities in rural areas, and the UK Government are now actively encumbering Welsh rural authorities. Consequently, although many key drivers of the Welsh rural economy are devolved, Westminster is failing where it is encroaching. That is why I urge the Government to work with, rather than against, Welsh institutions to help them deliver locally informed economic strategies that will further, rather than hamper, the Welsh rural economy. Anything else will ensure only that stagnating rural incomes, rising rural poverty and youth migration will continue unabated.

No issue better encapsulates the consequences of such an outcome than the worsening second home crisis in Wales. The low incomes and poor economic prospects of rural communities have left them unfairly exposed to the rapid increase in house prices and second home ownership across the UK. It is not an overstatement to say that this has created a situation of pervasive exclusion of local workers and younger members of communities from their local housing markets.

In Gwynedd, for instance, approximately 40% of houses that go on the market every year are now bought as second homes. In the village of Cwm-yr-Eglwys, Pembrokeshire, there are now only two permanent residents—the rest of the 50 houses are holiday homes. This not only has dire ramifications for local public services and distortionary implications for the local economy, but fundamentally means that local workers, especially the young, find it almost impossible to stay in their local communities. That is why I welcome action by Plaid Cymru-led local authorities, such as those in Gwynedd, Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire, to increase revenue through second home council tax premiums to fund local housing initiatives, and I urge the Welsh Government to work with Plaid Cymru to address this issue urgently.

Fundamentally, however, we need to improve the resilience of the Welsh rural economy itself. Last week's headlines alone were an unwelcome reminder of the urgency of doing so, as they announced a bad trade deal with Australia. This could well establish a disastrous precedent for Welsh agriculture, as well as increase the growing risks posed by climate change, as described by the Climate Change Committee.

On the subject of trade, I urge the UK Government to involve the Welsh and other devolved Governments closely in the negotiation of new trade deals, particularly as economic development in key sectors such as agriculture are devolved competencies. As my Plaid Cymru colleagues, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), have argued, the deal with Australia threatens to undercut our local farmers, hollow out our rural communities and damage our climate.

Equally, our net zero pledges require urgent action to decarbonise our rural economy and build upon its key strengths. Wales is an energy-rich nation, yet we lack not only the borrowing powers to finance nationwide developments, but a modern energy transmission grid that would allow local renewable energy developments to feed electricity into it. That hampers the ability of actors ranging from farmers to local authorities to decarbonise and make the best use of Wales's natural resources for our common good. Those are just two issues, but I hope that today's debate will further this much-needed discussion on improving the rural economy's resilience.

The Welsh rural economy has a pivotal role to play not only in ensuring Wales's post-pandemic recovery, but in ensuring that we meet our net zero obligations as sustainably and rapidly as possible. The Welsh rural economy is a vital component not only of the wider Welsh economy, but of Wales as a nation. It is the heartland of the Welsh language; the origin of some of our finest food and drink; the guardian of the sustainable use of our environment; and, of course, the destination for tourists worldwide.

Plaid Cymru is calling for the UK Government to work with, rather than against, the devolved Governments, by involving and engaging with them, whether on regional and rural development funds or in trade negotiations. We urge both the UK and Welsh Governments to support Plaid Cymru's proposals to address the second home crisis and, in order to meet our net zero objectives, to give us the borrowing and regulatory powers needed to develop Welsh renewable energy projects and connect them to a newly upgraded electricity transmission network.

Not only are these goals achievable; they are undeniably necessary to support our Welsh rural economy and allow it to flourish. If our communities are to withstand the unprecedented and interlinked crises ahead, resilience must be built into our economy in the long term. The Westminster Government have failed time and again to show they have the ambition or the ideas to do so, but today's debate provides them an opportunity to set out a coherent strategy for supporting the future of the Welsh economy. I look forward to a constructive debate. *Diolch yn fawr.*

2.43 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I thank the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) for securing this important debate on the future of the Welsh rural economy.

My constituency of Ynys Môn has one of the lowest GVA rates in the UK. It is heavily dependent on tourism, and haemorrhages young people when they leave school because of the limited local employment opportunities. Frankly, if any part of Wales needs an economic revival,

it is Anglesey. In the past 21 years, since the Senedd was established, and with a Labour Welsh Government, the island has systematically lost major employers, including Anglesey Aluminium, the Wylfa nuclear power station, Octel and Rehau, with huge job losses. We have seen next to nothing from the Welsh Government to address these issues. As such, I am campaigning to bring a freeport to Anglesey.

The benefits incumbent with freeport status would encourage inward investment and employment on the island. I already have businesses, such as Tratos, keen to set up on Anglesey, should we get freeport status. This would mean hundreds of jobs waiting to be created, yet the Welsh Labour Government are digging in their heels and refusing to launch the Welsh freeport bid prospectus. The people of north Wales can only look on as Liverpool establishes itself as a freeport and businesses that could have come to us go instead to England.

Even our farming community suffers when the Senedd votes in legislation creating a whole-Wales nitrate vulnerable zone at an estimated £360 million cost to Welsh farmers, putting local farms at risk of financial ruin.

Anglesey has been sidelined by a Welsh Government who have no concept of the issues facing the island and no local presence. It therefore falls to the UK Government to pick up the pieces of the Welsh rural economy—a job that they are taking on with gusto. Let me give a few examples of the support being given to Ynys Môn. The Secretary of State for Wales was very clear when he gave evidence to the Welsh Affairs Committee last week: if the Welsh Government will not commit to setting up a freeport in Wales, then the UK Government will. There is massive support locally for a freeport on Anglesey and we are putting together an exciting and innovative bid, led by Stena, which has the potential to transform the future of our island. I urge the UK Government to take this forward as quickly as possible.

The levelling-up and community renewal funds have been opened by the UK Government with millions of pounds available for investment. The community renewal fund gave me the opportunity to work directly with the Isle of Anglesey County Council and to build relationships with them. The island's head of regulation and economic development, Christian Branch, and his team submitted a fantastic range of projects last week, which will generate local jobs and boost the economy directly and indirectly. Our council will also receive over £140,000 in capacity funding to help it generate excellent quality bids for these funds.

We are working hard to bring new opportunities here. In his March Budget speech, the Chancellor announced £4.8 million of funding for the new Holyhead hydrogen hub. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be on the island next week to meet M-SParc and the Minister for Science to discuss bringing the cutting-edge thermo-hydraulic facility here. I am also in talks with Rolls-Royce about bringing SMRs to the island as well as continuing discussions about potential developers for Wylfa Newydd.

The trade deals that the UK Government are working on will open up new and exciting markets for our farmers. Countries keen for our high-quality produce are coming online. Earlier this month, the Minister for Trade Policy spent 50 minutes speaking to farmers on Anglesey, in English and in Welsh, about those opportunities. He was

[Virginia Crosbie]

also happy to reassure them that scaremongering on food standards is incorrect and that standards will not be compromised by imports.

The UK Government are also committed to levelling up communications and transport infrastructure. They are delivering the shared rural network to improve 4G coverage and have committed £5 billion to support the roll-out of broadband through Project Gigabit. The Union connectivity review by Sir Peter Hendy highlighted the need for investment in road and rail infrastructure right across north Wales. All these moves by the UK Government will contribute to levelling up our rural community on Anglesey by giving businesses and individuals better access where they have been failed in the past.

Anglesey needs good-quality, well-paid jobs. This is how we stop our young people leaving; how we stop the decimation of the Welsh language; and how we preserve our local communities, our language and our heritage. I see great opportunities for the Welsh rural economy with the moves being made by the UK Government, and I look forward to seeing the fortunes of Anglesey reversed as a result. *Diolch yn fawr.*

2.49 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC) [V]: *Diolch, Mrs Cummins; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I would first like to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) for securing the debate, and commend her for such a passionate speech—I agree with the sentiments wholeheartedly. A particular challenge that rural Wales faces, and on which I would like to focus my remarks this afternoon, is a lack of connectivity, in digital and in transport, between our rural economy and the rest of the UK, and the wider global market.*

Digital connectivity remains a tremendous challenge for the rural economy of Wales. Ofcom's "Connected Nations" report in 2020 noted that nearly 9,000 premises in Wales cannot access a decent fixed broadband service or get good 4G coverage indoors, with almost all those premises in rural areas. More recently, NFU Cymru and others found that less than 50% of those who lived in rural areas said they had standard broadband, only 36% had superfast broadband, and 66% said that they or their household had been impacted by poor broadband.

That has dire consequences for constituencies such as mine, where only 20% of the population live in an urban area. In the rural areas, it is estimated that 26.5% do not receive a decent broadband connection—by that, I mean a download speed of 10 megabits per second—compared with the Wales average of 11.9% and the UK average of 9.3%.

That is largely to do with the UK Government's difficulties in delivering a digital infrastructure strategy that works for rural communities in Wales. The Government's Future Telecoms Infrastructure Review proposed an "outside in" approach, to ensure that gigabit-capable connectivity across all areas of the UK is achieved at the same time, so that no area is systematically left behind. However, the UK Government's reduced target of gigabit broadband coverage of 85% by 2025 is to the detriment of rural communities, which yet again will have to wait for improved connectivity.

The original plan would have been a big boost to people living in rural communities struggling on speeds below 30 megabits per second and the Government have already admitted that reaching the final 1% of very remote homes could be prohibitively expensive. That is without even addressing the excess costs facing rural communities under the universal service obligation, which offers a maximum of £3,004 to a single premises, well below the costs being quoted to connect some of my constituents in Ceredigion. To make matters worse, schemes that exist to address rural connectivity, such as the broadband upgrade scheme, need greater co-ordination between the Welsh Government and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport if their potential is to be realised.

Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire were included in the pilot broadband upgrade scheme, which proved successful locally in aggregating community demand for better broadband in such a way as to encourage alternative network providers to bid to undertake upgrade work in some of our most rural communities. A number of these companies have shown an interest in connecting communities across Ceredigion. However, despite working successfully with local residents, they have encountered a range of difficulties, foremost among which were data problems that saw entire communities being deemed ineligible for gigabit voucher support due to their sharing a postcode area with a solitary premises that had benefited from broadband upgrade work, despite the fact that they themselves were struggling on less than 3 megabits per second.

More recently, a number of proposals to connect communities have been thrown into uncertainty due to the announcement that commercial roll-outs might be possible in these areas in the next four or five years. No detailed plans have been announced, but the eligibility criteria for gigabit voucher funding mean that, due to this announcement, proposals already under development as part of the broadband upgrade fund may no longer be viable. So the communities affected are thrown into yet another limbo in their quest for decent broadband.

Compounding this debacle is the fact that the Government's policies for addressing better mobile connectivity in rural areas are also not delivering. The shared rural network, for instance, uses many of the emergency services network sites run by the Home Office. The delay by the Home Office in constructing new masts and connecting existing masts is denying rural communities in Wales the opportunity of improved connectivity now.

Just as important as digitally connecting our rural economy is the need to decarbonise our transport system rapidly and responsibly reduce private car use. Local authorities in Wales have a vital role to play in developing and supporting local bus networks, such as Bookabus. However, such services do not come cheap. In Carmarthenshire alone, over 85% of local transport routes in rural areas are subsidised to some degree, with the average subsidy in 2019 in Carmarthenshire per passenger being £3.63. As such, it is simply not enough for the Governments on either end of the M4 to call for improved active travel or the adoption of electric vehicles if they are not also prepared to invest in the necessary infrastructure and improved public transport.

In sum, better supporting our rural communities' connectivity, both digital and transport, is pivotal to securing the future and resilience of the Welsh rural economy. All areas, all communities—indeed, all nations of the UK—deserve equal treatment, so I hope the UK and Welsh Governments will do their utmost to secure the investment and, where necessary, the policy reform to allow our rural communities to fulfil their potential.

2.55 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mrs Cummins. It is an absolute pleasure to speak in this debate and to serve under your chairmanship, I believe for the first time.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) on bringing forward this important debate and setting out so well in her opening remarks the many challenges facing rural communities in Wales. Needless to say, I agreed with everything she said. It was a pleasure to listen to her opening remarks.

Levelling up has acted as a convenient smokescreen for the UK Government on these matters, but we have yet to see a credible strategy underpinning the slogan. In my first Parliament here, in 2010, there used to be “geographical rebalancing”. There was not much geographical rebalancing in the past 10 years, but now we have levelling up. What discussions is the Minister having with the Treasury about how issues facing rural communities will be factored into the metrics used to measure the success of levelling up? We know that work is going on, and we hope that there will be more than just words behind the strategy on this occasion.

One of the key measures must surely be improved connectivity through better transport and broadband infrastructure. On broadband, I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake). The pandemic has proved beyond any doubt that access to broadband is critical, both for economic prosperity and individual wellbeing.

The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of maintaining our physical fitness and provided an opportunity to enable more active travel. In Carmarthenshire, the county council is about to submit a shovel-ready levelling-up fund application for an exciting Tywi valley cycle pathway, linking the towns of Carmarthen and Llandeilo. It has my full support, and I ask the Minister to look into the submission and give his support to what we are trying to achieve in Carmarthenshire.

Moving towards more sustainable models of travel is critical if Wales is to meet our climate targets, yet currently 87% of all journeys in mid-Wales are undertaken by car. To reduce that figure, we must drastically improve our railways. It will come as no surprise to anyone who frequently travels by train in Wales that we have historically received only 1% of rail investment, despite having 11% of the track. I encourage the Minister to look at the submission by the renowned transport expert Professor Stuart Cole to the UK Government's connectivity review. He makes the case for a £20 million investment in the beautiful Heart of Wales line, which connects Swansea and Shrewsbury, and links three of the main market towns in Carmarthenshire, all of which reside within my constituency: Ammanford, Llandeilo and Llandovery. Professor Cole outlines how that investment would improve and increase service provision on the line and bring substantial economic and social benefits.

Notwithstanding my points about decarbonising transport, I believe that there is still an important role to be played by investing in road transport. I cannot miss the opportunity to highlight the very damaging announcement today by the Welsh Government that they will not invest in the Llandeilo bypass—there is a moratorium on bypass developments. There was a cast-iron guarantee for the communities I serve in Carmarthenshire that it would be built by now. There has been obstacle after obstacle, and today's news will be a hammer blow for the Tywi valley.

All too often, rural Wales finds itself at the back of the queue for investment in infrastructure. Our farmers are bearing the brunt of Wales being an afterthought in the UK Government's trade policy. The lamb and beef tariff rate quotas in the proposed trade deal with Australia have confirmed the worst fears that many of us had about the trajectory of trade policy post Brexit. It sets a precedent, and not only for the agriculture sector. Trade deals with far bigger economies than Australia will undoubtedly be more problematic, not just for food but for other sectors such as steel and manufacturing.

Meanwhile, the consequences of Brexit are beginning to bite. Analysis by the Food and Drink Federation of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs data shows that British food and drink exports to the EU fell by £2 billion in the first three months of 2021, with sales of dairy products falling by a staggering 90%. It is time to give up on the spin that those are just teething troubles, and acknowledge that the latest figures show that wholesale dentistry is required in the Trade and Agriculture Commission. An urgent veterinary agreement on sanitary and phytosanitary rules would be one way to remove barriers for Welsh farming exports created by the current Brexit deal, as well as alleviating friction caused by the Northern Ireland protocol.

Reports indicate that at the G7, President Biden offered a trade deal—which I suspect did not include food products—with the US, even if the UK aligned with the EU on food standards. Surely that is too good to turn down, considering the current shambles. Has the Minister made any assessment of whether reports of reduced checks in the Australian trade deal would prevent such an agreement with the EU?

Before I bring my remarks to a close, I would like to touch on another issue that threatens not only to undermine the long-term sustainability of Welsh agriculture and the unique linguistic and cultural traditions maintained by farmers in our country, but completely to change the local landscape. There is growing evidence of Welsh farms being bought by large multinational companies from outside Wales for unregulated woodland planting in order to offset their carbon emissions. Furthermore, rich people from outside Wales are buying up productive Welsh farms and planting them, while coining Glastir support.

Once an agricultural holding is lost to woodland, it will not return. Anyone who recognises the challenges of the climate crisis will support a policy of increased woodland. However, the debate on the issue far too often fails to recognise the contribution that grassland systems play in providing an important carbon sink. I am delighted to see my colleague the hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) here. In Scotland, they have managed

[Jonathan Edwards]

to increase woodland planting without supplanting agriculture, working with their farmers. We need that approach in Wales.

This is a matter for the Welsh Government, which in my view should set a maximum limit based on the national woodland target for tree planting in each farm holding, and ensure that Glastir and woodland planting schemes are available only to actual, active farmers. I am interested to know whether the Minister has come across this issue in Sir Fynwy. I would like to use the debate to call on the Welsh Government to revise their planning technical advice notes, to ensure that woodland planting is done in a manner that preserves our agricultural heritage.

There is also a wider question. Carbon offsets may present a very attractive shortcut for companies to reduce their emissions, but we need to cut emissions in the first place. The UK Government are due to publish a net zero strategy before COP26. Will that address the question of corporations using carbon capture, rather than reducing their carbon emissions?

To tackle the many issues faced by rural communities, the Welsh Government must be empowered with the fiscal levers required to deliver an effective post-covid recovery strategy. That includes reforming the funding formula, greater tax freedoms and increasing the cap on borrowing. Only in that way can we deliver tangible benefits for those living in rural communities throughout Wales.

3.2 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I thank the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) for securing the debate. I speak today as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for Wales. I am sure Members will join me in welcoming my newest colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green), to the House, a proud Welsh woman, as she made clear with her affirmation in Welsh yesterday.

Moving on from yesterday's news to today's debate and the future of the Welsh rural economy, the Welsh high street, like much of the UK, has suffered over the past 15 months. It is obviously right that shops had to close during the pandemic, but now they must be supported in the recovery. When talking about the rural economy, people often assume that it is just agriculture. Although I will turn to that, it also includes those businesses that serve rural communities, for example, local shops. It is vital that those businesses are supported during the recovery, something that my colleague the Liberal Democrat Member of the Senedd for Mid and West Wales has been championing since her recent election.

I ask the Minister to detail what consideration has been given to rural retail generally. In the face of strong competition from online retailers, what measures will be considered to level the playing field in the recovery from the pandemic? As part of that recovery, and as businesses and communities respond to having left the EU, it is vital that communities throughout Wales, particularly those in rural areas, receive investment.

It is only two weeks since I last spoke in a debate in Westminster Hall about the importance of the community renewal and levelling-up funds. Then I asked whether the Minister responding would commit to a meaningful relationship with the Welsh Government on the formation and administration of those funds and, going forward, of the shared prosperity fund. I also asked for assurances that Wales would not lose out on the funding it used to receive. Today, I add to those questions by asking whether the first meeting of the promised inter-ministerial group with the Welsh Government has taken place and whether a statement can be made as to its outcome. If it has not, when will such a meeting take place?

In the previous debate, we were reassured that the stated figure of 5% of allocated funding coming to Wales represented a funding floor, not a ceiling, but I understand from my colleagues in Welsh local government and from my own experience in my constituency of North East Fife in Scotland that it has been arguably more challenging for local authorities under the devolved Administrations to put together bids for both funds, the deadlines for which passed last week, so again I ask the Minister what steps will be taken to ensure that the floor is met even if fewer bids from Wales are received than expected.

Finally, I turn to agriculture. As colleagues have mentioned, there are significant concerns that the Australia trade deal will put the Welsh rural economy at risk. I say "concerns", but perhaps I should say "suspicions", because full details are still awaited. There were recent reports in the media that there will be no tariffs on Australian beef imports until they rise above 35,000 tonnes—six times the current level of imports—or on lamb imports until they go above 25,000 tonnes, which is three times the current imports. Australian animal welfare standards are significantly below ours, which means that people there can produce cheaper products.

This Government say that they support Welsh farmers, but if those reports are true and Welsh farmers are undercut by such produce, how can they be doing anything other than breaking that promise? How does the Minister plan to support Welsh farmers in the light of the Australia trade deal? Sadly, parliamentarians will not be given a vote on the deal when it comes to Parliament, so what opportunities will we have to scrutinise it? I am sure that Welsh farmers, like farmers in North East Fife, have worked very hard over the last few years to diversify their economies. I would hate to see that hard work undone by that trade deal.

Judith Cummins (in the Chair): I call Dave Doogan.

3.6 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Thank you, Mrs Cummins, for your indulgence, given my slightly late appearance at this debate. I apologise to colleagues in the debate and especially to the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) for being slightly late—demonstrating to colleagues that it is literally impossible to be in two places at once.

I am very pleased to take part in this debate, but I will proceed with caution because, despite a very happy 18 months living and working in the Vale of Glamorgan, I recognise my limited knowledge of matters Welsh, and there is nothing more irritating to a Member of Parliament than somebody talking about our part of the world

with less than comprehensive knowledge. But there are very many similarities between the situation that the rural Welsh economy finds itself in and the rural Scottish economy.

I represent a rural ward in Angus in Scotland. There is not so much difference between the Welsh valleys and the Angus glens. I would contend that neither are being particularly well served by the UK Government at the current time, a classic example of that being the Australia trade deal. I will not labour this point. It is a hot topic in the Chamber and in the media. Suffice it to say that the reassurances—if we can call them that—coming from the Department for International Trade and, to a significantly and tellingly lesser extent, from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are very hollow indeed. The supposed safeguards for Welsh producers, Scottish producers and Cumbrian producers of lamb are paper thin. There is also the fact that, watery as they are, they are timebound over a maximum period of 15 years. I wonder what the Government will tell Welsh farmers is going to happen after 15 years. Is the scale of Welsh farming suddenly going to increase after 15 years to the extent that farmers will be able to compete with the colossal enterprises in Australia and, by that time of course, New Zealand, Mexico, Brazil and many other colossal producers?

Liz Saville Roberts: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concerns about the anticipated trade agreement with New Zealand, which we expect to be announced in August? It has seen the precedent set with Australia and, in terms of lamb, this deal looks even more damaging than the present agreement.

Dave Doogan: The right hon. Member is exactly right. We are looking at the thin end of the wedge. I will come on to why this is a function of a disconnect in the current set-up of the United Kingdom, but of course she is right. With my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), I met the Australian high commissioner to the UK about a year ago, and we were assured by him that Australia was not particularly interested in bulk volumes, in terms of exporting lamb to the UK. I did not believe it then and I do not believe it now; it is inconsistent.

New Zealand will follow where Australia leads. Such is the unseemly haste with which the UK Government are pursuing any and all opportunities for international trade, as though it somehow validates the ridiculous and reckless Brexit course, that they will do deals with New Zealand and we will see further attrition in the markets that we currently satisfy from domestic production. It is a very damaging prospect that faces us now.

Yesterday I met NFU Scotland members in Angus. Their issues include the arbitrary discussions around journey times for animals; the trade deals we have touched on today; welfare standards that we must adhere to in this country but that our competitors are not similarly held to; and the availability of seasonal agricultural workers because of the Conservative Government's fundamental ideology of not wanting people to come from outside to support our industries and enhance our communities, despite the negative effect that that has on the rural economies of the constituent nations of the UK. Likewise food standards are now a lottery, depending on the food we buy and the market it comes from.

I had an interesting meeting recently with a renewable energy company that has floating wind farms. It has a tremendous pilot project off the Pembrokeshire coast, and it wants to do something similar off the North sea coast, off Peterhead. The dialogue that it had with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy was so slow that it represents a golden opportunity lost by the Government to open up rural and very rural parts of our economy and to meet our net zero and renewable energy targets. There is a level of disconnect. Even if the company did get the project going, like many renewable projects in mid and west Wales, the feed-in tariffs, although not so bad in Wales, are still appalling, whereas we have energy producers around London paid to connect to the grid. In Wales they will have to pay a couple of pounds per unit, and in Caithness in Scotland, very, very rural communities will have to pay £6 or £7 per unit. BEIS just holds up its hands—"It's not us. It is Ofgem." Such levels of disconnect from central Government in London are not acceptable. They hold our economies back.

As a member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, I take part in good faith and in good spirit when discussing issues that are of no consequence to my constituents because I am a Member of the UK Parliament. I would rather not be, but I am—I wish I was a member of a sovereign Scottish Parliament. What has come through loud and clear is the disconnect and the asymmetry in the representation of the people of the United Kingdom. There is no English Government, but DEFRA is little more than an English Government Department. It has very little locus in the United Kingdom at large, and where it does, it exercises it with indifference and ambivalence. It is a great impediment to our rural communities.

3.13 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mrs Cummins.

I add my congratulations to the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) on securing today's debate. At the start of her speech, she talked about the combined challenges of Brexit, covid and 10 years of austerity, which have had a real negative impact on the Welsh economy, including the Welsh rural economy, and she talked about the pivotal role that the rural economy plays in Wales. She also spoke about the levelling-up fund and the competitive nature of the fund, which was the subject of a recent debate, and her concern—shared by some Opposition Members—about the focus of that funding, which should be based on need and deprivation and issues other than the competitive funding stream that we have seen in recent weeks. As other Members have, the right hon. Lady voiced her concerns about the Australia trade deal and spoke about the need to involve the devolved Governments in this and future trade negotiations, which some of us have been calling for in recent weeks.

The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) talked about the freeports. I agree that it would be a positive step, but I gently ask her to convince her colleagues to offer financial support for Welsh freeports similar to that provided for English ones. I understand Wales gets just a third of the funding available for freeports in England; that difference is clearly not acceptable.

Liz Saville Roberts: I also beg the Government to give us some clarity about exactly which freeport they are talking about in Wales. Holyhead is much mentioned, but there is also mention of Pembrokeshire and the ports there as well, with Milford Haven. It is one thing to praise the virtues of freeports—although we are concerned that they may cause economic displacement—but could we also have greater clarity about exactly which freeport and which place they are talking about in Wales?

Gerald Jones: We do indeed need clarity from the UK Government on freeports, not least on funding but on other issues as well.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) talked about a subject that is close to my heart: the digital connectivity challenges across rural areas of Wales and that striving for broadband upgrade. It is right to recognise that, these days, decent broadband is regarded as a necessity, not a luxury.

The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) talked about sustainability and the need for sufficient investment in railways, comparing the 1% of investment with the 11% of track. He also raised concerns about trade deals and the involvement of devolved Governments in those.

The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) talked about rural shops and retail. She also spoke about the levelling-up fund, which we discussed in this Chamber just two weeks ago, and the assurances that the fund will address the obvious need of our communities in Wales.

Finally, the hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) expressed concerns about the trade deals and how the current discussions do not bode well for future trade deals, not least the New Zealand trade deal, which the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd also mentioned. He also spoke about the level of disconnect with the UK Government.

We all know that Wales has some of the most stunning natural and rural areas of any nation in the world, but we all have a part to play if we are to ensure that those areas can continue to thrive and are protected for future generations. The Labour Welsh Government have used the tools available to them to take action against practices that threaten our environment and rural areas. They have used planning powers on land and sea to oppose fossil fuel extraction, including by maintaining the ban on fracking. They have also pursued ambitious policies to protect the environment, bringing forward a net zero target for Wales, creating a new national forest for Wales and driving forward major renewable energy projects, such as the Awel y Môr offshore wind farm and the world-class centre for marine engineering at Pembroke Dock. In Wales, we have reached the milestone of generating more than 50% of our energy from renewable sources.

As we have heard in the debate today, farmers are on the frontline in the climate emergency. The Welsh Government's sustainable farming scheme will credit farmers for good environmental practices that have not been valued in the market in the past, such as improved soil, clean water and actions to tackle climate change. In Wales, we have protected the terms and conditions of agricultural workers by retaining our agricultural workers' board, in contrast to the Government's decision to

abolish it in England. As we have left the European Union, farming subsidy schemes are being amended. The Welsh Government are committed to ensuring that all funding coming from the UK Government to replace the common agricultural policy and other EU subsidy schemes is retained for that purpose. Yet the UK Government have removed more than £130 million in rural development funding for Wales, which threatens our rural economies.

Finally, we know that the effects of the pandemic continue to be felt across all communities in Wales, right across the UK and further afield. Our rural areas in Wales are no different. Farms and other agricultural businesses have faced extreme pressures. For obvious reasons, a number of rural events have been cancelled over the last 15 months. Agricultural shows, such as the Vaynor show in my constituency and many others, provide an integral opportunity for farmers and agricultural workers to celebrate together our heritage, language and rural communities.

I am pleased that the Welsh Government's Wales farm support group has met throughout the pandemic to consider what can be done to support our farmers and agricultural businesses. Bespoke support has been provided to the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society to support preparations to reinstate shows when it is safe. I welcome this debate and the ongoing discussions with the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd.

3.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): It has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mrs Cummins. Diolch yn fawr iawn i'r Aelod gwir anrhydeddus dros Dwyfor Meirionnydd. Although we obviously disagree and see things slightly differently politically, I acknowledge many of the issues raised by the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) and their importance. I am pleased we are having this discussion on a subject that is of importance to all, regardless of our political persuasions.

I begin by assuring the right hon. Lady, and other Members, that the recovery and renewal of our rural economy is a central part of our strategy to build back better from the pandemic, but also to strengthen the Union—a matter for which the hon. Lady may not share my enthusiasm. The passion evident through all the contributions shows we can agree on other things. We agree that the countryside of Wales is close to the hearts of everyone who lives there, and because of the large proportion accounted for by land classified as rural, it is essential that local businesses in those areas are able to flourish, drive up the economy and create jobs for local people. From the mountains of Snowdonia to the beaches of Ceredigion in Pembrokeshire and the rolling hills of Montgomeryshire, Radnorshire and Monmouthshire, there is a special place in the national consciousness of Wales for its rural locations.

If Wales is to continue to thrive, it is essential that the local economies of rural Wales are able to create good, sustainable jobs—not just jobs, but careers to drive up growth, as I heard on a tour of north Wales. We are committed to levelling up in every part of the United Kingdom, and Wales is certainly no exception. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales and I have

undertaken visits, and my first visit after lockdown was to north Wales to discuss the growth deals and look at the issues the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd has rightly raised today.

The importance of tourism to the area was underlined by the Tourism Network, which says that people do not want jobs; they want careers. The network tells young people to not go into a minimum wage job and stay there until they are sick of it and leave for England or elsewhere. They want people to be offered a career, so that they can go in doing a low-wage job, and at the same time undertake training for bookkeeping, personnel, or whatever, allowing them to become the leaders of tomorrow. That is something we would all want to support.

Before I go into the detail of the UK Government's commitments to Wales, I will reflect on the unprecedented support they provided to businesses and individuals during the covid pandemic. More than 500,000 jobs were protected by the UK Government's support schemes, such as the coronavirus job retention scheme. Billions were provided in Government loans to Welsh firms, and an extra £8.6 billion has been provided to the Welsh Government through the Barnett formula since the start of the pandemic. I was left scratching my head when I heard the First Minister suggest that we had taken money away from the Welsh Government. I am surprised that when he suggested that in an interview he was not asked how much money he received two years ago—the difference is absolutely huge.

Liz Saville Roberts: The Minister mentioned the levelling-up fund and that the Welsh Government have said they now receive less than they previously did. What does he make of the Welsh Government's estimation that they are set to receive as little as £50 million a year, instead of the £375 million they previously got from the EU, under levelling-up agreements?

David T. C. Davies: There is a very simple answer to the right hon. Lady on that point: £375 million a year is the average that the Welsh Government received in structural funds throughout the programme period, and £375 million is what they will continue to receive. In fact, I think it is slightly over that in the next year. That money will continue to come from the European Union over the next two or three financial years, so the extra money she refers to does not replace the structural funds; it is additional to the structural funds, which they will continue to receive. As for tail ends—to use a term that I hear a lot—and that EU money gradually dissipates, it will be replaced by the shared prosperity fund. We are absolutely standing by our manifesto commitment to ensure that Wales receives exactly the same amount after Brexit as it did before Brexit. I am delighted to make that clear.

As right hon. and hon. Members will undoubtedly be aware, the Secretary of State for Wales launched “The UK Government's Plan for Wales” on 20 May. It sets out how we intend to build back from the pandemic by investing in digital and transport infrastructure, providing the right financial backing for green industry, and supporting jobs and growth right across Wales in the coming months and years. As one would expect, the plan had a thread of ambitious projects and initiatives for rural Wales, and I will turn to some of those commitments.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) rightly raised the issue of broadband, as did the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) and many others. Yes, it is a traditional bugbear for our rural communities and, as the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) rightly said, we have realised just how important it is during the pandemic. I entirely agree with most of what has been said in this Chamber. Members are right to hold the Government to account for not quite reaching the speeds in rural areas that we would like, including in my Monmouthshire constituency. I welcome the fact that Ministers are being held to account and being put under pressure on this issue.

However, we have invested £5 billion to support the deployment of gigabit-capable broadband in the hardest-to-reach areas of the United Kingdom, including in Wales. We will be investing £1.2 billion over the next four years. BT Openreach recently announced plans to deliver full-fibre broadband to about 415,000 homes and businesses across Wales over a five-year period. The shared rural network programme, of which the hon. Member for Ceredigion was a bit critical, will deliver 33 new masts, which will hopefully mean that 95% of Wales is covered by 4G by 2026. I make one genuine suggestion to the hon. Gentleman in particular, whom I met recently to discuss the growth deals in mid and west Wales, and the potential projects that may come forward. On a recent visit to Swansea, I saw that connectivity has been made one of the major project areas of the Swansea city deal, as the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr will be aware. When we return shortly, we will look at how the Swansea digital village is developing. My suggestion to the hon. Member for Ceredigion is very simple: encourage the local authorities in the area to make connectivity one of the planks of their growth deals.

Liz Saville Roberts: In my constituency, we are waiting for the Home Office to switch on 10 masts for the emergency services network. That is something the Government could do immediately in the here and now. I urge the Minister to use his good office to good effect, and ensure that we get improved connectivity along those lines.

David T. C. Davies: My officials are following that specific issue with interest at the moment. I suggest that they may wish to draft the right hon. Lady a response, because it seems a perfectly reasonable point to be making.

The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr also mentioned the importance of physical fitness during the pandemic. He is a fine exemplar of that, given that the last time I met him he was just coming out of the gym in the hotel that I had also been in. He practises what he preaches, which is very good.

I shall move on to the support the Government have given to farmers—the bedrock of our rural community. Various Members raised the Australian trade deal, so I will come on to that in a second. I believe that some misinformation has been put out about agricultural funding. Like EU structural funding, it will of course continue to come from the EU for the next couple of years. The UK Government have rightly made the commitment to match the agricultural funding we received

[David T. C. Davies]

before we left the European Union and to ensure that the same amount is received going forward.

The hon. Members for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) and for Angus (Dave Doogan) raised the Australian trade deal, along with various other Members, and I have written down a couple of notes about it. Of course, we received beef imports from Australia as members of the European Union and the total amount that came in last year was about 560 tonnes. According to the AHDB, the amount that we imported in total was around 238,000 tonnes—about 400 times the amount that was coming from Australia. Most of that came from the Republic of Ireland. So if anyone is starting to get a little bit worried about an Australian trade deal, it should be the Irish Government, not British beef farmers. I think the hon. Member for Angus suggested that it could go up six times if we sign the trade deal. Well, we will sign the trade deal, and even if it did go up six times—even if it went up 10 times—it would still be an absolutely tiny fraction of the total amount of beef that we import from Ireland each year.

Dave Doogan: Does the Minister accept that the detail and nuance of this crisis is what it displaces? The volume in itself is one element of the factor, but it is what it displaces because our production costs are far higher than Australia's.

David T. C. Davies: The hon. Gentleman says that, and I have also heard it, but I am not sure I entirely accept it. He appears to have a smartphone in front of him, and I suggest he has a look at the prices for cuts of beef in Coles or Woolworths, which are the two major supermarkets in Australia, and compares them with Tesco. To be honest, by and large the same cuts of beef cost more in Australia. Australian beef costs more on the shelves of Australian supermarkets than British beef does on the shelves of British supermarkets. The idea that Australian beef is ridiculously cheap does not really stand up to much scrutiny.

Liz Saville Roberts: I anticipated that the Minister would make this argument on the price. Will he recognise that Australia has suffered two droughts in recent years? Previously Australian lamb was extremely cheap, at 300 cents per kilo. With the markets in China being as fragile as they are, and Australia perhaps seeking alternative markets, the prices may not remain as high as they are at present. Looking into the future and in the long term, that is perhaps a disingenuous argument.

David T. C. Davies: Looking into the future and the long term, of course that is the case. The level of sterling or the Australian dollar could vary or the markets in China may not be the same, but there is generally seen to be a drive towards greater wealth, not just in China but across the whole of the Asia-Pacific rim, which is driving an increase in the demand for beef and sheep meat. I cannot pretend to look into the future and guess what currency and stock prices might do—if I was any good at that, I probably would not be an MP, as I would be making millions in the City. Based on 560 tonnes coming in at the moment, I do not see that there is anything very much for anyone to worry about, even the Irish farmers, and especially not considering the very

high-quality beef that we produce in Wales, and in Scotland, if I may say so to the hon. Member for Angus.

The danger of ad-libbing means that I have probably used half my speech on that issue, so I will now turn to tourism. It is another area that is of great interest and importance to us in Wales—I think it was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd. I was absolutely delighted when I was in north Wales to be able to sample the first-class tourism that north Wales has to offer. I did so by staying at the brand-spanking-new Hilton Garden Inn, the first Hilton in north Wales, and visiting Surf Snowdonia, which certainly was no hardship for me. I also looked at some of the other tourism projects that are taking place in north Wales, which are all coming about as a result of the growth deals that have been funded jointly by the UK Government and the Welsh Government. We have put £120 million into the North Wales growth deal. We will support the mid-Wales growth deal with £55 million across the region, and I hope tourism will play a part in that and in the other regions of Wales.

We are also very, very ambitious as to what the growth deals can do in helping to support our efforts to become net zero by 2050. The hon. Member for Angus mentioned floating offshore wind. I suspect I know which company he met with and I know it is very enthusiastic about getting floating offshore wind into Scotland and off the coast of Wales. I do not know what is going on in Scotland, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I personally signed off a cheque for some of the money for the Swansea Bay city deal, which will help build infrastructure at Pembroke Dock to enable floating offshore wind companies to trial their products there.

I believe I know which company it is, and I fully support its enthusiasm for dealing with BEIS. However, BEIS is already saying that it will ensure, when the new contract for difference auctions come forward, that offshore wind is part of that mix, so it may be reluctant to talk to specific companies. I can understand why that might be, because BEIS will not want to be seen to be lobbied by or to give preference to any single company, but it has made it very clear that floating offshore wind will be supported through a strike price. That should enable those industries to thrive, which is a very good thing.

Notwithstanding the enthusiasm of the hon. Member for Angus for Scotland, I would like to say that there is indeed huge potential in the coastal areas of Wales. We are absolutely blessed with marine energy potential and we are seeing a number of early-stage schemes looking into that. As well as Pembrokeshire, I should mention the Morlais project in north Wales, which is more about hydro energy than floating offshore energy. I believe that might be one of the first projects that comes forward in the North Wales growth deal—I very much hope so. It is one that I was certainly enthused by, and I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn has done a great deal to lobby me and BEIS Ministers to ensure that that project goes ahead.

Finally, I shall turn to transport, which has also been mentioned by various Members present. I would never underestimate its importance to the rural economy. It is only fitting that the global centre of rail excellence will be on the site of the Nant Helen opencast mine in Onllwyn; that facility will support innovation in the UK

rail industry, including the testing of cutting-edge green technology. That is a real vote of confidence in rural Wales, and one that the Secretary of State for Wales was absolutely instrumental in making a reality. I know how many meetings he personally held with various officials and other Ministers to make sure that that happened.

In addition the UK Government are developing numerous other rail schemes, such as the £2.7 million Cambrian line signalling upgrade, which is due to be delivered by May 2022. The upgrade will enable the introduction of new trains and allow interoperability with other digital signalling schemes. There are also the investments that have been made in new stations, such as Bow Street in Ceredigion; I think the hon. Member for Ceredigion and I were there at the virtual opening of that in February 2021.

There is the £17 million being spent on the Conwy Valley line between Llandudno Junction and Blaenau Ffestiniog to repair and restore it after multiple flood events in the past five years. We are also going through the outline business cases to develop the freight lines on the South Wales relief line, which will mean more trains going between Cardiff and Bristol and will have a beneficial impact on constituents of the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, I am sure. In north Wales, we are beginning the process of the outline business case to improve the North Wales Coast line. So there is a great deal going on to improve transport in Wales.

I take slight issue with the mention by the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr of the much-quoted figure of 11% of the railways and 1% of the funding, because that was simply looking at enhancements. I believe that page 20 of the same report—I may be wrong about that, but it is certainly in there somewhere—makes it clear that, actually, if you look at maintenance operations, renewals and enhancements, the overall figure is closer to around 4%, so it is not quite the headline that the hon. Gentleman states.

Jonathan Edwards: The Minister may not accept my argument on that point, but has he read the statement of funding policy that accompanied the last comprehensive spending review? It indicated that the Barnett consequential share for Wales is plummeting as a result of the Department for Transport spending on HS2, and showed the inequity that Wales faces compared with Scotland and Northern Ireland because of that.

David T. C. Davies: I think the hon. Gentleman is right that HS2 was not Barnettised, and I would be heading off down a branch line myself in terms of this debate if I go into it. Very briefly, virtually everyone here has signed up to the view that we need to become carbon-neutral by 2050. If we are to do that, one of the things that we must do is get people out of their cars and on to trains. If we are to do that successfully, we need to build lines where they will get the maximum number of people out of cars and on to trains, and that happens to be along the HS2 route.

Some expert in the field said to me the other day that it was a pity it was called High Speed 2, because that gives the impression that it is all about delivering a high-speed train. But he said it is not at all; it is about delivering a huge amount of extra rail capacity that will get vast numbers of people out of their cars, off the roads and on to a train, which will be powered by

electricity that should come from green sources. Possibly the name could have been slightly better chosen.

I may have exhausted your patience, Mrs Cummins, so if there are no further interventions, let me thank all hon. Members for an interesting, perceptive debate. If I have not responded to every question, I should be more than delighted to do so if I am reminded of what they are.

The UK Government's commitment to the Welsh rural economy is not in any doubt. It is integral to building back better from the pandemic, as well as strengthening the Union. Our support for the Welsh rural economy is unwavering and I am sure will go from strength to strength in the coming months and years, driving local growth and creating jobs. As we come out of this pandemic as a result of the wonderful vaccine, that it was possible to deliver so quickly as a result of Brexit, the Secretary of State for Wales and I look forward to visiting Wales on many occasions over the coming months and hopefully even years—who knows—in order to see those growth deals in action and to watch levelling up happen before our eyes. *Diolch yn fawr iawn.*

3.20 pm

Liz Saville Roberts: *Diolch yn fawr iawn, Cadeirydd.* I am very grateful for the opportunity to wind up. Members have touched on many points that will be close to our hearts, and close to the hearts and the experiences of people who live in rural Wales.

I would like to return to three issues, the first being the question of connectivity, which many of my colleagues raised. Let us just take a step back. We talked about levelling up and about many of the wonderful, glittering projects that will happen. None the less, there are certain activities, certain functions, that only central Government can do. When it comes to infrastructure and connectivity—whether we are talking about the grid for electricity, or connectivity in terms of mobile signal and broadband—that is where government has to intervene, be that the UK Government or the Welsh Government. If government does not do that in rural areas, it will not happen, and that will not increase the salaries that people are able to draw down in rural areas—as I mentioned, almost a third of the people working in my constituency are under the real living wage. We are talking about raising those salaries to a level where people can afford mortgages, which surely we should use as a mark of success. If we are serious about that, we should be looking at government doing what only government can do.

Secondly, I would like to touch upon the significance of Welsh farmers and their excellent track record in upholding animal welfare standards and turning grassland into the highest standard of protein that we can imagine. We have to maintain food production alongside environmental diversity. Those should not be two contradictory points, but things that we must hold together.

Farmers will be disappointed that in the UK we only have two full-time agricultural counsellors, and farmers actually pay for them by a levy. That compares to, I think, 22 full-time for Australia. Extraordinarily, the Netherlands has 100. If we were looking at that, that really would be the Government putting farmers' interests first. I always like to quote the president of the NFU, Minette Batters, who said:

[Liz Saville Roberts]

“We need a Government that stops doing PR and starts doing policy.”

I will leave that there—it is a very appropriate quote.

A theme that I want to raise, although many aspects of it are devolved, is housing. Housing, for us in rural Wales, is such a symbol. In every street, in every family that I speak to with young people, children—my own children among them—are looking for homes in their own communities, looking for homes in the areas in which they grew up, and being utterly disheartened by the lack of availability, or even the prospect of availability. The market economy has failed them. Competition has failed them, and it is failing and undermining our communities.

That means, of course, that essential key workers cannot afford to live within many of those rural communities. We have care workers who have to keep a car, who cannot afford to keep a car, who then go and work in retail. Yet we have an ageing demographic and we need those workers, but they cannot afford to live in those areas. In the fire service, there are retained firefighters who are working out of the town in which the fire engine in which they work is located, who cannot be on shift when there is an emergency. In the here and now in rural Wales, that is the symbol of how those who seek to govern us are not dealing with the problems that face us every day.

Forgive me: Plaid Cymru MPs are inclined to do this. I will close with the line that sums up this issue for the area of Meirionnydd: “Fesul tŷ, nid fesul ton, bydd colli Meirion”—we will not lose Meirionnydd in one great swoop; we will lose it house by house by house. All that we stand for; all that we love. It is very vulnerable. It is our duty to protect it. Diolch yn fawr iawn.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of the Welsh rural economy.

3.45 pm

Sitting suspended.

Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon

4.5 pm

Judith Cummins (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the new hybrid arrangements. Members are all attending physically, and I remind you to please clean your spaces before you use them and, importantly, before you leave the room. I also remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the situation of Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins, and to have the opportunity to highlight the situation of Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. I want to try to put a human face on some of what I will speak about, and I will start by referring briefly to a constituent of mine, whom I will call Mr N. I will speak about him and his family.

The case of Mr N and his family represents so much that is brilliant about how the UK and the international community support Syrian refugees, but also so much that is awful about the gaps that there still are. Mr N, his wife and his younger children have found safety and a home here in the UK in my constituency, which is of course the brilliant bit. However, the family has suffered too much and many people, including me, would say that we can do more. Not all of what I would term as Mr N's immediate family have made it here. His adult daughter, son-in-law and one grandson remain in Lebanon.

As I will come to, the situation for Syrian refugees in Lebanon is not good, and that has impacted on the family in the most heartbreaking way. There were previously two grandsons. One lost his life after illness at the age of three. Mr N explains that his grandson was initially refused admission to hospital in Lebanon. Even when he was finally admitted, he was left for seven hours without receiving treatment, which the family attribute to his status as a Syrian refugee. That accords perfectly with the evidence from the country, which I will come to.

Of course, the loss of the child has hit the family hard, with Mr N's daughter and wife particularly badly hit. Mr N's daughter had already been vulnerable to mental ill health after her husband had been detained and suffered ill treatment in Syria. They are currently residing in a garage on a farm in Lebanon, where they are working in exchange for accommodation. The family rely on the family here to transfer them money for food and basic essentials. A family reunion application for Mr N's daughter, son-in-law and grandson has been refused, but given his circumstances, I hope that decision can be revisited and reversed. Although I appreciate that the decision is not the responsibility of the Minister's Department, I would be incredibly grateful if he could persuade one of his Home Office colleagues to meet me to discuss the case.

The family's grim existence in Jordan is far from unique. Millions of other Syrians across both Jordan and Lebanon are also suffering. That is a collective failure by the international community, because it cannot be left to those two relatively small countries to take an unbelievably disproportionate share of responsibility

for those who fled conflict and persecution in Syria. The countries are trying hard. There is no doubt that we can ask more of them, but we should ask more of ourselves first.

I will briefly set out a bit more about the situation for Syrian refugees in those two countries and ask what the UK response is, in terms of both aid and taking refugees from the area. Of course, there has been good work in both of those areas, but the Minister will not be surprised to hear that I am deeply concerned about what cuts to international aid mean for the work that is going on there. I am also concerned about the end of the Syrian resettlement scheme, the gaps in the family reunion rules along the lines of those that have hit my constituent's family, and the so-called new plan for immigration. My concern is that it is driving desperate people straight into the hands of people smugglers. I am concerned about what the cuts to aid and all the reforms to immigration will mean when they are added together.

Despite talks of crisis here in the UK or in Europe more generally, it is not our wealthy club of countries that is required to take responsibility for hosting those who had to flee Syria. As ever, that responsibility has fallen on countries such as Jordan and Lebanon. Since 2011, over 5.6 million refugees have fled Syria and sought safety abroad, not only in Lebanon and Jordan but in Turkey, Iraq, Egypt and elsewhere. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that refugee poverty and vulnerability is increasing and that the impact on host communities is growing. Funding for the humanitarian response is not keeping up with need.

UNICEF reports that among those 5.6 million Syrian refugees, 2.5 million children live in those same countries in camps, informal settlements and urban settings among host communities. The situation for those children is sometimes dire. UNICEF says:

“Major challenges remain in realizing the rights of refugee children. Due to the protracted situation and the covid-19 crisis, refugees are vulnerable to several protection risks, including psychosocial distress, child labour and domestic and sexual violence. Economic hardship has led some women and girls to resort to negative coping mechanisms such as child and forced marriage. The socio-economic impacts of covid-19 have also disrupted and reduced access to health care, vaccinations and learning, and increased food insecurity and child poverty, resulting in an overall decline in children's well-being.”

As we have heard, Mr N's grandson obviously struggled to gain access to healthcare, with devastating consequences.

Jordan has provided refuge for over 1.3 million Syrians, which is the third-highest number of Syrian refugees that any country has taken in. Around half of them are registered refugees and around 126,000 of those live in refugee camps, while the greatest number have settled in urban and rural areas, mainly in northern governorates and Amman.

The Assessment Capacities Project's humanitarian analysis programme reports that in Jordan

“almost 6 in 10 Syrian refugees of working age are unemployed. Amid aid cuts and the covid-19 pandemic, most Syrian families are relying on humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs. Before the pandemic, Syrian refugees living outside of camps spent more than two-thirds of their monthly household budget on shelter, leaving few resources for food, health or education. They often resorted to negative coping mechanisms such as cutting meals, child labour, or early marriage. This is a rising concern as more urban refugees and host communities have difficulty accessing basic services and earning an income due to the covid-19 containment measures.”

The UN calculates that 86% of Syrian refugees outside camps in Jordan live below the poverty line and that most of them rely on humanitarian aid to meet their basic needs. Although Jordan is not a signatory to the refugee convention, the Jordanian Government work closely with UNHCR. However, even before the pandemic Jordan was facing record unemployment and slow growth, and things are much worse now.

Before I move on from Jordan, I should also mention in particular the situation just over the border in Syria at the Rukban camp, where humanitarian workers are prevented from accessing 12,000 refugees who are stranded there. I understand that those restrictions have been contributed to by the Jordanian Government, as well as by the Assad regime and Russia. The presence of coalition forces in the area around the camp and border crossing means that they could be well placed—they may even be required—to ensure that aid is delivered, and it would be useful to hear the Minister's response on that.

Lebanon hosts more refugees per capita than any country in the world, including around 1.5 million Syrian refugees. Lebanon was already facing deep economic and financial crises before covid. Not only has the pandemic made things significantly worse, but so too did the explosions at Beirut's port on 4 August last year. The UNHCR reports:

“The protracted nature of the refugee situation with limited self-reliance possibilities, coupled with the impact of these recent crises, have led to an exponential rise in extreme poverty among refugees. According to the 2020 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (VASyR), 89% of the Syrian refugee families are now living below the extreme poverty line, up from 55% in 2019. The situation is creating hunger, increased debt and mental and physical health problems, as well as increasing risks of evictions, exploitation, child labour and gender-based violence. At the same time, the percentage of Syrian refugees holding valid legal residency has further decreased, as the number of refugees able to pay for residency renewal has reduced and fewer fall within the criteria of the 2017 fee waiver. A lack of legal residency exposes refugees to the risk of arrest and detention. It also hampers their access to basic services like education, health care and social services, as well as to obtaining civil status documents such as marriage and birth registration. Non-Syrian refugees without legal residency are particularly vulnerable and at high risk of deportation to their country of origin”.

The scale of the problem with residency rights is huge. Human Rights Watch has suggested that only 22% of the 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon have the legal right to live there, meaning that

“the majority are living under the radar, subject to arbitrary arrest, detention, harassment and summary deportation to Syria”.

Refugees and other vulnerable groups are also being left behind in the covid response, with Syrian refugees dying from the virus at a rate that is more than four times the national average.

I turn now to the UK response. As I say, I acknowledge that some excellent aid work has been funded. The Syrian vulnerable persons scheme has been, on the whole, an absolute triumph. But the question is this: what happens now? Neither Jordan nor Lebanon are on the list of 34 countries that will receive bilateral overseas development aid from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in 2021-22. However, I fully appreciate that other Departments may spend money in those countries, that the UK may contribute to multilateral assistance, and that the list of countries might grow beyond 34. Nevertheless, we really need some information here and now.

[Stuart C. McDonald]

The Minister provided a written answer at the end of April in which he talked about the need for aid to be

“more strategic and remain a force for good”.

However, he did not explain what the implications of that were for Jordan and Lebanon. The International Rescue Committee says its funding for protection work for vulnerable Syrians in Lebanon has been removed. Another programme in the same country, aimed at providing protection services to 107,000 people was cancelled before it could even begin. The Mines Advisory Group has confirmed that all UK funding to support its work there in removing and destroying landmines has been cancelled. That is probably the tip of the iceberg and as much as I could find in the time available. Surely now is the time to increase spending in Jordan and Lebanon, rather than cut it.

Meanwhile, the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Scheme has been closed, having achieved its 20,000 target over five years. A new global resettlement scheme has been announced and is under way, but we know little about its ambitions in terms of numbers or how many it will take from Jordan and Lebanon, the focus of the earlier scheme. If there is no target, how do we budget? How do partners such as local authorities plan?

In the grand scheme of things, the global community is not even beginning to scratch the surface of what needs to be done. As the UNHCR's Ambassador in the UK has said:

“UNHCR estimates that 1.44 million refugees globally are in need of resettlement, but only 22,770 were resettled through UNHCR last year, with 829 arriving in the UK. These are the lowest numbers we have seen in almost two decades—just when refugees' needs are extremely acute and rising”.

Turning to key asks, regarding the family I mentioned, if there is any way the Minister can encourage a Home Office Minister to meet me to discuss that specific case, I would be hugely grateful. Will he also comment on the issues relating to the Rukban camp and humanitarian access? More generally, what is the FCDO's response to the deteriorating situation for Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan? How can now be the right time to cut aid? What impact will that have on people who are forced to seek better conditions elsewhere? What work will he do with UNHCR to achieve its goals in supporting refugees there, including access to protection, to a legal status, to protection from arrest and forced return to Syria, and access to health care, work and support? Will he work with the Home Office to broaden family reunion rules, so that families such as the one I have highlighted can be reunited here? What are the targets for the new resettlement scheme? How many will come from this region? Does not this combination of cuts to aid and a flimsy regime of safe legal routes simply mean that all the more people will feel compelled to use people smugglers—something that none of us wants to see?

In conclusion, these countries may seem far away, but I think we all agree that every country, particularly wealthy countries such as ours, has a responsibility to play our role in supporting the victims of the war in Syria. That also, of course, has an impact here. Syrians continue to flee here, including on dinghies in the Channel. Most importantly, there is an impact on families, such as my constituents, who are already here and settled

and who have seen their loved ones suffering in such a terrible way. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to put these points and the family's case today.

4.17 pm

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): It is a pleasure to serve under you as Chair today, Mrs Cummins. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) for securing this debate. I pay tribute to the work he has done in support of Syrian refugees and the moving points he made about his constituent Mr N and his extended family.

Let us first recall why we are having this debate. Over the last 10 years, Assad's unrepentant and unreformed regime has inflicted untold suffering on the Syrian people and has consistently and deliberately undermined efforts to pursue peace. Over half of Syria's population has been displaced by the violence; more than 6.4 million people have fled their homes and sheltered in other parts of Syria; and over 5.5 million have taken refuge in neighbouring countries. As the hon. Gentleman said, the number that have fled to Lebanon is estimated to be 1.5 million and they make up the largest concentration of refugees per capita in the world.

The UK has a long and proud history of supporting refugees in need of protection and the Syria crisis is no exception. To date, we have committed over £3.7 billion in response to the crisis in the region—our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis. Since 2012, across Syria and the region we have provided over 28 million food rations, over 21 million medical consultations, 6 million cash grants or vouchers, 10 million relief packages and over 14 million vaccinations. Our aid provides life support to millions of Syrians, in support of refugees to remain in countries in the region, and it enables host communities to provide for and manage a protracted refugee presence.

Jordan and Lebanon have shown tremendous generosity in hosting 670,000 and 880,000 registered refugees respectively. As the hon. Gentleman said, that is not the full number of refugees that those countries have had to host. The UK Government recognise that generosity, which is why we have contributed over £720 million in bilateral development assistance to Jordan since 2012, and over £780 million in humanitarian and development funding to Lebanon since the start of the Syria crisis.

In Jordan, our support has provided access to quality education and social protection. It has enabled partners to deliver primary and reproductive healthcare, and specialised care for refugees with disabilities. Over the past three years alone, UK humanitarian funding has helped 65,000 refugees and vulnerable people access mental health services, legal aid and rehabilitation for people with disabilities. Our cash programme has supported around 100,000 refugees with regular cash assistance.

With our support, the Jordanian Government have enrolled 83% of all Syrian children in education, the highest proportion in the region. In Lebanon, since 2011, we have provided 1.1 million people with sustainable access to clean water and sanitation. We have helped provide access to education and psychosocial support to 300,000 children. We have improved infrastructure and services in over 220 municipalities, and we have helped to create 1,300 new jobs for both Lebanese and Syrian communities and supported nearly 400 small and medium-sized enterprises.

Despite the grave economic challenges facing the UK this year, we have continued to provide humanitarian support for the Syrian crisis, as part of our commitment to the region and its overall stability. At the Brussels conference on supporting the future of Syria and the region, in March this year, the UK pledged at least £205 million to the Syrian crisis for 2021. That support will continue to deliver essential, lifesaving and life-sustaining assistance in Syria, and provide vital support in neighbouring countries that host refugees.

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East mentioned our aid. The UK Government are completely transparent about our aid programme. We publish detailed information every year, and this year is no exception. Final audited spending for the 2020-21 financial year will be published in the annual reports and accounts. Final 2020 spending will be published in statistics on international development in the autumn, and will contain detailed breakdowns. I hope that document will allow him to answer some of the questions that he posed at the end of his speech.

Ahead of the publication of those figures, I can explain what our development assistance will achieve in Jordan and Lebanon this year. In Jordan, we will continue to support the most vulnerable refugees with cash transfers for food and basic needs. We will support refugees and vulnerable Jordanians to access services such as legal counselling, child protection services and rehabilitation for people with disabilities. In Lebanon, we will continue to provide those most in need with assistance and protection services to cover essentials, and hopefully reduce gender-based violence, which he alluded to in his speech. We will ensure that Syrian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese people have access to quality formal and non-formal education.

Through our CSSF—the conflict, stability and security fund—we will support vulnerable Syrian refugees to access services and will support initiatives to improve livelihoods, community peace building and reconciliation. Our support for peace-building initiatives is particularly important as the economic crisis in Lebanon puts additional strain on all communities, both Syrian and Lebanese, but we are very concerned about the increase in the critical rhetoric around refugees that we hear in Lebanon, particularly the reports of forced returns.

Although we hope Syrian refugees will ultimately be able to return home, conditions in Syria do not currently allow that to take place, and it is essential that international law is respected and that any refugee returns are voluntary and safe, and done with dignity. We continue to work with the UN on a political process to deliver a lasting peace in Syria. We do not believe the Assad regime,

which has committed so many atrocities against the Syrian people, is capable of delivering that peace. If the regime and its backers want to avoid another 10 years of conflict, they must seriously engage with the political process as outlined in UN Security Council resolution 2254.

When I visited Lebanon in December last year, I stressed to my counterparts, including the then Foreign Minister, that conditions in Syria did not allow for safe, voluntary and dignified returns. I made clear the need to uphold their commitment to the principles of no forced returns. I also stressed to my counterparts the need to grip the economic crisis, which has devastating effects on the already vulnerable Syrian refugee population. The UK is united in agreement with the rest of the International Support Group for Lebanon on the issue. Only the formation of a new Lebanese Government and the implementation of economic reforms can unlock the international financial support required to stabilise the economy.

Finally, I will outline the support for refugees at home. The UK has a long history of supporting refugees in need of protection. Our resettlement schemes have provided safe and legal routes for tens of thousands of people to start a new life here in the UK. Overall, since 2015, we have resettled more than 25,000 refugees through safe and legal routes direct from the regions of conflict and instability, around half of whom were children. On 25 February, we fulfilled our commitment to resettle 20,000 refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria under the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, and we continue to welcome refugees through the UK global protection scheme, as well as through the community sponsorship and mandate resettlement schemes.

Our focus will remain on helping people directly from the region of conflict or instability, thus reducing the drivers for people to put themselves in the hands of evil people-trafficking criminals. That commitment, alongside a fair and firm asylum system, will ensure that we continue to offer safe and legal routes to the UK for vulnerable refugees in need of protection.

For more than a decade the Assad regime has inflicted untold suffering on the Syrian people. It is a source of pride that the UK, as a force for good in the world, is supporting Syrian refugees in countries around the region and at home. We will continue to do so with determination, and with persistence we can, I hope, secure a brighter future for Syria and its people.

Question put and agreed to.

4.30 pm

Sitting suspended.

Planning System Reforms: Wild Belt Designation

4.50 pm

Judith Cummins (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, and there will be suspensions between debates. 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 cameras 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. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and before they leave the room.

I also remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn in Westminster Hall. Members attending physically who are in the later stages of the call list should use the seats in the Public Gallery and move to the horseshoe when seats become available. Members can speak from the horseshoe only where there are microphones.

I aim to start the Front-Bench speeches promptly at 5.35 pm, so an immediate time limit of three minutes, which might need to be reduced as we go on, will apply in order to include everybody in the debate. Please consider keeping interventions to an absolute minimum. I call Claire Coutinho to move the motion.

4.51 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered a proposal for Wildbelt designation in planning system reforms.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. In the UK, we have seen a 41% decline in our species since 1970, and in England one species in eight is threatened with extinction. Wildlife habitats in this country are fewer, smaller and more distant than they ever have been, which is a problem not only for biodiversity, but for our fight against climate change. When nature is working, it can capture carbon, improve our air and water quality, and act as a flood defence. Restoring and protecting our natural system could provide more than a third of the carbon mitigation needed by 2030 to meet the Paris climate agreement. When nature is broken, however, it cannot protect us.

The Government are already taking action. We have an ambitious goal to build a new national nature recovery network in order to create 500,000 hectares of connected wildlife-rich habitat by 2042. To give some context, that is equivalent to 200,000 football pitches. The Prime Minister has also committed himself to protecting 30% of our land and sea for nature recovery by 2030. We are backing up those pledges by investing close to £750 million in the Nature for Climate Fund and restoring wetlands, peatlands and woodlands. Our historic Environment Bill introduces a new biodiversity net gain requirement for development, creating a sustainable funding stream

for environmental improvements and ensuring that, when we build homes for people, we build habitats for wildlife alongside them.

As things stand, the sites of those hard-won green gains, where we are investing in restoring and repairing nature, are not protected under existing designations. In England, we have lots of land designations, but none of them exists to protect nature in recovery. The site of special scientific interest designation is critical for preserving individual sites that have been identified as wildlife hotspots, and the national park area of outstanding natural beauty and green belt designations—many hon. Members have them in their patch—protect landscape and amenity value, but do not directly protect biodiversity value. Although we very much like to spend time in beautiful green fields—I feel honoured to represent a seat with 94% green belt, which I think is the highest total of any seat in England—they can often be quite poor in terms of wildlife habitat. That is why I propose the new designation of wild belt to plug the legal gap and to safeguard our investments.

Wild belt is the brainchild of Craig Bennett, chief executive of the Wildlife Trusts. His proposal would provide longer-term protection for land being managed for nature's recovery—a new designation that goes beyond conserving the nature we have to creating and connecting corridors across the land, making sure that wildlife and the natural environment have the time and space they need to flourish.

One site that would benefit from a new wild belt designation is Holmesdale wetlands in Godstone, east Surrey, which is one of three biodiversity opportunity areas being restored by the Surrey Wildlife Trust to create a connected living landscape across Surrey. All three are exposed under the current system, but could be protected by a new wild belt designation.

Left to degrade, those wetlands would emit carbon to the atmosphere, fuelling global warming, but restored they would be one of the most cost-effective methods of removing carbon—sucking out carbon, sponging up flood risks and enabling the return of a riot of bugs and insects. Those wetlands are a cost-effective natural means to achieve our aims, which is why this work deserves protection.

Across the UK, we see that nature recovery work is creating signs of hope. Take the return of the noble beaver, which is one of the best natural flood defenders, flow regulators and flora supporters we have. The beaver was once native to England, and we are seeing the beaver return after four centuries of extinction in Britain. Last summer, we had another biodiversity boost from the return of the white stork. Extinct for more than six centuries, it is back and successfully breeding in the south-east of England.

Last winter, we saw an ecological miracle on the River Don, which was once considered the most polluted river in Europe—for the first time in two centuries, salmon have spawned. East Surrey's own natural haven, the Lingfield nature reserves, after decades of restoration work by hard-working volunteers, is home to more species of butterfly than are found across Northern Ireland. I am hopeful that our environmental treasure chest will expand again this year with the return of sand martins, nesting in Surrey for the first time in 25 years thanks to the work of the Surrey Wildlife Trust.

Bringing back species will be a key part of helping ecosystems to function, yet the examples I have mentioned are in the minority. We have seen a decline in our hedgehogs because their habitat has become so fragmented that many have struggled to find a mate. We have seen a decline in our bee population, whose abilities we rely on so as to grow food and crops, but the creation of a wild belt could create stepping-stones for our hedgehogs and pollinator pitstops for our bees.

The benefits of wild belt would be far-reaching not only for nature, but for our own health and wellbeing. We have seen time and again, especially during the past year, that people feel better when they are surrounded by nature-rich space. A survey carried out at the peak of the first lockdown last year found that 87% of people agreed with the statement, “Being in nature makes me happy.” The science is pretty clear: having good access to nature can reduce our risk of developing obesity, heart disease and diabetes.

The proposal also makes socioeconomic sense. Poorer households are 3.6 times less likely to live close to nature-rich space than richer households, and it remains the case that poorer neighbourhoods have poorer-quality green space, but by stretching round, through and between England’s towns and cities, wild belt could knock down those barriers and level up green access.

Making sure that we can build the right homes is our moral duty to the next generation and an important part of maintaining this country’s competitiveness in an increasingly competitive world, so it is important that wild belt works alongside housebuilding, not against it. Wild belt would, however, help to address the real concerns of my constituents about species loss, and help us to live in harmony with nature.

Schemes such as the Trumpington Meadows development in Cambridge have synchronised housing and biodiversity ambitions, although it was degraded agricultural land when the housing developer and the wildlife trust came together to build in an ecological way. Now it is home to a 1,200-strong community where 80% of the land remains biodiverse space and 40% of the properties are affordable housing.

Wild belt might encompass some greenfield sites, but it could overlay the area of outstanding natural beauty and green belt designations and make use of forgotten bits of land: river valleys, roadside verges, railway lines, scraps of golf courses. Members here today will all have such pieces of land on their patch and those could be rewilded to create a network of green continuous corridors from the countryside all the way through our towns and cities.

I shall bring my remarks to a close and allow time for other Members to speak. However, just as we have led the world in reducing carbon emissions and in renewable energy, we now have an opportunity to lead the world in restoring nature. Alongside COP26 in Glasgow this year, we have the largest biodiversity conference in a decade a month before, in COP15. I believe these planning reforms are a national opportunity, and the introduction of a wild belt designation would give us the chance to put nature at the heart of our recovery.

5 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) on securing the debate. My right hon. Friend

the Minister will understand that, because of time constraints, my remarks will have to be fairly brutal, but I mean no discourtesy to him.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey mentioned that 41% of our native species are in decline, and 15% of those species are threatened with extinction. We have lost 97% of our meadows, 80% of our chalk grasslands and 50% of our ancient woodlands. The United Kingdom, to our shame, is one of the most nature-depleted nations in the world. The Prime Minister set a target of having 30% nature-friendly land in the United Kingdom by 2030. If we are to hit that 30:30 target, we will have to take some fairly serious action.

The Wildlife Trusts said in response to the “Planning for the Future” White Paper that it would

“do little to create better homes and communities for wildlife and people. The proposals for three new zones do nothing for nature’s recovery—both the ‘Growth’ and ‘Renewal’ zones fail to integrate nature, and it is business as usual in the ‘Protected’ zone.”

The proposal for a wild belt is certainly a useful tool and a good suggestion for a way forward. However, I say to my right hon. Friend the Minister that the hedgerows of this country, the headlands on agricultural land and the agricultural land itself, with the changing crops and changing seasons, provide the best possible habitat, if we are serious about renewing this country. We have to protect agricultural land. I look to my right hon. Friend to assure me that that will happen.

5.2 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins, I think for the first time. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) on securing such a timely debate. Following the Chesham and Amersham by-election, the issue of planning has indeed been raised, although it is a little disappointing that no Liberal Democrat Members have decided to come along and contribute to today’s debate.

A revision of the planning system in England and Wales is long overdue. The emphasis has always been on the number of properties constructed; largely ignored has been the effect of developments on biodiversity, natural habitats and types of landscape that have not been considered worthy of designation. The proposal from the Wildlife Trusts for a new wild belt designation to protect land that is being restored for nature is a good idea. A wild belt designation would enable land that does not do much for wildlife to be protected so that efforts to create or restore natural habitat or rewild the area were secure from future changes to land use. Therefore, I particularly support the five proposals in the Wildlife Trusts initiative.

I want to raise two issues through a constituency example. My constituency contains the Welsh Harp, which is a site of special scientific interest due to the migration of birds from throughout Europe to our country to breed in that location. The site is enormous, and it is very near Wembley, between West Hendon ward and the Welsh Harp ward in Brent. Those are areas of deprivation, but the site is a real gem.

Recently, we have had a regeneration of the West Hendon estate—something that needed to be done and was long overdue. Indeed, some of the properties have been marketed as waterside living, and that is correct—they are. However, I am concerned about a proposed bridge

[Dr Matthew Offord]

across the northern section of the Welsh Harp. That would mean the west side of the bridge being located in an area that is known as woodland, but is actually wetland. I return to the Wildlife Trusts' point that all decisions must be based on up-to-date data. We are in danger of losing a magnificent wetland that is used by creatures not only to breed, but to forage, which increases our biodiversity.

The second point I want to raise with the Minister is enforcement, which does not occur, particularly in my Welsh Harp location. My local authority, Barnet Council, simply does not have the money to ensure enforcement on a site of special scientific interest. Something must be wrong in that example. When local authorities cannot afford to fund adult social care, they certainly cannot afford to provide enforcement at such locations. I urge the Minister to look at the issues of data management and, indeed, enforcement resources.

5.5 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins, and I extend my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) on securing this important debate. She has clearly struck a chord.

I will always claim that the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust is visionary and ahead of the curve, and I should declare an interest as a member of it. The trust does brilliant work in my constituency, specifically around rewilding. Fishlake Meadows on the edge of Romsey, a bog in North Baddesley, and, of course, the Wilder Wallops project, which it has supported, are brilliant ways to inspire local communities not just to visit nature, but to volunteer and become part of it, and to ensure that facilities in those areas improve and increase. A specific designation could do exactly that.

I want to turn the clock back 10 years to when the chief executive of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust came to visit me and spoke of wildlife corridors—perhaps the forerunners of wild belts. That was a recognition that a belt in itself is not adequate: we need areas where wildlife can spread, move and migrate, and we need to ensure that they are linked so that where there is development, green corridors can surround that development to make sure that our wildlife can thrive. That is why a new planning designation could really help, giving strategic planners the opportunity to look at things holistically and work out how to integrate development and green areas in a managed way.

We know that nature, when left to its own devices, can be incredibly rich and can provide some of the solutions to climate and pollution challenges. In Romsey and Southampton North, we have some important designations. We have national park, SSI, SINC—site of importance for nature conservation—and ancient woodland, but no green belt. I will always make a pitch to the Minister to consider having some green belt in Hampshire. We have farmers who have embraced high-level stewardship and have pioneered environmentally friendly techniques and low plough strategies to prevent soil erosion. We have the Broughton water buffaloes, which are used as part of a regenerative farming policy that enables carbon to be captured and has built biodiversity.

None of that happens by accident. People take deliberate, carefully thought through decisions to improve the local environment. I am extremely envious of the green belt that my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey has in her constituency. I also want to pick up the comment about enforcement made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord). In the valley of the River Test, we have seen over the last few days a horrific pollution incident, which I sincerely hope agencies such as the Environment Agency will seek to remediate as quickly as possible. That incident reinforces the message that where we put in protections for our environment, we must also give authorities the power to enforce when accidents happen or, indeed, when deliberate acts cause pollution.

Fundamentally, I want to leave the Minister with one thought: we need planning policies and strategies that will help nature and our environment, and the proposal for a wild belt could do exactly that.

5.8 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins, and I join other Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) on securing such an apposite debate. It is a testament to her and to the importance of the issue that so many colleagues have joined us. It is always a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes).

If hon. Members will indulge me, I will stake a claim to representing rewilding central, because I share not only the estate of Knepp with my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), where we have beavers and white storks, but the Norfolk estate, which has done such a fantastic job nurturing the difficult-to-rear grey partridge.

Last week, the Minister visited the Barlavington estate in my constituency, where there is one of the last surviving populations of the rare Duke of Burgundy butterfly. Unlike a fellow yellow or orange-tiered species, this is one that we do wish to foster in the south of England. All this is connected by places such as the Wiston estate, where Richard and his family continue to nurture environments. Sadly, we do not have any water buffalo—I shall take the message back to West Sussex that no rewilding project is complete without them.

We benefit in many parts from the South Downs national park, where genuine protection is given. Areas between the national park can be knitted with areas of natural beauty, such as Chichester harbour or the North Weald. However, too often—and increasingly—they are separated not just by islands of concrete, but by encroaching areas of it. The wild belt proposal from the Wildlife Trusts, which has my full support, would be a magnificent endeavour to protect the precious species we have heard about. It commands my support and I hope the Minister will take that into account. We know he is listening and has been extremely diligent in consulting with colleagues. However, as we bring forward proposals, would the wild belt not be a wonderful component within a new planning system that put nature at its heart?

Judith Cummins (in the Chair): I remind Members to wear masks when they are not speaking.

5.11 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I am going to change the tone of the debate slightly, to be more pragmatic, and talk about protection and responsibility. The biggest local issue in my patch before covid was planning: the need for homes for those who retire to downsize and for families wanting to grow, and of course the aim of reducing cost. Crucially, we need the right homes, in the right place, with the right infrastructure, all while protecting the character and promoting the environment of our community. Who is responsible for that? Nationally, MPs set the broad framework of how we deal with this. We have the system and we protect the environment. Locally, county councillors deal with the roads and infrastructure. Fundamentally, at the core of our process, it is the responsibility of borough councillors to make those decisions.

The best way to protect areas responsibly is through local plans. I know that the Minister wrote to our borough leader in Hinckley and Bosworth because there have been delays in adopting a local plan. That causes a huge problem, because every month we get more speculative developments. The second way is through neighbourhood plans. My community is passionate about deciding the best way to support home growth in a sustainable manner. The third way is the designation of areas of outstanding natural beauty, sites of special scientific interest and special areas of conservation, and now a proposal for wild belts.

In Leicestershire, that is a real opportunity. We have no green belt. We are sandwiched between Birmingham and Nottingham, which both do have green belt. We are a prime area for development and well connected. However, that needs to be done responsibly, with priorities put into maintaining the character and environment. A shining example is the areas around Burbage Common, which are constantly under threat.

I see wild belts working on two levels: on a macro level, with channels around the A5 joining Birmingham and Leicestershire; and on a micro level, in parts of neighbourhood plans to allow protected development to happen, with the local community at the heart of what that character looks like. It fits with the Government's ambitious proposals to have 30% of the land for nature by 2030. Most importantly, it would give protections to our wildlife and communities, for which we all have the responsibility.

5.14 pm

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) for securing the debate. I am pleased to speak on this crucial topic, and to see many of my hon. Friends doing the same. I welcome the publication of the Government's planning White Paper and the Wildlife Trusts' response. It is vital that the planning system takes into account the natural environment and does so as soon as possible. During the past year, our dependence on local parks and outdoor spaces has increased. Local communities have relied on those spaces, and we have appreciated more than ever the huge benefits for both mental and physical health afforded by being outdoors.

Having green spaces for purposes such as active travel is vital. I believe that our communities are better off when planning decisions have cycling and walking in

mind, not just for our physical and mental health but for the environment. Currently, around 8% of the land area of England is designated as a national or international protected area for conservation. However, in Nottinghamshire the proportion is below that level and the protection of more land will be vital, if we are to ensure that 30% of England is in nature recovery by 2030.

Adjacent to my constituency of Broxtowe are locations, such as the Erewash valley, that need to be at the heart of our green recovery. The Midlands Engine recently published the green growth action plan, which demonstrates the potential of the midlands to lead the way with investment in blue and green infrastructure, green jobs and protection of our landscapes. The Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust has also undertaken fantastic work to ensure the protection and preservation of our environment.

We are fortunate in Broxtowe to be linked to the East Midlands Development Corporation, which through its partnerships is spearheading world-leading research in green growth. For example, there are plans for the Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust to have a unique research hub. That research hub, based at Attenborough Nature Reserve, a much-loved and well visited nature reserve in my constituency, will focus research on nature recovery techniques. Those techniques will help us meet the challenges of the combined climate, ecological and health crisis, while driving investment and creating jobs. Such plans are a demonstration of how we can harness research and partnerships within the community easily to incorporate wild belts in our local area, benefiting both the environment and our economy.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey once again for securing the debate. I conclude by saying that I fully support the Wildlife Trusts' proposal for the introduction of wild belts. I believe it is our right to step up to our responsibility and protect our natural environment for future generations.

5.17 pm

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho). Let me put my cards on the table: I wholeheartedly support an additional designation of wild belt within a formal legal framework. I want to focus my remarks on what is true for many things in this place. It is crucial not only to have a good idea but to define what it is, to ensure that it is effective and achieves the aims that it seeks. In doing that, I ask Members to bear with me, as I draw on past experiences to describe the wild belt today.

Trophic pyramids—my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey once misunderstood and thought that I had said “tropical pyramids”—are a fancy title for the web of life in an ecosystem. From the bottom to the top, any extensive study, or any child, will tell us that all elements of a trophic pyramid are required to be in place for an effective ecosystem, as the chain of energy flows up, from the soils and decomposers, the detritivores and fungi, primary producers, the plants, the chemivores, the primary consumers, the herbivores, caterpillars, grasshoppers and cute rabbits. There are the secondary consumers; omnivores and carnivores—hedgehogs and birds, in English. Then there are the tertiary consumers: carnivores—the wild cats. Any ecosystem requires all of those things.

[Katherine Fletcher]

The only way to return the UK to its natural state is for us to wind back the clock 15,000 years and for all human beings to clear off. That is not going to happen. At that point, we would see bears, wolves, giant elk, wild cats, beavers and a truly natural ecosystem. I hug trees, but we are not going to clear off deliberately. What can we do to manage responsibly a patchwork of natural state environments to a self-sustaining state? What does that mean for the legal framework and the law?

I have highlighted, as have colleagues, the importance of reservoir populations, on a scale that allows for a viable population of at least secondary consumers—the hedgehogs. That needs two things. First, that needs space, in the form of viable access habitat that we can measure in multiples of field. For that to be effective, the dots must be joined up by wildlife corridors. Secondly, the most important thing to make the effective ecosystem is something that no politician can produce or promise: time. To introduce another term, that is sere succession. They need to be left in place to occur—the bramble patch and the foxgloves that are slightly messy on the eye. This is as important as those wonderful mature forests or the wetlands in South Ribble, the salt marsh and peat bog.

What can we do as the House of Commons to highlight their importance? We need additional categorisation: growth renewal protect wild belt, and the space designation to allow it to happen, but also the acceptance that a wildlife corridor even 3 metres deep will allow it to happen. Create the space and time and do not let it swap in and out over five and 10-year periods.

5.20 pm

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) on bringing forward this important debate. In a past life, I was environment editor for the *Observer* and *Times* newspapers. I was always struck by how, when we look at this country, we see it as it is now, not as it has been in the past or could be in the future. We have become completely accustomed to the phrase “nature depletion”. We do not see it.

Half of the reason is because I spent a lot of my youth in Norway, which is a country of pure wilderness. I have spent time in Norway seeing nature as it is. I come back here and see a real lack of nature everywhere. We have cut down almost all our woodland in the UK. We have only 11% tree cover in the UK, which compares with the European average of over 30%. In Europe, only Ireland and Denmark have fewer trees than we do.

As people have mentioned, we have lost a lot of our major species. Some of them are coming back. Reintroductions are going on and that is great news. Our largest predator in the UK is the badger. It means that species such as deer have no natural predators whatsoever and we have to cull them. We need to have a vision of how we are getting nature back. One of the great things that is happening is that people are now thinking about that and the Government are supporting that. They now support stopping biodiversity loss by 2030. They have big programmes, such as the nature and climate fund, to bring back nature in all its glory.

In Cambridgeshire, we have a vision for doubling nature by 2050. I am working with the Natural Cambridgeshire group, which works with Natural England and various other groups, such as the Wildlife Trusts, to try to double the amount of biodiversity in Cambridgeshire by 2050, but we need help. We are one of the most nature-depleted parts of the UK. We have only 3% tree cover, which is one tenth of the European average and one quarter of the UK average. It is partly because the land is so fertile that it has all been cleared for farming, quite understandably, but we need to bring nature back and that is very much supported.

How can the Government help? Planning is a big issue in Cambridgeshire. We have a huge amount of house building, but it would be great if the planning Bill, when it comes forward, could help to promote biodiversity and put nature back. It needs to bring back biodiversity in the UK rather than hurt it. One of the great ways of doing that would be through wild belts, as proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey and the Wildlife Trusts. We have lots of green belt, but that does not help to promote or protect biodiversity. Wild belts will be able to do that, but the devil will be in the detail on exactly how they fit in with the legal framework and the protections they will give to nature.

5.23 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) for her excellent proposal to promote and increase nature biodiversity. We know that this is important and have heard that from across the room. However the proposals for planning reform shape up, it is absolutely imperative that we put nature and biodiversity at their very heart. I am pleased to see that is happening. Let us not forget that the UK, along with nearly 90 other countries, is committed to reversing biodiversity loss by 2030, through the leaders’ pledge for nature.

We know that globally, let alone in the UK, nature and biodiversity are still declining alarmingly. That is why I wanted to speak in this debate, because giving legal protections to aid nature recovery is vital. Creating wild belts as the mechanism for areas set aside for nature recovery, and providing green corridors for wildlife to move between biodiversity hotspots, is an excellent idea.

Many of us were lucky during lockdown, because we could count on having access to green space, but what about the 11 million people—one in eight—who do not even have a garden? A wild belt designation could easily sit alongside an AONB, a national park or an SSSI. If it gives more access for the public to enjoy protected green spaces that cannot be developed on because they are there for nature to recover, it would give enormous benefits, and not just for nature and biodiversity, but for our wellbeing and health.

The Government are doing enormous work on decarbonisation and setting world-leading targets, but the focus on nature and biodiversity must have equal standing with those targets. We know that the landmark Environment Bill legally binds us to improve air quality, soil quality and water quality, and to leave the planet in a better state than we inherited it, as does the Agriculture Act 2020, which focuses on the environment and promoting biodiversity. It is hugely important, and the Government are doing it. They are weaving it into the very fabric of every piece of legislation coming forward, to enhance

and protect nature, and I can see that a wild belt designation would do the same thing. That is why I entirely support it as part of the planning reforms.

5.26 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I particularly welcome the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) in her introduction, and the comments made by my hon. Friends the Members for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) and for Bosworth (Dr Evans) in setting out the impacts on their constituencies, which mirror those in my constituency.

The London suburbs are an area where we serve the needs of a capital city, but they are also a very popular area for people who are looking to access nature. They often enjoy some planning protection as green belt, which for many years—sometimes many centuries—has been vital as the lungs of the city and as part of the agricultural infrastructure that maintains the life of the city. In Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner alone, we have the beautiful Colne valley, Ruislip woods—oaks that formed the roof of Westminster Hall—and Ickenham marshes, all of which are successful examples of where the local authority and local voluntary groups have undertaken rewilding efforts. That has benefited native species such as stag beetles, various kinds of river fish and red kites, which are now quite common across the area, having been on the verge of extinction not so many years ago.

Despite the impact that we see from projects such as HS2, it is clear that the planning process offers a real opportunity to protect and enhance the wildlife in areas that may be green belt but that certainly surround our towns and suburbs. I can give examples of where local authorities serving my constituency have required everything from bat tunnels to newt ponds as part of planning developments, in order to ensure that wildlife enjoys the protection that the local community expects.

However, as we go into the debate about what type of approach we want to take as part of levelling up, we need to be more strategic about supporting, preserving, developing and improving our green spaces and the part that plays in everything from climate emissions to animal welfare in our country. That is where the concept of a wild belt offers a huge advantage, and it is certainly one that I encourage Ministers to take forward. It is ancillary to the benefits that we see from the green belt, but with a specific focus not just on places that look beautiful and are easy to enjoy, but on places that can provide vital parts of our ecosystem for wildlife—places that may often be found at the margins of our towns and cities, but which are so incredibly important for nature. We must ensure that we support the biodiversity of our country for the future. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey for securing the debate, and I hope the Government will give the issue very serious consideration.

5.29 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) on securing this important debate. I will be brief and focus my contribution on public transport and the inclusion of waterways in any wild belt.

I have had excellent meetings with Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, which is a force of nature in itself. I know from its briefing that wild belt could happily overlap with other designations, such as national park and SSSI. However, we perhaps need further clarity on what wild belt designation would mean for mothballed and protected transport routes. A wild belt that can be enjoyed by people reconnecting with nature is surely one that needs to be connected to public transport corridors.

My bid, along with colleagues, to reopen the Stoke to Leek line is compelling precisely because of the transformative opportunity it presents to reconnect urban communities with the wider countryside. It will involve clearing quite a lot of vegetation and decades-old trees on the old mothballed line, but the net socioeconomic benefit will be substantial, on top of the environmental benefit of modal shift from road to rail.

I also want to see Etruria station reopened and built back better as an interchange with local buses and, crucially, with the existing blue-green corridor of the Trent-Mersey canal, which is on the national cycle network. I want to go further. My reverse Beeching bid for Etruria includes exploring the rewilding of Fowlea brook as a new blue-green corridor running through Etruria valley. The brook runs through concrete channels and culverts, and it still suffers the effects of centuries of heavy industry, even though it need not and should not.

The Environment Agency is already investing in flood protection in the brook by increasing its capacity in Stoke town, but I want the ambition of rewilding Fowlea brook to match what we are delivering on the River Trent. I said in my maiden speech that we need “more Trent in Stoke-on-Trent” and I am delighted that we are getting on and doing that. The Sunrise project has reintroduced meanders, canopy shade and spawning grounds to the Trent. The BBC’s “Countryfile” was hugely impressed with Trentside walks. Trentside walks will undoubtedly make Stoke-on-Trent an even better place to live, visit and study.

We could have a wild belt walk all along the urban Trent, levelling us up and even exceeding the ambition shown by central London’s Thames path. Causley brook and tributary brooks through Bentilee and Eaton Park could be superb trout-spawning grounds and walking routes, with a few interventions, and the route along Foxley brook through Abbey Hulton could be a much more attractive blue-green walking route if it were rewilded out of concrete and restored to the glory that attracted the abbey’s monks to the confluence of the Foxley and the Trent in the first place. In short, a focus on blue-green routes would mean rewilding for nature, for residents and for the leisure tourism economy. Waterways should be a priority.

5.32 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins, and well done to my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) for securing this debate.

I have hardly any time, so let me cut to the chase. We have a huge challenge here, which is to stop biodiversity loss by 2030 and, in fact, to reverse it. We talk of nature and natural recovery, but what do we mean by that? Nature for the United Kingdom is truly an overwhelmingly forested land mass, whereas the rural landscape that we have come to know and love is, in fact, entirely man-made and a managed environment. We need a realistic solution.

[Jerome Mayhew]

One such solution is a shared approach with improved agricultural practices—that is crucial, because only 6% of our land mass is developed and the rest of it is used for agriculture—plus rewilding of marginal land.

What is the bad boy here? It is farming practices post world war two, when, frankly, we broke the co-existence between nature and food production. That was encouraged by the common agricultural policy, whereby we had subsidies to remove hedges, subsidies to put subsoil drainage in our fields and huge subsidies to bring as much land as possible back into production. That was then followed up by agronomists who had been employed by agribusiness to pitch for the use of agrichemicals on the land in ever-increasing amounts, in the pursuit of yield above all else. The result has been a reduction in long-term rotations, the increasing use of expensive inputs, reduced profitability and therefore reduced margins, both in profit and loss terms and in terms of margins around fields. The result was reduced space for nature. As we have heard, that has led to a 97% reduction in our meadows and an 80% reduction in our chalk grasslands.

What should we do about that? The big answer is that we need to move our agriculture substantially towards regenerative principles and farming, but I do not have time to talk about that now. The second answer is to take marginal land out of production and use it for wildlife restoration.

A wild belt designation, with the consent and support of landowners, will help in the nature fightback. It could build on the concept of conservation covenants, which already exist, but bring that concept into the planning process. It would be a recognition of the new approach to natural recovery, bringing it within the planning system, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey so ably described. Together with ELMS and our new approach to agriculture, that could change mindsets and highlight that nature has a value in its own right.

5.35 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) on securing this debate on a wild belt in the planning system. I commend her contribution, and those of so many others, about the importance of wildlife and the added value that local wildlife trusts and others provide by increasing biodiversity and protecting nature in their constituencies. We have heard so many good speeches.

The importance of our wildlife, and the need to protect and enhance it, is not in doubt. What has been in doubt is the Government's commitment to bring forward legislation that will be effective in halting and reversing that decline in the UK, and specifically in the planning system, on which so much of the future of our country's land is dependent. The Government claim to be protecting native and endangered species, but we need to ensure that the rhetoric and the reality match.

I will not reiterate the facts about the level of the crisis of nature depletion in the UK—I thank the Wildlife Trusts for the excellent briefing—but there is no doubt that the UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries

in the world. We failed to meet 17 of 20 UN biodiversity targets, while funding for UK wildlife and environment has been slashed by 30% in two years. We need a serious plan for delivery of the recovery of nature but, unfortunately, we have a Prime Minister who has dismissed those trying to protect our natural environment as “newt counters”. Funding has dropped, particularly to Natural England, where staffing has halved since 2010.

The planning system needs to be at the centre of the challenge. It can and should be shaping a path towards net zero emissions and our work to improve biodiversity and our natural environment across the country. I will not rehearse the concerns expressed by many Members in last night's debate about proposals to amend the planning system, but there is no doubt that those working in the field say that the existing protections are inadequate to protect wildlife and wildlife sites.

Ministers at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have said in the main Chamber that with the Environment Bill, they want to protect the environment and include new species abundance targets. However, the amendments that we have now seen commit only to

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

In those amendments, there is no commitment to reversing the decline in nature. That is left to the planning system to achieve, and the proposed planning Bill will be crucial.

I will close my remarks with some questions for the planning Minister. Will the forthcoming planning legislation do what the Environment Bill clearly does not? The Government have said that they want to ensure that street trees are planted in every new development. That is a clear and measurable target, and it is to be welcomed. Will they do the same for other natural environment targets? If the Government have given consideration to introducing the status of a wild belt, how will we know that that is binding and a reality, not yet more rhetoric?

How exactly will the Government strengthen planning powers? How will developers be held to conditions once they have gone and future landowners manage the land? The Government intend local plans to be the primary tool for shaping and delivering future development. That will require huge resources and specialist expertise from both councils and non-governmental organisations, particularly if wild belts are to be a factor in all local plans; that is the only time the public will get a say in planning decisions in growth areas, which will cover a fair bit of the country. As it appears as though the public will be excluded from decisions around planning applications in growth areas, how will local wildlife trusts and other community organisations input their concerns and expertise into the decision making on specific planning applications? I leave those questions with the Minister, who may reply now or in writing.

Judith Cummins (in the Chair): I gently remind the Minister that he may wish to leave a couple of minutes for the Member in charge to respond.

5.40 pm

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): Thank you, Mrs Cummins. It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I will certainly leave as much time as I am able to my hon. Friend the Member for East

Surrey (Claire Coutinho). I congratulate her on bringing forward this debate and on assembling such a passionate, wild bunch in favour of her wild belt designation proposals.

I will say a few words about our planning proposals before I turn to my hon. Friend's proposals. We have said that building back better from this pandemic means ensuring not only that new developments are greener and better for the environment, but that they support healthy, happy and flourishing communities and habitats. I want to be absolutely clear that one of the key purposes of our planning reforms is to leave a legacy of environmental improvement.

Our new planning system will improve both the quality and the standards of development. It will secure better outcomes, including for our countryside and the environment, alongside increasing the supply of land for new, beautiful homes and sustainable places—not least by getting local plans in place; as my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) rightly noted, that is a significant contributor to preventing speculative development and building in the wrong places, rather than the right ones.

To deliver on our ambitions, we have announced a number of proposals for driving forward environmental benefits, through both the Environment Bill and our proposed reforms to the planning system. The Environment Bill, which has already come before the House, mandates, for the first time, a 10% net gain for biodiversity as a condition of most new developments. We are now proposing to extend that to the nationally significant infrastructure regime.

Recognising the relationship between the environment and development, we want to broaden the use of measurable environmental net gains beyond biodiversity to include wider natural capital benefits, such as flood protection, recreation and improved water and air quality, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) suggested. Alongside existing regulations that protect our most threatened or valuable habitats and species, that will allow us to establish a strategic, flexible and locally tailored approach that focuses, above all, on positive outcomes. We want to capitalise on the potential of local nature recovery strategies, including opportunities for new habitat creation, as we seek to make the system clearer and more responsive.

To complement this, we are examining the current frameworks for environmental assessment. They are often complex and lengthy, and we believe they lead to unnecessary delays, hindering opportunities to protect the environment and open up appropriate development. Our intention is to bring forward a quicker, simpler framework that encourages opportunities for environmental enhancements to be identified and pursued early in the development process. We will embed this approach through further updates to national planning policy, ensuring that environmental considerations feature fully in planning decisions, including their role in mitigating and adapting to climate change.

As several hon. Members have suggested, our reforms also encourage the sector to think more creatively about biodiversity and about how bee bricks, green roofs and community orchards can improve the quality of our air and the quality of our lives. We are taking action through the national planning policy framework to set the expectation that all new streets will be tree-lined,

aspiring to the beauty of green infrastructure such as we see in the cherry blossom trees that line the streets of Bonn in Germany.

Protecting and enhancing the green belt is very much part and parcel of this. I said that yesterday in the debate on planning brought forward by the Opposition, and I say it today specifically to my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), who is keen on the green belt—she said as much in her speech. I trust that she will encourage her local council to be equally keen on the green belt. I can certainly assure her, as I assure the shadow Minister, that it is our intention to undertake a wholesale reform of local authority resourcing, including looking at the fee structure to ensure that local authorities have the wherewithal to do the job we ask of them.

Caroline Nokes *rose*—

Christopher Pincher: If she will be very brief, I will give way to my right hon. Friend.

Caroline Nokes: We have no green belts in Hampshire, and it would be lovely to have some. Would my right hon. Friend the Minister consider it?

Christopher Pincher: In consultation with local authorities, I am happy to have that discussion with my right hon. Friend.

Before I turn to the issue of wild belt designation, our White Paper proposes a new approach to the categorisation of land, reflecting its potential for growth, for renewal and for protection. We are now considering responses to our consultation carefully, so I hope that hon. Members will understand that I cannot say overmuch about the proposals while they are still being digested. I can say, however, that I am open to some of the proposals that my right hon. Friend has suggested, but with this word of caution. It is not only roots and vines that creep; the scope of Government Departments and their arm's length bodies also creeps. We must be very careful that by giving statutory powers to such bodies, we do not allow them to make use of land—or rather, designate against development of land—that could be good brownfield sites, such as land close to railway lines. That simply places the weight of expectation of development on other places, such as greenfield sites. We need to be careful about what we wish for.

What we want to do is to build on more brownfield sites to protect the sort of land that my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) talked about. That is why we have increased the local housing network calculation for the 20 largest cities in our country; that is why we increased brownfield regeneration funding by £500 million; that is why we have introduced an urban taskforce; and that is why we have introduced PDRs, to allow better and easier gentle densification of urban and town centre landscapes.

We are determined to support our environment through our planning reforms, we are determined to build on brownfield first and we are determined to take forward the views and aspirations of all in this Chamber who want wildlife to be placed first and foremost at the heart of our planning reforms. I appreciate that the fickle finger of time is ticking down the clock, so I am very happy now for my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey to retake her rightful place and close the debate.

5.48 pm

Claire Coutinho: I thank the hon. Members who contributed today; looking around this room, I see such a wealth of experience in environmental matters, and it has been a privilege to hear from everyone. I am grateful to hear so much enthusiastic support for this proposal, and I am grateful to the Minister for a gracious and detailed response. Most importantly, I welcome his wise recognition of the level of support that he has heard in this room.

We have heard passionate speeches today about the tragedy of species decline and the importance of access to green space, but I think the most important word has been “strategy”, which was mentioned by my right hon.

Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) and so many others. It is always a good day when I hear my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher) talk about trophic pyramids. Finally, I thank the Wildlife Trusts; those are the words we have heard the most today, and for very good reason. I am very glad to put this proposal forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered a proposal for Wildbelt designation in planning system reforms.

5.49 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 22 June 2021

CABINET OFFICE

Sale of Cabinet Office Stake in Axelos Ltd

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove):

Introduction

I am pleased to announce that the Cabinet Office has conditionally agreed to sell its 49% stake in Axelos Limited to PeopleCert International Ltd, a member of the PeopleCert group. This is part of a joint sale with Capita of the whole of Axelos. Subject to the timely satisfaction of conditions the sale is expected to complete in July.

Sale of the Cabinet Office stake will generate cash proceeds of approximately £175 million. The Cabinet Office has also received cash dividends of approximately £10.7 million this year making total cash receipts of some £185.7 million.

As part of the sale, the Cabinet Office will also receive accelerated settlement of outstanding deferred consideration (currently worth some £24 million) owed to it by Axelos dating from the formation of the joint venture.

The sale values the business at £380 million on a cash free, debt free basis.

Axelos staff and senior management will be transferring with the business.

Rationale and timing

The Axelos joint venture was established with Capita in 2013 to commercialise certain best practice methodologies (principally ITIL and Prince2) previously developed by HM Government. The Cabinet Office chose to retain a 49% stake on the formation of the business with a view to delivering better value for money through a future sale.

The sale followed a strategic review triggered by Capita's desire to sell its majority stake. The Cabinet Office concluded that a joint sale was likely to attract greater interest and generate a higher price per share than a separate sale of the Cabinet Office's 49% stake; it also offered the opportunity to share in the premium typically available on the sale of a controlling stake.

The sale was conducted through a public auction process and the sale proceeds exceed the Cabinet Office's retention value.

Contingent liability

The sale terms include standard sale indemnities and an indemnity by the Cabinet Office for 49% of Axelos' share of the deficit in the Capita Group's defined benefit scheme, calculated on the basis set out in section 75 Pensions Act 1995, to the extent that it exceeds the allowance already made for it. Any liability under the indemnity is not expected to exceed £300,000 and is expected to be settled during this financial year.

On this occasion, due to the sensitivities surrounding the commercial negotiation of this sale, it was not possible to notify Parliament of the particulars of the contingent liability in advance of the sale announcement. Instead, the Cabinet Office notified the chairs of the Public Accounts Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee.

More information on this contingent liability has been set out in a departmental minute that has been laid before the House alongside this statement.

Fiscal impacts

The impact on the fiscal aggregates, in line with fiscal forecasting convention, are not discounted to present value. The net impact of the sale on a selection of fiscal metrics are summarised as follows:

Metric	Impact
Sale proceeds	£175 million
Hold valuation	The price achieved is above retention value.
Public sector net borrowing	The sale reduces public sector debt. All else being equal, the sale will reduce future debt interest costs for Government. The reduction in Government's shareholding means it will not receive future dividend income that it would otherwise have been entitled to through these shares.
Public sector net debt	Improved by £213.9 million
Public sector net liabilities	Improved by £50.5 million
Public sector net financial liabilities	Improved by £50.5 million

[HCWS112]

DEFENCE

Report of the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): The Ministry of Defence welcomes the Select Committee's report on the Armed Forces Bill (HC1281). I am grateful for the Committee's support of the endeavours to improve the lives of our Service personnel, veterans and their families. I will address the Committee's recommendations in turn.

I look forward to engaging with Members across the House as the Bill makes progress.

Beginning with the Committee's recommendation that Select Committee scrutiny should continue to be the convention for Armed Forces Bills, I believe that the appointment of a Select Committee, with its ability to produce a report and to make recommendations, ensures transparency and proper scrutiny of the Armed Forces Bill and the legislation in question. I therefore thank the Committee for their work and report and readily welcome the Committee's recommendation.

I note the Committee's recommendation that more time be allocated for the conduct of its business. The Government are committed to giving Select Committees adequate time to undertake their work. However, the

timing available for primary legislation is ultimately a matter for the business managers. The primary purpose of Armed Forces Bills is the quinquennial renewal of the legislation that governs the Armed Forces. Armed Forces Bills must reach Royal Assent before the Armed Forces Act 2006 would expire. Additional time for the Select Committee could compress the time available for other stages of the Bill, impact the wider parliamentary programme and delay the Bill's passage, placing undue pressure on the deadline to renew the Armed Forces Act 2006. Furthermore, time is also given for further scrutiny of the Bill, as it is considered by a Committee of the whole House as well as by the Select Committee.

The Committee's keen interest in the Armed Forces Covenant reflects members' universal support for our Service personnel—both regulars and reserves—veterans and their families. While there remains a difference of view on some issues, I welcome the Committee's assertion that questions in the annual continuous attitude surveys would help to ascertain whether the Covenant has had a positive or negative impact on the defence community. For that reason, the armed forces and families continuous attitude surveys already include a Covenant-related question on whether the Service person or Service family feels advantaged or disadvantaged compared to the general public in specific areas, such as housing, education and healthcare. This provides a measure of whether Service life is having a positive or negative impact and is therefore of use as a measure of the Covenant.

I acknowledge the Select Committee's concern over how the duty to have 'due regard' would function in practical terms and its recommendation that the Government should conduct a review of this after 24 months of operation. We recognise the importance of understanding the impact of the new duty, and how that can be measured will form an important part of our ongoing work in helping our Covenant stakeholders as they begin to implement the new Covenant duty. We are always happy to work with the House of Commons Defence Committee, and the Government will of course continue to report on the progress of the Armed Forces Covenant, including the new duty, annually to Parliament. As part of the Armed Forces Act, the new Covenant duty would also be subject to the quinquennial parliamentary renewal process.

Further, I thank and appreciate the Committee's conclusions on our efforts to reform the Service Justice System. The Bill addresses a small part of that work, and we are implementing a number of recommendations following the Service Justice System review that will ensure the Service Justice System is more effective, efficient and provides a better service to those who use it, in particular victims and witnesses. A key means of underpinning that assurance will be the establishment of a Defence Serious Crime Capability. We are making progress to build a stronger, more effective and collaborative approach to policing across Defence, building a means of maintaining the capability and skills of the Service Police along with further joint working with the civilian police forces.

On another note, I thank the Committee for welcoming Defence's efforts to speed up the Service Complaints process, though the Committee still has concerns as to possible delays to appeals and has suggested that priority should be given to implementing all the recommendations

of the Wigston review within six months. However, let me reassure the Committee that Service Complaints Reform aims to tackle the main areas of delay in the Service Complaints system, through increased efficiency and other measures aimed to increase confidence in the system.

The ability to set a reduced appeal timeframe where it is appropriate to do so will further align the SC system with other public sector and the MOD's civilian grievance system timeframes. Regulations will continue to ensure that those who need extra time due to the unique elements of service life will continue to have access to the system, by allowing extra time where it is just and equitable to do so. We will work closely with the Service Complaints Ombudsman on the detail of the regulations that will be brought forward.

Defence is committed to delivering the Wigston recommendations. As set out in the Gray review, out of the 36 Wigston recommendations, 34 had either been implemented or were in progress. The remaining recommendations are in progress and being prioritised, with some linked to the reform of the Service Complaints system and implementation dependent on the AF Bill being passed.

I welcome the Committee's finding that the experience of people in the Armed Forces with protected characteristics has improved. I also recognise there is more to be done. While the Committee recommends that a metric be added to the annual report on the Armed Forces Covenant to report on the experience of those with protected characteristics, we report on this in other ways. I wish to assure the Committee that we continue to explore how better to identify the issues affecting our people, and this remains a central issue for Defence. The recent Defence Command Paper set out our intent to tangibly, rapidly and significantly improve the lived experience of all those working in Defence, including those with protected characteristics. The MOD already reports progress against this intent through departmental performance and risk reporting processes, as well as mainstream Defence feedback mechanisms and regular localised climate assessments, all of which is subject to regular review by the Chief of Defence Staff and the Permanent Secretary. Diversity is a source of strength for the Armed Forces, and we welcome and encourage absolutely a more diverse Armed Forces.

I welcome the Committee's recommendation that the Government urgently set out how their plans to meet targets for the Transition, Intervention and Liaison Service, Complex Treatment Services and Improving Access to Psychological Therapy. The Government remain wholly committed to their ambitions set out in the NHS long term plan to expand and transform mental health services in England and to invest an additional £2.3 billion a year in mental health services by 2023-24. This will give 380,000 more adults access to psychological therapies by 2023-24. All but one of the four regional areas are meeting or exceeding targets for the Transition, Intervention and Liaison Service, and activity is already in hand to further improve performance in those few areas where targets are not yet being met. The number of days that a patient waits from initial referral to being offered an assessment for referral in 2020-21—up to the end of January 2021—was on average 12 days, which falls within the 14-day target. All four regional areas are

meeting this target, and it is an improvement from the waiting times in 2019-20. Following an assessment, a patient is offered an initial clinical appointment, if the outcome of the assessment is to be seen within the Transition, Intervention and Liaison Service. The target for this is also 14 days, and in England on average so far in 2020-21 this target is being met. Only one regional area is not currently meeting the target, but it has seen a reduction in average wait of 11 days since 2019-20.

Launched in 2017, the Transition, Intervention and Liaison Service, the Complex Treatment Services, and more recently the High Intensity Service, have been offering support to serving personnel, veterans, and their families dealing with complex mental health issues. These services have now been brought together under the collective name Op COURAGE, providing a single point of entry for veterans looking to access support for their mental health needs.

We are doing our utmost to ensure that our mental health services are there for everyone who needs them during the pandemic. Talking therapies are being made available remotely so people can access help safely from home. The NHS is working to ensure that the option of face-to-face support is provided to people with serious mental health illnesses across all ages where it is clinically safe to do so.

This leads me on to the Committee's next recommendation that further work must be done to ensure that the principle of "priority treatment" is better understood by both veterans and service providers. In 2018, the MOD/UK Department of Health's Partnership Board established the Priority Treatment Working Group. The group's membership is made up of both patient and clinical representatives from all four nations, MOD, Office for Veterans' Affairs and the Service Charities sector. The group continues to meet to share best practice of priority treatment and will discuss the action from the Committee—to address the lack of clarity and understanding amongst veterans, family members, and service providers and develop methods to improve understanding.

Within its report, the Committee has recommended that work be undertaken to minimise variation in the level of services across the UK, with specific reference to Northern Ireland to deal with the challenges faced by veterans attempting to access mental health services there. We believe that, by improving awareness and understanding of the Covenant among public bodies, our proposed legislation will help to reduce disadvantage to the Armed Forces Community and minimise variation in service across UK.

The unique circumstances in Northern Ireland mean that delivery is approached in a different way from the rest of the UK. The Government are making good progress in delivering the Covenant in Northern Ireland. For example, the first Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner has been appointed and will jointly chair—with the Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Reserve Forces and Cadets Association—a Mental Health Committee, bringing together key statutory and third-sector providers of mental health services and support. The Northern Ireland Veterans' Support Office, which has been provided with additional funding by Her Majesty's Government to assist in delivery of the Covenant, continues to work directly with the Armed Forces Covenant Fund

Trust to ensure that all funding programmes in support of veterans' mental health are fully promoted and accessible to the widest range of eligible, trusted organisations, in order to enhance those services available statutorily.

The Ulster Defence Regiment and Royal Irish (Home Service) Aftercare Service includes provision of mental health support. The Government have committed, as set out in the New Decade New Approach agreement, that the MOD will consider whether this should be widened to cover all veterans living in Northern Ireland. In addition, projects that benefit the Armed Forces Community in Northern Ireland received over £1.6 million last year from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust.

I turn to the recommendation of the Committee that work should be undertaken to improve data collection with regard to the numbers of serving personnel and veterans requiring treatment for addiction and other mental health illnesses. I wish to reassure the Committee that the MOD is committed to the mental health and wellbeing of its Service personnel and provides dedicated and comprehensive services, including support for alcohol, drugs and gambling-related disorders. Serving personnel requiring any form of healthcare, including treatment for drug and alcohol addiction, are cared for within the Defence Medical Services establishment.

For those accessing Defence Medical Services care, we already collate and publish statistics on those accessing specialist mental healthcare for substance abuse—alcohol and drugs. These figures are published annually in the mental health official statistics, where we make specific reference to those assessed with alcohol-related substance abuse.

In the strategy for our veterans, the Government committed to improve the collection and analysis of data on veterans' needs and experiences to inform future policy and services. The Government are developing a veterans' data strategy which will achieve this across a wide range of topics, such as veterans' health and wellbeing, mental health, employment, housing and relationships.

Wherever they live in the UK, all veterans are able to receive specialist support if they need it. Each devolved Administration provides support in a way that best suits their region. The majority of veterans access the same healthcare support as the general population through NHS services.

In England, each part of the country now has specialist mental health services designed for Service leavers, ex-Service personnel, Reservists and their families through the recently launched Op COURAGE - the Veterans Mental Health and Wellbeing Service. This is the new overarching name for the Veterans' Mental Health Transition, Intervention and Liaison Service, Veterans' Mental Health Complex Treatment Service and Veterans' Mental Health High Intensity Service. Op COURAGE provides a single front door to dedicated services for veterans and makes it easier for veterans and their families to get help.

Further, I observe that the Committee touched upon the area of service housing and in its conclusions felt that the Government might wish to consider adding service accommodation to the list of functions to which the duty of due regard under the Armed Forces Covenant applies. While I thank the Committee for its well-intended suggestion, we feel this is unnecessary. The purpose of

the Covenant duty is to raise awareness among providers of public services relating to housing, education and healthcare of how service life can disadvantage the Armed Forces Community in accessing those key public services. The MOD is fully aware of the issues impacting the Armed Forces Community and works with other Departments and Devolved Administrations to raise awareness across all service providers. Accommodation forms part of the Secretary of State's annual statutory report to Parliament on the Covenant and is included in the Armed Forces, Reserves and Families Continuous Attitude Surveys conducted each year.

The provision of high-quality subsidised accommodation remains a fundamental part of the overall MOD offer to Service personnel and their families and is supported by annual improvement programmes and 24/7 repair and maintenance services. Over the last decade, £1.2 billion has been invested in construction and upgrades of MOD Service accommodation. There is continued investment in a range of new-build and renovation projects. All accommodation at the point of occupancy meets the decent homes standard as a minimum, with the vast majority exceeding this. In addition, we are developing the future accommodation model to give Service personnel more choice over where, with whom and how they can live, reflecting modern family life, with entitlement based on need, not rank. This model is currently being piloted at three sites. We recognise that many Service personnel seek stability for their families. A key part of this is helping personnel buy their own home. The Forces Help to Buy Scheme, first launched in 1 April 2014, is open to new applicants until 31 December 2022.

[HCWS109]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Indemnity for the Independent Review into Issues Raised at West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Minister concerned to present a departmental minute to Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the minute, except in cases of special urgency.

I have today laid a departmental minute proposing the provision by NHS England and NHS Improvement of an indemnity that is necessary in respect of an NHS England and Improvement non-statutory, independent review of whistleblowing at West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust.

This review follows widely reported events arising from an anonymous letter that was sent in October 2018 to the relative of a patient who had died at the trust. The purpose of the review is:

- to consider the appropriateness and impact of the actions taken in response to the issues raised by/connected with the October letter by the trust and other relevant bodies; and
- to produce advisory recommendations and learnings.

The indemnity will cover any sums, including any legal or other associated costs, that members of the review team are liable to pay in relation to legal action brought against them by a third party in respect of liabilities arising from any act done, or omission made, honestly and in good faith, when carrying out activities for the purposes of the review. The indemnity will apply to any work carried out from the commencement of the review to its completion in 2021, in accordance with the review terms of reference. The indemnity will cover the contingent liability of any legal action in the run-up to and following the publication of the review report, and for two years after that date. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

The Treasury has approved the proposal in principle. If, during the period of 14 parliamentary sitting days beginning on the date on which this minute was laid before Parliament, a member signifies an objection by giving notice of a parliamentary question or by otherwise raising the matter in Parliament, final approval to proceed with incurring the liability will be withheld pending an examination of the objection.

A copy of the attachments can be viewed online at: Written statements - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament

[HCWS110]

Draft Health and Care Data Strategy

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I would like to inform the House that the draft strategy "Data Saves Lives: Reshaping health and social care with data" has been published today by NHSX and builds on the ground-breaking use of data during the pandemic.

Over the last 18 months, when facing this country's greatest public health emergency for generations, one of the most powerful tools at our disposal has been the power of data. Data helped us to identify those who are most vulnerable to coronavirus and ask them to shield; the NHS covid-19 data store we set up was pivotal to our day-to-day response; and it powered vital research that helped us discover new treatments that saved lives across the world.

Under these proposals to deliver truly patient-centred care, everyone in England will be given better access to their own healthcare records and detailed information about exactly how they are used. Patients will be able to access test results, medications, procedures and care plans from across all parts of the health system. They will be able to have confidence that health and care staff have up-to-date information, regardless of the care setting, so they will no longer have to repeat details unnecessarily. By improving their access to data, people will also be able to manage appointments, refill medications and speak remotely, not just face to face, with health and care staff when needed.

This strategy not only seeks to bring people closer to their data, it will also support the NHS in creating a modernised system. The public need to be confident to share their data with the NHS, which will hold it securely on their behalf. These protections reflect the strict parameters for the use of data and security standards set out by the national data guardian for health and

care. Today's new strategy commits the NHS to going even further with a commitment to publish the first transparency statement setting out how health and care data has been used across the sector by 2022. Modern use of patient data saves lives and maintains the highest levels of privacy. The two goals are complementary, not contradictory.

We are publishing this today in draft form so that we have the opportunity to engage with the public and right across the health and care system. The learning from this will be included in a final version to be published in the early autumn.

I will deposit a copy of the draft strategy in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS111]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership: Launch of Accession Negotiations

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): The UK will today launch negotiations with 11 countries belonging to a free trade area, in a landmark moment for the UK as an independent trading nation. Joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) hitches the UK to some of the world's biggest current and future economies populated by half a billion people and with a joint GDP of £9 trillion.

It would secure our businesses and British exports superior access to these dynamic markets, with 65% of the world's 5.4 billion middle class consumers expected to be in Asia by 2030. UK exports to CPTPP nations would increase by 65% —£37 billion—until 2030 and, in addition to this growth, comparative static analysis shows an additional increase in trade by £3.3 billion as a result of UK accession.

Membership of CPTPP would build on the FTAs we have now signed with 67 countries plus the EU, and opens new markets for our services sectors, lowers tariffs on goods like cars and whisky, and creates new opportunities for UK farmers. The historic trade deal agreed in principle with Australia on 15 June will mean iconic British products will be cheaper to sell into Australia, boosting UK industries that employ 3.5 million across the country. This agreement, and others with CPTPP members including Japan, Singapore and Mexico, are a gateway into the fast-growing Indo-Pacific region and will boost our bid to join CPTPP.

CPTPP members represent 13% of global GDP, growing to 16% if the UK joins. Joining CPTPP would put the UK at the heart of this dynamic group of countries, deepening our ties with some of the world's biggest and fastest-growing countries, as the world economy increasingly centres on the Pacific region.

Joining CPTPP is expected to boost this growth even further, and that means supporting even more UK jobs. It is an advanced and ambitious agreement which goes deep in areas of UK interest such as services and digital trade.

The Indo-Pacific is the world's growth engine: home to half the world's people; 40% of global GDP; and some of the fastest-growing economies that are at the forefront of new global trade arrangements. By entering

into a free trade agreement with these countries, the UK can benefit from this growth. Acceding to the CPTPP would help the UK engage more deeply with the region, and help us secure increased trade and investment opportunities, diversify our trading links and supply chains, and embed open trade.

As part of CPTPP, our analysis shows that every nation and region of the UK is expected to benefit. Each region of the UK already exported over £1 billion worth of goods to CPTPP members in 2019, including £3.1 billion from the East Midlands, £2.4 billion from Scotland, and £2 billion from the North West. Membership could deliver a £1.8 billion boost to UK GDP in the long run and to increase take-home pay for British workers by £800 million.

Accession could see 99.9% of UK exports being eligible for tariff-free trade with CPTPP members. Joining would secure lower tariffs for exports such as whisky and cars, which are in high demand in the Pacific region; 65% of the world's 5.4 billion middle class consumers are expected to be in Asia by 2030.

CPTPP also greatly benefits the UK as the world's second-largest services exporter. It makes travel easier for businesspeople moving between CPTPP countries, and goes further in areas of key UK interest, with advanced provisions that facilitate digital trade and modern rules on data that would help the UK's cutting-edge tech sector go global, and enable more financial and professional services markets to be opened up.

CPTPP also sets modern rules for digital trade across all sectors of the economy, supporting UK businesses seeking new opportunities in member markets. Digitally delivered services from the UK to CPTPP, such as making online international bank transfers, selling an e-book from an online marketplace or giving legal advice over Zoom, were worth £18.7 billion in 2019.

The more CPTPP expands, the greater the benefits to the UK. Economies including the Philippines, Thailand, Taiwan, and Republic of Korea have all expressed interest in joining. By having a seat at the table as the first new member, the UK can help shape CPTPP's future development as it grows.

Today, the Department for International Trade has published four documents, copies of which have been placed in the House Library:

- Our outline approach to negotiations, setting out our objectives for the negotiations.

- A response to the public consultation on membership of CPTPP, setting out how it has informed our policy.

- Our geostrategic vision for trade with the region.

- A scoping assessment, providing a preliminary economic assessment of the impact of membership.

On Wednesday 2 June, CPTPP nations agreed to the UK's bid to begin the accession process to join CPTPP. The UK will continue to work closely with Japan, as this year's chair of the CPTPP commission, alongside the other CPTPP nations to progress negotiations as quickly as possible. As in all negotiations, we are committed to upholding our high environmental, labour, product and food safety and animal welfare standards in our negotiations with CPTPP member states, as well as protecting the national health service (NHS).

CPTPP has high standards in areas including the environment and labour. Its rules commit members, for example, to protecting the minimum wage, freedom of

association, the elimination of forced and child labour and, crucially, enforcing their own laws in these areas. CPTPP also affirms the UK's right to regulate in our national self-interest, rather than forcing harmonisation on its members, complementing the UK's system of strong rule of law coupled with the freedom to set our own regulations.

This Government are committed to transparency and will ensure that parliamentarians, UK citizens and businesses have access to information on our trade negotiations. The written ministerial statement of 7 December 2020 set out our transparency and scrutiny commitments, including regular updates to Parliament and engagement with Select Committees, which will apply to the UK's process of accession to CPTPP.

[HCWS108]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Extending Covid-19 Local Support Measures

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Throughout the covid-19 pandemic, this Government have provided an unprecedented package of support for individuals, families, communities and businesses who need financial help at this critical time.

The Covid-19 Local Support Grant—previously known as the Covid-19 Winter Grant Scheme—has enabled local authorities in England to support families across the country who are struggling with the cost of food and utility bills as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. The scheme has run from 1 December, with a total investment of over £269 million so far. Between 1 December and 16 April, local authorities had made almost 6.3 million awards under the scheme.

The Covid-19 Local Support Grant arrangements will be extended for a final time, with a further investment of £160 million, to cover the period up to 30 September. This temporary support is being extended beyond the planned ending of restrictions, to help families get back on their feet as the economy recovers and the vaccine rollout continues. Well-paid work is the best route out of poverty and that is why we have a plan for jobs.

The Covid-19 Local Support Grant is in addition to the £220 million Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme, which has been scaled up to cover the whole of England across the major school holidays in 2021—including this summer. The HAF will provide disadvantaged children across the country with healthy meals and enriching activities.

[HCWS107]

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 22 June 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
TREASURY	735	TREASURY—continued	
Access to Cash	748	Home Ownership	745
Apprentices	736	Immigration: Sharing of Data between HMRC	
Business Investment	739	and Home Office	747
Covid-19: Support for Culture and Arts Sector	738	Investment in Green Industries	740
Educational Catch-up Provision Funding	745	Northern Ireland Protocol	735
Financial Services Sector	742	Personal Credit: Self-employed People	738
Freeports	747	Plan for Growth Sector Visions	744
Furloughed Employees	741	Topical Questions	749
Gender Equality	748		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 22 June 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	25WS	HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE—continued	
Sale of Cabinet Office Stake in Axelos Ltd	25WS	Indemnity for the Independent Review into Issues	
		Raised at West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust ..	31WS
DEFENCE	26WS	INTERNATIONAL TRADE	33WS
Report of the Select Committee on the		Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for	
Armed Forces Bill	26WS	Trans-Pacific Partnership: Launch of Accession	
		Negotiations	33WS
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	31WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	35WS
Draft Health and Care Data Strategy	32WS	Extending Covid-19 Local Support Measures	35WS

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Tuesday 29 June 2021**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Tuesday 22 June 2021

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 735] [see index inside back page]
Chancellor of the Exchequer

Events Research Programme [Col. 757]
Answer to urgent question—(Nigel Huddleston)

Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill [Col. 774]
Motion for Second Reading—(Brandon Lewis)—agreed to

McVitie's Tollcross Factory [Col. 825]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Covid-19: Religious and Ethnic Minority Communities [Col. 261WH]
Covid-19: Recovery of Central London Businesses [Col. 282WH]
Welsh Rural Economy [Col. 290WH]
Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon [Col. 312WH]
Planning System Reforms: Wild Belt Designation [Col. 319WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 25WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
