

**Monday
28 June 2021**

**Volume 698
No. 24**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 28 June 2021

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. BORIS JOHNSON, MP, DECEMBER 2019)

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 17 DECEMBER 2019]

SEVENTIETH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 698

FOURTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2021-2022

House of Commons

Monday 28 June 2021

The House met at half-past Two 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

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Child Poverty

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on tackling child poverty. [901835]

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on tackling child poverty. [901857]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): Throughout the pandemic, our priority has been to protect the most vulnerable, which is why we spent an additional £7.4 billion last year to strengthen the welfare safety support for working-age people. Our ambition is to help parents return to work as quickly as possible, as there is clear evidence of the importance of having parents in work for reducing the risk of child poverty. That is why we are spending over £30 billion on a comprehensive plan for jobs.

Rushanara Ali [V]: I thank the Minister for his answer, but 60% of kids in my constituency are living in poverty, and over 4.2 million live in poverty across the country. The numbers have gone up by 700,000 since 2010, and the Government's limited extension to the local support grants does not make up for the cuts to universal credit, which will mean that families are £1,000 a year worse off from September. Is it not time that the Minister reconsidered that decision and made sure that families do not lose £1,000 from September, so that more children are not forced into poverty?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We are wholly committed to supporting families with children. We spent an estimated £111 billion, including £7.4 billion on covid-related measures, on working-age welfare in 2020-21. In addition, as the hon. Lady referenced, we introduced the covid local support grant. We have now extended that grant with an additional £160 million in funding between 21 June and 30 September. That brings the total funding package to £429 million. For the hon. Lady's constituency—I reference Tower Hamlets London Borough Council—it means an overall funding package of over £3 million.

Richard Burgon: What we have been hearing from the Government is, frankly, rubbish. In Leeds East alone, 11,000 children—that is approaching half of all children—live in poverty. It is not getting better for the children of Harehills, and it is not getting better for the children of Cross Gates, Gipton, Seacroft or anywhere else; it is getting worse. Poverty levels went up by 25% in the five years before the pandemic, and it is going to get worse when £20 of universal credit is taken away from families in October. I dare the Minister today to come to the food banks of Leeds East and tell people in my community why the Tory party thinks that their children should be forced into further poverty this winter.

Will Quince: Recent statistics show that before the covid-19 pandemic, we were in a strong position, with rising incomes and 1.3 million fewer people, including 300,000 fewer children, in absolute poverty, after housing

costs, compared with 2010. There were also over 600,000 fewer children in workless households. Our long-term ambition is to support economic recovery across our United Kingdom, and our new plan for jobs is already supporting people to move into and to progress in work.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): In-work poverty has hit a record high and the vast majority of the millions of children in poverty have working parents, but the Government's response is to cut universal credit this September. There is no sign of an employment Bill to improve conditions at work, and they have also frozen help with housing costs. What is the Government's plan to tackle in-work poverty? A good way to start would be to cancel that cut to universal credit this September.

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. As our economy improves, we will increasingly focus our support on in-work progression to improve opportunities for those in low-paid work and support them towards financial independence. As part of our comprehensive £30 billion plan for jobs, there is an extra 13,500 work coaches, the kickstart scheme, the restart scheme, SWAP—the sector-based work academy programme—and our in-work progression commission, which will report shortly on the barriers to progression for those on persistent low pay and recommend a strategy for overcoming them.

Jonathan Reynolds: I would remind the Minister that universal credit is an in-work benefit and it is means-tested. If people do progress, they will not be eligible for that support, so it is not an argument for proceeding with that cut in September.

Can I ask the Minister about a significant barrier to work, which is childcare? He will know that soaring childcare costs have to be paid up front, but universal credit is paid in arrears, leaving parents in debt. I recently met the campaign Mums on a Mission, which has been forced to bring legal action to try to make the system work for parents. More people would be able to work the hours they wanted if we got this right, but do Ministers understand just how significant a problem this is?

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman knows that I will not be able to comment on live litigation, but what I would say is that we do have a comprehensive childcare offer, both as a Government and specifically as a Department. I would also say that, unlike the previous benefit system, in which childcare costs could be up to 70% recoverable, in universal credit the figure is 85%, so it is a far more generous system.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has told the Work and Pensions Committee that cutting £20 a week from universal credit in October will reduce unemployment support to the lowest level for over 30 years at exactly the point when unemployment is being increased by the ending of the furlough scheme, and that it will also pull 400,000 people, including many children, below the poverty line. What assessment will the Minister make of the impact of that cut on child poverty before the cut goes ahead?

Will Quince: The first thing I would say is that the Government have always been clear that the £20 increase to universal credit was a temporary measure to support households most affected by the economic shock of covid-19, and that decisions on whether to extend support would be made as the economic and health picture became clearer. There have been significant positive developments in the public health situation since the increase was first announced, with the vaccine roll-out now significantly gathering pace. I say to the right hon. Gentleman that any look at measures of that kind in terms of forecasting is purely speculative, but it is our expectation that this additional financial support and other direct covid support will end once our economy has opened.

Jobcentre Services

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): What steps she is taking to help people back into work through the provision of jobcentre services. [901836]

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): What steps she is taking to help people back into work through the provision of jobcentre services. [901838]

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): What steps she is taking to help people back into work through the provision of jobcentre services. [901849]

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): What steps she is taking to help people back into work through the provision of jobcentre services. [901852]

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): What steps she is taking to help people back into work through the provision of jobcentre services. [901870]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): We have recruited thousands of new work coaches and expanded our jobcentre network through our plan for jobs. That, alongside our successful vaccine roll-out, means that we are seeing more claimants face-to-face in a covid-secure way. We are also delivering additional provision, including job-finding support, job entry targeted support, our £2 billion kickstart scheme and our restart scheme. We have also opened new Department for Work and Pensions youth hubs, expanded the sector-based work academy programme and increased our flexible support fund. Thanks to our work coaches and the plan for jobs, they now have more tools than ever to support claimants back into work.

Gordon Henderson [V]: I welcome the Minister's response, but my two local jobcentres are seeing a number of people fail to turn up for their appointments with work coaches. That appears to be driven by the lack of sanctions because of the pandemic, so what is my hon. Friend doing to make it easier for jobcentres to use sanctions?

Mims Davies: I am proud that our jobcentres have remained open throughout the pandemic to support the most vulnerable customers. Claimant commitments have continued to be tailored to individual circumstances by work coaches since July last year, meaning that sanctions remain at record low levels as we fully consider individual circumstances before deciding whether to apply a sanction.

Antony Higginbotham: It is really important that young people who are looking for that first break into employment do not pay the heaviest price from the pandemic. That is why the youth hubs, including the one in Burnley, are so welcome. I thank all the local jobcentre staff for the work they have done to set that up. To encourage young people to go and use it, will the Minister confirm what support they will get when they go into the youth hub, and would she like to join me in visiting the one in Burnley, so that we can get as many people through the door as possible?

Mims Davies: I have visited new youth hubs, both physically and virtually, including in Caterham, Rotherham, Liverpool and Winsford, and I would be delighted to join my hon. Friend and the team at Burnley. I know that they are working in partnership with the council, Calico, Burnley Together, the Prince's Trust, Active Lancashire and Burnley football club. Our youth hubs tailor their support, alongside local partners, to the needs of the community, and that is why they are so important in helping our young people to thrive.

Theo Clarke: Last Friday, I was very pleased to see a young apprentice at a local Staffordshire engineering business whom I had met previously when she was studying at Stafford College. Will my hon. Friend explain what she is planning to do to help the jobcentre in Stafford and how the Government will provide more employment opportunities for young people in Staffordshire to help to level up the west midlands?

Mims Davies: I know that my hon. Friend takes a strong interest in her Jobcentre Plus, as she updated me following her visit. I remind Members that since September 2020, our enhanced DWP youth offer has provided wraparound support for 18 to 24-year-old claimants, providing a 13-week tailored pre-employment course. I am pleased that Stafford JCP is hosting an interactive kickstart event tomorrow; our JCPs do that kind of event and engagement regularly.

Ben Bradley [V]: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all her team are doing to support people back into work. In conversations with my local jobcentre staff this week, they reported very positive progress. They asked what opportunities there might be to consider extending kickstart-style schemes or incentives, so they are able to help out-of-work adults as well as young people. I wonder if my hon. Friend could help me to answer their question.

Mims Davies: I am proud that our plan for jobs supports people, at any age and at any career stage, who are looking for new opportunities through, for example, our sector-based work academy programmes, our enhanced "50 PLUS: Choices" offer, and the new DWP "Train and Progress", through which people can train for longer into a growing sector using the flexibilities built in within universal credit.

Giles Watling [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for her earlier answers. Before this terrible pandemic hit, I had the opportunity to visit my local jobcentre in Clacton. Its staff are enthusiastic and devoted to their work, but that workload has increased dramatically as our hospitality and tourism sectors have been hit. These sectors are vital to the Clacton economy. Is the Minister taking

account of our often overlooked and deprived coastal areas as the Government continue their important work of helping people affected by this terrible pandemic back into work?

Mims Davies: Understanding the needs of every community is key—[*Interruption.*] I hear the Secretary of State mention Suffolk Coastal. The success of our jobcentres in understanding the local economy and getting local people back into work is key. Our JCPs change lives every day. One recent success story in Clacton was a customer who recently started a kickstart job in wildlife conservation—I am not sure whether my hon. Friend is joining him there at the moment—as a result of the five-week pre-employment course at the DWP.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Disabled people require support to get back into work. Disability is defined in the Equality Act 2010 as

"a physical or mental impairment"

that

"has a substantial and long-term adverse effect"

on their

"ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities."

Of the 2 million in the UK with long covid, three in 10 have experienced symptoms lasting longer than a year, including fatigue, difficulty concentrating and shortness of breath. This is resulting in widespread disadvantage and discrimination, and is erecting barriers to employment. Will the Minister commit to recognising long covid as a disability from the point of diagnosis to ensure that workers have support and protection against discrimination in the workplace?

Mims Davies: We always tailor personalised support to individual circumstances. I am proud of what we have done throughout the pandemic, particularly at our JCPs, to keep them open and keep people feeling safe, and to support businesses and workers to feel safe. I recently joined a spot check at the Bootle HQ with the CEO of the Health and Safety Executive. We have done over a quarter of a million checks to make sure that people feel safe at work.

Benefit Cap

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of households subject to the benefit cap. [901837]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): The most recent publication shows the proportion of capped households remains low, at 2.9% of the overall housing benefit and universal credit case load as of February 2021.

Beth Winter [V]: Today is a day of action for the "Right to Food" campaign, which I fully support. I can offer the Minister one possible policy to alleviate food poverty: drop the benefit cap. Food insecurity disproportionately affects families who are also most affected by the cap. The Child Poverty Action Group found that lifting the cap could take 150,000 children out of poverty. Will the Minister please explain her reasoning for not lifting it?

Mims Davies: The hon. Lady will be keen to know that, even in these current times, people moving out of the benefit cap and into work is going in the right direction. There are multiple vacancies in the hospitality, construction, care and logistics sectors. The benefits system provides a crucial safety net for people at their time of need and the benefit cap also provides a strong incentive for claimants to get into work and increase their hours so that the benefit cap does not apply.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Last week, former Work and Pensions Minister Lord Freud described the benefit cap, which is now hitting 120,000 more households than at the beginning of the pandemic, as “ghastly”. Efforts to protect incomes during covid have been undermined as increased universal credit and housing allowance rates led to more families being capped, with numbers rising as the grace period for universal credit expires. If the supposed aim of the benefit cap is for families to go into work and to cut their housing costs by moving, will the Minister explain how families have been supposed to do that in the past 12 months, when neither option was effectively possible?

Mims Davies: I remind hon. Members that the benefit cap is set at the equivalent annual salary of £24,000, or £28,000 in London, which importantly provides fairness between taxpayers in employment and those with working-age support. Claimants can approach their local authority for discretionary housing payments if they need additional support to meet rental costs, or indeed for hardship grants. The hon. Lady should look out for the forthcoming in-work progression report, which will look at all these matters. We should take all this in the round.

Rules for Terminal Illness Review

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): If her Department will publish the findings from its review of the special rules for terminal illness before the summer 2021 parliamentary recess. [901840]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): The Department is committed to publishing the outcome of the evaluation, and it will be announced in due course. I understand that the delay has been frustrating, and I remain absolutely committed to delivering an improved benefit system for claimants who are nearing the end of their lives.

Jessica Morden [V]: As the Minister knows, it is nearly two years since the DWP announced its review of the special rules for terminal illness and we are still waiting for it to be published. Last July, the Minister said it would be published shortly; today, he says, “in due course”. In the meantime, many have died while waiting for benefits decisions. How long do we have to wait until the Government scrap the six-month rule?

Justin Tomlinson: I pay tribute to the hon. Member, who has been brilliant at championing the need to make changes, with which the Department agrees as part of its review to raise awareness of support, improve consistency with other services and, crucially, change that six-month rule. We will be able to make changes very, very soon.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Like the review of the special rules for terminal illness, the Government’s disability strategy has been much delayed. After two long years, we are told to expect it “soon”. Disabled people are hoping for radical policies that will improve their lives. However, many fear it will contain warm words and platitudes but no real action. Can the Minister convince us that his strategy will be published with a fanfare and not just a whimper?

Justin Tomlinson: Absolutely. I am grateful to all the stakeholders and those with real-lived experience, including disabled people themselves, who have been working with the Department on: the proposed changes to SRTI; our forthcoming health and disability Green Paper, which will look at both disability benefits and support and disability employment, of which we have delivered record amounts; and our national strategy for disabled people, which has the Prime Minister’s personal support and will, for the first time, bring genuine cross-Government focus to create more inclusivity and remove barriers. All of those are due very soon, and I am confident that they will be well received.

British Sign Language

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): What recent assessment she has made of the potential merits of bringing forward legislative proposals to provide British Sign Language with full legal status. [901842]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): On 18 March 2003, the UK Government formally recognised that British Sign Language is a language in its own right. Provision for accessing services by users of BSL are already covered by the Equality Act 2010 and the public sector equality duty.

Sarah Olney: My constituent Feras Al-Moubayed is engaged in a dispute with a high street bank but has been unsuccessful in his attempts to secure time with a BSL interpreter to sort through and categorise evidence documents for his case. As a result, he has missed several Financial Ombudsman Service deadlines, which has caused considerable stress and anxiety. If the Minister will not commit to bringing forward legislative proposals to provide BSL with a full legal status, will he commit to making more provision available to support people such as Mr Al-Moubayed in my constituency in the interim?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Member for raising that matter; I encourage her also to raise it with our Treasury colleagues, because it sounds like additional support is needed. On the broad principle, I welcome the fact that the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), who has a great deal of personal experience in this area, is looking at a potential private Member’s Bill, for which I have offered my full support by hosting a roundtable with the Equality and Human Rights Commission, stakeholders and cross-Government officials to look at how the public sector equality duty and the Equality Act 2010 are or are not providing sufficient support for those who rely on BSL. I welcome all support in that area.

Kickstart Scheme

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the progress made by the kickstart scheme in creating jobs for young people. [901853]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I am delighted to say that we have agreed funding for over 230,000 jobs. What matters, though, is whether young people are starting those jobs. Over 36,000 young people have—nearly doubling since the previous DWP questions—and there are about 100,000 jobs currently live in the system waiting to be filled, so it is a very exciting time for young people to get kickstarted.

Chris Clarkson: Getting young people into these kickstarter positions is hugely important, but it is only a first step, so will my right hon. Friend tell me what support is available to those young people to turn these kickstarter opportunities into permanent roles?

Dr Coffey: One of the key features of the kickstart role is the £1,500 that is given for employability support. Combined with that, there are now over 27,000 work coaches right across Great Britain. What will tend to happen is that those young people, after four months of being on kickstart, will be engaged to see what the next role could be. That could be an apprenticeship or a permanent role, and we are already seeing people get permanent work with their kickstart employers. I particularly pay tribute to Tesco, which has been absolutely amazing in the process so far, and I encourage other employers who are equally standing up to the challenge to continue to try to make sure that every young person gets a chance.

£20 Universal Credit Uplift

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the potential effect of removing the £20 a week uplift to universal credit and working tax credit on child poverty in Scotland. [901844]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): No assessment has been made. Projecting the impact of an individual policy on poverty levels is complex and inherently speculative. It is difficult to isolate the specific impact of one policy and determine its effect on how many people fall below the poverty threshold, which itself changes over time.

Kirsten Oswald: That is simply not good enough. Ploughing ahead with the scheduled cut to universal credit means ignoring the advice of three Select Committees—the Scottish Affairs Committee, the Work and Pensions Committee and the Lords Economic Affairs Committee—over 100 Tory MPs, former Tory Minister Lord Freud and over 50 anti-poverty charities. In the face of that, how can the UK Government justify cutting £20 a week for millions of families already living on subsistence incomes?

Will Quince: Our expectation is that, as the vaccine is widely rolled out, restrictions will be lifted and our economy will reopen over the next few months. Therefore, the Government's focus will rightly shift towards supporting

people's incomes by helping them back into work and to increase their earnings through progression as part of our comprehensive plan for jobs. We have consistently shown throughout the crisis that we will continue to assess how best to support individuals and businesses as the situation develops.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): A Joseph Rowntree Foundation report stated that before the pandemic over half of working-age people receiving income-related benefits were already below the poverty line. We are at a critical juncture. This Tory Government can carry out one of the biggest cuts to benefits in decades, bringing the basic level of benefits back to early-1990s levels, or they can provide substantial long-term support to people, so which will it be?

Will Quince: As I said, our expectation is that as the vaccine roll-out gathers pace, as restrictions are eased, as our economy opens up and as our labour market starts to grow again over the next few months, it is absolutely right that our focus shifts towards supporting and empowering people back into work, because we know—all the evidence shows us—that work is the best route out of poverty. We will do that through our £30 billion comprehensive plan for jobs.

Levelling-up Agenda

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to help implement the Government's levelling-up agenda. [901845]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Levelling up is the Prime Minister's key priority, making sure that people right across this country have the opportunity to thrive. The way that the Department does that is to work with other Departments, particularly thinking about skills and people going into in-work progression, as well as the use of levers, such things as the flexible support fund, that are aimed at removing barriers for people to take advantage of the opportunities available.

Mr Sheerman [V]: You will know, Mr Speaker, and the Secretary of State should know that Huddersfield is a prosperous, highly skilled area of our country—yes, in Yorkshire and the north of England. Just like our next-door neighbour, Batley and Spen, we are waiting for the promises and the slogans to turn into leadership and change. It is not good enough to talk about a northern powerhouse that never arrives or levelling up that is never delivered. When will we see the high rates of unemployment in our part of West Yorkshire and the high levels of people on social benefits reduced? Bring back prosperity—let's have some leadership on this, I beg you.

Dr Coffey: I share the hon. Gentleman's ambition and am very confident that Ryan Stephenson will make an excellent MP in the future to bring that to Batley and Spen. It is important to recognise the wider issues that the hon. Gentleman and his area face. I am sure that we will continue to work with Tracy Brabin following her election as Mayor to ensure we get the skills relevant to those areas, but it will take local leadership as well as the leadership that we offer from the centre.

In-work Poverty

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of people in in-work poverty. [901846]

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of people in in-work poverty. [901867]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): The number of working-age adults in working families in absolute poverty before housing costs fell by 300,000 in 2019-20. We have strengthened the welfare system, spending £7.4 billion in 2020-21 on measures such as the universal credit uplift. This is on top of additional support such as the coronavirus job retention scheme and the self-employment income support scheme.

Fleur Anderson: Wandsworth food bank does an excellent job of helping people in need, but it would like not to exist. Some 56% of the current food bank referrals from my constituents are due to wages being too low; 43% are due to unpredictable work from the gig economy. Many of my constituents in Putney, Southfields and Roehampton are working two or three jobs, and across the country one in six working households are unable to make ends meet. What steps has the Department taken to ensure that work always pays?

Will Quince: The Government are wholly committed to supporting the most vulnerable in our society, spending over £111 billion on working-age benefits in 2020-21, including an additional £7.4 billion in covid-related welfare policy measures. Additionally, my Department's covid winter grant scheme—now the covid local support grant—has helped those families most in need with the cost of food and other essentials. We take the issue of food insecurity incredibly seriously; that is why we have published data on household food insecurity from the family resources survey for the first time, to get a better understanding of the lived experience of families.

Tony Lloyd [V]: The Minister has made it clear on a number of occasions that the Government believe that the way out of family poverty is to get people into work. What would he honestly say to a child growing up in a family in my constituency whose parents work and who is still living in poverty? What words would he use?

Will Quince: Of course I do not want to see anybody in this country, let alone any child, growing up in poverty. Working-age adults in working families were approximately four times less likely to be in absolute poverty than working-age adults in workless families. A child living in a household where nobody works is five times more likely to be in absolute poverty than a child in a household where every adult is working. As I said, we have to focus on in-work progression and tackling in-work poverty, and we are doing that: we have the In-Work Progression Commission, which will report shortly on the barriers to progression for those in persistent low pay and set out a strategy for overcoming them.

Benefit Sanctions

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What recent assessment she has made of the potential effect of reintroducing benefit sanctions on vulnerable claimants. [901847]

Dr Coffey: As we approach 19 July, we have to have a business-as-usual approach in how we traditionally respond to the needs of our claimants, but I want to stress that, as ever, the claimant commitments are perfectly tailored to different benefit recipients. We also take into account the different vulnerabilities that people face. That is why, just over a year ago, we changed the process so that decisions would be made in a more centralised way to get a consistent approach, recognising that we want to ensure that people fulfil their commitments and the requirements made by DWP in order to continue to receive the benefits that they have.

Marion Fellows: As the DWP resumes face-to-face assessments, we know that more people will be hit with sanctions. We also know that this will disproportionately affect care leavers, as they are more likely to be sanctioned. Beyond scrapping sanctions altogether, will the DWP set up an internal marker and a single point of contact in each jobcentre to assist care-experienced claimants?

Dr Coffey: I will be open: I do not know how the law applies in Scotland. I know that in England and Wales there is a duty on councils to continue to have an element of responsibility for people who have left care until they reach the age of 25. I want to encourage the hon. Lady by saying that, right around the country, our jobcentres and work coaches are mindful of the extra demands, and that we continue to make sure that people's individual vulnerabilities are accounted for.

Disability Employment Gap: Covid-19

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on the disability employment gap. [901850]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): The disability employment gap has narrowed by 0.3 percentage points in the year to March 2021 and now stands at 28.6 percentage points. The Government remain committed to seeing 1 million more disabled people in work by 2027, despite the challenges of covid.

Dr Cameron [V]: MPs, like businesses, must do everything possible to ensure inclusion in employment for people with disabilities, but there is great concern that the employment gap will increase as a result of covid-19. I would like to thank the Department and the Minister for their recent assistance; a quarter of MPs across the House have now signed up as Disability Confident employers following our recent all-party parliamentary group for disability workshop. Could the Minister encourage those MPs who are still considering signing up to do so, so that we can reach our next target of a third of cross-party MPs being Disability Confident employers and ensuring that Parliament is a role model for inclusive workplaces?

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Member has been an absolute superstar in her role as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for disability. She organised a brilliant event to incentivise, encourage and cajole MPs from across the House to lead by example by signing up to be Disability Confident employers, and we saw a huge increase in the number of MPs who are signed up. She is absolutely right to keep pushing, because collectively we can make a difference, and she has personally led on that.

Benefits System: Fraud and Error

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle fraud and error in the benefits system. [901851]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): The Department has taken huge steps to reduce and minimise fraud and error during the last 12 months. We have introduced a range of measures, including optimising digital capability, expanding our integrated risk and intelligence service and policy functions, developing prepayment risking techniques and introducing a prepayment enhanced checking service for high-risk claims.

Dr Evans: I am grateful for the Minister's answer. Of course, errors are inevitable in such a large system, be they errors with overpayment or underpayment. Apart from trying to stop that, the key thing is to make sure that they are communicated clearly and resolved swiftly, so what is his Department doing to ensure that this is the case?

Will Quince: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we want to see issues resolved as quickly as possible. I would stress that the vast majority—around 95%—of payments are paid correctly, and the Department has processed over 4.3 million new universal credit claims since March 2020. The priority has been to get money to those people who need it desperately as quickly as possible. To do that, we streamlined some of our normal checks, but we are currently revisiting any high-risk claims that we paid during the covid-19 trust and protect period. I would of course be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to talk about this issue in more detail.

Supporting Young People into Work

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): What steps she is taking to work with (a) charities and (b) training providers to support young people back into work. [901854]

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): What steps she is taking to work with (a) charities and (b) training providers to support young people back into work. [901856]

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): What steps she is taking to work with (a) charities and (b) training providers to support young people back into work. [901858]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): Engaging with charities and training providers is central to our support for young people. This collaborative working includes the co-delivery of our national network of more than 130 new

DWP youth hubs, helping us to assist young people to be ready to take up opportunities in growing sectors and move into new kickstart roles.

David Johnston: I am one of those people who do not think it is a good idea for everybody to work from home, because it means that young people do not have older workers that they can observe and chat to, to learn the ropes. However, while a lot of office space sits empty or underoccupied, would my hon. Friend consider encouraging employers to make that space available to charities and training providers in order to train young people in the skills they need?

Mims Davies: I very much understand my colleague's comments. Supporting young people to thrive and find new opportunities is an important priority for me, and I take his comments on board. This is exactly what we are doing with our new DWP youth hubs. Jobcentre Plus works with employers, training providers and charities to identify local training needs and to ensure that opportunities and suitable outreach are available for all claimants, including young people.

Saqib Bhatti [V]: Careers fairs can be a fantastic way of promoting opportunity in the local area, which is why I plan to host one in my constituency of Meriden in the coming months. Given the strengths of jobcentres and their local relationships, what support can they provide to help make careers fairs such as mine a success?

Mims Davies: Jobcentre staff have a wealth of knowledge of the local labour market, cultivated by working closely with MPs, partners and businesses in their local community. My hon. Friend's careers fair will be a very welcome addition to the ongoing work of Jobcentre Plus branches in the area, which are inviting employers on a one-to-one basis for kickstart interviews daily. They have virtual group information sessions as well to get young people into work.

Matt Vickers [V]: The Lakota Training Group, set up by Joanne and Paul in Stockton, does incredible work, helping the long-term unemployed to develop the skills and confidence they need to get great jobs—they go above and beyond to change the lives of so many people. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to help training providers such as Lakota continue to help people find work and unleash their full potential?

Mims Davies: I know that my hon. Friend's local Jobcentre Plus in Stockton has a very important relationship with Lakota and they have been working closely together for a number of years. They are currently offering motivational and employability courses, including "All about you", which builds on the customer's skills, confidence and job search techniques and will help us, crucially, to deliver good job outcomes for local people in Stockton.

Personal Independence Payments

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of personal independence payment applications her Department has approved during the period that covid-19 restrictions have been in place. [901855]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): Volumes of new PIP claims awarded have remained stable since the introduction of covid-19 restrictions. Official statistics show that since April 2020 some 225,000 new PIP claimants have had awards. Over this period, we have continued to assess all claims on the basis of paper evidence or telephone assessments, where necessary.

Anna McMorris: One of my constituents who is severely disabled and vulnerable had her personal independence payments removed and lost vital care as a result—that was because medical advice was ignored by the assessors. Another lost his mobility car at the height of the pandemic, leaving him trapped, isolated and suicidal, unable to access vital services. Another had to turn to food banks to survive. They all had rejected applications overturned many months later at tribunal. Four out of five disabled and vulnerable applicants have faced unnecessary barriers to PIP support during covid. I am proud of my team in Cardiff North, who have been there to support my constituents through this traumatic time, but many are not so fortunate. So what is the Minister doing to make sure that assessments are right first time, to avoid this trauma and delay?

Justin Tomlinson: Although the vast majority of assessments—we have had over 4 million PIP assessments—are right first time, there are serious implications for those involved where they are not. As part of the forthcoming health and disability Green Paper we will be looking at claimants' ability to get good-quality supportive evidence; the role of advocacy; the role of the assessment itself; and further changes on mandatory reconsideration and appeals, building on the holistic changes we brought in that allowed us to nearly double the successful changes at the mandatory reconsideration stage, rather than have claimants having to go through the long appeal process. The key bit here is that the vast majority of successful appeals are because of additional written or oral evidence at that stage, and we need to make it as easy as possible to get such evidence into the beginning of the application.

Universal Credit Claimants

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that universal credit claimants are able to take advantage of sector-specific training opportunities. [901861]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): Through our plan for jobs, we are working with employers to deliver sector-based work academy programmes and swaps, and to provide bespoke training and experience, alongside a guaranteed interview for a real job in growing sectors. Additionally, DWP Train and Progress has provided even more flexibility for universal credit claimants to access training for longer, including new skills boot camps led by the Department for Education.

Cherilyn Mackrory [V]: I thank the Minister for her answer. In Truro and Falmouth, and around Cornwall, hospitality businesses are struggling to recruit staff at the moment. Does my hon. Friend agree that UC claimants

could be provided with hospitality sector-specific training, and, potentially, with further incentives, to ensure that these vacancies in this hugely important sector are filled?

Mims Davies: I am working strongly with the sector. These are some of the most rewarding, varied and enjoyable roles that there are. It is right that we encourage people to work in hospitality, as well as to enjoy its reopening. In Falmouth, we have created an intensive programme to provide claimants with an interest in hospitality with a set of transferable skills to ensure that they have the skills they need to flourish in this vital sector in beautiful Cornwall.

Topical Questions

Mr Speaker: We now come to topical questions.

[901895] **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Mr Speaker, I was really looking forward to answering Question 35, from the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), but that is okay.

Mr Speaker: If you had sped up, I would have got it in!

Dr Coffey: Well, there we are. By the way, Christine, the answer is none.

On the topical statement, on the basis of a successful G7, at which the employers taskforce fed into the discussions about work, I was able to participate in the G20 last week in Italy, as well as work on the OECD in terms of some of the work we want to do to make sure that, as a world, when we build back better we share and collaborate, because we want to make sure that we build back fairer and greener. I am particularly excited about the opportunities to help people with health conditions and disability to re-enter the world of work.

Greg Smith: Increasingly sophisticated digital skills are ever more crucial for those seeking work. With that in mind, what steps is my right hon. Friend taking to help all universal credit claimants to improve and strengthen their digital skills as they seek work?

Dr Coffey: I am conscious that digital inclusion is a key part of the skills issue. We are working collaboratively with the DFE, particularly on digital boot camps, and we have even changed the rules of aspects of universal credit to make sure that people can fully participate in extended courses. We will continue to use and signpost people to whatever resources are available.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The Public and Commercial Services union has been clear that the rush back to face-to-face assessments poses a serious risk to vulnerable claimants and staff alike. Given those concerns, I was quite surprised to learn that the Secretary of State has not personally met the PCS union in her nearly two years in office. Will she do better than just commend DWP staff for their tireless work throughout the pandemic and actually meet the union that represents those staff to listen to their serious concerns about safety?

Dr Coffey: DWP staff are real staff at the very frontline. We undertake risk assessments for every single jobcentre. Dealing with trade unions is an operational matter that is ably done by senior officials in my Department. I am confident and we know that our workers are keen to get back into the office and to make sure that they encourage people there. Our mission is to try to help people to get back into work and we know that face-to-face interventions are the most successful way to make that happen.

[901896] **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) [V]: Young jobseekers who were just starting to build their CVs when the pandemic hit will have different needs in respect of entering the world of work from those who may have years of experience to draw on. Can my right hon. Friend tell me what dedicated support is available specifically to help young people to take those first crucial steps into the working world?

Dr Coffey: Probably the most obvious element is the £2 billion of funding for the kickstart scheme. Let me give a recent example of where I have seen kickstart work well: a young man in south-west Scotland started off an apprenticeship and was very quickly set aside, and then his confidence was rebuilt by a work coach and he managed to get into a kickstart placement and is now thriving. It is important that our 27,000 work coaches in well over 700 jobcentres already are making sure that young people are at the forefront in respect of the help we are seeking to provide.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): One of Britain's best-known companies, P&O, has failed to pay £140 million that it owes to the merchant navy pension fund. This debt could cause serious problems for the fund, which has 24,000 members who work in a wide range of firms far beyond P&O. Despite P&O owing this enormous sum, the Government have awarded its parent company two lucrative freeport contracts. Will the Minister explain how on earth the Government allowed this to happen? We are getting used to sleaze and cronyism; is this an example of sleaze and cronyism, or is it sheer, unadulterated incompetence?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The hon. Gentleman is a member of the Labour party. He will recall that it was the Labour party that set up the Pensions Regulator with operational independence to deal with these matters. He may have forgotten the basis on which the Pensions Regulator was set up, but I have not. It is a matter between the Pensions Regulator and the individual company, but I am sure that he will take that up when he meets the Pensions Regulator.

[901897] **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): This is in no way a criticism of the very hard-working DWP staff in the north of Scotland, but, prior to covid, as the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) has pointed out, one-time face-to-face meetings did work. However, since covid, we have had virtual meetings, often followed by another virtual meeting and yet another virtual meeting, or even a face-to-face, which has led to huge delays, and, if that is followed by an appeal, this is really unacceptable. Will the Secretary of State look at two things: first, will she

ensure that we go back to timely face-to-face meetings; and, secondly, if there is a geographic element to this, because I represent such a huge constituency, could that be looked into as well with a view to sorting it out?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point about the rural elements. That is taken into account in the prioritisation of people we may wish to see in face-to-face interventions. We treat every claimant as an individual in trying to help them at this stage, and none more so than in his part of Scotland.

[901900] **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): As the furlough programme comes to an end, a great many people will be concerned about their prospects. Does my hon. Friend share my appreciation of the work of the Bolton and Leigh jobcentres and all the work that they have done to make sure that they are fully prepared to support people during this difficult time? Will she also welcome the fact that many employers locally are reporting that they have jobs for people to go to?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): I hugely appreciate the endeavours of all our work coaches, especially and including those in Bolton and Leigh JCPs. The Office for National Statistics says that our new monthly experimental vacancy data suggest that we are almost back to the pre-pandemic level in terms of vacancies; it was over 800,000 in May. Through our Jobcentre Plus provision, we have a wide variety of support available to help employers to fill those vacancies.

[901899] **Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP) [V]: Always a pleasure, Mr Speaker. Will the Minister exempt the £500 Scottish Government covid-19 payment to health and social care employees resident in Scotland from the Department's calculation for the payment of universal credit?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I believe that I have written to him—if I have not written to him, I know that I have written to a number of his colleagues on this matter. We do owe a huge debt of gratitude to health and social care workers for the work that they have done over the course of the pandemic. This is not as simple as he suggests. We follow exactly the same treatment of moneys coming into universal credit as Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs does and, as a result, that is very difficult to do, which is why we will not be doing it.

[901901] **Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: The impact of poverty is individual, but just by way of statistics, 40,000 families in the Rochdale borough are dependent on universal credit or legacy benefit; 30% of our children are growing up in poverty; yet the Government's response is to take out, through universal credit, planned cuts of £23 million every year from the borough. The Secretary of State talked about building back fairer. Let me ask her: is that fair?

Dr Coffey: First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his knighthood; it is well-deserved given his political and public service.

I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members have made on this matter. As the House will well know, we are absolutely committed not only to making sure that this is a temporary measure, but to helping people get back into work. We believe that that continues to be the best way, especially as there are vacancies across the country, and we will strain every sinew to help make that happen.

[901905] **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): Last week was Armed Forces Week. One of the great things about a career in the armed forces is the skills and qualifications that our men and women receive. What work is the Department doing with the Ministry of Defence to support our personnel as they transition back into civilian life to make sure that those skills and qualifications are fully utilised?

Will Quince: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The vast majority of veterans make a successful transition to life outside the armed forces, with around 85% securing employment easily. The DWP provides support to veterans in a number of different ways, including through our voluntary entry to the work and health programme and through our network of hard-working armed forces champions up and down the country. That work complements the resettlement support provided by the Ministry of Defence, sponsored by Career Transition Partnership.

[901902] **Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): Last week, I had the pleasure of visiting the Little Village baby bank in Roehampton in my constituency, whose staff do fantastic work helping struggling families. I asked them what would make the most difference for those families, and they said that the two-child benefit cap causes the most damage. Is it not time that the Minister looked again at that benefit cap and scrapped it?

Will Quince: I am afraid I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Lady. I appreciate the question, but the two-child limit is a question of fairness and of putting those who are in receipt of benefits in the same position—facing the same life choices—as those who are not in receipt of benefits.

[901903] **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab) [V]: Three quarters of children living in poverty have at least one adult working in their household. What is the Minister doing to make work pay, so that children can have a decent standard of living?

Will Quince: I think I have covered this one. As our economy improves, we will increasingly focus our support and work on in-work progression to improve the opportunities for those who are in low-paid work and to support them towards financial independence. The in-work progression commission will report shortly on the barriers to progression for those in persistent low pay. Our plan for jobs—those extra 13,500 work coaches, kickstart, restart, job entry targeted support and the sector-based work academy programme—will make a difference, and of course we have the strategy coming out of the in-work progression commission.

[901910] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): Some 2.1 million pensioners now live in poverty. Figures from Independent Age show that ensuring the uptake of pension credit

could help to address that. My older constituents are losing out on up to £3.5 million in pension credit that is going unclaimed. Will the Secretary of State now produce a dedicated action plan to increase the uptake of pension credit?

Guy Opperman: As the hon. Lady should be aware, on 16 June we had a pension credit awareness day, working with Age UK, Independent Age, various other charitable organisations and the BBC to get greater uptake of pension credit, and I am pleased to say that pension credit numbers are improving. There is more to do, but we are working with stakeholders to ensure that that does happen.

[901911] **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): On Friday, I was pleased to meet Carole Dawe, who is the manager of the Maesteg JCP office in my constituency. What came across was that this deeply dedicated team of people have been working right through the pandemic as one of the few front-of-house services that is still open, no matter what is put in front of them. Among the real concerns that were put to me was that they are doing an awful lot of bereavement support and that clients are arriving with significant mental health problems. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give me that, as we begin to open up, more support, training and, where needed, staff will be provided to ensure that our constituents get the very best support from what is becoming a lot more than just a simple jobcentre?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman is right to praise the staff at Maesteg jobcentre, and I join him in that. This is where the “Plus” is part of Jobcentre Plus. We are conscious that people may need to have many skills, and we continue to try to upskill our work coaches right across the country to make sure they do. It is fair to say that we need to make sure that our work coaches are trained to signpost people to the right services in their area. Many go above and beyond what would normally be expected, and I commend them for doing so.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I thank the Department and particularly the Harlow jobcentre for the work they have done in supporting vulnerable families during the pandemic. I welcome the kickstart scheme, which will provide a real incentive for employers to employ young people, but will my right hon. Friend work with the Treasury to reform the apprenticeship levy so that big companies can use more of the levy if they employ disadvantaged young apprentices?

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend is right to praise the staff at Harlow jobcentre, and I agree that they do an excellent job. In terms of what could be done with reform of the apprenticeship levy, that is one of the factors we should be considering in ensuring that some of the most disadvantaged young people get that extra foot on the ladder. We are trying to do that in certain ways through kickstart and then to provide elements of a pathway for those young people to make sure they have a longer lasting job, whether they go into an apprenticeship or directly into permanent employment.

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

3.29 pm

Sitting suspended.

Loss of Secret Documents

3.33 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence to update the House on the leak of classified and sensitive documents from the Ministry of Defence.

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): As the House will be aware, a number of Ministry of Defence classified documents were lost by a senior official early last week. Upon realising the loss of documents, the individual self-reported on Tuesday 22 June. The documents lost included a paper that was marked “Secret UK Eyes Only”. The documents were found by a member of the public at a bus stop in Kent. The member of the public then handed the papers to the BBC. The Ministry of Defence has launched a full investigation. The papers have now been recovered from the BBC and are being assessed as I speak to check that all documents missing have been recovered and what mitigation actions might be necessary. The investigation will look at the actions of individuals, including the printing of the papers through to the management of the reported incident, and at the underlying processes for printing and carriage of papers in Defence. The investigation is expected to complete shortly. While the investigation is being conducted, the individual’s access to sensitive material has been suspended. It would be inappropriate to comment on the findings of the investigation while it is still under way.

John Healey: That sensitive MOD documents were found strewn behind a bus stop in Kent last Tuesday morning is certainly embarrassing for Ministers, but it is deeply worrying for those concerned with our national security, so I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. This is not the first time that there have been known leaks based on classified documents from the MOD that have found their way beyond the MOD. In January, it was the assessment of how far short of our fighting strength our infantry battalions are. Early this month, it was personal details of more than 1,000 forces personnel, including special forces, which the Armed Forces Minister has now confirmed to me is also subject to a military police investigation. Are the military police involved in this investigation?

I am glad that the Minister has confirmed that the investigation will look at how and why these highly classified documents were copied and then carried out of the Department. When will it report, and will he publish the findings? He needs to do more to reassure us about the risks involved in the leak. Will he confirm the level of “UK Eyes Only” classification that the document had? Has the inquiry yet ruled out espionage? Were our allies informed immediately, and at what appropriate level?

The Minister mentions ongoing operations. Our frontline forces on HMS Defender were totally professional in dealing with aggressive Russian actions in the Black sea last week, but they must be asking, “What about our back-up at the MOD?” when top secret documents about their mission, ahead of their mission, found their way to the back of this bus stop in Kent. Finally, Ministers need to do more to reassure the public and our forces personnel that they have a grip of their Department, and have taken actions to stop the series of security breaches at the Department.

Jeremy Quin: I will take all those points in turn. I share the right hon. Gentleman’s concern over the incident. We take the loss of all data and documents very seriously. In direct answer to his question, the MOD police are involved as part of this investigation. On the timing, I have said “shortly”. I hope that it will be in very short order. I hope that it will be as little as a week, but I cannot commit to that in case the investigation finds more stuff that they need to go into. I would hope that it will be a very short process indeed, and that we will be able to inform the House in Defence questions next week, but forgive me, Mr Speaker, if the investigation needs to take longer. We will explain that on Monday if so.

Regarding espionage, again this is clearly a matter for the investigation, but I emphasise to the House that the individual self-reported when he became aware—that the documents had been mislaid. We have certainly informed the United States. It is aware of this circumstance. If anything further comes out of the investigation, it will be informed again. The right hon. Gentleman referred to our armed forces’ totally professional conduct in the Black sea last week. He is absolutely right to do so. They behaved absolutely impeccably, and I share his concerns that we must always be providing good back-up and good support to those armed forces.

I assure the House that, as it would expect, there is intense preparation and intense work to ensure that every angle and every analysis is covered before armed forces conduct themselves around the world, but clearly evidence of that should not be forthcoming from the Department. These are secret documents. The investigation will be appropriately conducted, and we will see what we can learn to improve our procedures for the future.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con) [V]: One thing that would seem only common sense to anyone finding classified documents is that they should hand them to the police. Can the Minister advise us what the legal position is? Was any official secrets legislation broken by somebody handing these documents to anybody other than the police? Was any official secrets legislation broken by the BBC in not handing them directly to the police but in choosing instead selectively to quote from classified information? Will the Government inquire as to whether the BBC paid any money for the acquisition of these documents from someone who ought to have handed them to the police straightaway?

Jeremy Quin: In an ideal and proper world, the documents should not have been available where they were, so that is where the original fault clearly lies. In the event of documents of this nature being found, clearly one would encourage members of the public to hand them in to the police. In this instance, they were handed in to the BBC. Naturally, I would have preferred the BBC to hand them over immediately and not make reference to them, but it has a job to do, and I recognise that it has behaved responsibly and handed the documents back to the Department. We are analysing that now.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP) [V]: There was certainly something of *Le Carré* in the faintly absurd discovery of these soggy documents behind a bus stop in the garden of England. I do not think that we can help but notice the general context. The documents were discovered in the same week in which a more

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

serious security breach—that of confidential CCTV images from a Whitehall Ministry, which leaves many of us unsure and distrustful of the motives of those involved. The whole thing reminds me of one of my favourite Le Carré quotes:

“Cheats, liars and criminals may resist every blandishment while respectable gentlemen have been moved to appalling treasons by watery cabbage in a departmental canteen.”

Does the Minister accept that many of us are worried about these episodes and what they say about the decline of standards in public life? I do not mean the quality of the cabbage served up in the canteen of Main Building.

Jeremy Quin: This is a mistake, it appears. I do not want to prejudice the investigation, but it appears that it is a mistake by an individual. It is important that one gets on top of that mistake, what can be learned and how we can help to ensure that such mistakes do not happen again. I am here to speak about this particular incident—I think that another urgent question follows this one on another issue—but I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s concern. I know that it is genuinely intended. I am sorry that this incident has happened, and the investigation will be thorough.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Putting aside the particulars of this recent incident, may I ask the Minister of State when the Government will introduce their reform of the Official Secrets Act, particularly on the classification of papers and punishment for those who breach the Act? Given that the Act is over 100 years old, is it not the case that in some situations it is no longer fit for purpose, and that reform needs to come sooner rather than later?

Jeremy Quin: I understand where my right hon. Friend is coming from. This is something that he has mentioned previously in the House. As I recall, there was reference to this in the Queen’s Speech. It is not my direct departmental business, but I understand that it is something that the Government are looking into.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I think that the documents pertained to HMS Defender, which must concern us as much as any other ones. Since Churchill was First Lord of the Admiralty and Jellicoe commanded the Grand Fleet and Beatty the battlecruisers, all documents pertaining to what the fleet was doing were kept totally confidential to the Ministry of Defence and never left that building, so I hope that the inquiry will pick up what exactly happened. The morale of our armed services depends on their confidence in this sort of thing not happening. I hope that the Minister accepts that, because the morale of those brave people who defend the country is, above all else, crucial.

Jeremy Quin: On the latter point, I could not agree more. The comments I have received from members of the armed forces today reiterate that. It is absolutely vital that they should have confidence in such procedures, which they follow themselves. There are policies and procedures in place under which documents can be taken out of the Department, but they are tightly constrained. It is up to the investigation to find out whether or not they were followed in this case.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Personally, I am rather saddened that the BBC saw fit to publish information that was secret, rather than pass it straight to the police or refer it to the Ministry of Defence. I think that reflects poorly on the BBC, which is, after all, a public service broadcaster. In the past it was normal practice for anyone in the MOD carrying restricted, classified or sensitive documents out of a secure location to do so in an approved briefcase, which was often manacled to the carrier’s wrist. Have such arrangements stopped now?

Jeremy Quin: As I mentioned to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), there are policies and procedures in place as to how documents can be safely taken out of the Department on the rare occasions when that is necessary. I think it is for the investigation to work through whether those procedures were followed in this instance and whether those procedures need to be reformed or improved for the future.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I think my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) was absolutely right to contrast the exemplary professionalism of our forces on HMS Defender with this unfortunate episode. I understand that the Minister has said that there will be an inquiry that will report as quickly as possible, but will he confirm that when that inquiry reports we will not have to have another urgent question? Will he commit today to a statement on the Floor of the House, so that all the facts that can be publicly known can be discussed, rather than a Minister having to be dragged here for another urgent question?

Jeremy Quin: We will certainly ensure that that information is known to Members. We should ensure that the outcome of the investigation, and certainly whether any further tightening of our procedures is required, are shared with the House.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con) [V]: The UK enjoys a strong bilateral relationship with Ukraine, highlighted by the recent trilateral agreement signed on board HMS Defender, but maintaining the highest levels of information security is critical to retaining confidence and credibility with our allies. I am reassured that the Minister’s Department is launching an investigation, but have the Minister and the Secretary of State spoken with our counterparts in the Ukrainian Government, along with our ambassador to Ukraine, to ensure that confidence and credibility with our allies has not been undermined and that Ukraine and the wider region remains uncompromised by this leak?

Jeremy Quin: I would not, as a matter of course, comment on the discussions we hold with our friends and allies overseas, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right to refer to the agreement struck last week. It was an important agreement for British shipbuilding and for Babcock, and I look forward to that enhancing the Ukrainian navy in due course.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): This is not the first time such a thing has happened, and I am sure it will not be the last. It is so serious an issue that the BBC chose not to report on various details in the bundle, because it could have endangered the security

of service personnel in Afghanistan. What steps have the Government taken to secure the safety of service personnel in Afghanistan and in the Carrier Strike Group?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Lady refers to the BBC choosing not to report, and I think that was right. One would have preferred the BBC to have handed the documents straight over, but it acted responsibly by not relaying information that could have caused problems. We are going through the investigation. We are ensuring that all those documents have been returned, and we will be ensuring that any mitigating actions that need to be taken are put in place.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Given the loss of these sensitive documents, can my hon. Friend confirm that we have taken all reasonable steps to ensure that the safety of our serving personnel has not been compromised?

Jeremy Quin: Absolutely; that is an ongoing task. There is intense planning behind all defence engagements and activities. That continues to be the case, and we always ensure that it is the defence, the safety and the security of our defence personnel that is uppermost in our minds.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: After this weekend, with sensitive military documents left at a bus stop and questions over the surveillance of a Secretary of State in his ministerial office, and as we are well aware that adversaries of our country, be they hostile states or terrorists, forever probe our national security for weaknesses, can the Minister tell the House which organisations are involved in the investigation into how documents were compromised in this way?

Jeremy Quin: I have already confirmed that the MOD police are involved in this process, but I can assure the right hon. Lady that all those whose involvement in the investigation is relevant and appropriate will be involved. She is absolutely right to refer to the ongoing threat to our national security in cyber terms as well as in the context of physical documents, and we as a Government ensure that we have the right advice from the right professionals in the right way.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I believe my hon. Friend said that the documents were reported missing last Tuesday, and of course HMS Defender was hassled on Wednesday. The investigation will say whether there was a link between those two incidents, but what it raises in my mind is the information that has come out about the situation in Afghanistan. It is a very tense situation right now, with the Americans withdrawing and the problems we are hearing about. Is the Ministry of Defence now reassessing the plans with our allies, including the Americans? We do not know at the moment what information there may be on the ground in Afghanistan and the security threat that it represents, including for ongoing security issues. Is my hon. Friend having conversations with our allies about potentially needing to reassess the next 12 months in Afghanistan?

Jeremy Quin: I can reassure my right hon. Friend that we constantly update and keep abreast of developments on the ground in Afghanistan and indeed in other theatres,

but I would not wish to alarm him. There is an investigation under way that will test what information was in those documents, whether they have been returned and what mitigating actions, if any, need to be taken as a result.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question, and the Minister for his very helpful responses. Recognising that the protection of internal waters may provoke Russian aggression—it may not be very hard to do that—can the Minister confirm that, alongside allies, we will not duck, but rather that we will maintain maritime freedoms in that area? Will the Minister further confirm that those trusted with classified documents will treat such information with the appropriate level of care?

Jeremy Quin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I will not go into the details regarding HMS Defender—that has been the source of a written ministerial statement—but it and its innocent passage may well be the subject of questions at Defence questions next week. I can absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that maintaining the proper classification and proper secrecy of documents is absolutely critical. That is the purpose of this investigation, and if we need to tighten our procedures, we certainly shall.

Bill Wiffin (North Herefordshire) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. Because of the nature of my constituents, I very rarely speak about defence matters, but I cannot begin to tell the House how angry I am that this civil servant or whoever it was who scattered these papers put the lives of 190 personnel at risk on HMS Defender. If you go to a military funeral, Mr Speaker, you will appreciate, as I am sure you do, how precious our service personnel are. I want the Minister, if he possibly can, to confirm to the House that the punishment for this sort of breach of security will match the risk to those people on HMS Defender as a result of this stupidity and incompetence.

Jeremy Quin: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I can reassure him that we always emphasise the need for safety and security on Defender and other ships in the Royal Navy. As the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) said at the outset, they behaved in the most professional and exemplary fashion in conducting their innocent passage in the Black sea. I totally endorse what he says regarding the seriousness of this issue, but he will of course appreciate that the investigation must come first. We need to see the outcome of that investigation before any further consideration as to action should be taken.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): This is not the first time there has been a security breach at the Ministry of Defence; in fact, it is the third time in six months. The Minister said that there are policies and procedures in place for secure documents leaving secure settings, but clearly those policies and procedures are inadequate or not working. Can he reassure the House that those policies and procedures will change as a result of this investigation?

Jeremy Quin: It appears to be a loss of documents rather than a deliberate act, although, as I say, I should not prejudge the investigation. That needs to be determined finally, but the loss of documents was reported by the

[Jeremy Quin]

individual concerned. Above official sensitive level, that is an extremely rare occurrence; no incidents have happened in the last 18 months. I checked over the last 18 months for the loss of documents above that level.

However, the hon. Lady is right that no one should take with equanimity information leaving the MOD in circumstances where it should not leave. The investigation is ongoing. I hope that it will report shortly. We will see whether it has recommendations as to how we can further tighten our procedures or whether this was a case of those procedures not being followed. If there are recommendations, we will take that very seriously and we will certainly share with the House.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. Clearly, one of the concerns here is that, had these materials been on a tablet or some other electronic device, they would have been properly security protected. The fact that the documents were literally that—printed documents—means that they were removed from the Ministry of Defence. I understand completely that we cannot know the circumstances, but can my hon. Friend confirm that there are restrictions in place on taking classified documents out of the Ministry of Defence in this way, and that they will continue to be in place? It seems astonishing that we are in this position.

Jeremy Quin: Yes, indeed. My hon. Friend makes a good point: tablets and electronic devices have password protection and encryption, which, as I understand it, prevent these incidents from happening and provide a greater level of protection. In relation to the physical carrying of paper documents, as I say, there are restrictions in place. There are procedures that should be followed. It is down to the investigation to find out whether they were followed in this instance and whether we need to tighten them up further.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): The seriousness of a leak such as this comes not just from classified information being put in the public domain, but from the fact that we know our adversaries will be poring over it to find potential weaknesses, including looking at planned movements of Royal Navy vessels and things like that. Will the Minister take this opportunity to confirm that all our operations will continue to be in line with international rules, sticking up for the rule of the UN and law of the sea?

Jeremy Quin: Absolutely. Again, that is not the subject of this UQ, but my hon. Friend can rest assured that we will continue to conduct ourselves appropriately and professionally, as the Royal Navy always does and as it did last week in its innocent passage across the Black sea. That is absolutely the case. I sincerely hope that this is not a case of our adversaries having sight of these documents, but that is something that has to be confirmed by the investigation.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): While there have been attempts today to scapegoat the civil servant involved and the BBC, the fact is that whether the civil servant's actions were caused by carelessness, forgetfulness, malice or whatever, at least one other person had a responsibility to stop that civil servant getting those papers out the

door of the MOD, so at least one other person, and possibly a whole chain of precautions, has failed. Will the Minister give an assurance, first of all, that the investigation will not be allowed to become a blame allocation or scapegoating exercise? Will he also assure us that not only will Parliament be advised of the result of the investigation, but that he or one of his colleagues will come back to give a statement and be questioned and held to account by Members of Parliament on the results of that investigation when it is ready?

Jeremy Quin: The investigation is partly to find out what happened and the circumstances behind the mislaying of these documents. I will not prejudge whether others were involved; it just needs to be discovered. I totally take the hon. Gentleman's point that one should not jump to conclusions. We need to have a proper investigation. As I say, the police are involved. We need to find the conclusions of that. We also need to find out what we need to learn for the future, and I will make certain that the House is advised of the conclusions of the investigation.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Recent incidents would appear to suggest that the MOD has some difficulty in safeguarding the nation's secrets. Aside from the loss of documents, there would also have had to be a deliberate act in removing pink paper from a secure area. Will the Minister please confirm that when the culprit is proven to be negligent, he or she will be invited to walk the plank?

Jeremy Quin: I understand my hon. and gallant Friend's concern, which will be shared by other hon. and gallant Members and by his former serving colleagues, but I think it is important that we have the investigation and find out exactly what is at fault. That also includes an examination of our policies and procedures to make certain that they are fit for purpose.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) [V]: The Minister recognised in his comments, I think, that revealing this information could have put the safety or even the lives of our serving personnel at risk. In that context, it is not scapegoating to say that if it was human recklessness, it has to be dealt with in a salutary manner—but if there is system failure, Ministers have to look very carefully at themselves and at senior officials to know why it could have taken place. The investigation has to give reassurance that this can never happen again.

Jeremy Quin: I am not going to say whether it is human recklessness, or what it is, until the investigation has reported. As I say, there are quite serious policies and procedures in place; whether they need to be tightened again is a subject for the investigation, and I will be interested to hear what it says. We will take what it says very seriously, I can assure the hon. Gentleman.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The success of all security processes clearly lies with the people who implement them. Is the Minister able to outline what document security training is undertaken at the MOD, who receives it and how often?

Jeremy Quin: There is indeed a security brief; my understanding is that it is mandated to take place for all employees annually and that it includes information on how documents should be properly and professionally handled.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The thing is that the Minister is far too nice and is being far too reasonable. Should we not all be a bit more angry about this? Carelessness is a form of treachery when dealing with documents of the significance to which he has referred in the House. Frankly, I do not understand why the Secretary of State is not here. This is a very, very serious point, and the Government need to make sure that if somebody has acted recklessly and put British service personnel in danger, that person will be expected to resign.

Jeremy Quin: Mr Speaker, you will be very relieved that the Secretary of State is not here, given that he was in contact with someone who has tested positive for covid-19.

Mr Speaker: I am.

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman gets the point. I am sure that the Secretary of State would have wished to be here otherwise, so please do not take it as a lack of interest on his part. He is doing the right and responsible thing. We all want our colleagues to do the right and responsible thing in all circumstances.

Please do not take my desire to hear the results of the investigation to be covering up anything other than serious disquiet, and indeed anger, that this has happened. It should not have happened; these documents should not have been mislaid. I am deeply sorry that that has been the case. We need to see from the investigation the circumstances that led to it and get the full details, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are taking it very seriously.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: This latest breach further demonstrates why the Government are not trusted with data. From the NHS data grab and the Home Office's loss of 15,000 arrest records to losing details of thousands of covid cases in a track and trace Excel spreadsheet, and now this—how can the Minister reassure the public that breaches of this severity will not happen in future? When will the Government publish details of a more comprehensive and robust investigation into wider security practices?

Jeremy Quin: The irony will not be lost on the hon. Gentleman that, whereas he referred to massive data accumulations through the internet and online services, what we are talking about here is paper documentation being left and mislaid. It is a different scenario. As I say, the investigation will check what happened, why it happened, what we can do to prevent document loss in

future and whether there are more measures we need to put in place. Ultimately, however, this is the loss of physical documents. It should not happen. As I said to the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) earlier, I did do a trawl and we have no record of documents being mislaid at above official sensitive level in the last 18 months. I hope that this is an extremely rare circumstance, but we still need to learn the lessons.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): This is clearly a “never” event: it should never happen. In the Minister's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton), he talked about the training that individuals go through to avoid such events. Of course, they can happen—like a fire or a pandemic can happen. Can my hon. Friend enlighten me on whether there are drills for such never events? If not, will he consider implementing drills to deal with these kinds of fallouts?

Jeremy Quin: There are procedures in place if lost documents are reported. The investigation will certainly check that we took the right actions on the reporting and in the actions that were taken subsequently.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Once again, secret documents have been lost from the Ministry of Defence. Indeed, it is the third major breach in the last six months. The Secretary of State seems to be asleep at the wheel while our nation is becoming the butt of jokes in the international security community. Will the Minister confirm that the safety of our brave British troops has not been compromised? Can he also advise what conversations have been had with our allies, whose personnel may have been put at risk as a result of this breach?

Jeremy Quin: I have no evidence to suggest that the safety of our personnel has been compromised, but clearly, as I have said, this is an investigation. It will go through the documents. It will ensure that missing documents have now been returned. It will go through the contents of the documents and put in place any mitigations that are needed. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we have been in contact with the United States. It is aware of the issue and we will keep it updated if we need to in future.

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

4.7 pm

Sitting suspended.

Security of Ministers' Offices and Communications

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we come to the next urgent question, I want to say something about the implications for this House of the apparent security breach involving the Department of Health and Social Care. We do not comment on the detail of security arrangements on the Floor of the House. However, I want the House to be reassured that I have directed senior officials to consider what implications there are for security arrangements in the House from the recent event in Whitehall and to take any necessary steps with urgency. I will not take any points of order on this matter.

4.11 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on security arrangements relating to ministerial offices and communications.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez): I appreciate your comments, Mr Speaker, about matters in relation to the House. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) for his question and for the chance to address concerns felt across the House about the security of ministerial offices and communications. These are concerns that the Government also take very seriously.

As has been the practice of successive Administrations, the Government do not generally comment on internal security matters. On the specific incident relating to the leak of footage from a security camera to the media, given the public interest in the case I can confirm that the Department of Health and Social Care has launched an investigation that is supported, as appropriate, by the Government security group based in the Cabinet Office. Until the investigation is complete, it would be inappropriate to give further details. I am sorry to hon. Members who will understandably be seeking a lot of details on this matter. It is the case, however, that robust safeguards are in place around the security of Ministers, parliamentarians and Members of devolved legislatures.

My hon. Friend may also want to ask about ministerial communications, which I am happy to go into. Government guidance is that official devices, email accounts and communications applications should be used for communicating classified information. Other forms of electronic communication may be used in the course of conducting Government business, but each Minister is responsible for ensuring that Government information is handled in a secure way. How that is done will depend on the type of information and on the specific circumstances.

Mr Bone: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question and for your comments. I thank the Minister for her response, but it seems to me that the revelations over the weekend that the Secretary of State for Health's personal office had recording devices in it should be of national concern. If Government and parliamentary offices have recording devices in them—whether audio, visual or both—it is of the utmost concern. Since the disclosure, several Cabinet Ministers have gone on the record to say that they had no knowledge that their offices might be subject to surveillance.

It is totally unacceptable for private conversations between Ministers, civil servants, Members of Parliament and members of the public to be secretly recorded. It also brings into question whether the Wilson doctrine has been broken. Since the premiership of Harold Wilson, it has been a long-standing rule that secret recordings of Members of Parliament by the police, security services or state are outlawed, so I have a number of questions for the Minister on which I hope she will be able to be a little more forthcoming.

First, do the offices of Ministers or Members of Parliament have recording devices in them? If so, who authorised them? Who has access to the recordings? What is the purpose of the recordings? How long are they kept? Has the Wilson doctrine been broken? Are there currently any Members of Parliament under surveillance by the police, intelligence agencies or the state? What measures are taken to ensure that there are no illicit recording devices in ministerial and parliamentary offices? Are they routinely swept for those devices?

Mr Speaker: Before you answer that, Minister, I should say that you have no responsibility for the House. That is a responsibility of the House that I am looking into, but everything else is fair game.

Julia Lopez: I appreciate that clarification, Mr Speaker, which is important.

I wish to assure my hon. Friend that we do endorse the Wilson doctrine, and I agree that it is unacceptable should there be any secret recordings within Government offices. My understanding in this case is that this was a CCTV camera operated by the Department of Health and Social Care, which is why it is being investigated by that Department. We do not believe that there are covert concerns at this moment, but there is an ongoing investigation into this, which, unfortunately, we are going to have to be patient on and wait for the details of. But once that investigation has been completed, notwithstanding the security concerns, we will want to provide him with reassurances on a number of the extremely important questions that he has raised.

My hon. Friend also asked about the extent to which offices are regularly swept. There is an organisation called UK NACE—UK National Authority for Counter Eavesdropping. It is the Government lead for counter-eavesdropping and this includes the technical manipulation of protective security systems, including CCTV. This is an area where it works very closely with the Government Security Group. My understanding is that it takes a risk-based assessment when it comes to sweeping, so in Departments where there are particular security sensitivities and concerns, those sweeps are taking place on a relatively regular basis, but Departments are accountable for the way in which their security is maintained within the Departments. The Cabinet Office plays a supporting role through the Government Security Group, setting out standards to which Departments are expected to adhere.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) on securing this urgent question, and I thank the Minister for her opening comments regarding CCTV and the limitations, but, given how little we currently seem to know, will she come back to the House when she does have some answers regarding this?

Incredibly, this is not even the biggest scandal of the day when it comes to ministerial security and communications, and the Minister alluded to this comments. This morning, a Government spokesperson claimed that all Ministers only conduct Government business through their departmental email addresses yet I have, right here, the minutes of a departmental meeting in which senior civil servants report Government contracts being approved from a Minister's private email address. Who is telling the truth? It is a pity that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster could not be here in person, given his personal experience of the perils of using his private emails to conduct ministerial business and to try and avoid freedom of information laws.

And it goes well beyond one Department. Last week, the Cabinet Office refused to answer my questions about the Prime Minister's mobile phone. Today, it has been reported that he, too, will not deny using private email addresses. Can the Minister now say from the Dispatch Box, categorically and on the record, that no Minister or Prime Minister has used, or does use, private email for Government business, especially when it involves spending public money?

This morning, the Justice Secretary agreed that private email was a huge security issue. He admitted that this revelation does raise legitimate questions. On this, he is right. Now it is time to answer those questions. Will those involved refer themselves to the Information Commissioner so that a genuinely independent investigation can take place? If any Ministers have used private email for Government business, what action will be taken and what will be done to prevent it from happening again? What steps have been and will be taken to preserve private emails as evidence for the public inquiry into the Government's mishandling of the covid pandemic?

Our country faces daily threats from hostile foreign states that have already, for example, hacked the private email account of the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox). What advice have the Government taken on the security of Ministers' private email accounts? What does it say about this Government that they will launch an inquiry into leaks of CCTV but not into their own Ministers?

Julia Lopez: I thank the right hon. Lady for her important questions, which I will seek to answer. It is important to understand that Government guidance is that official devices, email accounts and communications applications should be used for communicating classified information. Other forms of electronic communication may be used in the course of conducting Government business. Each Minister is responsible for ensuring that Government information is handled in a secure way, but how that is done will depend on the type of information and on the specific circumstances.

The right hon. Lady asked about the procurement of personal protective equipment, I believe, or a covid contract that was conducted allegedly via a private email address. I am happy to look into that. But there needs to be understanding of the fact that when we were at the height of the pandemic, a huge volume of correspondence was coming to Ministers via their personal email addresses, their parliamentary email addresses and their ministerial email addresses.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): That's all right, then!

Julia Lopez: I am not suggesting that there is something we should not be looking into. My point is that—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman could wait for me to finish. Some 15,000 offers of help to secure PPE came in following the Prime Minister's call for assistance. Obviously people wanted to respond to that call, and then we needed to manage the sheer volume of correspondence. The important thing to note is that when PPE offers did come in, they went through the same eight-stage process, so no matter which way those things were communicated, they went through the same process, and that should provide assurance.

Insofar as there are questions to answer, I want to assure the right hon. Lady that we have conducted a number of internal and external inquiries into this matter. There is the Boardman investigation into contracts and there was a National Audit Office investigation into contracts, so I assure her that this matter has already been looked into. She is absolutely right to ask questions and I am absolutely right to reassure her.

I would add that there have been a number of debates on covid contracts in this House, one of which took place in Westminster Hall. I was on maternity leave at the time of the pandemic. I shared the right hon. Lady's concerns and wanted to understand what had happened, so I responded to a debate in Westminster Hall on those questions and I set out very candidly some of the concerns and challenges that we faced at the height of the pandemic. A number of hon. Members engaged in that debate and asked very legitimate questions to which I responded to the best of my ability. I am not aware that the right hon. Lady has ever engaged in any of those debates. If she wishes to generate a lot of hue and cry over this, that is understandable from a political point of view, but it is my duty to set out the challenges we faced and the ways we are addressing some of the concerns.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for coming to the Dispatch Box to answer the urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). As she will know, the Wilson doctrine covers deliberate surveillance, so what safeguards are there for whistleblowers who may inadvertently discover material that is in the public interest?

Julia Lopez: It is important that a distinction is made between material that was inappropriately sourced and then leaked and people who are trying to raise legitimate concerns that require public transparency. I shall look into the concern that my hon. Friend has raised to make sure that there is no blurring of those two very important and distinct issues.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I will follow your strictures precisely, Mr Speaker—all my questions are about ministerial offices.

Was the former Health Secretary aware, and indeed, was the security officer in his Department aware, of the CCTV camera in his office? Is the Minister aware of similar CCTV cameras in any other ministerial office? Who installs such systems in Ministries and who monitors them and has access to their feeds? Do they record video only or is it sound and vision? Given that there were reports of this footage being touted on Instagram for some time, is it true that staff from private companies

[Stewart Hosie]

manage those systems and monitor the footage? If it is true, who is responsible for vetting, and what is the process for vetting, such staff?

Finally, and most importantly, how confident is the Minister that others—states and non-state actors who would do us harm—have not already compromised other staff or gained direct access to some of these CCTV feeds?

Julia Lopez: Those legitimate concerns will be raised and, I hope, addressed through the Department of Health and Social Care investigation. As I say, the Cabinet Office is there to set the standards, on which we have regular correspondence and engagement with Departments.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of points—who installs such machines and so on—that we need to look into via the Department of Health and Social Care investigation. My understanding is that it was a CCTV camera, not a covert device. There are obviously questions to answer about the way in which civil servants are vetted—they do go through stringent vetting processes—and in respect of a risk-based approach as to which Departments need to be more regularly swept. I hope that some of the answers that the hon. Gentleman seeks will be answered by the Department of Health and Social Care investigation into this matter.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): During a pandemic, the position of Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is one of the most safety-critical roles. People should have been able to have the frankest of conversations with him regarding the nation's health without fear of being recorded. Throughout this awful crisis there have been a number of leaks, with the most notable being the one before the second lockdown in November last year. Will the Minister assure the House that, along with cameras, ministerial offices should not have microphones hidden in them, and that any review of security will ensure that all ministerial offices are checked for them regularly?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for raising an important point. As I have said, sweeps are conducted across Departments. Ultimately, the permanent secretaries of Departments are accountable for security within them, but the Cabinet Office sets out clear guidance and continues to liaise with Departments about how that is adhered to. My hon. Friend raises an important point about covert devices, and we all seek the same reassurances as him on these matters.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Crikey, Mr Speaker—who would be a Minister on a day like today?

I do not want to go into the detail of what happened on the day in question, but it occurs to me that the security camera—I think we are accepting that it was a security camera—must surely to goodness have been pretty covert. I know where the security cameras are in my local high street where I live in the highlands. The more we go into this matter, the odder it gets. The public deserve an absolutely open explanation as to what has happened. If the cameras are covert, or semi-covert, why are they? Why does a Secretary of State not know, on a need-to-know basis, about this sort of thing and where the cameras are?

Julia Lopez: My understanding is that the camera was not covert, but, as I say, the Department of Health and Social Care is conducting an investigation and that will answer some of these questions.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): There is currently a lot of speculation in the newspapers about the implications in respect of foreign powers using these sorts of surveillance tools. Will my hon. Friend confirm that at this stage there is no reason to believe that foreign powers have been involved in respect of this particular camera at the Department of Health and Social Care but that the investigation will look at whether there is any connection?

Julia Lopez: My understanding is that there have been some reports about whether there is anything to be concerned about in relation to covert surveillance; I think some of that is just speculation. I am afraid I cannot comment on security matters, as my hon. Friend will understand, but I assure him that all these questions are being asked within Government to make sure that we have watertight systems.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP) [V]: I accept the need for external CCTV coverage to ascertain entry and exit, but have any checks been made to establish whether any other internal offices, where Ministers, MPs or staff could be monitored, have a device installed covertly? Has the country of origin of the device used in this instance been established?

Julia Lopez: I speak on behalf of the Cabinet Office. I asked questions about my own office today and received assurances, and I imagine that Ministers across the Government estate will be asking the same. As I say, the Department of Health and Social Care has launched its own investigation and will be accountable for that.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): The leaking of footage from inside private ministerial offices raises two important questions. Why had a camera been installed? If it had been done legitimately, how did the footage come into the public domain? Will my hon. Friend confirm that the matter will be investigated with the urgency it requires?

Julia Lopez: I can provide my hon. Friend with those assurances, as I have provided them to the House this afternoon.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab) [V]: The Minister did not give a straightforward answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), so I will ask her again: is she confirming that Ministers did use private email addresses to approve contracts and that the Department of Health and Social Care therefore misled the public in its statement denying categorically that that happened? Given just how serious this is, will she agree to refer it to the Information Commissioner so that there is an independent investigation, not another Government whitewash?

Julia Lopez: My understanding is that it is not within the Minister's power to approve contracts—that goes through the approval of civil servants. I would like to offer the hon. Lady that assurance, but I am happy to look into the particular incident she highlights further if there are concerns that need to be looked into.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Ministers will often need to discuss matters of the highest confidential nature and see highly confidential documents, so does the Minister agree that Ministers should be able to make such decisions in the British interest, without any fear or favour?

Julia Lopez: I quite agree with my hon. Friend. In the decisions we take throughout this pandemic to tighten the system to ensure that there are no concerns, such as those expressed by hon. Members, it is important that we do not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Ministers should have the space to make important national decisions.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con) [V]: Does the Minister know whether there are rules common to all Departments on where security cameras can be sited and where they must not be sited?

Julia Lopez: My understanding is that the general policy is that cameras are not sited within Ministers' offices. I think this situation was an outlier in that regard, and we will have a better understanding of why it occurred once the Department's investigation is complete.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab) [V]: The shadow Secretary of State asked the Minister directly whether any Minister or the Prime Minister used private emails to conduct Government business, and in response the Minister basically repeated the guidelines, which seem to suggest that, yes, Ministers can use a private email and it is up to them to police themselves. Given the stench of cronyism around this Government, can she not see how that answer is completely unacceptable? All this needs to be opened up, and transparency must be the order of the day immediately.

Julia Lopez: My point is that it is not Ministers who make the final decisions on contracts and that important processes are gone through. There may be questions about the direction of email traffic, but the point is that every decision is scrutinised under the same process when it comes to providing covid contracts—if that is the hon. Gentleman's concern.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con) [V]: Although I welcome the Department of Health and Social Care's rapid investigation, this case raises potentially serious concerns about the security of all private offices. Can my hon. Friend assure me that the Department will work with security teams across Government to protect the privacy and security of all Ministers?

Julia Lopez: As I suggested, the Cabinet Office already works across Government on the standards we expect when it comes to the security of private offices, and Mr Speaker addressed concerns in relation to Parliament.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is not acceptable to have covert surveillance at work for Ministers, Members or anyone else, but the public are entitled to transparency on issues raised about things such as private emails. The Government already have answers to give on donations for the Prime Minister's flat, peerages to donors, tax breaks by text and unlawful contracts to associates, so

does the Minister agree that her Government's murky dealings are the real sordid affair that the public should see a light shone on?

Julia Lopez: As I say, there have been a number of investigations to look into some of the allegations that have been put to Government over the course of the pandemic, including the National Audit Office's report. We have conducted our own investigations, because we take seriously some of the allegations that have been put to us. As I say, there are processes in place that people went through. There were a number of other challenges we faced at the height of the pandemic, which I have been candid about in Westminster Hall and in other places, but the public should be assured that their money has been spent with care. As I say, there were challenges we went through, relating to the sheer number of items of correspondence and emails that were coming in. It is not for Ministers to conduct and make decisions on contract awards over private email, and we are happy to look into any concerns in that regard.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): If I understood the Lord Chancellor correctly this morning, he said that when he wants to read a sensitive document, he goes to a separate room in his Department to do so. Could we have a look at what procedures are in place across Government to make sure that Ministers can read sensitive documents safely?

Julia Lopez: As my hon. Friend will be aware, there are different levels of document classification, so procedures are already in place to ensure that Ministers can read such documents in privacy and with great security, but if there are concerns about whether those safeguards are robust enough, we will look into them.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Something really does not add up here. As I understand it, the Minister is saying that the camera in the office of the Secretary of State was not covert. In other words, the Secretary of State knew it was there, yet we have all seen the video. If that is true, he must be the stupidest man on earth. Is the Minister really trying to persuade us that he knew that there was a camera in his office? When he had meetings with other Ministers, were they informed that those meetings were being recorded? Is that really what she is trying to suggest? It blows my mind, this idea.

Julia Lopez: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman's mind is blown. I am a Cabinet Office Minister who is responsible for overall adherence to Government security rules. When it comes to the placement of the camera in that office, I am afraid that it is for the Department of Health and Social Care to account for itself when it comes to what happened. It is already conducting an investigation, which we will want to look at.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): As a former Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care with the previous Secretary of State, in candidness, no one ever told me that our meetings were being observed. I never asked, it is true, but I was certainly never told. The issue, to my mind, is of course that they were being recorded, but more, who had access to those images? Does the Minister think that things would be made much easier for everyone as the Department of Health and Social

[Steve Brine]

Care begins the investigation if the, let us remember, profit-making media organisation involved simply made it clear how it was able to see inside a senior Minister's office?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his pointed and important question, and I hope that during the course of the investigation led by the Department that some of these answers will come through so that we can scrutinise them ourselves.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab) [V]: The Minister has astonished us all by saying that this was not a covert device, yet we have just heard from a former Health Minister that he did not know about it. The Minister is somehow asking us to believe that the now departed Secretary of State somehow knew about it, but clearly if he did he would not have behaved in the way he did right in front of it, so I think that she is stretching credibility. When I was a Minister, we were not allowed to use our own inboxes or our own private emails for Government business. We were told very, very bluntly at the beginning of our ministerial career that this would not be allowed. Why on earth is it different now?

Julia Lopez: I appreciate the hon. Lady's question, but I am not asking her to believe anything. I am asking her to have patience while the Department conducts its own investigation into exactly what happened. On the use of emails, there are clear guidelines to which Ministers should adhere, but we have to accept that there was a situation in which we all had to move online, and we all have to account for the way in which we handled ourselves in that period.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) [V]: I have lost count of the number of times my colleagues and I have raised issues about the lack of transparency, honesty and integrity under which too many Government Ministers operate. The ministerial code is not worth the paper it is written on. The whole sordid affair follows on from the former Health and Social Care Secretary being found to have acted unlawfully in his disclosure of contracts for personal protective equipment, contracts for mates, and now the revelation of the use of private emails. This, as others have said, smacks of his covering his tracks.

On the cameras, if Ministers were unaware of them, that is nothing short of Big Brother. What other Department buildings have similar cameras of which we are not aware?

Julia Lopez: I think that will form part of the investigation, and it is something that the Government's security group will actively look into.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): On the use of private emails for Government business, will the Minister confirm the legal position under the Freedom of Information Act? My understanding is that if a public authority—the Secretary of State clearly is a public authority—uses a private email for Government business, that private email and those emails are subject to the Freedom of Information Act, and the destruction of any emails in order to prevent them from being disclosed

would be a criminal offence. That information will obviously be of some reassurance to people. Is she able to confirm that from the Dispatch Box?

Julia Lopez: Yes, I can confirm that official information held in private email accounts is subject to FOI.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): When the investigation into this matter is concluded, will the Minister come back and tell the House whether this leak has reached the threshold to warrant an investigation by the intelligence agencies?

Julia Lopez: The investigation is being led by the Department of Health and Social Care. The hon. Lady raises an important point about the threshold at which it is subject to security and intelligence investigations. I will get back to her on that, but I hope that we will be able to update the House when the substantial findings have been reported.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Like my good and hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), I joined the Department of Health in moving into this new building, 39 Victoria Street, at the end of 2017. Will the Minister ask the Department to consider in its internal investigation whether the devices were installed as part of the new build or subsequently? Will she also please develop a protocol from the Cabinet Office across Government that all Ministers, and frankly all people working in Government buildings, are notified of any official listening, visual or other sensors in their place of work, so that they are aware of it rather than, as we have been today, surprised by it?

Julia Lopez: Those are very pertinent questions, and ones that I have asked in advance of today and to which we will all want answers. My right hon. Friend makes an important and useful suggestion when it comes to the protocol in relation to CCTV or any other device that might be found in a Minister's office. I am sure that other Ministers across Government will want that assurance.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State, engaged—at least as we thought—on matters essential to our national security, health and wellbeing is filmed, unbeknownst to him, and that film is leaked to a national newspaper when it could just as well have been a foreign power. I have to say that I find the Minister's complacency incomprehensible. Can she at least confirm that the Government know where each Government CCTV camera is, who has access to them and whether outsourcing has led to a plethora of private security firms and other contractors having access to the footage?

Julia Lopez: I assure the hon. Lady that I am not complacent. This is a fast-moving situation. We found out about this device on Friday, and I have sought a number of assurances. Some of them cannot be answered at the moment because a live investigation is under way, but these questions are being asked and we do want to understand the situation so that we can assure the House. I am placed in the rather frustrating position of not being able to provide the clarity that people understandably demand on a day like this. I will have to ask the House's forgiveness while the investigations are under way.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): The truth is that the days when officials asked Ministers for instructions via papers placed in locked red boxes are long gone. The truth of the matter is that officials in Whitehall Departments expect Ministers to be in contact with them 24/7. It can be very difficult for Ministers in those positions to access secure devices to look at things. May I ask the Minister to instruct the Cabinet Office to really challenge the guidance that is given to officials and Ministers about this, so that Ministers are not finding themselves unwittingly having to use private emails, as I found quite often as a Minister in the Department of Health?

Julia Lopez: That is such an important point. We are living in different circumstances where electronic communications mean that we are contacted at all hours of the day on different email accounts, different devices and so on. We are trying to clarify the guidance on this, because this is a situation that we are perhaps not as best prepared for as we should be, but we are not complacent. My hon. Friend also raises the important point that there are lots of different systems across which Ministers have to operate. I had my parliamentary account and my Cabinet Office account, for example, and we also have to engage in meetings across different systems. Trying to move between those systems can provide a real challenge, and this is something that we need to provide clearer guidance to other Departments on.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Government's lax security has resulted in information and communications ending up in the wrong hands, and the Government's lax procurement processes via text, private email and a word down the pub have led to billions of pounds of public money ending up in the wrong hands. Sensitive information and public money are neither safe nor secure, so how will the Minister ensure that there is an end to this casual approach to information and communications relating to security and spending? And for the third time, what discussions have taken place with the Information Commissioner over these casual communications since these revelations have come to light?

Julia Lopez: I have not personally discussed this with the Information Commissioner over the weekend. As I say, a number of issues have come to light that we need to be on top of, and I hope to assure the House on these matters in the coming days.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) [V]: Our Prime Minister has had to have his phone wrested from him by the security services for conducting Government business by WhatsApp, and now a Health Secretary has been using his Gmail for official purposes. Can the Minister please answer the second question posed by the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) and confirm to us that it would be a criminal offence for any Minister to destroy communications they have made about Government business on private emails or private messaging apps for the purpose of defeating the ends of justice regarding our freedom of information request or, indeed, defeating the ends of justice in any future inquiry into the covid crisis?

Julia Lopez: As I say, official information held in private email accounts is subject to freedom of information and all the rules and restrictions around that.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): My hon. Friend has said that the ultimate responsibility for security lies with the Department, and that the Cabinet Office sets best practice. Given the importance and sensitivity of security, should we not centralise this to ensure that every Department complies and that there is no aberrant behaviour?

Julia Lopez: The ultimate responsibility is with the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Secretary, but it is for the accounting officers to be answerable on these matters for their Departments.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The Minister said that this was not a covert device and that it was known about, but then she said that they only found out about it on Friday in a fast-moving situation, so she needs to get her story straight, not least because we have two respected former Ministers in the Department—the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) and the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne)—in the Chamber who knew nothing about these cameras. The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) rightly talked about the Wilson doctrine and the importance of monitoring the surveillance of Members of Parliament, so would it not be a good idea if the Prime Minister now made a statement to the House to tell us exactly when he first knew about this device and about the content that was on it?

Julia Lopez: I wish to assure the hon. Member that we maintain the Wilson doctrine and that we wish to ensure that there is no covert surveillance within a Minister's office. That is extremely important. Some of the questions that people have rightly raised with me this afternoon will want to be answered through the investigation that is under way in the Department of Health, and I am sorry that I cannot provide greater detail on that at the moment.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be aware, as everyone in this House is, how livid Mr Speaker and many people here were at the leaking of the second lockdown and how Mr Speaker asked for a full investigation into the incident. What has emerged over the weekend has blown all that up. The leaking could have involved a whole number of people who were never even considered as part of that investigation, which, as Mr Speaker has informed us on Privy Council terms, is still ongoing. Will my hon. Friend the Minister liaise with her Department and with the Cabinet Secretary to ensure that any information of who had access to that video footage and covert surveillance of that office is fed into the investigation that Mr Speaker has asked for to find out how things were being leaked to the press before this House knew about them?

Julia Lopez: I thank my right hon. Friend for those very important questions to which we all want answers. I hope that they will be answered as part of this investigation.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does the Department of Health and Social Care handle its own ministerial office security, or is that done across Whitehall by other organisations such as the police?

Julia Lopez: There is a range of different ways in which security is maintained across the Government estate. Some of those are dealt with by the police, some by Government security, and some by the Departments themselves. The mix of those in this particular instance will be looked into.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): As parliamentarians, we all have sympathy for the Minister being sent here to respond to these questions without many of the answers to them. We had all expected that her boss would be here for these questions, as indeed he would have been had he thought he had the answers to give to them. May I ask her, the next time she meets the Cabinet Secretary, to stress how unsatisfactory this situation is, how dangerous it is to the security of this nation, and that the House demands not only that this situation is never repeated, but that we get the answers that she has been unable to furnish us with today?

Julia Lopez: Those are answers that we will hopefully get once the investigation is complete. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is in Scotland today so he could not be in the House. I share the hon. Gentleman's anxiety about getting answers, because these are extremely important questions about the security of Ministers' Offices, which, as a Minister myself, I want some reassurances on.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Is the Minister able to reassure the House that, in considering the findings of the Department of Health and Social Care's own internal investigation into this matter, she will not rule out considering whether this leak was a breach of the Official Secrets Act?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend, and I shall want an answer to that question.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): First of all, is a Department-led inquiry sufficient for the gravity of this situation? We need to know whether these recordings extend to other Departments, who all this footage is offered to, and who benefited from the release of the footage. We need to understand the security risks of Ministers doing business by private email, as has been said. The Minister cannot just say, "Oh, it's complicated." It is simple. We have a parliamentary email address and Ministers should use it—end of story. Also, it is only because of this leak that we have found out about yet another crony appointment that the Government did not bat an eyelid about, so who is taking the lead in investigating all these other matters?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I am sorry that I cannot furnish the House with answers on the matter of security on this day, but I hope to be able to do so shortly.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con) [V]: I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting the urgent question of my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). With one Department spreading documents behind a bus stop and another one publishing CCTV, I cannot say that I am terribly surprised if Ministers do not want to use their private offices. Does my hon. Friend, who is doing a very good job at the Dispatch Box, agree that we need a root-and-branch change in the trust and behaviour of the civil service?

Julia Lopez: In so far as there are any questions raised in this entire episode about whether a matter was leaked, there will be questions to be answered in so far as they involve any civil servants, who are vetted when they do their jobs and have to adhere to certain codes themselves.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: May I say to the Minister first of all that this House should take precedence in the priorities of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, not travelling to Scotland?

When I was a Minister, neither parliamentary emails nor private emails were allowed to be used for Government business. Will the Minister therefore confirm whether using private email accounts to discuss sensitive Government business is in breach of the Freedom of Information Act, the Official Secrets Act, the Data Protection Act or the Public Records Act 1958, which place specific requirements on the use of Government information?

Julia Lopez: As I have said, Government guidance is that official devices, email accounts and communications applications should be used for communicating classified information, but other forms of electronic communication may be used in the course of conducting business, and official information that is held in private email accounts is subject to FOI. I hope that that provides the right hon. Lady with assurance.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for coming today to respond to Peter Bone's urgent question and for responding to 37 parliamentary questions in total. We will now suspend before the statement on covid.

4.55 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Update

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I would like to congratulate Secretary Sajid Javid on his new appointment.

4.59 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): I am honoured to have been asked to become Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. I understand the responsibility that comes with this job, especially at this critical moment. As someone who has sat on the Front Bench for many years, this past year has been a difficult one. I have been frustrated not to be able to play my part in helping to meet the greatest public health challenge that our country has ever faced, so I am especially proud to have been given this opportunity for public service.

Nothing embodies the spirit of public service more than our national health service and those who work in our social care. I have seen it in my own constituency; I saw it again just this morning at St Thomas's Hospital, where I met doctors, nurses and volunteers who have moved mountains over this past year. Now, they are helping us vaccinate our way out of this pandemic. I pay tribute to them all, and I pledge to do everything I can to deliver for them and the people of this great country. I look forward to working with colleagues on both sides of the House on this vital mission.

We are making phenomenal progress with our vaccination programme. Vaccination is now open to every adult in the country, 84% of adults have got a jab and 61% of adults have had two doses. This progress has allowed us to safely take the first three steps out of the lockdown and towards the greater freedoms that we can enjoy today. We owe this strong position not only to the NHS, but to everyone who has played their part.

I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), who has worked hard throughout all these testing times. He achieved a great amount in the work that he did, and I know that he will have more to offer in public life. I wish him the very best.

There remains a big task ahead of us to restore our freedoms—freedoms that, save in the gravest of circumstances, no Government should ever wish to curtail. My task is to help to return the economic and cultural life that makes this country so great, while, of course, protecting life and our NHS. That task has been made all the more difficult by the delta variant, which we now know makes up some 95% of new cases in the UK. Not only does it spread more easily, but the evidence points to a higher risk of those who have not been vaccinated needing hospital treatment, compared with the previously dominant alpha variant.

This narrowing of the race between the virus and the vaccine led to this Government's difficult decision to pause step 4 on our road map until 19 July. We are using this extra time to protect as many people as we can. When the Government took that decision on 14 June, more than 4.3 million over-40s had had a first dose but not a second. The figure is now down to 3.2 million people over 40. We can all be reassured by how many more people are getting the life-saving opportunity that a vaccine offers.

At this two-week review point, I want to update the House on our progress on our road map to freedom. Our aim is that around two thirds of all adults in this country will have had both doses by 19 July. We are bringing forward second doses, and bringing forward our target for first doses too, so we can meet that 19 July goal. Vaccine uptake remains sky-high. We have seen that age is no barrier to enthusiasm for getting the jab: as of this weekend, more than half of adults under 30 have taken up the chance to be vaccinated—including, in the past couple of weeks, all three of my own adult children.

Our vaccines are working, including against the delta variant. The latest modelling from Public Health England shows that they have saved more than 27,000 lives and have prevented more than 7 million people from getting covid-19. We know that, after a single dose of vaccine, the effectiveness is lower against the new delta variant, at around a 33% reduction in symptomatic disease, but two doses of the vaccine are just as effective against hospital admission with the delta variant as with the alpha variant.

The jabs are making a difference in our hospitals, too. In January, people over 65 who were vaccinated earlier in our programme made up the vast majority of hospital admissions; the latest data shows that that group now makes up less than a third. While cases now are ticking up, the number of deaths remains mercifully low, and we will continue to investigate how our vaccines are breaking that link between cases, hospitalisations and deaths. I am also encouraged by new data just today from Oxford University's mix and match trial, which shows that a mixed schedule of jabs, such as getting the AstraZeneca jab first and the Pfizer second, could give our booster vaccination programme more flexibility and possibly even some better immune responses.

Finally, we continue to see a rise in hospitalisations. Although in line with the kinds of numbers we had anticipated at this point in our road map, the number of people needing hospital treatment for covid-19 has doubled since the start of May. Admissions are most clearly increasing in the north-east and south-west of England, so we have been boosting testing centres and vaccines in those areas and keeping a close watch on the numbers.

I spent my first day as Health Secretary—just yesterday—looking at the data and testing it to the limit. While we decided not to bring forward step 4, we see no reason to go beyond 19 July because, in truth, no date we choose comes with zero risk for covid. We know we cannot simply eliminate it; we have to learn to live with it. We also know that people and businesses need certainty, so we want every step to be irreversible. Make no mistake: the restrictions on our freedoms must come to an end. We owe it to the British people, who have sacrificed so much, to restore their freedoms as quickly as we possibly can, and not to wait a moment longer than we need to.

With the numbers heading in the right direction, all while we protect more and more people each day, 19 July remains our target date. The Prime Minister has called it our terminus date. For me, 19 July is not only the end of the line, but the start of an exciting new journey for our country. At this crucial moment in our fight back against this pandemic, we must keep our resolve and keep on our road map to freedom so that together we can beat this pandemic and build back better. It is a task that I am deeply honoured to lead and one I know will succeed. I commend this statement to the House.

5.7 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Can I just say at the outset that, despite our fierce political differences, my dealings with the previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), were always courteous, respectful and professional, and I wish him well in resolving his personal difficulties.

I welcome the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) to his place and thank him for advance sight of his statement. He will find working with the NHS and social care staff both inspirational and rewarding, and I hope he will agree to make arrangements for them to receive a fair pay rise and not the real-terms pay cut that is currently pencilled in.

Today, the Secretary of State has let it be known that the 19 July reopening will effectively go ahead. He told the news this morning that there is “no going back” and that lifting restrictions will be “irreversible”. A word to the wise: I have responded to a lot of these statements these past 15 months, and I remember Ministers telling us there was “nothing in the data” to suggest that 21 June would not go ahead. I remember children returning to school for one day before the January lockdown. I remember, “It will all be over by Christmas”. I remember, “We will send it packing in 12 weeks”.

Well, we have seen around 84,000 cases in the past week—an increase of around 61%. Today, we have seen the highest case rate since January. If these trends continue, we could hit 35,000 to 45,000 cases a day by 19 July. That will mean more long covid—the Secretary of State did not mention more long covid—and it will mean more disruption to schooling. For some, it will mean hospitalisation, and we know that even after two doses, someone can catch and transmit the virus, so what is he going to do to push infections down? Vaccination will do it eventually, but not in the next four weeks.

I want to see an end to restrictions and our constituents want to see an end to restrictions, but I hope the Secretary of State’s confidence today about 19 July does not prove somewhat premature or even, dare I say it, hubristic. Can he confirm that by “irreversible” he is ruling out restrictions this winter? Has he abandoned the plan that the previous Secretary of State and officials were drawing up for restrictions this winter?

Increased infections will impact on the ability of the NHS to provide wider care. Today, the Secretary of State has promised to give the NHS everything it needs to get through the backlog, so will the hospital discharge and support funding be extended beyond this September, or will trusts have to make cuts instead? How does he define getting through the backlog? When will the NHS again guarantee that 95% of patients will start treatment within 18 weeks of referral? We know thousands are waiting too long for cancer care, so when will the NHS meet its cancer target that 96% of patients wait no longer than a month from diagnosis to first treatment? When will he give primary care the resources to meet the challenge of the hidden waiting list of over 7 million patient referrals that we would have expected since March 2020?

Given the pressures on primary care, is it still the Secretary of State’s plan to press ahead with the GP data transfer? To be frank, Mr Deputy Speaker, if the Department cannot keep its CCTV footage secure, how

does he expect it to keep our personal data secure? Will we see a plan to fix social care, or is today’s *Telegraph* correct when it reports that he, the Secretary of State, is of the opinion that we are completely at the wrong stage of a Parliament to launch a new social care strategy? Is that really his view? Given the pressures across the whole of the healthcare service, will he abandon the ill-thought-through top-down reorganisation of the NHS that the previous Secretary of State was set to embark on?

Finally, given the recent questions of propriety around covid contracts, the Secretary of State will understandably want to present himself as a new broom. Can he confirm that he will not use a personal email account to carry out Government business? Can he explain why the social care Minister has been using a personal email account to carry out Government business? Why was the Minister for Innovation, the noble Lord Bethell, using his personal email account to discuss the awarding of Government contracts, and why did he have meetings with a firm that won a contract but not declare it? Can he tell us whether he maintains confidence in that Minister? Is it not time that that particular health Minister was relieved of their ministerial responsibilities as well?

Sajid Javid: First, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments and for what he said about my predecessor.

On the right hon. Gentleman’s questions, he started by rightly pointing out the incredible work that our NHS staff across the country have been doing, even before the pandemic, but especially, I think we would all agree, throughout the pandemic. I heard about that myself this morning during my visit to St Thomas’s Hospital talking to staff—doctors, nurses, consultants—and hearing directly about the challenges they faced at that time but also the challenges they continue to face. I wanted to hear from them what more the Government can do, whether on recruitment or resources, and what more help can be provided. So it remains an absolute priority. Of course, it is absolutely essential that, when the pay settlement process is complete, that is a fair process. Of course, it absolutely will be and it will be a fair pay settlement.

Turning to the right hon. Gentleman’s next question about the timing of the move to step 4, I set out, I think clearly in my statement, the Government’s plan and the rationale for that plan. I point out that what is at the heart of this is the vaccination programme and the excellent work that has been done by many across the country: the volunteers, doctors, and nurses. I visited a vaccination centre today, as well as St Thomas’s Hospital. Excellent work has also been done by the Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi). More people are getting vaccinated. We are seeing clear evidence that we are breaking the link—this is absolutely crucial—between the number of cases of people getting infected by covid-19 versus those who sadly end up in hospital or even, in some cases, lose their lives. The more evidence we see of that, the more confident it can make us that we will put this pandemic behind us. That is what gives me confidence about the date of 19 July. With all the data I saw yesterday—I sat down and discussed it with the experts and my colleagues—it is very clear that we are heading in the right direction, and I am very confident about that date of 19 July.

The hon. Gentleman rightly asked about the backlog. The focus, for all the right reasons, of the NHS and social care system on dealing with the pandemic has, sadly, seen a significant backlog of cases build up. The Government have already provided record amounts of funding to try to deal with some of that backlog. In total to deal with the pandemic, some £92 billion of extra funding has been put into the NHS and social care system, and much of that is targeted at the backlog. It will be an absolute priority—it was for my predecessor, and it certainly will be for me—to see how quickly we can deal with that and what the best and most efficient way is to do so. Just today, on my visit to St Thomas' Hospital, I heard some excellent new ideas from people on the frontline. We will certainly be listening to them as we set out further plans.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about social care, and I should warn him not to believe everything he reads in the press—and I think he should know that. Social care remains an absolute priority for this Government, and for me. The Prime Minister himself has rightly made some very clear commitments on social care, and we absolutely intend to meet them. When it comes to reform, of course we are committed to the Bill on NHS and social care reform, which my predecessor has talked about at the Dispatch Box. If hon. Gentleman sits down with me, perhaps I can persuade him a little of the virtues of that Bill, and I am sure I can convince him that it is essential. If, like me, he believes that what matters most are the patients—we want the people who go into hospital feeling unwell to be seen quickly and efficiently and to get better—the people in our social care system, and having better integration, then he will believe in the virtues of that Bill. I hope, eventually, he can come to support the Bill and do the right thing.

Lastly, the hon. Gentleman asked me about my Ministers. I have such a fantastic ministerial team—all and every single one of them. It is not just a question of confidence; it is a group of Ministers who are incredibly talented and who have delivered both in this House and in the Lords. Having led five Departments previously, I have had some considerable experience of working with Ministers, and this is one of the best teams I have ever had.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): Mr Deputy Speaker, my apologies for missing the start of this statement. May I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend to his post? He will bring experience, ability and integrity to this role, and I have no doubt he will do it with great distinction. He will understand, of course, that in my role I have to scrutinise him, so I want to say to him now that he is welcome to as many seven-hour sessions of the Health and Social Care Committee as he is willing to attend, and we look forward to talking to him there. I do want to wish him well, and I also want to echo his comments about his predecessor. To be Health Secretary in a pandemic is the most difficult job imaginable. My right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) brought enormous energy and determination to that role, and the country is in his debt.

As the Secretary of State deals with what we hope are the final stages of this pandemic, can I ask him whether he will also be giving thought to how to prepare the NHS and care system for future pandemics, and whether at the top of his list will be putting more resilience into the social care system—not just meeting our manifesto

promises on a cap on social care, but making sure that local authorities have long-term stability in funding to ensure they can look after every older person with dignity and respect?

Sajid Javid: First, I thank my right hon. Friend for his remarks, and I welcome the scrutiny that he and his Committee will provide. I am not sure about the seven hours bit, but I very much welcome the scrutiny and the intention.

On his question about preparing for future pandemics, a huge amount of work is already going on. Just yesterday, I met the chief executive of the UK Health Security Agency, which will work on much of that. As I think my right hon. Friend knows, in the best part of a year that I have been away from the Front Bench, I spent time as a senior fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School where my project was looking at potential future pandemics. I will put that knowledge, and everything I learnt through the process in doing that preparation, to use.

My right hon. Friend is also right to raise the importance of social care reform and the work that needs to be done, including on sustainable funding. He will remember how in the past we often worked together as Ministers. In these different roles, I look forward to working with him on that same issue of how we provide a long-lasting, sustainable solution to the social care challenge that this country faces. As I said to the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), that remains a huge priority, and I look forward to talking to my right hon. Friend and learning from him, too.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: In welcoming the new Secretary of State to his place and thanking him for advance sight of his statement, I would like to ask how he plans to review or modify current covid policy? The management of any epidemic is not rocket science but infectious diseases 101: avoiding the importation of dangerous variants through border control and quarantine; and stopping the virus spreading from one person to the next. Does he plan to revise the Government's quarantine and traffic light system to avoid importing more variants, which, like the delta, would threaten the reopening of the domestic economy and society?

On Friday, the National Audit Office released a report on the NHS Test and Trace system, which did not quite get the media coverage one would have expected. One year on, Serco is still reaching only 83% of contacts, while Scotland reaches 98% and Wales 95%. Both of them have used public health and health protection teams from the start. As covid restrictions are eased, a well-functioning test, trace, isolation and support system will be critical to detect and control small clusters and avoid future surges. Therefore, instead of awarding Serco a new contract for more than £300 million, should the opportunity not be taken to reform the system?

It is only isolation that stops the onward spread of the virus, and while the £500 isolation payment is welcome, it is less than the minimum wage, and many are excluded by the eligibility criteria. With no results at all registered for almost 600 million issued lateral flow tests, will the Secretary of State shift some of that funding to provide more generous and accessible financial support for those who are asked to isolate? While vaccines are reducing the likelihood of hospitalisation, cases are rising exponentially.

[Dr Philippa Whitford]

Does he recognise that allowing the current surge to go unchecked would put pressure on the NHS and run the risk of even more infectious or vaccine-resistant variants emerging?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady first talked about the importance of border control, and she was right to do so. That is why the Government have already put in place the so-called traffic light system, with this Department working across Government with the Home Office, Border Force, the Department for Transport and others. The system absolutely needs to be kept under review to ensure that it is doing its job in protecting the people of this country from viruses, and especially from any new variants of covid-19 that may emerge. I can give her reassurance on that.

The hon. Lady also raised Test and Trace. She should know that the NHS Test and Trace system is the largest diagnostic exercise of its kind in British history. We have carried out more than 200 million tests, identified more than 4 million positive cases and found more than 7 million of their contacts. Every time that happens, whether in England, Scotland or any part of the United Kingdom, that breaks the chain of transmission and saves lives.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): May I say how delighted I am to see my right hon. Friend back on the Front Bench? I congratulate him on his appointment to this crucial role, and I welcome his approach, as set out in his statement. He will be an excellent Health Secretary.

Can my right hon. Friend confirm that 19 July will mark the end of the road map out of lockdown, that “terminus” means the end of the line, not an interchange, and that it is his intention that all restrictions will be lifted on that date?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind remarks. As she will have heard in my statement, it is absolutely our intention to have step 4 commence on 19 July and to remove restrictions and start returning to normal. She asked me specifically about all restrictions, or which restrictions. It is certainly our intention to remove restrictions, but as we follow the data in the coming days, we will set out more in due course.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): May I begin by welcoming the Secretary of State to his place? I look forward to engaging constructively with him on a range of issues.

The Secretary of State will be aware that during the course of the pandemic, well in excess of 40,000 people lost their lives to covid in care homes, and the “protective ring” that his predecessor talked about being in place at the start of the pandemic went in far too late. He will also be aware that two in three unpaid carers looking after loved ones—some 7 million people—have reported their mental health worsening as a result of the pandemic. Will he help his boss to make good on his promise of almost two years ago on social care reform and honour his manifesto pledge to work cross-party on this issue, and meet me and my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) to urgently start work on it?

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments about working together. She is absolutely right to say that, especially on something as important as social care, which she is right to raise as a priority for the Government and for this House. She reminded the House that, sadly, so many people in care homes have lost their lives through this pandemic. She will be aware that, even before the pandemic, the Government had pumped billions more into the social care system, and during the pandemic there was a lot of support, but a lot more needs to be done, and I think that is what she rightly gets to. The Government have said that the best way to find a sustainable solution to the country’s social care challenge is for parties to work together and co-operate, and I would happily meet her.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con) [V]: I welcome my right hon. Friend back to the Government, and I look forward to working with him in the months and years ahead.

The Feilding Palmer Hospital in Lutterworth is the only hospital in my constituency. It was threatened with closure but is now being used as the principal covid vaccination centre in the southern part of my South Leicestershire constituency. Once the Secretary of State has settled into his important role, will he meet me to discuss the important future that I hope to see for that much-valued district hospital?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue about his local hospital. As a constituency MP, I absolutely understand the importance of local hospitals and having that support in the local community. This hospital in particular has done a great job with vaccinations, and it continues to do a fantastic job. I think that is a very good sign of the contribution that it can potentially continue to make for the local community, and I would very happily meet him.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and, as the Democratic Unionist party health spokesperson in this place, I wish him well, on behalf of my party, in his new role. I have absolutely no doubt that he will do an excellent job.

If we are aiming for progression and moving away from restrictions such as the wearing of masks, may I ask when people will be able to attend worship and sit in churches self-distanced, without wearing a mask, just as diners can sit in a restaurant self-distanced without a mask? If we are going to have parity, then I believe that churches should have parity with restaurants.

Sajid Javid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. I agree with him that as we move towards removing restrictions and step 4, we should take seriously into account what he said about people attending churches and the restrictions that they currently face. That is certainly my intention.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con) [V]: The Secretary of State will rightly focus on the immediate challenges of covid, but his Department is also about to make decisions related to integrated care systems, which have potentially enormous long-term implications for the provision of healthcare for my constituents and the constituents of fellow Cheshire MPs. The NHS wants

to create a Cheshire-Merseyside ICS, which will not serve the best interests of our residents. Will the Secretary of State meet us urgently to discuss the proposal before it is quietly pushed through?

Sajid Javid: First, I thank my hon. Friend for the work that he personally has done to support the NHS, especially through his work in A&E departments. I also thank others who have contributed in that way. On his particular question, no final decisions have been made on ICSs. I absolutely understand the importance of his point. I want to make sure that we get these things right and, although I understand that he has already met Ministers in the Department, I would happily meet him myself.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: I welcome the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to his new role. During the past 10 years, nearly £8 billion has been lost from budgets for adult social care. Too often during the covid pandemic, social care has been an afterthought for Ministers and officials. The results have been all too clear in the tragic levels of mortality in care homes. The social care sector is desperate for investment and reform, so will the new Secretary of State commit today to bringing forward proposals to invest in and reform social care as soon as possible, and at the latest by Christmas this year, as promised?

Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Lady on the importance of social care and that it should be a priority for reform, as it is for this Government. I do not agree with her characterisation that under this Government it has not been a priority or her suggestion that there has been under-investment. When in my previous role as the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and certainly as Chancellor, we increased funding a number of times. I think we agree that we need a long-term, sustainable solution—we are not there yet—and that is something the Government are absolutely committed to.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) [V]: I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new role. I wish him every success and I support his plan to unlock soon. Will he look at expediting trials of other drugs and treatments that may help covid-19 patients and have been looked at elsewhere? Will he also encourage work on air extraction and cleaning systems, to see what more can be done to stop transmission of the disease, as we are going to have to live with it to some extent?

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend for his welcome. On his question, I simply say yes, I will.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) [V]: I welcome the Secretary of State to his new role. He could begin by launching cross-party work on social care reform by responding to the 2018 report by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and the Health and Social Care Committee, because three years later we are still waiting for a Government response.

On test and trace specifically, the NAO report on the national system that was published the other day was hardly complimentary. The Secretary of State will be aware, from his previous role as Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, of the

great professionalism of directors of public health and the work that they do. As the NAO report says, in many cases they are still waiting for up-to-date data to deal with local covid outbreaks. Will the Secretary of State commit to rectifying that situation and ensuring that directors of public health are fully involved in the new model for testing and tracing that will be undertaken from July this year?

Sajid Javid: I think the hon. Gentleman agrees with me on the importance of social care, which we have discussed in the past and will no doubt discuss again going forward. He mentioned the NAO report; if he will allow me, I will take a closer look at that and write to him.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I warmly congratulate the Secretary of State on his new role. Now that thousands of people are allowed to gather together at a football match to shout and cheer as much as they want, is it not time that we allowed congregations in church to sing hymns together?

Sajid Javid: I can tell my right hon. Friend that that is certainly what I would like to see and it is certainly my intention to allow that to happen as soon as possible. When it does, I hope we can sing a hymn together.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State back to the Front Bench. One vector of the current surge in cases has been the rise in cases in schools. On 17 June, we had a quarter of a million pupils away from school. What steps does he think need to be taken to address the decline in the number of tests being carried out in schools? Does he think that the wearing of masks should become mandatory?

Sajid Javid: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has raised that issue, because it is very important. The point he is rightly making is that when we are asking children not to be in school for those reasons, to try to control infections, it is having a huge knock-on impact on their education, and none of us wants to see that. I have already asked for fresh advice from my Department on this issue and I intend to discuss it with my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary to see what more we can do.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I wholeheartedly welcome my right hon. Friend to his new position. Given his extensive experience, both inside and outside Government, does he agree that the UK's success post-pandemic will depend on the Department of Health and Social Care working closely with local councils, social care providers, businesses and community representatives to ensure that we protect both lives and livelihoods in the years ahead?

Sajid Javid: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. As someone who has also been the Local Government Secretary and the Business Secretary, I agree with him even more, just directly from that experience.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The new Health Secretary has not been on the Front Bench for a year, but in that time he has been very busy—very busy indeed, lining his own pockets. He has been getting £1,500 per

[Richard Burgon]

hour for his second job and £1,500 for his third job, all while NHS staff at Seacroft Hospital and St James's University Hospital in my constituency have been working harder than ever, getting our communities through this covid crisis. Given that he has done very well out of the past year, bagging hundreds of thousands of pounds during a national crisis, would it not be the height of hypocrisy for the new Health Secretary to refuse our NHS staff the pay rise they so clearly deserve?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is going to have to try a lot harder than that.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con) [V]: I welcome my right hon. Friend to his place, as others have done. I also welcome his optimistic and confident statement, which is so refreshing and is music to millions of ears. I concur with him when he says that we must learn to live with this virus, which will continue to throw up variants in the years ahead. Many constituents are having trouble actually seeing their GPs. Will he help by persuading some in the profession to return to physical meetings?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue. Even before I had this job, that issue came up again and again when I was a constituency MP just like him, and I absolutely understand it. It has especially been raised by older members of my constituency; people have brought this issue up where they are perhaps not as familiar with technology and they want that face-to-face meeting. I have already asked for advice on that and I will write to him on it, if I may.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) [V]: Many constituents have contacted me about GP provision too, particularly the letting of key practices to private US healthcare companies. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to reassure me and my constituents that he intends to keep our NHS public?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that the NHS is one of our greatest public services. In fact, it is one of the greatest public services that any country has, and it is an example to the rest of the world. It is something that we will cherish and continue to support in every possible way.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): I warmly welcome the return of my right hon. Friend to the Front Bench. Some services such as maternity were temporarily suspended at Stafford's County Hospital so that those wards could be used to treat covid-19 patients at the height of the pandemic, but does he agree that it is vital that those services are now returned to the hospital as soon as possible?

Sajid Javid: That is an important issue for many hon. Members. Services, in this case maternity services, were understandably, I think it is fair to say, suspended to deal with the pandemic. As we return to normal, it is important that those services, on which local people rely, begin to return to normal as well. If it is helpful for my hon. Friend, I can certainly set up a meeting for her with my hon. Friend Minister for Health so that she can discuss that in more detail.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Now that the Health and Social Care Secretary is in post, will he break with his predecessor's outright refusal to deliver the pay rise to NHS staff in England that they deserve? Will he, at a minimum, commit to matching NHS pay rates in Scotland, delivering a pay rise for staff in England, and to providing more money in consequential to help devolved Governments support NHS staff in devolved nations?

Sajid Javid: The whole House would agree that the Government must absolutely make sure that there is a fair pay settlement for all NHS workers, and that is certainly what there will be.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): I am absolutely delighted to see my right hon. Friend back in his rightful place on the Front Bench. There can be no clearer example of the Government's commitment to recycling. I hope that he will bring his customary consistency in approach to the covid crisis, and tell us whether we are following dates or data. As for the data we get, it is not just about the number of infections—it is about who is infected, what age they are, whether they have pre-existing conditions, and whether they have been offered a vaccine, but have refused. It is not just about hospitalisations and how many people are in hospital. How long have they been hospitalised compared with the figures for previous parts of the pandemic? How many of them require extra care and how many are in intensive care units? We need to understand much better how the Government are reaching their decisions. The British people are not stupid, and Parliament needs to be taken into the Government's confidence much more. I trust, given the previous examples of how he has conducted himself, that my right hon. Friend can do that.

Sajid Javid: I should first tell my right hon. Friend that I am happy to be recycled. Recycling is something that we are all in favour of. On his important point about data, I saw the data in the Department for the first time yesterday. I saw the detail that it provides and how granular it is. I was impressed with that data, so I can give my right hon. Friend reassurance that the Government are looking at the data, and are absolutely taking it into account. I would also like to find a way to make sure that we can share as much of that data as possible so that others can benefit from it, and I will certainly look at ways in which we can do just that.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Despite the best efforts of our hard-working NHS staff, covid-19 has created a backlog in cancer care. Macmillan estimates that the backlog of people receiving their first cancer treatment stands at 37,000 people across England. One of the key ways in which the Secretary of State can help with the Government's goal of recovering from the pandemic is ensuring that we have enough well-trained and motivated NHS staff now and in future, so will he commit to addressing the cancer backlog and investing in the NHS workforce to build back better for the future now that he is in post? Will he meet me and Macmillan Cancer Support to discuss this urgent matter?

Sajid Javid: Cancer diagnosis and treatment has remained a top priority, and rightly so, throughout the entire pandemic. Some 2.47 million urgent referrals have been

made and over 618,000 people have been treated between March 2020 and April 2021. The hon. Gentleman may also be interested to know that following the “Help Us, Help You” symptom awareness campaign, many of the so-called missing patients are starting to come forward and urgent referrals are rising. That is what we all want to see.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend to his post and place on record my thanks to his predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), who was always assiduous in attending the Science and Technology Committee and, indeed, in coming to the Dispatch Box.

Is the Secretary of State aware that Professor Sir Andrew Pollard, one of the heroes of the Oxford vaccine, recently told my Committee that we need to be aware that new variants are likely to infect even the vaccinated, but:

“If...high protection against hospitalisation continues despite spread”

of cases

“in the community, the public health crisis is over”?

What will my right hon. Friend do to inform the public, and perhaps some officials, that we must move from being concerned about the number of cases of covid to focusing squarely on hospitalisation?

Sajid Javid: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. This is a such a crucial point and it is one that I referred to earlier. Of course, cases are not unimportant, but because we now have the vaccine, thankfully, and in this country in particular so many people are getting vaccinated—of course, we want to see more and more people coming forward, but the take-up is excellent, especially compared with other countries—it is the vaccine that is going to break the link between case numbers and hospitalisation. As I said, we are absolutely starting to see that. The indications are very, very positive on this, and I hope that is the kind of news that my right hon. Friend will welcome.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab) [V]: The Home Office recently updated its visa guidance to say that new international students and those returning to the UK must be here by 27 September or lose their post-study work rights. Around one fifth of our international students are from red list countries. Their arrival risks a surge in demand that will overwhelm the hotel quarantine system. Universities UK, the Confederation of British Industry and others have written to Ministers urging flexibility on visa rules to enable blended learning to continue with phased entry to the UK, so will the Secretary of State urgently meet his successor as Home Secretary to seek this change?

Sajid Javid: I was not aware of this issue. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has brought it to my attention, and I will certainly raise it with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con) [V]: I welcome my right hon. Friend to his challenging new role. One of the big challenges in my area is parents, grandparents and guardians having to deal with children and students from local schools and colleges who have to isolate for sometimes a third or fourth time in the past couple of months as a result of having been a close contact of a

positive case. This is having a huge impact on education, mental health and wellbeing, so what extra PCR testing, and what new approach to isolating, can be introduced to help to support local families and children?

Sajid Javid: This is another very important issue. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the impact of the isolation that is demanded of children—understandably so, but it is having an impact on their education, their mental health and in so many other detrimental ways. That is exactly why I have asked for fresh advice on this. I want to see if there is anything more that we can do—any more flexibilities. I am aware that there is a pilot programme in place at the moment that certain local authorities are using whereby tests can be used in lieu of isolation, but I want to see if we can go further, and I will be happy to discuss that further with my hon. Friend.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con) [V]: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment as Secretary of State and wish him well.

In Bexley borough we have some of the highest-performing vaccination teams in the country, and we are all grateful to those involved for their tremendous work. However, will my right hon. Friend confirm that the vaccine roll-out remains his top priority, so that my constituents can be confident that we will defeat this pandemic, ease restrictions and see life return to normality after 19 July?

Sajid Javid: I can certainly confirm that to my right hon. Friend. As he suggests, the vaccine is the best way out of this pandemic. Let me share with him that four fifths of adults have had their first jab and three fifths have had both jabs—that is almost 77 million jabs across the country, with millions more to come. This is going to be our way out of this crisis, I am grateful for the huge amount of work that NHS staff and volunteers are doing in his constituency and throughout the country to achieve that and to get more and more people vaccinated.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]: In Newcastle, infection rates are doubling every week and are now at over 400 per 100,000. The Secretary of State may think that that is not important because, thankfully, hospitalisations and deaths are not rising at the same pace, but more and more people are being asked to self-isolate. My constituents want to do the right thing, and the vast majority do, but support is woeful. Does he recognise that that is one reason for higher rates in areas with higher levels of low-paid and insecure work? As a former Chancellor, will he fight for more support, including extending eligibility to anyone without access to workplace sick pay?

Sajid Javid: I could not hear the question entirely, but I think I got the gist of it. Areas that are seeing rising case rates—as I mentioned, some parts of England are seeing particularly high increases—are, as the hon. Lady knows, being given extra support through testing, tracing and other means, including extra financial support. We will absolutely keep under review how much further support can be provided to help with the issues she mentioned.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment and warmly welcome his return to the Front Bench. Does he share my concerns regarding this winter, when we predict that an increase in covid hospitalisations may be superimposed on normal NHS winter pressures? Can he confirm that plans and preparations are being put in place now to support our NHS in what may be a very difficult winter indeed?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. I can absolutely confirm that plans are being put in place. A huge amount of work was done by my predecessor and, of course, I will continue that work—just yesterday, I had meetings on winter plans. I can give my hon. Friend the absolute assurance, not just on vaccinations but on dealing with the backlog, that there are plans in place, and in due course I will come to the House and set them out.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): In answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) earlier, the Secretary of State said that he is working on a plan for social care and that we are not there yet but that we are getting there. However, the Prime Minister told us that he had a ready-made plan back in July 2019. What has changed? Does that plan exist, or has it been changed?

Sajid Javid: The Prime Minister has a plan, and we are working on the detail of that plan.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con) [V]: May I also congratulate the Secretary of State and welcome him to his position? Does his optimism on the end of domestic restrictions extend to those who want to take up international travel again or who work in the industry? Is he also confident that the three fifths he mentioned who have been double-jabbed will be able to go to amber list countries without quarantine? Would he be willing to meet me and other colleagues who share a concern that we need to do more to try to help our industry?

Sajid Javid: First, my hon. Friend will know that, in terms of 19 July and the restrictions that will be removed, we are focusing on domestic restrictions. He knows that, separately, we also take very seriously the border controls, the border restrictions and the so-called traffic light system. In terms of making any further decision on that, he will know that it is kept under constant review on a very regular basis, and it is something that I intend to sit down and discuss with my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary as soon as I can.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's return to the Front Bench. I know from my experience of dealing with him

in Government that he is a man of real integrity, which is an essential quality in a Health Secretary at a time like this, so I welcome his appointment.

I welcome my right hon. Friend's tone and his intent to get us back to normal, but let me pick up on his earlier answer to our hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer). There are those in government, from documents that I have seen, who are preparing the ground for the return of restrictions in the autumn and the winter. Will he rule out the use of lockdowns and restrictions in the winter as a mechanism for managing covid, and look at alternatives to ensure that the NHS is able to deal with us getting back to normal?

Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his kind and warm remarks. I know that he has taken great interest throughout the pandemic in the restrictions in particular, and I absolutely understand why it has been so important to him and others. I am very happy to meet with him to discuss the issues in more detail and listen to his views. He should know that it is my intention, and the Government's intention, as I have said from day one on this job, to remove all restrictions as quickly as possible.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I give a warm welcome to my right hon. Friend. I wish him very well. I am looking for a change in policy as much as a change in tone. I return him to the subject of education. Estimates suggest that a quarter of a million children are missing school today due to precautionary isolations, the vast majority of them sequential due to the bubbles that they are caught in. Under the current rules, 10 days of isolation is then unavoidable, even with a negative PCR test. Have our young people not suffered enough? Are we really going to continue to do this to ourselves? Is this not an area, given the availability and reliability of testing now, where I might find the change of policy that I am looking for?

Sajid Javid: Other hon. Members have rightly raised this very important issue, and my hon. Friend is right to draw attention to it once again. It is something that I have focused on from day one on the job. That is why I have asked for fresh advice on it. As he knows, that decision was made with the data that was available at the time. Clearly, data is changing all the time, and we must ensure that we keep that under review for exactly the reasons that he has just set out. As I say, I have asked for advice on that and will hopefully be able to say more on it as soon as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Secretary of State for Health for his statement. In his first outing in the new role, he has responded to 31 questions in one hour, so thank you very much.

Point of Order

5.58 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Last Monday, following Education questions, I raised a point of order querying the Secretary of State's claim that the Government aimed to roll out tutoring to 6 million pupils. The Secretary of State insisted that that figure was correct; however, at the end of last week, "Schools Week" reported that when it approached Department for Education officials about the figure they contradicted the Secretary of State, saying that the pledge is for 6 million courses, not 6 million pupils. Mr Deputy Speaker, in the light of that discrepancy, and the possibility that the Secretary of State has given incorrect information to the House, can you advise me on what steps I can take to ensure that he comes to the Chamber to clarify the matter, in order that hon. Members can be sure that we have accurate information?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of the point of order, because that allows for a fuller response, which I think is what every Member would like. Although the content of answers to parliamentary questions and contributions is not a matter for the Chair, I must remind the House that the Government's own ministerial code requires Ministers to correct any inadvertent errors in answers to parliamentary questions at the earliest opportunity. An error has been made in this instance, and I am sure that the Government will seek to correct it as quickly as possible. I know that the Whip on duty will pass this on to the Minister. If the hon. Member wishes to pursue the issue, I am sure that the Table Office will be able to further advise her. I now suspend the House for three minutes.

5.59 pm

Sitting suspended.

Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Bill

Second Reading

6.2 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The reasoned amendment in the name of the Liberal Democrats has been selected.

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall): I beg to move, That the Bill be read a Second time.

The Bill contains two halves: first, a measure that changes the valuation assumptions that are applied when making business rate determinations in the light of covid-19; and secondly, a measure that will provide for the disqualification of unfit directors of dissolved companies. I will start with the first measure before moving on to the second.

The pandemic has presented significant challenges for businesses in all sectors. Our response has been of a similarly unprecedented scale, with more than £280 billion provided throughout the pandemic to protect millions of jobs and businesses. In this year's Budget, the Chancellor announced an extra £65 billion of support for 2020-21 and 2021-22. The support we have provided for businesses included 100% business rate relief for all eligible retail, hospitality, leisure and military properties for 2020-21, at a cost of £10 billion. Combined with those eligible for small business rate relief, this means that more than half of ratepayers in England will have paid no rates in 2020-21.

At this year's Budget, we confirmed a further three-month extension to the full 100% business rate relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, followed by a further nine-month period of relief at 66% subject to the cash cap, at a further cost of £6 billion. That takes the total level of support provided to businesses by Government through relief from business rates since the start of the pandemic to over £16 billion.

That is an important context for the Bill, because as well as helping businesses through the pandemic, it is also important that we support local government with the critical role it has in supporting our communities. A vital part of that is the income that it receives from business rates, so while it is necessary to provide rates relief to businesses, it is important that we do so in a way that is targeted and that ensures that those who can still contribute continue to pay this tax.

With that in mind, clause 1 is concerned with how rateable values should be assessed during the pandemic. A business rates bill is calculated by multiplying the rateable value of the property by the multiplier, or the tax rate, and then applying the reliefs. The rateable value of a property is therefore, broadly speaking, its annual rental value at a set valuation date, which in the current rating list is 1 April 2015. All rateable values should therefore reflect annual rental values at 1 April 2015. This provides a consistent tax base for all businesses.

Of course, it is necessary to update the tax base, which is done at regular revaluations undertaken by the Valuation Office Agency. The next revaluation was originally scheduled for 1 April 2021, based on values at 1 April 2019,

[Luke Hall]

but last year we took the step of postponing it to 1 April 2023 to ensure that it better reflected the impact of the pandemic; Parliament approved that change by passing the Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Act 2021. The Act received cross-party support, for which we were extremely grateful.

Outside those general revaluations, a ratepayer can still submit a challenge to the VOA on their property's rateable value between revaluations for a number of reasons, such as to correct factual errors or reflect a material change in circumstances. If not satisfied with the outcome of the challenge, the ratepayer can appeal the VOA's decision to the valuation tribunal. It has been an established principle of the business rates system that a material change in circumstances challenge can be made on the basis of a physical change to a property or its locality. For example, a successful MCC challenge could be made following the partial demolition of a property, or significant roadworks near a property that might affect its value.

However, following the pandemic, the VOA received high numbers of MCC challenges seeking a reduction in rateable value to reflect the impact of the pandemic. Of course, the MCC legislation, as first set out in the Local Government Finance Act 1988, was not designed with covid-19 in mind, and the MCC system has never been used in response to economy-wide impacts or shocks. It has therefore become necessary to clarify, as clause 1 does, the treatment of covid-19 in assessing rateable values.

We have been clear that relying on the MCC system to help businesses that need further support in the light of the pandemic is not the right mechanism. It would mean significant taxpayer support going to businesses with properties such as offices, many of which might be able to operate normally throughout the pandemic, at a time when we have provided significant support to those most affected.

For example, the workforce of a consultancy firm based in central London that was previously entirely office-based is likely to have been working largely from home since the start of the pandemic, but the business itself may have continued to operate throughout. Under the business rates appeal regime, it could have argued that its office space had undergone a material change of circumstances due to the reduced occupancy.

If that business's appeal had been successful, it would have been awarded a business rates reduction, but it would not have been right for it to have a reduced tax liability on that basis, given that it had not actually suffered an economic impact. Relying on the MCC system to support businesses would also mean resolving disputes through the courts, which could take years and create additional uncertainty both for businesses and for local government, which relies on income from business rates to deliver vital local services.

The Bill will therefore ensure that the coronavirus and the restrictions put in place in response to it cannot be used as the basis for a successful MCC challenge or appeal. It will ensure that changes to the physical state of a property can continue to be reflected in rateable values as and when they occur, irrespective of whether they are a result of the coronavirus, but that the general impact of the pandemic on the property market will not

be reflected until the next revaluation in 2023. Until then, all rateable values will continue to be based on the property market as at 1 April 2015. This approach is supported by the Public Accounts Committee, which has welcomed the financial certainty that such a measure gives to councils.

Clause 1 applies in England. Business rates policy is fully devolved, so whether the same legislation is necessary in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland is a matter for their respective Governments, but we have been working closely with the devolved Administrations regarding the Bill. Although the law in Wales is similar to that in England, different legislation applies in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Of course, the impact of the coronavirus may have been different, so whether the devolved Administrations choose to follow the measures set out in clause 1 will depend on the individual circumstances and choices made in those countries.

We have also supported businesses. We have put £16 billion of support into business rates for the pandemic, and we have announced a relief worth an additional £1.5 billion for ratepayers impacted by the pandemic who have not been able to access business rate reliefs. These new reliefs will be administered by local authorities and will be distributed according to which sectors have suffered the most economically, rather than on the basis of temporary falls in property value. This will ensure that support is provided to businesses in England in the fastest and fairest way possible, and we will continue to work with and support councils and local government to enable ratepayers to apply for the new reliefs as soon as possible.

The second part of the Bill deals with the abuse of the process whereby companies are removed from the register and dissolved. The large majority of company directors are responsible, passionate about their businesses and diligent. They act as effective stewards of the companies to which they are appointed, and I pay tribute to the directors who make such a valuable contribution to our economy and who have fought so hard over the past year to ensure their company's survival, preserving the jobs and livelihoods of so many within their business and beyond.

Unfortunately there are exceptions, and the business community and the wider public must be protected from those individuals who abuse the privilege of limited liability. Those directors who act recklessly, irresponsibly or even criminally should expect to have to answer for their conduct. That means expecting to have their conduct investigated and, if they had done wrong, facing the possibility of being disqualified from acting as a company director for up to 15 years, depending on the severity of their misconduct. Disqualification protects the public from the actions of those who have demonstrated they are unfit to hold the position of a director of a company, and acts as a deterrent to reckless or culpable behaviour.

Evidence to support disqualification action comes from the investigation of companies and the conduct of their directors. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy may investigate live companies through the powers contained in the Companies Act 1985, and also the conduct of the directors of insolvent companies through similar powers in the Insolvency Act 1986 and the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986. If such investigations reveal evidence that a director's conduct has fallen below the standards expected of someone in

their position, a period of disqualification can be sought, either through a court application or through an undertaking given by the person to the Secretary of State. A period of disqualification protects the business community and the wider public by preventing the person from acting in the promotion, formation or management of a limited company. Breach of a disqualification order is a criminal offence, and an extremely serious matter.

As things stand, though, there is a loophole in the disqualification regime that some irresponsible directors have been able to exploit. It concerns the situation where a company has been dissolved without entering insolvency proceedings. Dissolution should not be used as an alternative to insolvency proceedings, but there is evidence that some directors have been using the process both as a way of fraudulently dodging the payment of company debts and of avoiding insolvency proceedings and the scrutiny of their behaviour that comes with that.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I support the measures that my hon. Friend is taking in the Bill. He mentioned fraud. I take it that the measures he is talking about would not negate the potential for prosecution of fraud where it was demonstrated that a company director had defrauded the taxpayer by means, for example, of a bounce back loan.

Luke Hall: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. He is an expert on these matters in this House, and I look forward to working with him as we deliver the Bill.

When a company is dissolved, the only way the conduct of its former directors can be scrutinised is if it is restored to the register, which is a costly process involving court proceedings. The Insolvency Service regularly receives complaints about the conduct of directors when a company has been dissolved, and many such complaints relate to the use of dissolution to dump the debts of one company, only for a new company to start up in the same business, often with the same directors and the same employees, and often even working out of the same premises. The debts dumped in this way are often large tax debts, awards made by employment tribunals or sometimes even debts owed directly to consumers.

The provisions in this Bill will close the loophole and allow the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to investigate the conduct of former directors of dissolved companies and, where public interest criteria are met, to take action to have them disqualified from acting as a company director.

We consulted on this measure back in 2018 and it received a warm welcome from stakeholders. It has now become extremely important that we get it on to the statute book, so that it can support the business community and the wider economy in recovering from the impact of the pandemic.

This new power to investigate and seek disqualification of former directors of dissolved companies forms part of a package of counter-fraud measures seeking to target any fraudulent behaviour relating to bounce back loan schemes through the abuse of the dissolution process and to ensure the responsible use of public funds. Retrospective provisions in the Bill will mean that, when the new provision becomes law, conduct that is happening right now will become subject to investigation and could be used to support future disqualification proceedings even if the company is dissolved.

The Bill fulfils the Government's commitment to introducing two important measures: it will make changes to the business rate appeals system and provide for the tackling of abuses associated with the process whereby companies are removed from the register and dissolved. These are two distinct areas of policy, but our approach is consistent. We will ensure the continued operation of a coherent framework, deliver certainty, support businesses to thrive, and allow councils to plan for their finances with confidence and continue to deliver the first-class services on which our communities rely. I commend the Bill to the House.

6.15 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to respond on behalf of the Opposition to the Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Bill. It is a short Bill but one that will have important consequences for many businesses and individuals.

The Opposition recognise the rationale behind the Bill and we do not intend to divide the House on Second Reading, but there are elements of the proposals where the Government need to be clearer about how some of the measures will work in practice and to spell out how all businesses will be supported. Businesses and local authorities have already faced massive uncertainty this year and they should not face more. I welcome the chance to discuss the Bill to ensure that we get the detail right. We will seek further clarification and information and consider tabling amendments as the Bill makes progress.

Clause 1, as we have heard, legislates to ensure that coronavirus cannot be taken as a cause of material change of circumstance for business rates valuations, and therefore prevents rateable values for businesses from being altered to take into account the impact of coronavirus. We recognise that the most effective way to provide help for businesses hit by the pandemic is not via the process of application for a material change of circumstances, and that MCCs, in the context of what we hope and trust is a temporary change in circumstances, are not the correct mechanism for determining valuations.

We also acknowledge that the demand of large numbers of appeals could put strain on the system and that the most effective use of the VOA's time and resource is the upcoming revaluation of business rates. Indeed, as the Minister said, we supported the delay in the next business rate revaluation last year, so that it did not take place in the middle of the pandemic. It is now important that the VOA is able to effectively carry out the revaluation in 2023, so I accept the logic for these measures. It is important that, where businesses have experienced what would normally qualify as an MCC, for example, a physical change of the property or the locality, not related to coronavirus, the property owner will be able to appeal against the 27-list valuation on that basis. I would be grateful if the Minister, in responding, clarified for the record and for the assurances of businesses watching that a material change of circumstance application not related to coronavirus will still be allowed and that this is not a blanket ban on MCC claims.

We welcome in principle the announcement of additional relief to businesses that have not so far benefited from any rate relief. That is a positive step towards supporting

[Jeff Smith]

businesses, particularly in the supply chain of the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors—businesses that have seen an economic impact but have not received relief so far.

We welcome the relief, but it is unclear how the £1.5 billion figure was calculated and we have real concerns over whether it will be enough to support all those businesses that desperately need it. We are particularly concerned that the figure may not be enough to compensate one sector that has been particularly hard hit, the aviation sector, and large airports. I know that the airports, some of which have submitted applications for MCCs, are concerned that £1.5 billion is nowhere near enough to fairly reflect the impact of the pandemic and to protect jobs and livelihoods across the worst-affected sectors. The aviation sector is united in agreement that the lack of business rates relief adds to the failings of Government to provide meaningful support to the aviation industry throughout this pandemic. If £1.5 billion is demonstrated to be insufficient, can the Minister assure the House that the Government will come forward with further funding when necessary? Will the Government give consideration to a further package of support for airports impacted by coronavirus? Has the Minister undertaken an assessment of the impact that the Bill may have on the operation of national infrastructure such as airports? Was any consideration given to exempting them from the provisions?

We acknowledge that this funding mechanism has the potential to get help to businesses more quickly than via the process of application for MCC, but the Government need to get the funding out to local authorities and businesses as quickly as possible. That is why it is a matter of real concern that the Government have so far failed to give details of how the £1.5 billion will be allocated and spent.

The original announcement of the funding came on 25 March. Three months later, there is no indication of the methodology. In answer to a parliamentary question on 18 May, the Minister said that the guidance on the distribution of the fund will be finalised once the Bill has passed through Parliament. That means it is likely that allocations of the fund will not be made until after the summer recess. That means businesses will not receive payments until September at the earliest, and that is not good enough for businesses and local authorities. Many businesses do not know whether they will qualify for the fund, given that the criteria have yet to be published. There is a genuine risk that some businesses may not survive long enough to benefit if there is not some assurance of support before the autumn.

The delay also puts local authorities in a difficult position. The Government expect them to set up local initiatives to deliver grants, but have not given them details about their individual allocations or national guidance on administering the scheme. I therefore strongly urge the Government to provide businesses and local authorities with the clarity they need by publishing an early release of the indicative funding allocations and the eligibility criteria. It will be important that this funding is kept under review to ensure it is enough to meet demand. Will any new burdens due to administrative or other costs be covered by the Government? Businesses have been through so much uncertainty in the last 18 months, it is unacceptable if the Government are going to add more confusion and delay.

We welcome that the Bill gives local councils the assurance that their income from business rates will remain reasonably stable and predictable for the immediate future. With business rates currently forming such a substantial part of local authority income, a major change could have hit local government finances hard after an exceptionally challenging period with inadequate support from central Government.

From April this year to March 2023, the VOA is conducting the next business rates valuation. We appreciate that managing a large number of MCC appeals at the same time could lead to a need for extra resources for the VOA, but we think there is already a need for extra resources for the VOA. Revaluations of business rates are slow and infrequent, and a wide coalition of business organisations has called for more frequent revaluations for a closer and more accurate link between the actual rate and the state of the economy and businesses' ability to pay. We understand the need for the next revaluation to be moved to 2023. The VOA should be given the resources it needs to carry out more frequent evaluations.

Clauses 2 and 3 make provision relating to investigation and disqualification of directors of dissolved companies. The Opposition are pleased to see the closing of a legal loophole that for too long has allowed unscrupulous or unfit company directors to evade responsibility. It is right that the Government should have the power to investigate and disqualify directors of dissolved companies. In particular, we know that between January and March this year there were over 170,000 company dissolutions in the UK, a 25% increase compared with the same period in 2020.

That raises the suspicion that dishonest individuals may have tried to exploit this loophole to avoid repaying bounce back loans. The current way to pursue fraudulent activity in relation to dissolved companies—applying to the court to restore the company—is a lengthy and costly process. We agree that it is in the public interest to remove that barrier and deliver more accountability on unfit company directors. I do, however, have a couple of questions for the Minister on the detail.

First, how will additional investigations brought about by the change be funded? Under the Bill, the Insolvency Service can apply to a court to disqualify a director only if the director's company has been dissolved for less than three years, so it is really important that the Insolvency Service is given the resources to carry out investigations effectively and quickly. The Government need to ensure that a lack of resources does not lead to investigations into directors of dissolved companies coming at the expense of investigations into directors of insolvent ones. Put simply, if the Insolvency Service is not adequately funded, the aims of the Bill will not be met and unfit directors could continue to get away with fraudulent actions.

Secondly, if a director is to be found culpable, how exactly will the Government go about facilitating the repayment they may owe? The disqualification regime in itself does not provide measures for repayment, so can the Minister give any more detail about how the compensation orders will work? In what circumstances might the Government aim to restore the company and begin an insolvency procedure? These are questions that need to be cleared up for the Insolvency Service, the courts and creditors to have clarity over how the Bill will work in practice.

In summary, Labour accepts the overarching measures in the Bill, but we are concerned by some of the lack of detail within. The good intentions of the Bill will not be delivered without proper funding for all the sectors affected. While those issues go unaddressed, we will continue to express those concerns as the Bill makes progress. Uncertainty is not good for businesses. They deserve clarity. The lack of detail on funding is a concern, and measures to hold directors to account will not be successful unless the Insolvency Service is fully funded. I look forward to the Minister addressing those questions in closing the debate. I have no doubt that businesses and local authorities up and down the country will be hoping he does so, too.

6.25 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called so early in a debate, Madam Deputy Speaker; I am not used to that happening frequently. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I have been involved in business rates as a businessperson for a long time, and I greatly sympathise with businesses that have been hit by coronavirus. We know there is a disproportionate impact on some sectors as compared with others, but I support the Government's measures here and I will explain why. The Government have put a lot of support in—I think the Minister said it was £16 billion in business rates relief to certain sectors and at least another £10 billion in grants above that. There is £1.5 billion in the Bill for businesses that were not included in those schemes.

The amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), who I think will speak next, is flawed. It shows a deep misunderstanding of how the business rates system works. Business rates are not about a business; they are about a property. All business rates are based on a property value. What she is trying to argue is that a business of a different type, such as a nightclub, should be treated differently in terms of business rates from, for example, a retailer or a bank that might have traded successfully. Asking the Valuation Office Agency to value something on the basis of how a certain business has been hit by coronavirus would turn the business rates system completely upside down, at a time when that would not be particularly helpful.

I understand that more than 300,000 businesses potentially would have taken this route, some of which had not been hit by coronavirus. The amendment would create a huge opportunity—a bonanza—for the legal sector to look at this area and take these things to court. That would ultimately cost the taxpayer a lot of money on many occasions where the businesses concerned had not suffered from coronavirus.

The point is about the material change of circumstance. It is about a permanent change. That is what the measure is there for: a permanent change, as the Minister said, such as a demolition or something that affected all the premises in a locality. This is not about general market conditions. Hopefully, coronavirus will be a temporary thing and the restrictions caused by it will in two or three weeks' time be long gone. For that reason, I do not support the hon. Lady's amendment, and I support the Government's action in terms of a material change of circumstance and restricting the right to take an appeal forward.

Clause 2 concerns former directors of dissolved companies. I absolutely support closing that loophole, too. As the Minister said, often, one sees business owners who will use subterfuge to avoid, for example, the repayment of bounce back loans or the payment of suppliers. That is inappropriate. If there is a direct route to that through going straight to being a dissolved entity, it is absolutely right that we close that loophole.

I listened to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), and he made some very good points about resources for the Insolvency Service. I have worked with it quite a lot on various matters while I have been in this House and it is not the most proactive organisation around. It may be a lack of resources, but certainly there is no point having the regulations if we do not regulate such businesses, and we have to make sure that, if these measures are introduced, the Insolvency Service does hunt down the people who try to avoid their debts, including fraudulently. As I said in my intervention on the Minister, if these debts have been avoided fraudulently, those people should be prosecuted for fraud. That is another area where we lack resources. The UK has a very poor record on hunting down fraud and financial crime. That is an area where we need to beef up our resources, which would have a huge payback, of course. Consider the relative amounts charged in financial sanctions in the US versus the UK: even accounting for the size of its economy, five to six times more money comes back into the US Treasury through its prosecution of fraud. There would be a big payback for our Treasury if we beefed up resources.

Let me touch briefly on one issue with the Insolvency Service that is not directly related to the Bill but reflects on certain points made by the shadow Minister. I have been trying to get the Insolvency Service to take action against a rogue set of business rates consultants called RVA, who go into unsuspecting small businesses that do not understand that small business rate relief, for example, is freely available; they just need to contact the council and it becomes applicable to their premises and business. They do not understand that, and RVA signs them up to a contract that basically takes 50% of the relief for up to 12 years, for writing one letter to the local authority. That is absolutely wrong. We should close that organisation down now. The Insolvency Service has promised to look at it, but not as proactively as it might.

I will make a wider point on the general issue of insolvency. As many people in this place know, I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking. For some time we have had real concerns about the insolvency profession generally, and its probably unhealthy links with some of the people it gets its work from, not least the high street banks. We are doing an inquiry into that alongside the legal firm Humphries Kerstetter. We are taking evidence now and will produce a report in early September on those conflicts of interest. We have seen lots of cases, including one quite recently with KPMG and HIG where both have been fined a significant amount in a draft judgment.

There are some unhealthy alliances here. We need to remove those conflicts of interest and, as the Government have said they will consider doing at some point, move towards an independent, ombudsman-style regulator

[Kevin Hollinrake]

for the insolvency profession. That does not exist now; it is pretty much self-regulation, which has been proven time and again not to work. I know that is not particularly a matter for today, but this was a good opportunity to get it on the record.

6.32 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to contribute to this debate. I will confine my remarks to clauses 2 and 3, which are the ones that apply in the whole of the UK. The Minister pointed out that clause 1 does not apply directly to Scotland.

The SNP welcomes the provisions to close the loopholes that have been identified, although they do not go nearly far enough. I am a bit concerned that this is the second or third time recently that a Bill has been brought forward to tighten up on director and company misconduct and company fraud, but it is framed so narrowly that it is almost impossible to amend it to widen its scope or improve it further. Although we will not oppose Second Reading tonight, I hope that we are not too far away from a more comprehensive review of companies legislation with a wider scope so that Members with particular changes they want to see are able to put them forward to be debated by the House.

In effect, the proposals make a slight change to the way in which the directors of a company are allowed to be completely separate from the company itself when things go wrong. The concept of creating a separate legal entity when a limited company is formed is perfectly sound. There were valid reasons for introducing it 150 or 200 years ago, when companies legislation was in its infancy. Many of those reasons are valid today, and we should retain the protection for directors, senior managers and, indeed, shareholders of companies that go to the wall through no fault of their own, through bad luck or misjudgment. But the reasons for protecting company directors do not extend to making it harder to deal with con men, and the occasional con woman, who set out to become millionaires at the cost of other people's pensions, savings and hard-earned cash.

When there are reasonable grounds to believe that the directors of a company have been guilty of serious misconduct—including criminal misconduct, in some cases—we cannot allow them to delay, reduce or in any way frustrate the result of punitive action just by dissolving the company. That would be like saying that somebody who faces charges under the Road Traffic Acts can get away with it just by scrapping the car. It is not the vehicle that is at fault but the people who were driving the vehicle at the time.

The Government have rightly pointed out that some of the abuses in respect of which they want to tighten up are those carried out by what are called phoenix companies: the directors shut down one company and in essence resurrect the same company, but because they give it a different name, rank and serial number it is legally a different company and all the sins of the previous company are forgotten about.

Directors do not even need to close down the guilty company first: the same abuses can equally well be perpetrated by running two or three—or, in a case I will come to in a moment, 23—parallel companies with

exactly the same couple of shareholders and exactly the same couple of directors, and very often no other employees at all. Through a process that is sometimes lengthy, sometimes short, they dump all the liabilities and debts on to one company and shut that one down, while the assets and benefits are hidden away in a separate company, to be shared only by the directors. In those circumstances, surely it is right that the Insolvency Service and other regulators have the unrestricted right to pursue the individual directors, regardless of which company name they hide behind at the time.

It has to be said that if the Government are serious about imposing improved standards of integrity in the City of London, it is unfortunate that they have chosen to present the Bill on the day when one of their own Ministers told the BBC that the standard of integrity in Government conduct by which they want to be judged is what they can get away with electorally. There is a double standard there that is perhaps not directly relevant to this debate, but the Government cannot afford to ignore it.

Let me mention one example of what can go wrong when directors appear to run a company for their own benefit and not for the benefit of those whose money they are supposed to look after. The Nunn McCreesh limited liability partnership was incorporated in August 2012 and dissolved by voluntary strike-off in October 2015. It had only three officers: Phillip Nunn, Patrick McCreesh and a company that they jointly owned called It's Your Pension Ltd, incorporated in 2013 and dissolved by voluntary strike-off in 2016.

Coincidentally, at the same time that Mr Nunn and Mr McCreesh took the decision to dissolve the limited liability partnership, the Insolvency Service was finding that the LLP had been paid nearly £900,000 for identifying investors for Capita Oak—a name with which Members will be familiar as it was a pension fund that collapsed, taking £120 million of other people's pensions with it. Capita Oak remains under investigation by the Serious Fraud Office; we do not know whether the part played in the Capita Oak story by Nunn McCreesh and numerous other companies is part of that investigation.

Mr Nunn and Mr McCreesh moved on quickly from their dissolved LLP and set up a whole web of companies—23 at the last count—under the Blackmore brand. Between 2016 and 2019, one of these companies, Blackmore Bond plc, raised £46 million by selling high-risk mini bonds to investors that they knew were completely unsuitable for that type of investment. Blackmore Bond plc went into administration in 2020 and the investors have almost certainly lost all of their £46 million.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very interesting case. I am sure he will be aware that the Financial Conduct Authority was warned on numerous occasions about the activities of Blackmore Bond but apparently did nothing about it until it was far too late.

Peter Grant: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was reading through the back of my notes, but he is only about five or six lines ahead of what I was going to say.

I do not know whether Mr Nunn and Mr McCreesh were ever placed under formal investigation, or whether they might still be under investigation, for their part in the Capita Oak story—for obvious reasons, that kind of

information is not shared—but surely the fact that they were able to dissolve their company should not make any difference to the investigations to which they can be subjected and the sanctions they should face if they are found guilty of misconduct in their management of Nunn McCreesh LLP or, indeed, any of the umpteen other companies they have run.

Perhaps if, as the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) indicated a moment ago, the various regulators had communicated with each other more effectively, the Financial Conduct Authority would have heard loud alarm bells ringing when in 2017 it was alerted to the highly questionable sales techniques that Blackmore Bond was using; perhaps if the FCA had made the link to the dodgy practices in relation to Capita Oak that were carried out by a different company under the same ownership and direction, it would have moved faster than it appeared to do; and perhaps, at least, the investors who ploughed £26 million into Blackmore Bond after the FCA was warned about it would have had some warning that the Blackmore Group might have been better named the Black Hole Group, because that is exactly what it became for £46 million of other people's money.

I described that one scandal out of the many I could have described to remind the House that we are not just looking at a theoretical loophole here; we are looking at regulatory weaknesses that have allowed chancers and charlatans to make well over £1 billion of other people's pensions and life savings disappear, and that is before we start to look at the business-to-business frauds that have forced small businesses into liquidation, often at massive financial cost to the entrepreneurs who have set them up.

The provisions in clauses 2 and 3 address just one of those weaknesses, and much more is needed. We need a complete reform of Companies House so that, for example, details of the beneficial ownership of Scottish limited partnerships and other secretive company structures have to be published. We have known for years that SLPs have been used to launder millions of pounds of dirty money created by illicit business activities, usually related to organised crime. We need to see action soon to put a stop to that. We need to reinstate the principle of the reverse burden of proof on senior bank managers, for example. When something goes wrong on their watch, rather than it being up to the authorities to prove that they were negligent, can we go back to requiring the bank manager to prove that they were doing the right thing? This reverse burden of proof often applies in other cases of professional misconduct or questions about professional conduct. All our regulators, including the Insolvency Service and the Financial Conduct Authority, need to be adequately resourced to keep up with the almost limitless ingenuity of the criminals they are trying to keep tabs on. That is about not just the amount of money they have, but the degree of training and experience that their people have, so that the person asked to take a decision as to whether somebody is fit to be registered with the FCA has the experience to know what kinds of warning signs to look out for.

Finally, we need legislation that allows us not just to disqualify directors who are guilty of wrongdoing; it should allow the authorities to order them to pay compensation to the victims. In some cases, I will support that on the basis of a civil balance of proof, which is on

the balance of probabilities, rather than the much higher bar of proof beyond reasonable doubt, which is why so many cases that the Serious Fraud Office takes to court never get as far as a conviction. We welcome the provisions in clauses 2 and 3. If the long title and the scope of this legislation had allowed it, we would have been submitting a significant number of amendments to improve it on Report. I hope the time is not too far away when legislation on the wider issue comes before the House so that directors cannot simply avoid disqualification by scrapping their vehicles.

6.42 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): A snappy title it is not, but a very important Bill it is, for two very good reasons. I wish to recap by saying that this Government have supported the jobs and livelihoods of the people of this country to the tune of some £400 billion—£300 billion in the past year alone; the last time we exceeded 10% of GDP was in the financial crisis, and before then world war two, and we are still supporting businesses, as we are doing with this Bill. When we are trying to protect the jobs and livelihoods of so many people, there will inevitably be areas of difficulty, yet the Government have always tried to support as many people as possible. The £16 billion-worth of rates relief has been an absolute lifeline for countless businesses, including those that get in touch with me in my constituency and others all around the country. The Government are to be commended for that. Even when businesses are more difficult to support, the discretionary funds for local authorities to be able to target those businesses are also a lifeline, and therefore the £1.5 billion of additional support for businesses whose circumstances have perhaps changed during the pandemic is incredibly important and welcome.

I want to touch on an equally serious matter: we read that potentially 60% of the £46.5 billion that has been lent out through various Government schemes—lent, I might add—might be defaulted on and not repaid. When the Government are the guarantor, I certainly welcome the Treasury taking the necessary steps to mitigate that risk and the retrospective powers to curb that significant problem, putting the parameters in place to deal with directors who might dissolve a company, walk away from their responsibilities and then not just have an effect on many people, such as creditors who are equally trying to get back on their feet, but cheat the taxpayers, who must also get back on their feet. That money is so important for the re-emergence of our economy, and we absolutely have to ensure that our public services can get up again, so any power through legislation, with the legal process in there to mitigate that, is very welcome.

It is worth pointing out that we have to be mindful slightly of not being out of this pandemic, and therefore, in going after directors who default on their responsibilities—I was a director once, and I would never dream of defaulting—we need to be careful to enable businesses to resurge again. We have to make sure that approaches to recoup the money are done in the right way. I am happy that the Exchequer is being protected in this way. I think it is very sensible legislation. We know that when we create something retrospectively it is often because we have moved at speed to protect taxpayers in the first place. This is very welcome legislation, and I back it 100%.

6.46 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “That” to the end of the Question and add:

“this House, while agreeing that the disqualification regime should be extended to directors of dissolved companies, declines to give a Second Reading to the Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Bill because it retrospectively overrules more than 500,000 business rates appeals made by 170,000 businesses, fails to consult the affected businesses to deliver adequate support, puts business and jobs at risk by delaying the delivery of additional business rates relief, ignores the impact of the pandemic on companies that have been excluded from business rates relief, fails to recognise the impact of the pandemic on jobs and businesses in the supply chain of retail, hospitality and leisure businesses from office-based companies to manufacturing firms, severely limits the only route available to tens of thousands of businesses in claiming Government support during the pandemic, sets a troubling precedent for future crises by retrospectively limiting businesses’ right to challenge their business rates bill, fails to bring forward meaningful reforms of the business rates system and risks leading to more job losses and company closures during an economic crisis.”

I am grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for his engagement on the contents of this Bill. The Liberal Democrats are pleased to support the aspects of it that relate to directors’ disqualification. We have seen far too often how individuals and businesses that are owed money can be defrauded by companies being dissolved and the fact that there is a lack of powers to pursue individuals for debts.

The urgency of introducing new legislation to protect against those practices has been sharpened by the large sums loaned to support businesses throughout the pandemic. The Public Accounts Committee, of which I am a member, recently conducted an inquiry into the bounce back loan scheme, and concluded that the combined fraud and credit risk of the scheme was between £15 billion and £26 billion. Although it was right for the Government to take the action they took and continue to take to protect businesses from the impact of the pandemic and the lockdown, it is now necessary to ensure that as many of those loans as possible can be repaid and to circumvent any possible actions that might fraudulently avoid repayment.

UK businesses, especially those in the worst hit sectors of retail, hospitality, travel and the creative industries, are beginning to emerge from this pandemic with an enormous debt burden. While I welcome these measures to ensure that UK taxpayers are not defrauded, there remains an enormous question mark over how many business owners who have conducted their affairs honestly and with integrity will face a debt burden for many years to come, and the extent to which that will be a drag on the revival of our economy. I urge the Minister to keep this issue at the top of his priority list and to support our indebted small businesses in whatever way he can.

Many businesses will be dealing with their indebtedness by looking to cut costs wherever they can, which will include reviewing all their existing expenses and exploring whether these can be effectively reduced. For many businesses, this will include applying to the Valuation Office Agency for a review of the rateable value of their business premises. Many businesses will be citing a material change of circumstances resulting from the

pandemic and the lockdown as the reason for their application. This is an established route for businesses to appeal against the amount of rates they pay. Major crises or changes in the law, such as the foot and mouth disease outbreak or the smoking ban, have previously been accepted as valid reasons for business rates appeals. Many businesses have had their business model permanently changed by covid, and where that will impact on the valuation of the property they operate from, their ratings appeals deserve consideration by the Valuation Office Agency.

I want to pick up on the comment from the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) about my amendment and to reassure him that it is about the market value, as it were, or the underlying value of the business. He cited nightclubs. I can probably count in decades the last time that I was in a nightclub. I do not know whether he has more recent experience, but it is a really good example of an industry that has been really badly impacted by the pandemic. Of course, not just the operating business model of individual nightclub businesses but the underlying value of nightclub premises will have been impacted, and that will be the material change of circumstances that those businesses will be relying on to contest their business rates.

Kevin Hollinrake: Rarely is a property built to be a nightclub. It is a property, which is valued on the basis of its rental value, which leads to the rateable value. That business may change hands and go from being a nightclub to a different kind of business. How could we have a rates system dependent on the business type that occupy premises? That is not how the business rates system works.

Sarah Olney: The hon. Member raises a valuable point. Nevertheless, if a property has always been operated as a nightclub business, a change of use, for example, which may well require an appeal to the local planning authority, still has a measurable impact on the value of that property.

I understand that 170,000 businesses have made 500,000 appeals to the VOA for consideration under covid-related material changes of circumstances. The Bill’s provisions retrospectively overrule covid-19 and Government restrictions as valid reasons for business rates appeals, effectively scrapping all 500,000 appeals. Instead, the Government propose a £1.5 billion fund to support payment of business rates for companies previously left out of business rates support—in other words, all those not in the retail or hospitality sectors, who have had a business rates holiday. However, the fund will not be available until after the Bill has received Royal Assent, and its Second Reading has already been delayed for 10 days, so how much longer will businesses have to wait before being compensated for not having paid a fair amount on their business rates?

There has been a lack of consultation with businesses before introducing the Bill and the proposed fund, and many firms will be left struggling with higher costs as a result. That is a direct threat to employment and to the ability of our economy to recover from the pandemic. I tabled the reasoned amendment outlining the Lib Dems’ opposition to the Bill, but I shall not press it to a vote.

Members of all parties in the House agree on the need for review and reform of the business rates regime. It imposes costs on businesses that they are powerless to

control and creates an unfair playing field for businesses that do not trade out of rateable premises. The Government could make the simple move of committing to annual revaluations instead of every five years. With that, those businesses that genuinely qualify for a rating reduction would see those benefits much sooner and we could remove the need for an appeals process to reduce their costs. Every effort should be made to support businesses and to save jobs. Implementing a punitive retrospective change in the law to prevent businesses taking practical action to save on their non-staff costs represents a threat to the economy and jobs. The Government could take practical action today to help businesses, but they prefer to proceed with this Bill, which enshrines a concerning precedent that will cause many businesses to struggle.

6.53 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I thank the Minister for setting the scene so very well and for answering some of the questions that I had. I will ask a few questions—it is my nature to do so—which perhaps the Minister will be able to answer for me. Rating is a devolved issue and thus the Northern Ireland Assembly will seek to apply the legislation so that businesses in Northern Ireland are on an equal footing with those on the mainland. The Minister referred to that in his introduction, and I appreciate that, although I feel the need to stress once again that the Northern Ireland protocol is in itself putting our businesses not simply on an unequal footing but on a different playing field. That is not the debate for today, but I want to put that on the record.

The fact of the matter is this: for many businesses, the coronavirus aid package for rates was the only thing that kept the creditors away from the door. I thank the Government and Ministers for all that they did to help businesses. If we are being honest and real, we know that is why businesses are in business today, and why—hopefully—they will continue beyond the next period of time. It is important that we give credit where credit is due. The only thing that kept those creditors away was the rates package, but for some people that was not enough, and coronavirus is the final nail in the coffin—we do not know how the future will unfold over the next period—which is lamentable, and we must continue to support our businesses through a difficult time. The news this morning back home was that some of the grant aid would come to an end this Wednesday, so I would be grateful if the Minister gave us an indication of what help will be available beyond the end of this month.

We are all aware in the House that there are some people who will take what was meant for good, to help those who need it, and use it for their benefit outside the realms intended by the grants. There are always people who may abuse the system and turn it to their advantage. I know one honourable man in my constituency—I know many honourable men and honourable women in my constituency, but I will talk about one in particular—who told me that he did not apply for any grants whatsoever and he could continue to trade during the coronavirus outbreak. However, he also told me that he could do with support right now, as the Northern Ireland protocol has increased his price on orders, and prevented him from selling dog treats in his shop, along

with other profitable lines. He would wish me, on his behalf, to inquire what help or rates reduction is available with regard to the insidious protocol.

Moving on, it has become clear that in order to help those who need it, we must tighten loopholes used by those who do not need help. The Government have set parameters tonight, and have closed some loopholes, and I am pleased that they have done so. That is why I support the aims of the Bill in closing the loophole with regard to the disqualification of directors. Currently, the power to disqualify directors under section 6 of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 applies only to directors of companies that have become insolvent. It does not apply to the director of a company that has been dissolved and, as a result, to obtain a disqualification order against a former director of such a company is arduous, time-consuming and costly, as the Secretary of State must apply to the court to restore the dissolved company to the register of companies. The process involves paying various fees, and once the company has been restored to the register, powers under section 447 of the Companies Act 1985 can be used to obtain information and documents that are necessary to investigate the conduct of a director. Finally, a disqualification order can be sought or an undertaking obtained under section 8 of the CDDA on the grounds that disqualification is in the public interest—or section 6 of the CDDA, but only if the restored company is insolvent. Those steps meant that in 2019, out of 529,680 UK company dissolutions, 33 companies were restored to the register in England and Wales so that they could be liquidated instead.

We do not have any idea how many cases were not made for those who abused the system, but I have seen an estimate—perhaps the Minister can give us an indication of the number at the end of the debate—that at most, misconduct occurs in 1% of company dissolutions, or about 5,000 a year. Can the Minister confirm that that is the figure, as I am concerned that the number may rise? Will he set out the steps that will be taken to ensure that it does not, as more insolvencies are expected due to the pandemic and, unfortunately, abuses are feared, in some cases, of the coronavirus loan scheme?

In conclusion, I agree that we should simplify the rules, which should not affect those who have done the right thing. We should give credit to those who did so, and those who want to do the right thing every time. I therefore support clause 2, which relates to sections 6 and 7 of the CDDA, as it will address the problem and close the loophole. The measure is also supported by professional accountancy bodies among others. There is a finite amount of grant aid and support available, so we have to be prudent. As the good book says, every one of us has a duty to be prudent with what we have and to use it correctly, so not one penny of the grant aid and support available should go to the unscrupulous. I support the Bill, and I thank the Government for what they have said tonight.

7 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate on behalf of the Opposition and to consider the contributions made by hon. Members. I also thank the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Sutton and

[Seema Malhotra]

Cheam (Paul Scully), for the meeting we had beforehand, in which we were able to discuss aspects of the Bill and issues that have been raised in the debate.

We have had some very positive and helpful contributions, including from the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), with whom I have worked closely on mortgage prisoner issues and other areas of financial services regulation. He brought his characteristic clarity to the debate, raising issues including prosecutions for fraud and the resources that are necessary for us to be able to act. The speech by the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) was so clear that it did not require an intervention, and I thank him for it. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made the important point that Northern Ireland businesses should remain on the same footing as those in the rest of the UK. The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) was right about the debt burden that businesses are facing, which is one reason why the Opposition have called for a flexible debt repayment scheme based on what businesses earn. That continues to be an essential part of how the Government must support businesses going forward.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) outlined at the start, the Bill contains some positive measures and we support its going forward. However, we want it to deliver for businesses and local authorities and to bring justice to unscrupulous company directors, and it also needs to be workable for the Valuation Office Agency and the Insolvency Service. There are significant gaps in the detail, which must be addressed if the Bill is to achieve its aim.

Clause 1 rules out covid-related material changes in circumstances in relation to business rates appeals. We understand that assessing thousands of appeals would not be the best use of the Valuation Office Agency's time when a full revaluation is due to take place in 2023. However, it is vital that this change is coupled with the £1.5 billion relief fund for businesses that have been badly affected by the pandemic but that have so far missed out on business rates reliefs—a point well argued by the Federation of Small Businesses, and I will come back to that point and to concerns that it may not cover everyone. The funding should also support businesses and supply chains that have been unfairly overlooked for so long.

Confirmation that the fund is an alternative to adjustments to rateable values as a result of material changes in circumstances appeals also provides much-needed certainty to local authorities. Since 2013 business rates revenue has formed an increasingly substantial part of local government revenue. While this reliance on business rates is imperfect and longer-term reform is needed, a large fluctuation in income at the tail end of the pandemic would be the last thing that local authorities need, and the Bill makes that less likely.

However, the lack of detail around the £1.5 billion fund is worrying. Since the figure was announced in March, businesses and local authorities have had no further detail on how the amount was calculated, how it will be allocated and who will be eligible, nor is there guidance on how it should be administered. Councils are expected to develop and set up local schemes to deliver this business grant relief, but they cannot start

the process until they receive their individual allocations and until the Government publish national guidance setting out the parameters for the scheme.

We are concerned that the allocations will not begin until the Bill has passed through Parliament, meaning that payments are unlikely to be made until September at the earliest. Businesses and local authorities are united in crying out for clarity on the distribution process, for clear and straightforward award criteria and for simplicity and speed in getting the funding out. Waiting until September will mean that many businesses will not survive long enough to benefit, especially in the light of the decision to postpone the next phase of unlocking and the fact that economic measures have not been continuing in lockstep with public health restrictions.

The Government previously said that this grant-based approach was to ensure that relief could be awarded more quickly than if it was sought under a rating appeal, so again, why the delay? I reiterate that the Government must publish an early release of the funding allocations and eligibility criteria, and I urge the Government to work closely with local authorities and the Local Government Association to make sure that that guidance is as clear as possible.

There are also further questions to ask about how the Government calculated the figure of £1.5 billion. What assurances can they give that it will be sufficient to support the businesses that have struggled so much without rates relief during the pandemic? I would be grateful if the Minister could cover that in his closing remarks. While the £1.5 billion discretionary fund has been broadly welcomed, the ruling out of material changes in circumstances rate appeals, as he knows, will have come as a disappointment to many businesses. Have the Government made an assessment of how many are likely to have been affected by the closing off of this avenue and how much they would have been able to claim back otherwise? Did these sums inform the Government's calculation of the £1.5 billion figure?

The Minister will also be aware of the concerns of airports such as Heathrow, Gatwick and Manchester, and the need for a proper deal for aviation, which, so far, the Government have failed to bring forward. Heathrow has continued to pay its £120 million annual business rates bill in full despite the plummeting passenger numbers, so has the Minister undertaken an assessment of the impact that the Bill will have on the operation of pieces of national infrastructure such as airports? Was any consideration given to exempting them from the provisions?

I will make a few comments on the directors disqualification aspects of the Bill in clauses 2 and 3. It has long been known that a small number of directors of companies fraudulently use the dissolution process as a way of avoiding paying back loans, and this has become a particular concern with the covid-19 bounce back loans. With the dramatic increase in the number of company dissolutions this year compared with last year, there are fears that a minority of rogue directors have sought to use this mechanism to avoid repaying state-backed loans. It is therefore right that the Bill aims to close the dissolution loophole, allowing directors who have unscrupulously dissolved their companies to be punished and deterring others from doing this in the future.

Additionally, applying to court to have dissolved companies restored is time-consuming and costly to the public purse. It is right that the Bill removes this hurdle

to tackling business corruption, but it is unfortunate that it comes now rather than three years ago, when a Government consultation, which the Minister referred to in his opening remarks, on the Insolvency Service's powers saw the majority of respondents agree that there was a gap in powers in relation to directors of dissolved companies. If action had been taken more promptly, as I think the Minister would agree, the significant exploitation of the bounce back loan scheme may never have happened in this way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington raised Labour's concerns about how additional investigations will be funded and the need for adequate resourcing of the VOA and the Insolvency Service. R3, the insolvency and restructuring trade body, has highlighted its members' concerns that not all their reports to the Insolvency Service are acted on, even where serious breaches of the law are suspected, due to resourcing issues. So how do the Government intend to address this while also ensuring that the Insolvency Service stands ready to take on a potentially even bigger case load?

I would add that if resourcing delays result in investigations going beyond three years since the company is dissolved, and that consequently means that a Government run out of time to apply for a disqualification order against a culpable director, that would be an utterly unjust outcome and an incentive for the phoenixism that we want to see end. It would also surely fail the public interest test, so, finally, will the Minister explicitly clarify whether the Government plan to use compensation orders against disqualified directors? The Government's approach to this must be made clear so that there is efficiency in returning funds to the public purse and other creditors can be monitored and evaluated properly.

I hope that the Government have been able to take note of the issues raised during this debate. Labour will keep pushing for these vital improvements and particularly for swift guidance and the release of the £1.5 billion relief fund. With many of the hardest-hit businesses yet again facing uncertainty following the extension of covid restrictions, we owe it to them to make this Bill genuinely helpful and not one more thing to worry about.

7.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): This is a Bill of two halves, considering that the football is on at the moment, and the contributions that we have heard from Members throughout the House attest to the importance of each of them. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government for opening these proceedings by setting out the context and the background of both elements of the Bill. I am also grateful to all the Members in all parts of the House who have participated in the debate. The points that have been raised are really important and I am glad to have the opportunity to respond, first on business rates and then on the measures relating to the disqualification of unfit directors of dissolved companies.

The House has today supported the point made by my hon. Friend that the pandemic has unquestionably had a significant impact on ratepayers. This impact has been felt particularly by those in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, but also by many other businesses that sit elsewhere in the wider economy. That is why since April 2020 the Government have provided £16 billion

of business rates relief targeted at ratepayers in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. As announced on 25 March, the Government intend that this will be supplemented by an additional £1.5 billion of relief to be made available to ratepayers who have not been able to benefit from the reliefs already put in place throughout the pandemic. Taken together, that represents an unprecedented package of support that reflects the unique impact of the pandemic on our economy.

These unprecedented circumstances have also tested other aspects of the business rates system, which was created long before covid-19 and was not designed with pandemics in mind. The material change of circumstances process is designed to be used in cases such as localised roadworks. Market-wide economic changes such as those arising from a pandemic can and should be considered only at a comprehensive business rates revaluation. Arguing material change of circumstances cases through the courts could result in years of uncertainty and is unnecessary where we can, as we are doing now, amend the law to ensure that it meets its original intention.

Sarah Olney: On what the Minister has said about the material change of circumstances argument not being appropriate in this case, would it not have been appropriate to have made it clear earlier in the pandemic, perhaps as long as a year ago, that it would not be an appropriate route for businesses looking to reduce their rates payment and not a circumstance that could be cited?

Paul Scully: A lot of messages can go out and have gone out over the past year so that we can flex in our ability to work with businesses. I think I can boil down my relatively long job title to "Minister for unintended consequences". We are always trying to make sure that we can flex and get clear messages out to businesses. The hon. Lady makes an interesting point. We have heard a lot about the £1.5 billion and when the guidance will be out. Clearly that is dependent on the passage of this Bill, but we want to make sure that we can work with the LGA and councils to give the clearest guidance so that they can get the money out as quickly as possible. The argument made by Members on both sides of the House is countered by the fact that by not having to go through so many appeals we can speed up the process and get the money out within weeks rather than, in certain cases, if we had to go through the entire process, years. That is why we can provide certainty to local authorities, which rely on income from business rates to fund their vital local services. It is on that basis that the Public Accounts Committee has welcomed the approach taken by the Government in the Bill.

Members have raised questions relating to when ratepayers will be able to benefit from the £1.5 billion relief that was announced on 25 March. We will work with all areas of local government to deliver the new relief scheme as soon as possible, once the Bill is passed, so that local authorities can set up their local relief scheme. The allocation of the £1.5 billion among local authorities will be made according to which sectors have suffered most economically rather than on the basis of temporary falls in individual property values. That will ensure that the support is provided to businesses in the fastest and the fairest way possible.

Seema Malhotra: Does the Minister have any clarity at all on the timetable so that local authorities know what to expect and when?

Paul Scully: The answer is as soon as possible, once this Bill has passed. I am looking forward to working with the hon. Lady in Committee to make sure that we can work through this as quickly as possible. Clearly, work will be done in consultation and conversation with the LGA and local councils to ensure that we can get comprehensive guidance in place. That is how we have been working over the past 14 months with local authorities on the other grant schemes.

Let me briefly cover a couple of quick points. The hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) asked whether there will be a blanket ban on MCCs. I can absolutely confirm that there is no blanket ban. On airports, it is a core principle of the business rates system that a material change of circumstances should be used between rate revaluations, so the drop in demand for airports in light of the pandemic is exactly the sort of market-wide economic change affecting property values that can and should only be considered at revaluation. We have been supporting airports with their fixed costs over the past year from the airport and ground operations support scheme. In his recent Budget, the Chancellor announced a further six months of support up to the equivalent of their business rates liability for the first half of the 2021-22 financial year, subject to certain conditions, and a cap per claimant of £4 million.

Seema Malhotra: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Scully: I will not give way, but I will happily come back to the hon. Lady if I have not answered her question. I do want to get through a few areas.

Let me quickly turn to the disqualification of directors of dissolved companies. The issue of insolvency funding came up a few times. Clearly, we will be working with the Insolvency Service to ensure that it has the resources to do its job. It employs its finite resources to the maximum effect by prioritising cases in which there has been most harm to the public and the wider marketplace. Clearly, its resources are not limitless.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) asked about insolvencies. Actually, the number of insolvencies has been at a 40-year low over the past few months because, effectively, in many areas, the economy has been held in stasis. That is why it is so important that, having put £352 billion-worth of support into the economy, we now have 352 billion reasons why we have to get the next bit right—why we have to help shape the recovery through these mitigations. We need to make sure that we continue to flex and continue to extend the support. That is why furlough carries on until September and why we have ensured that the winding-up proceedings have been extended for another nine months as well, so that we can get conversations going with landlords and tenants. It is so, so important to continue these measures.

I am glad that we have had broad support for the measures. In terms of compensation, directors can obviously be held personally liable for debt, and where there are breaches, there is disqualification.

Peter Grant: I note the Minister's comments that directors can be held personally liable, but does he accept that allowing an individual investor or creditor to sue a director at their own risk is very different from a scheme through which the Government or some other body effectively take that legal action on behalf of a group of aggrieved individuals, who individually cannot afford the risk of taking that action?

Paul Scully: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. Let me just answer a couple of his points. He talked about corporate governance and audit reform. That is something that we will legislate on as soon as parliamentary time allows. He referenced a Minister saying that we would adhere to standards that we thought that we could get away with. No, that is absolutely not the case. I did not hear that comment, but I suspect what the Minister said and meant was that we are accountable to the electorate. When I heard about that comment, I thought about my own constituency where I know at least one High Court judge, an insolvency practitioner, lawyers, forensic accountants, civil servants—I have them in my own Department never mind my constituency—and journalists and, boy, will they hold me to account at the ballot box, in my local media and in the national media should it be appropriate to do so. That is that standard to which we expect to work as a Government. I am glad that he also mentioned phoenixing, because this will strengthen the phoenixing legislation as well.

I have noted the helpful contributions made by Members across the House, and I am looking forward to working with colleagues in Committee to make sure that we can get this really important legislation for both of these measures through. The scrutiny that has been provided today is, as always, greatly appreciated. I look forward to discussing this Bill with Members throughout its passage, and I commend it to the House.

Sarah Olney: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

RATING (CORONAVIRUS) AND DIRECTORS DISQUALIFICATION (DISSOLVED COMPANIES) BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Bill:

Committee

(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.

7.20 pm

Sitting suspended.

Committee on Standards

[Relevant document: Report from the House of Commons Commission, Lay Members of the Committee on Standards: Nomination of Candidate, HC 474.]

7.22 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg):

I beg to move,

That, in accordance with Standing Order No. 149A, Ms Mehmda Mian be appointed as lay member of the Committee on Standards for a period of six years, with immediate effect.

The motion gives the House the opportunity to approve the appointment of Ms Mehmda Mian as a lay member of the Committee on Standards for a period of six years. I move the motion on behalf of the House of Commons Commission, which concluded that Ms Mian will bring the necessary skills and experience to the Committee's work that the recruitment process was intended to deliver. Her appointment will also contribute to maintaining a diversity of experience, gender and background among the seven-strong team of lay members.

Ms Mian is a solicitor, with significant non-executive regulatory and governance experience. She is presently a non-executive director of Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust and a board member of the Independent Press Standards Organisation, both since 2015. She is also a disciplinary committee member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and an associate director of the Lokahi Foundation. In addition, she has previously served as a non-executive director of the Disclosure and Barring Service at the Independent Safeguarding Authority, and is a trustee of the BBC. She had earlier roles as a commissioner at the Independent Police Complaints Commission and as a member of the Police Complaints Authority.

The lay members of the Committee on Standards play an essential role in providing an independent voice to the Committee's decisions. When lay members were first proposed over a decade ago, the rationale given by the Committee on Standards in Public Life was that it would be a step towards enhancing public acceptance of the robustness and independence of the disciplinary process for Members of Parliament. The independent and impartial status of lay members is therefore critical to maintaining confidence in our process.

The first three lay members of the Committee were appointed in 2012, and the Standing Orders were amended in 2015 to increase the number of lay members to seven. The term of office of the first tranche of lay members came to an end on 30 March 2017, and on 15 March 2017 three further lay members were appointed by the House to replace them. Two of the four lay members recruited in 2016 came to the end of their four-year terms on 18 May 2020; the other two had been appointed for six-year terms. On 10 November 2020, the House appointed one further lay member. The other vacancy remained unfilled.

Today's motion will restore the full complement of lay members. This debate reflects the House's important role in approving such appointments. Should the House agree to the appointment of Ms Mian today, I would like to take the opportunity to wish her well as she takes up her new role. I commend the motion to the House.

7.25 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is vital, given the importance of their work, that lay members of the Committee on Standards are well tested, carefully selected and able to bring extensive experience to the Committee. There has been a thorough and fair recruitment process that attracted a high calibre of applicants. I confirm that, as the Leader of the House said, it was thoroughly scrutinised by the House of Commons Commission, and we support the panel's decision.

Ms Mian was found to be the best candidate and to be entirely suitable for the important work of the Committee. I was particularly interested in her various scrutiny roles. I hope and believe that she meets with the approval of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the Chair of the Committee, and I am sure that we will welcome her and value her work. The Commission entirely supports this decision.

7.26 pm

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): As a recently appointed member of the Committee on Standards, I welcome this appointment. Elected Members of this Parliament are already expected to meet high standards in public life, as defined by the Nolan principles, and to adhere to the House of Commons code of conduct and related rules of the House. It cannot be right for MPs alone to be the sole adjudicators and decision makers on whether other elected Members—who may be friends, political colleagues or indeed political adversaries—may be in breach of the code of conduct. That would, I believe, be totally unacceptable to the public whom we are all elected to represent and serve.

From my limited experience on the Committee, I can say that the contribution of the current lay members is exceptional: they bring a wealth of knowledge, skills and experience of public life at a senior level across a diverse range of sectors. Lay members also bring a fresh perspective that is not clouded by political affiliations or party loyalties. Their independent and impartial status allows them to focus on the circumstances and the evidence in individual cases. They are therefore crucial to maintaining transparency, confidence and trust in the Committee's work and decision making.

From what I know of Ms Mian from her curriculum vitae, her previous experience and involvement in public life will enhance and complement that of the existing lay members, and she would make an excellent addition to the lay membership of the Committee. I understand that she has been through a thorough and rigorous selection process and is recommended for appointment by those responsible for carrying out that process.

This appointment will bring the number of lay members up to the full complement of seven, equal to the number of MPs on the Committee, and will enhance the diversity of the Committee. I therefore fully support the appointment.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Committee on Standards.

7.28 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): May I say that the panel was very ably chaired by Rima Makarem? She herself, as a lay member of the House of Commons

[Chris Bryant]

Commission, is a clear instance of how much lay members can bring to the way we do our business. It was also clerked very ably by Dr Robin James, the Clerk of our Committee.

Mehmuda has extensive experience. It is good that she has worked in so many different organisations as a committee member, non-executive director and so on. I was particularly impressed that she has been dealing with vets—somehow that seemed particularly appropriate for dealing with Members of Parliament. I was a member of the interview panel. What was really striking was that she showed a really strong sense of fairness, an ability to judge nuance and a capacity to work within a committee on sensitive issues. She did not seem to want to be the chair, either, which I rather liked. She also had a robust understanding of regulation. I am very confident that she will be a magnificent member of the Committee.

I have been the Chair of the Committee for the best part of a year, and the only regret I have is that since 18 May last year we have not had our full complement. For several months we were two down on the lay members, and we have been one down for more than a year. We need not rehearse all those arguments now, but I just hope that when we are replacing the new members, as we will have to do in the future, we can perhaps start this process a bit earlier so that there is no gap. We have an awful lot of work to do, and I very much look forward to welcoming Mehmuda at tomorrow morning's meeting.

Question put and agreed to.

Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body

7.30 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I beg to move,

That Marta Phillips, Dr Simon Thurley and Simon Wright be appointed as external members of the Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body under Part 1, Schedule 1 to the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019.

The House will be relieved that I do not intend to detain it long. The 90 minutes available for this debate may be more than is necessary, but it may help if I explain that I am bringing this motion forward on behalf of the Sponsor Body. Schedule 1 of the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019 states that the Sponsor Body must consist of between two and four external members, excluding the chairman. The current external board members were appointed on 1 July 2018, when the Sponsor Body was still in shadow form. Their appointments were confirmed by the House on 24 March 2020, as the body became a statutory organisation. Under the Act, a member must be appointed for a fixed term of not more than three years, although they can be reappointed. Their terms will therefore expire no later than 31 June 2021.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am not going to delay people for long either. I just wonder: we are doing all this appointing of people to the Sponsor Body, but are they ever going to mix a bucket of cement?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think it unlikely that Marta Phillips, Dr Simon Thurley and Simon Wright will mix buckets of cement on the estate of the Palace of Westminster. I am glad to say that work is going on. I have reported already to the House that the fire safety work has taken place and been tested across the estate, and I think that eight miles of pipe have gone in. Preliminary works are under way to make the preparations: Derby Gate is almost completed, and there will be a move of MPs into Richmond House. Many things are happening that will allow the restoration and renewal to take place, so I hope that that gives some reassurance to the hon. Gentleman. It is important that we keep up the pace to get to the full restoration and renewal. As for the individual members of the Sponsor Body mixing cement, that may be something they did in the earlier stages of their careers, but I do not think they will be doing it tomorrow.

A recruitment process for external board members has been undertaken by the Sponsor Body in recent months, and the interview panel included the chairman of the Sponsor Board, a parliamentary member of the Sponsor Board and an independent panel member. Following the recruitment process, the Sponsor Body has reappointed three of the four current external board members. I am grateful to all the external members of the Sponsor Board for their work so far. Today's motion will approve the reappointment of Marta Phillips, Dr Simon Thurley and Simon Wright, and I therefore commend this motion to the House.

7.33 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): As custodians of this beautiful place, we face serious duties for which almost all of us here are supremely unqualified. The Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority were therefore

established in order to bring in the skills and qualities and, above all, the knowledge and experience that we so obviously lack to the essential process of restoration and renewal, untroubled by any political considerations that we may have and aided by the relevant qualities. I understand that the new members to be appointed will bring such qualities. We have to give this magnificent building the love and care that it needs, and in order to do that, we need the right people in the right place at the right time.

Chris Bryant: It is good that Simon Thurley is there, but would not my hon. Friend be surprised if such an eminent historian as Mr Thurley were to support a proposal that the parliamentary archives should be hived off to Kew, probably never to return here again? Is it not important that the parliamentary archives should remain here in Parliament and in Westminster?

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, because it gives me an opportunity to agree with him most wholeheartedly. There are many other things on which we all have personal preferences that we would like to pronounce on. I, for one, would like to see the restoration of the cloisters to the parliamentary Labour party as soon as possible. For that, we need stonemasons and stonemasonry apprenticeships. If some of those could be allocated to some of my constituents in Bristol West, I would be most happy. I also recommend, to colleagues who have not had the pleasure, receiving a briefing from the parliamentary Sponsor Body engagement staff. I had a wonderful briefing today on the matter of voids. I will never again look at the grills under the Chamber in the same way, Madam Deputy Speaker, knowing what I do now and what it looks like underneath.

The Sponsor Body, of course, does know of what they speak. I am looking forward to seeing them get on with buckets, stonemasonry and whatever else they may

need to do in order that we may preserve, enhance and give this building the love it needs to restore it to the fullest possible health and effectivity.

7.35 pm

Mr Rees-Mogg: I had not intended to respond, but as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) mentioned the archives I would like to say that I entirely agree with him. It is extremely unfortunate that the Victoria Tower, a purpose-built archive, should not continue to be used for that purpose. I am deeply concerned about the lack of engagement there has been with Members of this House about the proposal, which many of us felt was rather sprung upon us. I am delighted to note that there seems to be cross-party consensus, with the shadow Leader of the House in favour of keeping the archive in the Victoria Tower. I hope that that will be taken on board by other authorities.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS)

That the draft Financial Markets and Insolvency (Transitional Provision) (EU Exit) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 13 May, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CUSTOMS)

That the draft Customs Safety and Security Procedures (EU Exit) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 24 May, be approved.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Question agreed to.

East West Rail Route Consultation: North East Bedfordshire

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

7.37 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The purpose of this evening's Adjournment debate is to discuss the East West Rail consultation and North East Bedfordshire. I wish to draw the Minister's attention to the flaws caused by the consultation process for the East West Rail route decision from Bedford to Cambridge. This is not a debate to argue for or against the railway in principle. Nor is it a debate to support or oppose any particular route corridor, or line of route. The purpose of the debate is to expose the significant problems of the consultation, which have created a significant deficit of trust with many of my constituents, and to request the Minister to investigate the many concerns about how the East West Rail project between Bedford and Cambridge is progressing.

As we have seen over the last two decades—indeed, over the last two weeks—people are increasingly sensitive to top-down initiatives that fundamentally change their communities and over which they believe their voice has not been heard. I thank local parish councils and their co-ordinating group BFARe—Bedford for a Re-Consultation—for their forensic analysis in preparing for this debate, and mention that I live near Bedford station. I welcome the Minister, who has been very open with his time and attention to this project. Finally, I thank the chief executive officer of East West Rail, who has today agreed to join me in walking the routes later this month.

The flaws in the consultation are multiple. Individually and collectively, they have broken down the trust of many of my constituents. Let me briefly list the main concerns raised with me. The consultation exercise gives every indication of being purposefully designed to reduce the interest and participation of residents in the area ultimately selected for the route. Critical cost assumptions have escalated wildly and never been open to proper scrutiny, and are facts—facts—that were dramatically changed after the consultation had closed, making the least attractive route the most attractive route. Constituents were not provided with an opportunity to comment on that, giving every impression of its being a fix.

The environmental impact assessment was cursory, falls far short of our net zero expectations and may result in brutal scarring of the Bedfordshire countryside forever. Critical local authority input to the consultation from Bedford Borough Council, upon which the Minister and his Department will rely, was submitted without approval from the council as a whole—a secret plan, containing flaky economic assumptions, airbrushing out references to existing homes that will have to be demolished, and potentially concealing acceptance of additional housing development as the price to be paid for the chosen route.

Finally, there was a failure to account for multiple changes, from covid to an emphasis on freight, a more polluting fuel and still rising costs—changes that risk making this rail line between two leading universities not a shining 21st-century example of global Britain but a polluting white elephant with potentially very significant cost overruns.

The 2019 consultation exercise was not statutory, but as the phrase goes, if something is worth doing, it is worth doing well. That consultation was not done well. Many parish councils on the potential routes were not contacted, including three in my constituency at Colmworth, Staploe and Wilden, all of which are on route E, the current preferred route. Postcards notifying residents of the consultation were sent to only some residents in the affected areas, not to all residents. Coverage of those postcards was variable; some wards received 5% coverage and others 20%, with no explanation for the variance.

Of the responses received to the consultation, fully half were from supporters of a single charity, which obviously made a tremendous effort to consult its members. That raises the question why East West Rail was not able to generate a fraction of that participation. Of all the in-person consultation events, not one was held in the area that was ultimately selected as the preferred route.

Those facts are the foundation for the lack of trust. I have spoken to countless residents who say they found out about the railway only after their opportunity to have their say was done. This is very shaky ground on which to proceed.

In the 2019 consultation documentation, there were five route options, A through E. Routes, A, B, C and D had costs of between £2 billion and £2.6 billion. Route E, the one subsequently chosen, had a substantially higher cost of £3.4 billion, £1 billion more than the average of the others, going into the consultation.

In the documentation released after the consultation, the cost figures for each of the routes A, B, C and D were raised by more than £1.3 billion, with increases of between 50% and 80%, yet the costs for route E were changed by only 9%. No satisfactory explanation has been provided for why East West Rail got the costs so hopelessly wrong on four of the route options and so forensically right on the one that it selected. The consequence was that route E went from being the most expensive to the second cheapest and became the preferred route.

It is clear why many residents feel cheated by a consultation that gives every appearance of having had its numbers fixed after their right to be consulted had ended. Does the Minister agree that the change in cost estimates played a significant role in the route decision process? Does he agree that that change clearly indicates that the consultation was done too early and gave a misleading impression to consultees? Does he worry, as I do, that the Treasury should be highly sceptical of any project cost estimates made in the future by East West Rail?

Two years after the first consultation, there remains considerable mystery about the costs and benefits of each route. As one constituent advises me, these uncertainties and the general lack of financial transparency indicate the clear risk of future cost overruns with a failure to achieve claimed economic benefits. I have asked East West Rail for a detailed session with me and others to unpack the costs and assumptions. Will the Minister nudge East West Rail to grant that meeting?

The Campaign to Protect Rural England for Bedfordshire has stated its firm opposition to the route selected and highlighted severe limitations in the consideration of the environment in the consultation.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I also entered the ballot to speak on behalf of my constituents, but clearly I was not as lucky as the hon. Gentleman. I share his concerns about the environmental impact of East West Rail, which is why I have called for the full electrification of the line. I cannot understand how the Government would even consider building new transport infrastructure into the 2030s without clean energy being the priority. What puzzles me is that route E has been known for at least three years, and the hon. Member—he can correct me if I am wrong—claims to be neutral about routes, but when route E was confirmed in January 2020, he said:

“I am pleased that the government has made this announcement to progress investment in this important rail link.”

Perhaps he can clarify that, and I will come back in.

Richard Fuller: The hon. Gentleman may or may not come back in—I think that is up to me to decide. Having granted him the opportunity to speak on behalf of his constituents, it is rather strange that he took the opportunity to quote—or misquote—my views to try to sow division on this issue. Actually, what he should be doing is speaking up for his constituents whose houses are being demolished as part of this process. That is what I thought he was going to intervene about, but apparently not.

As I was saying, the CPRE has raised a more fundamental point, with which I agree: the detailed assessment of environmental impact is being done right at the end of the process, rather than being front and centre at the start of the process. It rightly asks how a route that is longer and hillier, requiring significant additional construction and carving its way through open countryside, can have a carbon footprint consistent with our net zero targets. As a result, environmental impact is seen as the guise of mitigation rather than as a full part of a proper assessment. We cannot be a Government committed to biodiversity and protection of our natural habitat if we continue this practice. The Minister—indeed, the Prime Minister—has the opportunity with East West Rail to take a stand on this matter. Will the Minister therefore raise these environmental concerns directly with No. 10 and gain its assurance that this project, with all its changes, has the Prime Minister’s endorsement as being fully compliant with his green agenda?

In major project consultations, the opinions and views of local authorities are a crucial input. Local authorities are the voice of local opinion, and they undertake many of the facilitating functions—land acquisition, planning and construction mediation among others. The Minister had every right to expect a local authority to act democratically and sensitively in being that voice and in providing its input to him. Yet that was definitively not the case with Bedford Borough Council’s submission to the 2019 consultation, which was not presented to, debated by or voted on by local councillors. Indeed, not one of the councillors in the wards in my constituency was given that courtesy.

Essentially, the directly elected Mayor of Bedford submitted his secret plan, which added costs, made journey times longer and created an environmentally brutal route. I fully appreciate that the Mayor was committed to a line running through the centre of town rather than to a parkway station, but that personal commitment did not give him or his executive the right to bypass his own

council’s scrutiny. He may say that he had that discretion, but my constituents feel duped. And for what? What was the big economic gain for the borough? The council’s own analysis says that the proposal adds just 0.05% to annual economic growth—0.05% is hard to justify to the owners of homes that will have to be demolished.

Further, there are unanswered questions about whether the push for that route required the borough council to accede to additional future housing growth in the borough—essentially, whether the plan was secret because it stored up a development bombshell for rural north Bedfordshire. Will the Minister therefore advise me what significance the input of a local authority has in his Department’s evaluation of rail route options? Will he also allay the fears of my constituents that, in regard to additional housing or development expectations, there was no direct or indirect communication with Bedford borough by his Department or any other Department as a result of the routing of East West Rail through the town centre.

Engineering considerations for the route remain a source of significant contention. A consultancy was hired by the borough council to advise on engineering costs twice in the space of two months. In its first report it stated that the northern routes,

“come at a price of increased construction costs, increased disruption during construction, longer journey times and increased operational costs, as well as increased congestion and other highway costs.”

One month later, it produced a second report, stating that Bedford Borough Council

“has developed its own preliminary Route E design that reduces the cost differential to Route A by nearly half and avoids much of the highway disruption.”

Will the Minister advise me as to whether he was aware of what special engineering source was discovered by the council in that one month? I believe their analysis has proved highly influential with East West Rail, yet these figures from the council have never been made open to external review so that that assumption can be questioned in detail.

A number of changes have been made since the origination of this consultation. It originated in Lord Adonis’s Oxford-Cambridge arc vision, as part and parcel of acceding to the provision of 1 million homes in this region between Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire, including Bedfordshire, yet just a week or two ago the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government confirmed to me that that 1 million homes target is no longer a target. We know that the other project of Lord Adonis’s vision, the expressway, is no longer a long expressway; it has been junked in Buckinghamshire. We know that covid has changed crucial traffic assumptions, with greater working from home and with the opportunity for more office space in London to be converted to residential. We know that the vision for East West Rail has been cascading back in history, from his shining, 21st century, forward-looking vision where we connect two—potentially three—of our great universities to one involving a 19th century fuel of dubious merit. The Government have issued a 10-point plan for net zero, yet in some ways there are concerns that East West Rail now stands directly against those ambitions. As I said, we have more examples to show that people will change lifelong voting intentions to express their discontent with top-down projects that fundamentally change their surroundings.

[Richard Fuller]

I support East West Rail—I think it is a good idea, and the vision has its strengths—but what we are now being sold as the vision of East West Rail is not what the original intention was. Worse still, the process of going from that original vision to where we are now has destroyed trust, faith and belief in East West Rail, rather than building it up. People like infrastructure and we talk about it a lot here, but when people think about infrastructure they are talking about improvements to their town centres, about making it easier for them to get access to a GP appointment or about ensuring that their child gets into a good local school; it is not thought of in terms of spatial frameworks, visions for the future by departed technocrats or consultation exercises that treat people like fools. I urge the Minister to take these concerns and priorities seriously, play his part in restoring trust in this process and give the people that rail connection that they want, can understand and believe in.

7.53 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) on securing this debate on the East West Rail route consultation and the role played by the proposed railway within his constituency. I welcome his support for East West Rail as a concept, at the very least. I know that that is shared by the vast majority of his constituents, because, as he knows, he has instigated meetings where I have met people from a number of parishes and parish council leaders in his constituency and found that the concept of the railway is very much welcomed. However, they do have legitimate questions to ask and I hope I can answer some today. I have listened carefully to his representations about the impact of East West Rail on his constituency and his concerns about this being a fair consultation, and I will try to answer many of them now.

As my hon. Friend will know, a new railway line between Bedford and Cambridge is required to deliver the full East West Rail scheme between Oxford and Cambridge. In that vein, the East West Rail Company held a consultation, as he said, on route options A to E—we like natively described route options in the rail industry—which was open from 28 January to 11 March 2019. The outcome of that consultation saw the selection by East West Rail of route E as the preferred route option, announced, as my hon. Friend will remember, in January 2020.

The conclusions in respect of route E were reached using a number of assessment factors, such as faster journey times, lower fares and faster road journeys as a result of road users diverting to rail. The higher transport user benefits arise due to route E serving the most households, both within the catchment area around Bedford Midland station and in the growing population in Cambourne.

My hon. Friend mentioned the other recent non-statutory consultation, which included five route alignment options for the Bedford-Cambridge section of East West Rail, as well as the concepts for train service provision and stations between Bletchley and Bedford. The East West Railway Company is currently analysing the responses, and a preferred route alignment option based on the

consultation feedback, the application of the assessment factors and ongoing design work will be announced in due course.

My hon. Friend will be aware that both consultations were non-statutory and so were not a legal requirement for the project to continue. Indeed, they were examples of East West Rail trying to ensure that it was listening to the voices of people along the proposed routes. The East West Railway Company genuinely does want to hear from the people affected and use their views to shape the design of the railway. I hope my hon. Friend understands that the new chairman of the East West Railway Company is determined to listen to the views of the people along the route.

There are no fixed rules about the duration of a non-statutory consultation, but the East West Railway Company decided to run the consultation for a period of 10 weeks to provide opportunities for virtual question and answer sessions—given the lack of in-person meetings because of the pandemic—and to try to ensure that people had enough time to respond in a meaningful way.

My Department is content that both consultations met open and fair consultation standards. A range of promotional activity took place for both consultations, including, as my hon. Friend said, the sending of postcards to more than 120,000 households and businesses in the consultation zone for the first consultation, increasing to 270,000 for the recent consultation, to ensure that the virtual nature of the consultation did not mean that people missed out on the chance to take part. Advertisements were placed in key local publications and social media and local print were utilised.

Public consultation has been and continues to be a crucial part of the development of the East West Rail project, which is why the East West Railway Company has made great efforts to speak to as many local people as possible from an early stage. While I am the Minister responsible, the company will continue in that spirit as the project is progressed. Indeed, in my time as the sponsor Minister for the project I have tried to sit in on as many meetings as I can so that I can see exactly what is going on and how people's views are being reflected.

Richard Fuller: The Minister is absolutely right—he really has been on the front foot in engaging with people, as well as with me directly—but does he recognise that there is a difference between speaking to and listening? One concern that my constituents have is that in respect of some of the options that could really affect things, the conversation has been closed down and their concerns are not being listened to.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I completely get what my hon. Friend says, which is why I have tried my best and, I think, have succeeded in making sure that East West Rail actually listens to people along the route. I hope my hon. Friend will see that reflected in what comes out of the recent consultation as we move forward.

Mohammad Yasin: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is very kind. I will make two points briefly. One is that I have been told there is no chance of rerunning the consultation. Is there any realistic chance of rerunning it, because some people believe it was not run properly? Secondly, will he support the four-track option, rather than the six-track option? The four-track option will avoid the demolition of houses in my constituency.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his points. If he would not mind, I would like him to take a little question from me. I believe he supports East West Rail as well, so it is a question of making sure that his constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire are listened to properly, so that those who will be affected by the construction of this new railway, or elements of it, feel that their voices have been listened to, their concerns have been acted upon and everything has been done that can possibly be done to address the concerns.

I hear the point that the hon. Member for Bedford makes about four-tracking. I am no engineer, and I will not promise something that I cannot deliver. Nor will I promise something when I do not know where it is in the planning stages of East West Rail. I will happily go away and talk to East West Rail about it, because I know it is something that it will be considering as an option moving forward.

Richard Fuller: I am encouraged that the Minister wishes to enlist me in support for East West Rail—that is on the concept—but he knows what motivates me, which is: do the numbers add up and does the thing add up logically? I have two fundamental concerns that he has not addressed, and perhaps he will. Why is it right to go into a consultation with a clear set of numbers that go one, two, three, four, five, close the consultation and then present—“Ta-dah!”—we have changed all the numbers around, and now we are going to go with the option that originally went in as being the highest cost and now comes out as being the best option? That does not look right and is not right, and the Minister knows that if things are built on shaky foundations like that, trust is eroded at every further step. Will he therefore please look at that issue again and help East West Rail to try to close the trust deficit on that particular issue?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I will always do everything I possibly can to help my hon. Friend, his constituents and East West Rail to close that deficit gap on trust, as he says. I believe that there is a route through—not a physical route, but we should be using best practice to consult people on projects that will affect them at some point in time. I am also determined to deliver this project at pace and on budget, because there have been huge problems in the past with big rail infrastructure projects that have run over time and people’s lives have been blighted for much, much longer than they ever should have been because of the incapacity to deliver said rail project on time. That is not going to happen with East West Rail, and I will do whatever I can to allay the concerns of my hon. Friend’s constituents. I will happily talk to him separately again about how he believes I can assist in doing that. I am really happy to assist.

Public consultation has been and continues to be a crucial part of the development of this project, which is why the company has made all those efforts to speak to so many people. My hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Bedford were rightly concerned about the impact the project will have on constituents’ homes. It is entirely understood that the proposals will affect people’s homes and businesses, and farms in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire. The East West Railway Company aims to minimise the negative impacts on people’s land and property and

mitigate any unavoidable impacts. The East West Railway Company’s recent consultation included proposals for an initial compensation scheme for those affected.

My hon. Friend asked whether I could jog the elbow of the East West Railway Company, so that they can have a meeting on the true cost. He is a good businessman, a good politician and a good representative of his constituents, but he also knows that it is taxpayers’ money funding this project. I know he wants to get the best value he can possibly get, as do I, so I will not just nudge the elbow of the East West Railway Company; I will ensure that meeting happens in short order and that all the documents he requires are made available to him beforehand, so that he can do the preparation work he would like to do to do his job properly.

I completely get the point that my hon. Friend made about the environmental concerns. I am not one to go to No. 10 to ask for something—that is a tad above my pay grade—but I continue to listen to him on the question he is essentially asking: is there evidence that quality environmental assessments have been made on East West Rail? An appraisal was undertaken to assess the comparative environmental sustainability of the route options as part of the process for determining a preferred route option, as described in the preferred route option report. That assessment concluded that the routes by Cambourne—routes, B and E—were broadly comparable and had the

“fewest problematic areas with potential direct impacts on irreplaceable or sensitive features and the lowest likely mitigation effort.”

East West Railway Company will continue to assess the potential environmental effects as part of the route alignment development work. An environmental impact assessment will be undertaken and an environmental statement submitted when East West Railway Company submits its development consent order application to the Planning Inspectorate. It will therefore be going by the letter and in the spirit of the rules and the law.

My hon. Friend asked me about Bedford Borough Council’s representations and the Bedford Mayor’s secret plan. I have no idea whether the Bedford Mayor has a secret plan, but I truly believe he would not have had undue influence over any of the plans for East West Rail. I have asked the question previously, but I will happily go away and ask East West Rail whether it can bring anything to me so that we can either finally put to one side and dismiss what my hon. Friend says, or, if there is something in it, have it out in the open so that everyone can see it. It would then probably be a matter for local politics. However, I do not believe that would be the case, because I do not believe there is anything to see.

My hon. Friend asked about the significance of local authority contributions to the consultation process. I come back again and again to the point that we want everybody and anybody interested and affected by the proposed route alignment and the development of the railway to be involved in its design so that we get the process completely right. I believe there would have been significant conversations between the local authorities along the route and the East West Railway Company; less so, to be honest, with my Department, because that is not necessarily our brief. As he knows, his constituents will have many further opportunities to raise issues for consideration, including in a statutory consultation. In

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

the meantime, anyone who wishes to make representations should contact the East West Railway Company to have their voices heard.

With that, I hope that I have answered a number of my hon. Friend's points. I am determined that we and East West Rail are as open and transparent as possible with my hon. Friend, with other Members of Parliament in interested areas and with people potentially affected along the individual routes. I hope to have demonstrated

by action, not just word, that I truly believe that East West Rail needs to do that. I will continue to turn up at meetings with his parish councillors and others to ensure that that is the case. There will be further opportunities to influence the decisions that will have an effect—hopefully a very positive one—on the lives of his constituents going forward.

Question put and agreed to.

8.8 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 28 June 2021

[MARK PRITCHARD *in the Chair*]

Microchipping of Pets

[Relevant documents: Correspondence with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, on microchipping of pets, reported to the House on 3 September 2020 and 22 September 2020.]

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

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

4.30 pm

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): We are still in the hybrid setting, as hon. Members will have noted. Mr Speaker has asked me to remind all colleagues that they are expected to remain for the entire debate. I also remind Members participating virtually that they must leave their camera on for the duration of the debate and that they will be visible at all times, both to one another and to us in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks at their email address, which is westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before using them and before leaving the room. I remind Members that Mr Speaker has stated that masks should be worn throughout a Westminster Hall debate in the Boothroyd Room. Members who are attending physically and are in the latter stages of the call list should initially use the seats in the Public Gallery and move on to the horseshoe when seats there become available. Members can speak from the horseshoe only where there are microphones. There can be no interventions virtually; they can be made only physically. Thank you for your attention.

4.31 pm

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 300010 and 300025, relating to microchipping of pets.

The laws called for in the petitions are known as Fern's law and Tuk's law. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. Today we debate an issue that is close to the hearts of many hon. Members and their families, as well as the millions of pet owners around the country. As the proud father to Bella, my cavachon, and Bailey, my cavapoochon, I am horrified by the thought of ever losing them. I did have a scare recently when I was walking Bella in Bathpool park in Kidsgrove for her first birthday. Something spooked her and she ran off, leaving my partner and me frantic as we searched for her. Three and a half hours later, and with the support of the incredible Greyhound Gap team, led by the tenacious Lisa Cartwright, she was found—shaken but well. Pets are more than just animals; they really are members of the family, and when they go missing, the other family members are left devastated.

Before I start, I want to thank all those who have given up their time to help me to prepare for today. I thank the Fern's Law team, who comprise Debbie Matthews of Vets Get Scanning and the Stolen and Missing Pets Alliance; Dr Daniel Allen of Keele University and Pet Theft Reform; Marc Abraham OBE of the all-party parliamentary dog advisory welfare group and Lucy's law; Sarah Dixon of Focus On Animal Law and Flop Not Crop; and Freya Woodhall, founder of Let's Get Willow Home. I also thank Dawn Ashley, Sue Williams and Dominic Dyer, animal welfare campaigners and members of the Tuk's Law campaign. In addition, I thank all those campaigners who have been working tirelessly to support bereaved pet owners and to bring microchipping to the attention of this place.

I will take the two petitions in turn and try to keep the two clearly separate, as they are on distinct issues, albeit that both relate to microchipping. I will start with Fern's law. That campaign is calling for it to be made compulsory for veterinary practices to scan a pet when it is presented for the first consultation, or at its yearly check-up. The campaign, known as Vets Get Scanning, was started by Debbie Matthews after her two Yorkshire terriers, Gizmo and Widget, were stolen from her car in 2006. Within the first 24 hours, Debbie found out that the police regarded the theft of her dogs as not important enough to attend the scene, saying, "As it's only dogs, we won't come out." Thankfully, with the help of her father, Sir Bruce Forsyth, Debbie was in a position to launch a major campaign to get her dogs back, and the people who had bought Gizmo and Widget came forward after just one week.

However, for many owners, there is not a happy ending; and sadly, because pet theft is a low-risk, high-reward crime, it is on the rise. The scale of the problem is clear. Roughly 20,000 dogs and cats are listed on DogLost as missing. Debbie named her campaign Fern's law after a stray cocker-springer spaniel cross who was stolen from her home in Malden, Surrey in April 2013. Fern was reunited with her owners only in 2019. Fern was in a pretty sorry state, having been used for breeding during those six years. After a veterinary check-up, there was evidence that Fern had been taken to a vet for a medical procedure during that time, but because it is not compulsory for vets to scan dogs for microchips when they are first presented, Fern was not reunited with her family for years. That was a missed opportunity. How many other dogs and cats have been lost this way?

It was only when Fern was abandoned and a kind soul brought her to another vet as a stray that she was reunited with her owners. This is one of the contradictions of the issue. It seems that vets are happy to scan dogs brought in as strays, but sold-on and kept-by-finding missing dogs and cats that have a new keeper are not always scanned. It takes the same amount of time to scan a dog brought in as a stray as it does to scan one brought in by an owner, so why cannot vets scan dogs by default?

The other contradiction is that since 2016 it has been compulsory to have a dog microchipped. Microchips are sold to owners as a permanent marker with traceability, as a way to discourage pet theft, and as the best way to be reunited with their pets if they are stolen. But if microchipping is designed to reunite missing pets with

[Jonathan Gullis]

their owners, what is the point of having it when it is not compulsory for vets to scan the microchip at a pet's first veterinary treatment?

The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs held a consultation on making cat microchipping compulsory. Once again, however, what is the point if vets and others do not have to scan them? Many missing pets are never reunited with their owners, because it is optional for vets to scan and check microchip registration on the original database to ensure that pets and their owners match. If just one organisation is not committed to scan and check microchip registration, the whole system fails and is not fit for purpose.

The Fern's law campaigners want legislation to replace the current best practice recommendations from the British Veterinary Association, which, although they have been strengthened, are only optional guidelines. As Marc Abraham OBE said to me:

"Vets are missing a trick by not scanning dogs as standard. It is not a complicated procedure to scan a dog. It does not need to be done by a vet. The receptionist could do it while the owner is waiting in reception."

It seems like a no-brainer to me and I very much hope that, following its consultation, DEFRA will make it compulsory for veterinarians to check microchips.

I will move on to the next petition, which is about Tuk's law. It has been started to make it a legal requirement that no healthy animal can be destroyed by a vet without the vet first scanning the animal's microchip, to confirm that the person requesting euthanasia has the authority to do so and that the dual registration contact detail—that is, an animal rescue and owner—on the microchip is assessed and honoured.

The campaign is named after Tuk, a 16-month-old rescue animal that was euthanised in December 2017. He was not scanned prior to euthanasia and his rescue back-ups were not contacted or notified of his death. This is an important point. Typically, animal rescue organisations microchip pets in their care at the time of carrying out essential healthcare treatments, such as vaccinating, spaying or neutering. This usually occurs when new owners have been found for the pet, so the details registered for the microchips belong to the rescue. Once animals are rehomed, rescues remain a presence in their life, offering rescue back-up to new owners for the duration of the pet's life. They remain on hand for advice and if owners are no longer able to cope with or care for the pet, the rescue organisation's contract typically stipulates that the pet returns to its care, and it will then try to find alternative care. Tuk had full rescue back-up details on his microchip, but despite that and despite the fact that he was presented for euthanasia by an individual who was not his registered keeper, he was euthanised.

As I have said, our pets become family members and the thought of what happened to Tuk happening to one of my dogs is truly horrific. The Tuk's law petitioners shared details with my team of some tragic cases where pets were taken in by neighbours who had them euthanised, simply because they did not like them or the way they behaved. The youngest dog that was mentioned was only six months old.

I am told that 98% of vets have been presented with a healthy pet to be euthanised simply because of their behaviour. Tuk's law asks for vets to be compelled to

scan microchips and contact the registered keeper and rescue back-up when a healthy and treatable animal is presented to them for euthanasia, in order to prevent harrowing cases such as that of Tuk from ever happening again.

I was pleased to hear that progress on this campaign has been made, and the BVA has worked with the campaign and Government to strengthen its guidance to vets. The new guidance, which underpins the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' code of professional conduct, advises that veterinary surgeons should scan for a microchip in dogs prior to euthanasia, where, in their professional judgment, destruction of the dog is not necessary on animal health or welfare grounds.

That is a welcome change, but the Tuk's law campaigners argue that it does not go far enough. They argue that the new code needs to be publicised and enforced to save the lives of many dogs. The petitioners make it clear that action is needed quickly because there is a ticking time bomb coming down the road.

During the pandemic, we were all required to stay home and—quite reasonably—many people got a pet to help them to cope with the sudden dislocation from their normal lives; I did so myself. However, having a dog that needs walking every day is easy enough when the Government are telling people to stay at home; it is less easy when people need to be in the office again from nine-to-five. It is estimated that close to 1.5 million dogs were adopted or bought during the pandemic. As life returns to normal, many owners will realise that they cannot care for their dogs properly any more. Campaigners are seriously worried that, as a result, many healthy dogs will be brought in for euthanasia.

Dominic Dyer from the Tuk's law campaign says that the situation is expected to be even worse than the 2008 financial crash, when many families realised they could no longer care for their dog. I recognise that the BVA has concerns about making Tuk's law a legal requirement; it argues that it could inadvertently create problems not only for the veterinary profession but for the pets and owners that it seeks to protect. However, as Dominic made clear, we are on the cusp of potentially many thousands of dogs being given up by their owners. I am concerned that the current guidelines may not be strong enough.

An issue identified by both sets of petitioners is the need for a centralised database of microchipped pets. Currently, there is a complicated situation of 16 different national pet microchip databases recognised by DEFRA. Most databases offer the availability of a quick microchip database search. The technology already exists to create a centralised database—one only has to consider the centralised database of motor insurance. Dr Sharon Alston was kind enough to share her experience of working on such a system for microchipped animals in Ireland in the build-up to today's debate. A centralised database would be available to the police, vets, authorities and rescues, for easy access to microchip registration and quick reunifications.

The current system makes it much harder for owners to be reunited with their pets, even in cases where vets scan, but it does work. The BVA also recognises the lack of a centralised database as a key stumbling block for vets trying to reunite lost or stolen dogs, but when

Debbie asked the association if a centralised database would be the key to compulsory microchip checks, the answer was no.

On GDPR and reporting scanned missing pets, there would not be a breach for RCVS and BVA if the details are requested by the police as part of an investigation triggered by reports in the microchip database by the veterinary clinic. There seems to be a misconception that the obligation to report to the police falls on vets—it does not. The obligation to report rests on the chipping companies, which will contact the registered keeper.

I have probably gone on for long enough, and I am eager to hear what other Members have to say about the two petitions. All I will add is that Battersea Dogs and Cats Home and the Kennel Club have given their support to both petitions. I am a supporter of Fern's law, as someone who firmly believed that every time I took my dogs to the vets they were being scanned and checked. The fact that that is not happening gravely concerns me. My veterinary practice is delighted that I have become educated on that, following the emails I sent to make sure it never happens again.

I would like to believe that vets in any circumstances would already check microchips before euthanising a dog. I believe the vast majority of veterinarians would do such a thing—there is not a mass number of people disobeying the rules and guidance sent to them. Although Tuk's law should be taken into consideration, I like to believe in the goodness of the human spirit, and that vets are doing the correct and appropriate thing before ever having to do something as hard as putting down an animal, be it one that is sick or one that is well.

I am pleased to see the Minister and the shadow Minister here today, and I look forward to hearing their responses and the outcome of the consultation, hopefully in the very near future.

4.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What a pleasure to hear the introduction by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis). Whenever I attend a petitions debate in Westminster Hall either he or the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) is introducing a petition, and it is always a pleasure to hear either of them.

I have owned a dog probably all my life. I cannot remember not having a dog, from a very early age in Ballywalter in the 1960s. I remember the first dog we had, and I remember the last dog we had. Dogs are very much part of my life. My mailbox has taken a hit because of this issue, because so many people support the petitions. They may not have even signed the petitions but they support the principle, and it is important that they have that opportunity.

It is not very often that I am No. 2 in a Westminster Hall debate. As a matter of fact, I cannot remember the last time, but I was pleased to see the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) arrive. For a minute, I thought I was going to be the only Opposition Member, so I am pleased to see him in his place.

Although the signatories to the petition in my constituency numbered just 60, many more people have contacted me about this issue. The theft of dogs across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has been enormous this year. During the covid-19 pandemic, people have needed to have dogs as pets—that

was their contact with the outside. The great thing about a dog is that it will always love you. It always wags its tail. It will always respond to your affection. Even when you are cross, the dog will wag its tail if you turn on the charm again. That is what a dog does.

There are some examples of dog theft in my constituency. Cocker spaniels were making about £300 to £500 last year. This year, they are making anywhere from £1,500 to £2,000, so there has been a criminal aspect, to which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North referred. I am very conscious that, as they always do, the criminals seem to take advantage of someone's vulnerability.

Our dogs are our best friends. My dog is the one loving creature in my life that does not disagree with me. He does not huff with me, and he always offers unconditional love. I have often been so grateful for Autumn, my wife's springer spaniel, when I have come home from an arduous week at Westminster to see the pure joy that the dog has for me. I cannot say that Sandra, my wife, is just as happy to see me on every occasion. I say that in jest, because I know for a fact that she is happy to see me. She might not always express it as forcefully as the dog does, but that is by the way. The bond that comes from my relationship with the dog is unshakeable, and the thought of ever coming home and not seeing that wee tail wagging away is truly a difficult one to consider.

Our dog Autumn was a rescue dog. Someone had unfortunately been bad to it, and we brought it home to our house. The dog has settled in well, and the nervousness and vulnerability that it had at the beginning has gone away, thank goodness. As it is a springer spaniel, I was pleased to take it out shooting with me, so it has now become my hunting dog. It is my wife's dog, but it is my hunting dog, which I use on occasion during the shooting season.

How much worse is it for those who live alone and whose little cat or dog is their sole companion? I have had distressed constituents who are their wit's end ringing my office and searching for their lost cat. They cannot get help. When I contact my local council, which is always responsive, compassionate and truly wonderful, it is often unable to help, as it does not have a policy of scanning cats. That has not helped to alleviate families' distress, which is why I support the petitions that are before us, and I know that other hon. Members will endorse them.

According to figures from Cats Protection, some 2.6 million cats across the UK are not microchipped, representing 26% of all cats. My wife has three cats. At one stage, we had six cats. When three passed away, we did not replace them. My wife has worked in an animal charity for some time, and she now works in a cattery. Cats can roam freely and are known for their inquisitive nature. We have two cats who are house cats, and we have one cat who will hunt night and day. We live on a farm, so we want all the cats to hunt and to keep the rats and mice under control, which can lead to their becoming lost or injured. We have lost quite a few on the road. Without a microchip, an owned cat may never be reunited with its owner. If a cat is sadly killed in the road, a microchip allows the owner to be informed and have closure. If a cat is stolen, a microchip gives the owner the best chance of being reunited. If cats were all microchipped, as with dogs, it would prevent the euthanising of owned and loved cats. That is why I add my voice to the call of the petitions, to which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North referred in his introduction.

[Jim Shannon]

The all-party parliamentary dog advisory welfare group has clearly stated that although it is compulsory for the public to microchip dogs, it is only optional for vets, professionals, authorities and rescues to scan and check microchip registration. With new and potentially stolen dogs not being scanned and checked at their first vet consultation, the opportunity to identify and reunite thousands of stolen dogs is being missed. Members have asked lots of questions in relation to this issue, and I know the Government have given commitments. There have been some success stories in certain parts of the country, such as the midlands. It just shows how a dog that is stolen in Kent can very quickly end up in Birmingham, so a network of criminality is in place.

The flawed microchipping system does not provide any peace of mind whatever to families who experience dog or cat theft. The microchipping of all dogs and cats is absolutely essential, and we have a clear opportunity to put that right. Fern's story and subsequent campaign have highlighted how something that would take a mere minute of a vet's time could reunite families and bring healing to a devastated heart. For people I know whose dog or cat is the absolute treasure of their lives and their constant companion, not knowing whether their wee pet was roaming sick or in pain would be worse than knowing that they are gone. We can implement reform to take away that uncertainty for many.

As always, I very much look forward to the Minister's response. I am convinced that she understands what we are saying and will respond in a positive way. These simple changes are not onerous and would make great steps in animal welfare. I am proud to have spoken in the debate in support of the hon Gentleman and others who have said that something can be done. The fact is, we must do it now.

4.51 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Pritchard. May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) on his success in bringing this important issue to the public gaze and to Parliament, where we are charged with setting the laws and ensuring that they are properly policed?

I fully agree with the petitions and the sentiment behind them. They are focused on chipping dogs and reading the chips. Currently, it is compulsory to have one's dog chipped, but it is not compulsory, as I discovered to my surprise during lockdown, to scan those chips. That discovery led me to ask further questions. Many of the people whom my hon. Friend mentioned, including Debbie and others, showed me that it is literally incoherent that we have an obligation on owners to chip but not on vets to scan. What is the point of chipping animals if the honest people in society are the only ones who get them checked? We need that to be made obligatory.

My hon. Friend is quite right that there are between 14 and 16 separate databases, and that we need to ensure that the data is centrally available and read, so that we know who the original owner is and the right people—the people who originally owned the dog—have the say so on the decision about whether a dog is to be put down or not, as my hon. Friend said.

I draw the House's attention to the Report stage of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, for which I and my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) have tabled three new clauses. New clause 14 would require the sale of pets by cheque or bank transfer, basically banning cash sales. New clause 15 would make it compulsory for microchipped pets to be scanned by vets, who must check that the microchip number is registered on an approved database and confirm the correct registered keeper. New clause 16 would make the offence of pet theft a specific category of crime carrying a much more significant fine and/or incarceration.

I want us to come back to the idea that microchipping is important because it is necessary to understand who the owner is. I say that because there has been a staggering increase in crime relating to pets, and dogs in particular. As has been said, during the lockdown, many people who had never had a pet suddenly realised that they had more time on their hands and wanted one, so demand went up. Legitimate supply was unable to keep up for the simple reason that legitimate breeders were unable to put dogs and bitches together to produce legitimate litters, so we were left with the criminal fraternity, which did two things.

First, there was the increase in puppy farms, which is a disgusting state of affairs. A bitch will be stolen from somebody, she will be used constantly to produce young puppies until she is worn out within about six months to a year, and then the criminals have her put down or abandon her on the streets. That is really important. For those who care about this, it is not just a political game; it is very serious, because it is about unnecessary pain and the terrible lives led by animals who are taken by criminals.

Secondly, there has been an enormous increase in dog theft. The BBC reported a 250% increase in dog theft crime in Suffolk alone during the pandemic, comparing the year ending July 2019 and that ending July 2020. The Metropolitan police report the highest number of dog thefts in the country. The number of stolen dogs registered on the DogLost website increased by 170% from 2019 to 2020, and 2020 has been one of the worst years ever for dognapping.

It is bad enough that there is theft, which is a crime, but dog theft is the theft of people's pets, not just property, and that is where the law falls down again. Pets are more than just property. I might own this chair behind me, but the chair does not greet me in the evening when I come back. It does not console me when there is a problem. It just sits there. A dog is a sentient being and therefore has greater value than just an object, and it is time we brought the law up to speed.

The problem is that prices have rocketed. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North spoke about that earlier. The price has increased by 134% for chows, at £2,000 in October compared with £1,000 the previous March. Pets such as French bulldogs can be more than £5,000 each, and a litter can earn more than £30,000 for those who use them to breed. The problem is not just criminality. Violence is used by criminals to steal dogs to order, so we now have an increase in violent crime.

Here is the problem; it has gone to the gangs. I live in an area of north-east London that has real problems with street gangs. The police work hard on it and so does the local authority. I make no criticism of them.

But the gangs now see it as easier, cheaper and less of a problem to steal a pet such as a French bulldog and sell it on for cash rather than try to sell drugs on a street corner, because selling drugs gets them into much greater trouble. It leads to great violence to themselves and therefore becomes a bigger problem. Why would they not steal a valuable pet and sell it? They might get a £250 fine. They are just laughing their heads off.

Dogs are now valuable merchandise. There is no real criminal penalty for stealing one, so why not do it? That is one reason why violent thefts have increased dramatically. What the hell do they care if they smash somebody to the ground, hurt them—normally an elderly person—and take their dog? We have heard stories of people being stamped on, their hands smashed and the dog taken off the lead. Sometimes knives are used. All sorts of stuff goes on, because pets now have a significant cash value.

Cash is key here, which is why we want to ban the use of cash. It had a massive effect on the theft of lead from churches when we introduced a ban on cash for scrap metal. This is another angle of attack. I absolutely support what my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North said about microchipping. It is, however, only one element of what has to happen with regard to pets. We need to update the law. Far too many people out there are really worried.

I know what goes on in Ministries. I had six years in a Department, so I know what civil servants say: “Oh, Minister, this is really a second-order issue. There are many more important things that we have to focus on. There are all these big things that we have to deal with.” I say there is no greater issue than the thing that affects our constituents’ lives and worries them and that leads to criminality, violence and the loss of the legitimate property of a pet—a dog, a cat or whatever. It is time to make this not a second-order issue, but a first-order issue. I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that the issue has been kicked around the different Departments. I know that the Lord Chancellor is speaking to people in the next couple of days, so he takes an interest in it. The Home Secretary spoke to me and she took an interest in it, and I know that the Minister’s Department takes an interest in it. Can we please make sure that the Government recognise that whoever owns this problem, we all own it collectively as a Parliament—not even as a Government? We own it because we owe it to our constituents to save them from any further problems, any further violence, and any further threats and the theft of pets.

I am a dog owner myself. Like many others, I would hate the idea of my wife or somebody else being smashed to the ground, beaten up and their pet stolen. My wife has just stepped down as chair of the trustees of the charity Medical Detection Dogs. The charity is currently working on detecting covid, with brilliant and immediate results, as high as any of the tests. These are very valuable animals that save our lives. They sniff aircraft to check there are no bombs or illegal currency, and they come to this place to run around the Benches and tell us that we are safe. They are not items; they are pets that are owned by people, but they are also incredibly powerful and save lives. Now is the time to act. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to relay that back to all the Government Departments. Let’s get on with this, do what is right and help our constituents.

5 pm

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and all the hon. Members who have spoken so passionately on this subject.

The topic is close to my heart. I want to take Members back to the hazy days of 1986. Shadow was our family dog. He was a beautiful Labrador-cross—adorable, a real gentle soul—and we also had his mother, Suzie. One day I remember coming home from school aged 12 and she was missing from our garden. We contacted the police, the animal rescue centres and the council, but she was never found again, so I know what it is like when dogs go missing. As a family, we felt real anguish. As most of us who have pets know, our animals are part of our family. We felt real grief and loss not ever knowing what happened to her. Had microchipping been available then, we would have had a better chance of finding her. I believe it was first introduced into our country in 1989, just three years after we lost our dog.

According to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, it is estimated that there are 51 million pets, across 12 million households, across the length and breadth of the United Kingdom. With 44% of all households owning pets, including mine—I now have a miniature schnauzer called Godiva and rescue dog called Suzie—we are a nation of animal lovers who cherish our pets, and especially so in my constituency of Morley and Outwood. We have an annual dog show, the fantastic College of Animal Welfare, the RSPCA rescue centre, the Cats Protection rescue centre and the Whitehall Dog Rescue centre, where I got my own rescue dog, Suzie.

Over the course of the past year, we have seen how pets have become indispensable for so many people, especially supporting people when they have physical and mental health challenges. That is one reason that the welfare of our pets matters to us and why responsible dog owners will ensure their pets are microchipped.

The petitions call for two measures to be introduced, as was mentioned earlier: first, that vets must scan microchips of animals brought into them in order to combat pet theft, which we know is on the rise and, secondly, that vets should scan the microchips prior to performing euthanasia on any animal, to ensure that the owner is the person who has brought the pet in and that they are guaranteed to be aware of the situation. I am proud to support both these measures and all the measures that my right hon. and hon. Friends and Members from across the House have spoken about today.

If enacted into law, the measures in these e-petitions will help to reduce the suffering that both animals and their families face. They will ensure that animals can be reunited with the family that cares for them and that families can take comfort in knowing that everything possible has been done to help reunite them with their pets. They will guarantee that owners can fear less and if something has happened to their pets, in the saddest of circumstances, it maximises the chances that they will be there when they say their final goodbye. These measures are pure in their intentions, and I urge the Government to look seriously at them to further strengthen the great work we have already done on animal welfare in recent years.

5.3 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): It is a pleasure to be here under your stewardship, Mr Pritchard, although it will not be so much of a pleasure for my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), who brought the debate, because unfortunately he will have to listen to me for the next couple of minutes talking about my own pets. I think it is important to do that, because that is what humanises the debate.

In the nearly 18 months I have been here, this is one of the easiest speeches I have had to give, talking about my pets, Roux and Ada, who are two very silly whippets, the first of whom was bought before the first lockdown. In the same week that Michel Roux died, we got Roux, a grey, very small—very tiny—very meek whippet. She was supposed to be my wife's dog, while I was away down in Westminster, but of course we went straight into lockdown and Roux joined me, at my feet, at my beck and call. Every single day, during those phone calls, from 6 o'clock in the morning to 11 o'clock at night, dealing with my constituents in the pandemic, Roux was there. My only break was to get her a drink or feed her, to let her out and to take her for a walk. She was my companion.

That of course meant a problem, because that dog was supposed to be my wife's—so we had to get a second. The second came in the form of Ada, named after Ada Lovelace for two reasons: she has a great big heart—literally, on the side of her chest—and Ada Lovelace has a special place in my constituency. Ada is the complete opposite of the meek Roux; she is tenacious and grumpy, and she has only one gear, which is forward. That is problematic. When I go out across the fields of Leicestershire, Ada and Roux head out and leave me for dust. They are not only whippets by name. As people who have a whippet know, they are digital animals—they are either on or off. Most people say of having a whippet, “You don't own one; you wear one”—they are on the sofa, they are around our neck or lying in our lap. When we take them out, however, it is a different kettle of fish.

I am lucky to have the fields of Desford, Peckleton and Newbold Verdon all at my beck and call, because the dogs love to run across them. The problem is, they will spot children and other dogs on the other side of the fields, and be gone. The good news is that mine are so meek that I am yet to see a dominant display at any point. It usually ends with them rolling over and showing their tummy.

Whippets are fantastic escape artists. They are brilliant at defusing all my ways of keeping them in the garden, from chewing through chicken wire to leaping six-foot fences. That, however, is of course the cut and thrust of what we are talking about: they escape easily and, should they escape, they can disappear; and if they disappear, they can be lost and, unfortunately, lost forever—as we heard, tragically, from my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns).

About 8.5 million dogs in the country are chipped. I like to think that most of them have good homes, so that is at least 8.5 million people looking after them, although of course they are family animals. That is why the debate matters; it cuts through to who we are. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) hinted at that. He gave

many stats about how the subject not only is the soft underbelly of the emotional aspect of the UK, but leads to the harder crime aspect.

Given those serious points, I would like to think that if my dogs ever went missing, a vet would scan my dog. We know that the numbers have gone from 58% to 90% when dogs are chipped, but we also know that prices have gone up and that there is puppy profiteering. In my own experience—which with whippets, not the most popular breed—prices doubled in that timeframe. Worse still is puppy smuggling. I know, from when I asked about pet fish and how to protect oneself when buying them, that the Minister is working hard to deal with the issues. Most people are good people, they do their diligent research, but we need the vets and the industry to support our fight in dealing with theft and loss.

I am completely open to the fact that unintended consequences are possible. I would like to see the consultation get underneath what is going on, bringing with the Government the vets, the associations, the rescuers and of course the public, because at heart, as a Parliament, we can all agree, no matter which side of the House we are on, no matter which industry we are in—receiver or carer—that this can be resolved. I would like the Minister to consider that, to provide some dates for when the two measures are likely to come forward and, I hope, be passed.

5.9 pm

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) for securing an important debate.

Pet theft reform is something I have campaigned on for a while now. Indeed, we had a debate on pet theft last year, secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt). Many points were made, and I think that the Government are attempting to deal with them in this Parliament. They are trying to tackle this horrific crime, which impacts on our constituents so fundamentally. We need to use every tool available to us, and the two petitions highlight how absolutely crucial the rules on microchipping, databases and scanning are to getting this right. Fern, of Fern's law, spent six years as a lost dog away from her family. Had a vet been obliged to check her microchip—veterinary treatment had been sought for her in that time—we know she would have made it home more quickly.

Many petitions that come with such popularity from the general public have common sense at their core. Having a single database to identify lost or stolen dogs is basic common sense. If a dog is stolen, being able to add a marker to that single database to flag the pet as stolen is common sense. When a dog is sadly presented to be euthanised, we should establish that the correct and rightful owner is the person making that request. There is a further debate to be had about whether euthanising a healthy pet by a vet should be an available option, or whether surrender to a rescue would be a much better way to tackle unwanted pets, because no healthy dog should be euthanised. I know vets have an incredibly difficult time having to euthanise healthy dogs.

Pet theft is utterly barbaric. As we heard from so many people who have spoken, it is an urgent matter that we reform pet theft laws. Every day, I read another

story of a devastated owner who has lost a beloved family member. In recent local elections, I heard that this crime has become such a concern to people I met, especially older constituents and female constituents. They are now too nervous to take their dogs out, certainly towards the end of the day. I was talking to them when trying to get dog-walking groups together; obviously, in the pandemic, that has been difficult for people. However, we must deal with this. It is so important to our constituents.

As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), amendments have been tabled to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. New clause 15 would make Fern's law a reality, and I will support that new clause. We need action now. I spoke to the Lord Chancellor about pet theft a couple of weeks ago, and I have spoken to DEFRA Ministers and to the Home Office, and I am reassured that the Government are absolutely committed to doing this. I welcome the Government's setting up the pet theft taskforce, which will look at all the issues around pet theft and report in the autumn.

I thank my hon. Friend the Minister in advance: I talk to her a lot about various animal welfare issues, and she is a real animal lover. I know that so many people support these reforms. How they happen is not important; whether via amendments to that Bill or a separate Act, it just needs to happen, and it needs to happen immediately, or as quickly as Government time will allow. Finally, I thank everybody who has campaigned for Fern's law and Tuk's law and every single person who signs petitions and who writes to their Member of Parliament. It is so important that we are kept informed and that we keep the pressure up to get something done—to get positive action. I thank the Government for listening and reacting to that.

5.13 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. These two very important petitions essentially deal with the same matter—the fact that there is no legal requirement on veterinarians, local authorities or highways agencies to scan dog or cat microchips in any circumstances, and variations of legal problems that flow from that fact. I will confine my remarks in the main to Tuk's law, for reasons I will outline in a second. However, I fully support Fern's law. I will not add to what other hon. Members have said, but I do not think the Minister will be unsuspecting of what I am about to say. Fern's law asks for it to be made compulsory to scan and check all microchips, to reunite stolen dogs and cats. The request behind Gizmo's law is that more legislation should be brought in for deceased cats and other pets, and I urge my hon. Friend the Minister—she is the most fantastic Minister on such issues—to ensure that Gizmo's law is given due consideration at the earliest opportunity, which I know I say to the Minister every single time I meet her in and outside the main Chamber. Gizmo's law is an important part of the animal legislation that I believe the Government should bring forward.

Like many other Members, I am a dog owner. My friend is Bertie, a 16-month-old black lab, and I do not know what I would do without him. Tuk was a 16-month-old rescue dog—the same age as my dog—and, sadly, he was destroyed on 22 December 2017. This debate follows

on from that event and that sacrifice. Tuk was not scanned prior to euthanasia, and his rescue back-ups were not contacted or notified of his death, even though he had full rescue back-up registered on his microchip and on the original database. It required only the microchip to be scanned for the rescue back-up to be contacted and for Tuk to be saved, which highlights the importance of the legislation.

I have worked with Sue Williams, Dawn Ashley and Dominic Dyer. I introduced a private Member's Bill on Tuk's law, which sadly fell, in the last Session, but I have decided to make my remarks about Tuk's law their words, because they are the passionate campaigners who have driven the campaign forward. They are the people who have got over 100,000 signatures in their desire to protect animals.

What is a rescue back-up registration on a microchip? As part of the adoption contract, rescue organisations register their details on the original database as a secondary contact. In times of vulnerability, the secondary contact is there to protect the animal from being unnecessarily euthanised and to alert the veterinarian that an alternative is in place.

What is rescue back-up? Once an animal is adopted and rehomed, the rescue remains a presence in their life, offering rescue back-up to the adopter for the duration of the pet's life. The rescue is available for advice, and should the adopter no longer be able to care for the animal, the rescue will support them and find an alternative new home. For those reasons, I am therefore delighted that Tuk's law has been included in the Government's action plan for animals, and I thank the Minister and the Government for that.

I want to point out some of the concerns of the Tuk's law campaign. I know the Minister is aware of them, but they bear repeating. As ever, the Tuk's law campaign continues to lobby the Government to ensure that all microchipped details, including the rescue back-up contact details for the rescue organisation, are confirmed on the original database prior to the euthanasia of a healthy or treatable animal. The Tuk's law campaign also requests that, once confirmed, any identified rescue back-up details, including the rescue organisation's contact details, are registered on veterinarian practice databases, and that should an animal ever be in a vulnerable position, the veterinarians agree to communicate with the rescue or second contact prior to the euthanasia of the healthy or treatable animal.

Obviously, we have heard that DEFRA, the RCVS and BVA have taken some positive steps to prevent the unnecessary euthanasia of dogs. However, the Tuk's law campaign is dedicated to ensuring that lives are not unnecessarily lost. The campaigners consider that the commitment in its current form does not go far enough, and they believe that the omission of the word “treatable” in the recent change to the RCVS code of conduct leaves many animals still at risk. Although there is appreciation that the BVA has concerns regarding the levels of intervention that the veterinarian profession is willing to undertake, those steps should be taken when the life of any animal is at risk.

This is a subject that I could speak on for a long time. It is rooted in common sense, legality and the desire of all our constituents to ensure that no healthy animals—like Tuk, Bertie and the pets that right hon. and hon.

[James Daly]

Members have talked about—are ever in a position, be it through theft or loss, whereby they lose their lives through no fault of their own, even though a rescue back-up is in place to help them, to protect them and to ensure that they continue to be the constant companions that we all value and treasure as part of our everyday lives.

5.19 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) for leading this debate for the Petitions Committee; it is particularly good to see him here. I also thank the Minister, both for being here today and for recently visiting my North West Durham constituency; it was great to see her there.

Spice, Sam, Tess and Cookie were the pets that I grew up with at home when I was a child. It is quite clear that pets are far more than just animals; they are family members, too. That was attested to by my visit to Bishop Ian Ramsey Primary School in Medomsley on Friday, when I spoke to the children in year 6 there about this very issue.

I will not regurgitate too much of the speeches from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), or my hon. Friends the Members for Bosworth (Dr Evans), for Wolverhampton North East (Jane Stevenson), and for Bury North (James Daly), who have all hammered home the key points that need to be made. However, I will pay tribute to the Farplace animal rescue centre in my constituency, which does so much good work.

On Fern's law, the situation seems pretty clear to me. We have compulsory microchipping, so compulsory scanning is the obvious next step, because without it we do not have compulsory checking and therefore we have a weak system. Without compulsory scanning, how can we possibly move towards the compulsory microchipping of cats? It is an absolute no-brainer, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North said. Clearly, compulsory scanning should be made obligatory as quickly as possible.

Regarding Tuk's law, it was particularly nice to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North talking about his own 16-month-old dog, which is the same age that Tuk was when he was put down. It seems absolutely sensible for there to be a compulsory scan before destruction. Although the strengthened guidance is welcome, I would like the Government to consider what else can be done in this space.

As many Members have said, it is quite clear that lockdown has made this issue even more important, with the cost of dogs being driven through the roof over the past few months. Coming out of lockdown, when we might also see the destruction of dogs, is also important. It is quite clear that lockdown has made the situation even worse, which is why it is so important that the Government act. I hope they will speak to my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green about what can possibly be done.

It is also clear that the 16 different databases that currently exist are not fit for purpose. If we have just one system for cars, we should have just one for people's animals, which mean a lot more to them than their cars or so many other things in their lives.

I will conclude by saying that I really welcome these petitions; they are about issues that are hugely important to many of my constituents. In addition, pet theft has been a major issue. Durham Constabulary has raised it with me personally several times over the last few months during lockdown, so I really hope that we get some action and some positive words about it from the Minister today.

5.23 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP)[V]: It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) for calling this important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee and for setting the scene for us all in such detail at the outset.

Before I begin my contribution, I will declare an interest as the proud owner of Rossi the rescue dog, which won fourth place in the Westminster Dog of the Year contest a few years back; we are so proud of Rossi. I am also the chair of the all-party parliamentary dog advisory welfare group, or APDAWG. Additionally, I wish to thank from the bottom of my heart the 538 constituents of mine who signed the petitions that we are debating today. Like others who have already spoken, I express my thanks to Marc Abraham OBE, to Dr Daniel Allen, and to the Tuk's law and Fern's law campaigners, alongside Debbie Matthews, for their invaluable work in campaigning on these important matters.

Finally, I thank all the right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part today and spoken so passionately on behalf of their constituents, including the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Jane Stevenson), and those who spoke about their own pets: the hon. Members for Bosworth (Dr Evans), for North West Durham (Mr Holden), and for Bury North (James Daly), who has done so much already around Tuk's law, as I am aware; the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), whose wife is heavily involved in dog welfare and rescue; and the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns), who spoke so poignantly about the loss of her own pet, highlighting to us that animals are sentient beings and very much a part of our families.

Last Friday, I was proud to visit the south Lanarkshire rescue centre of the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and to speak with the CEO Kirsteen Campbell, alongside Mike Flynn and other staff who work there. Not only was it a privilege to see first-hand the lengths that staff and volunteers go to in order to treat and care for the dogs, cats and other little animals in desperate need of re-homing, it was great to hear so much more about the work it is doing with the Links Group to highlight the link between animal abuse, domestic violence and other social issues, as well as through its education programme. I was interested to hear that local shelters often have to pay the costs of animals seized until their court date, amounting to hundreds of thousands of pounds. It has been particularly difficult during the pandemic to raise funds. Much more must be done in legislation on temporary refuge.

In my visit to the SSPCA, it was clear to see the difficulty that it faces in reuniting pets with their rightful owners where their details have not been kept up to date. By acting on the petitions, first by making microchip scanning mandatory for vets at a pet's first consultation, and secondly by creating a centralised database for microchip companies, the House would take a vital step towards ensuring pets are given every opportunity to be reunited with their owners, wherever they are lost or stolen.

It is impossible to overstate the importance and urgency of the action required. The pandemic has seen a surge in pet ownership, with more than 3 million pets acquired since the start of the first lockdown, mostly cats and dogs. Tragically, the rise in demand has been accompanied by an unprecedented rise in pet theft. Given that 99% of pet owners consider their pets to be family members, yet only one in five stolen pets is ever returned to their family, the current gaps and the distinct and worrying lack of microchip scanning cause immense distress to families and pets across all our constituencies. Compulsory scanning at first visit would also act as a significant deterrent to pet theft, as thieves will be reluctant to sell on stolen pets for fear of compulsory scanning triggering a potential investigation or prosecution.

The real tragedy of the issue is that most of us who have pets assume that a vet's practice would scan our pet's microchip should they go missing. The public assume that practice is already in place. A Twitter poll published by Dr Daniel Allen found that almost 4,000 voters—or 98%—expected vets to check their pet's microchip should they be stolen. We read Government statements and information on microchip websites boasting that microchipping our pets will increase our chances of being reunited with them, and we believe them. Yet, very often, due to gaps in scanning and data collection, that is sadly not the case. One of the most common reasons cited against mandating vets to check pets' microchips on the first visit is that it would take too long to scan and check microchips, and it is not the vet's job. However, someone else in the practice could do it, such as a member of the support staff, to ensure that the vet's time is not taken up.

I welcome the Government's commitments and their action plan for animal welfare, particularly with regard to the introduction of compulsory cat microchipping and the explicit reference to reforming the current system of collating animal microchip data to prevent instances where pets have been euthanised without the express consent of their rightful owners. I echo the comments of hon. Members, including those of the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), that we must give vets every opportunity to succeed in reuniting lost pets with owners, and identify and prosecute instances of pet theft that cause such harm to everyone involved. We must take this issue forward collectively across Parliament. I am sure it has cross-party support and I very much look forward to the Minister's response.

5.29 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) for introducing the petition so well. There is good cross-party support from all the hon. Members in the debate for action to be taken. I fear that

it will be déjà vu for the Minister, because there have been examples, across a number of animal welfare debates, of Opposition and Government Members all agreeing that action needs to be taken. We also nearly always agree that that action would be relatively simple and low cost, and would have a substantially positive impact on our constituents. That puts the Minister in a bad situation, because she will have to explain why that action still has not happened.

We are facing a relative slew of parliamentary legislation—a real piggery of parliamentary business—around animal welfare at the moment. There is lots of it, but there is a lot missing from it. I want to hear from the Minister about what needs primary legislation, and I want clarification that it will be included in primary legislation. Where items do not need primary legislation—I believe that in this case we do not need primary legislation to take action—secondary legislation should be brought forward swiftly. The danger is that we will all just sit here in this debate and agree, but this issue requires the Government to act.

The petitions are well supported, with 235,000 signatures, including 436 from Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport. I know that people feel really passionately about this matter. The Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill—the flagship piece of animal welfare legislation that the Minister is introducing—offers a chance to tidy up and clear up a number of the remaining animal welfare problems. The Minister has looked carefully at Labour's animal welfare manifesto and included a number of the points from it in the legislation, and I am grateful to her for doing so. I know that Back-Bench Members from her own party would also be grateful if Ministers listened to their campaigns on this matter.

I am also grateful to the Minister for taking the time last week to sit down with me and the shadow Environment, Food and Rural Affairs team to talk through what is in the Bill and, importantly, what is not, as well as what could be put into it at a later stage. That is really where secondary legislation comes in. Some people watching the debate will not really be excited by secondary legislation, and the truth is that many people in this House are not particularly excited by secondary legislation either, but it does enable the Government, relatively simply, to change the rules on legislation that has already been passed, largely with cross-party support. I encourage the Minister to do that in the two cases before us.

During the debate, a number of right hon. and hon. Members have spoken about the loss of their own pets and what that meant to them. The hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) spoke about the loss of her dog, who went missing. As the Minister knows, I had my own experience of that when, as a little boy, I lost my cat, Bumblesnarf—named after Bumblebee from “Transformers” and Snarf from “Thundercats”, obviously—and I did not know where it was, whether it was coming back and whether it was in distress or in pain. Those are common concerns for people right across the country.

Compulsory microchipping makes a lot of sense and is hugely popular among the people we represent, but it would seem to be only part of the solution if we require compulsory microchipping but do not require compulsory checking of the microchip once it is in the animal. Throughout the debate we have effectively, without saying so, made the case that microchipping is good,

[Luke Pollard]

positive and has real benefits. However, the system has to deliver on the promise that was made, including by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who said way back in April 2016:

“Microchipping will not only reunite people with their lost or stolen pets, but also help to tackle the growing problem of strays roaming the streets and relieve the burden placed on animal charities and local authorities.”

He was right then and he is right now, but the system needs to work from end to end. At the moment, there are sizeable gaps in the system.

Microchipping is a cheap and easy procedure; it is safe for cats, dogs and other animals; and it is permanent and cost-effective. It needs to work, however, and that is why I think the challenge for the Minister is to convince herself, her Government colleagues and her officials that this action is worth taking.

I find myself in the awkward position of agreeing wholeheartedly with the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith)—as an Opposition Member, that is something that I pride myself on not always doing. [Interruption.] I will be talking to myself in the mirror later; do not worry. He raised a fantastic point about first and second-order issues. I do not know of a single voter in Plymouth who would say that animal welfare is anything other than a first-order issue. We, as parliamentarians of any party, need to make that case to Ministers—to use all parliamentary legislative opportunities, including secondary legislation via statutory instruments, to achieve this.

The right hon. Gentleman’s case for amending the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill—a Bill that I am not a huge fan of—to include pet theft is a good one. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and I have argued for the same thing from Labour’s perspective. Elements of that would have cross-party support, because pet theft is an increasingly difficult and stubborn problem. The pandemic has made it considerably worse; we all recognise the demand for animals and the company that they provide. The legislation needs to be flexible enough to catch up with that demand and the problems that it is causing. There is a real chance to do something on pet theft. I do not have high hopes for a taskforce, but I want to see action. We know what needs to be done—we do not need a delaying tactic to help us to get there slower—and it needs to happen shortly.

There is real support for action on microchipping cats, as we have heard. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) remarked in his speech that 2.6 million owned cats in the UK have still not been microchipped—that is a quarter of all pet cats. Cats, as we know, have a mind of their own. However, if an owner microchips their cat, it is an important aspect of the bond between them, because the owner knows that if the cat keeps going out, they will have the opportunity to be reunited with it. There is a good case for more work to be done on that. There is cross-party support for such action, as the Government’s consultation showed, so it should just happen.

There is also good support for Fern’s law. I do not share the concerns that have been expressed by a number of veterinary colleagues, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North. There is always time to ensure that the animal that the vet is dealing with—and its owner—is the one that is supposed to be there, and it is

right to take time to scan the animal properly. I notice that in the original response that the petition triggered, the Government said that the area is largely governed by self-regulation and best practice. I spent five years working for ABTA—the Travel Association—so I support self-regulation and industries looking after themselves, but not enough is being done on this. It is reasonable to require veterinary businesses to scan animals that come into their surgeries. I ask the industry to look again at that, because there is strong support for Fern’s law.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Jane Stevenson), talked about common sense being at the core of any good policy, and I agree with her. There is real concern about the databases: the fact that there are 16 different databases in this area shows not that the market is working effectively and efficiently, but that we have a broken market and a broken system. Along with those 16 databases, which do not often speak to each other, there are bogus websites deliberately set up by scammers to take money off pet owners who want to do the right thing and register their animal. That is not backed up by any certainty that were anything to happen, it would be looked at. I encourage the Minister to look carefully at the databases, because the whole system is not working. She would enjoy cross-party support if she took action in that respect, albeit first recommending that there should be quick action from the companies that are already dealing with the matter. If there is no voluntary action, there should be Government action.

Tuk’s law—that a healthy animal’s microchip must always be scanned before euthanising—is also a no-brainer. That must happen, and there is something obviously wrong with the existing system. I encourage the Minister to look at swiftly implementing Tuk’s law by whatever legislative route she can, whether in secondary or primary legislation.

That leads me briefly to the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly). He and I share a real passion to see Gizmo’s law put into legislation. It is frustrating for him and for me to hear that being skipped over in each and every debate. Heléna Abrahams, Gizmo’s owner, shares our passion for real change. I encourage the Minister not only to continue to listen to the hon Gentleman, but to act on what he says, because it is very sensible.

We also need to talk about the important issue of access to vets. In each of our contributions, we have made the case that access to veterinary care is available and that, when an animal is taken to a vet, a certain action should be taken as a result. However, there are many people who cannot afford access to a vet; it is a luxury that they cannot afford for themselves. We need to look at the affordability of access to veterinary care to ensure that everyone can access the proper services of a vet in this respect. That is another point from Labour’s animal welfare manifesto that I would encourage the Minister to cut and paste. I think that that would be popular.

When it comes to animal welfare, it helps to remember that doing the right thing for animals is almost always in the best interests of humans as well. That is where I think there is strong support from both sides of the House for the measures outlined in these two petitions.

I say to the hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) that I am a big fan of his Instagram and his pictures of his whippets. There needs to be a parliamentary caucus for parliamentary Lukes—indeed, we have a small one here in this debate.

The issue raised by the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) about the potential increase in the destruction of animals as we come out of lockdown restrictions is another good point. Although it does not easily fit into a solution, it certainly helps to identify an emerging problem that will get bigger and bigger, particularly with more animals potentially presenting with behavioural difficulties because of the on-again, off-again presence of their owners and families.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to set out the positive and cross-party case for action on this matter. I look forward to the Minister giving us—I hope—the good news that she will be taking action and not just delaying that further.

5.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for what I think is the first time, Mr Pritchard. It is also a great pleasure to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), and all who signed the petitions that led to the debate this afternoon. I reassure everybody that animal welfare is definitely a first-order issue for this Government. We all recognise the valuable contribution that our pets can make to our lives. We have heard this afternoon the sad stories of c/azbbShadow and Bumblesnarf, but we have also heard very heart-warming stories—from my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans), for example, and, indeed, from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who feels that his dog greets him more warmly than his wife.

Last month, we introduced a Bill to recognise that animals are sentient beings—the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill. Earlier this month, we introduced a Bill that will enhance protection for kept animals—the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill—including through provisions on puppy smuggling and livestock worrying; introduce bans on the export of live animals for slaughter and fattening; and put controls on keeping primates as pets.

I assure everyone that action is being taken. There is a long list of animal welfare issues to get through, and we are working through it. We are keen not to delay. Some of this can be dealt with in primary legislation. Some, as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) reminds me—he knows that I am a great fan of secondary legislation—can be dealt with in secondary legislation. Some can be dealt with by non-legislative means. It is important that we use every tool in our toolbox. I know that right hon. and hon. Members are impatient to get this done. It is important that we do that; I am not trying to hold anything up in this respect, but it is also important that we do it properly, that we do it after full consultation with the public and that we bring the members of the veterinary profession with us or encourage them to move with us on this, because, as many hon. Members have said, much depends on them.

We are committed to microchipping. Our action plan for animal welfare reaffirmed that, so compulsory cat microchipping will be coming in. We have consulted on this already. More than 33,000 people took the trouble to respond to the consultation. We are working up the detailed proposals at the moment and we will respond fully on that in the autumn, following which, I am sure,

hon. Members will have a great deal to say on our response. And we will definitely be introducing the necessary regulation next year.

The action plan for animal welfare also sets out our ambition to introduce further microchipping reforms in relation to the database systems. On Tuk's law specifically, steps have already been taken to give greater assurance that the microchip database information is checked whenever a healthy dog is presented for euthanasia. I pay tribute to Sue, Dawn and Dominic, the driving forces behind this campaign, for their tireless efforts to highlight the plight of Tuk and other dogs who were put down when an alternative home might well have been available. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) also mentioned the dark side of domestic abuse that can underlie some of these tragic cases.

We have listened carefully to the campaign's concerns and worked hard with the veterinary profession to develop an approach that has won approval from all sides. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons amended its guidance in May so that when a healthy dog is presented to be put down, the vet is now required to scan the microchip and check the details on the microchip database. This will enable them to consider whether anyone else has an interest in the animal, such as a rehoming centre that might well be able to prevent the animal from being put down. The guidance underpins the code of professional conduct for vets. Any vet practising in the UK is required to adhere to it. Notification of the change to the guidance was sent to every registered vet and was well publicised in sector publications. I am grateful to the veterinary profession for its positive engagement on this.

I heard, not least from my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North, that pets obtained during the pandemic might be given up as life returns to normal. I reassure my hon. Friend and other Members that we are monitoring this issue extremely closely as we—hopefully—come out of the pandemic. However, information received only last week from the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes suggests that dog and cat rescue centres have actually seen a decline in animals being given up for adoption and are currently, on average, below 60% full. In brief, we think that we have dealt with this issue by working closely with the veterinary profession, but we will continue to keep the matter closely under review as we come out of the pandemic, as suggested by many Members and the campaign.

On Fern's law, we recognise the clear emotional upset and trauma that the loss of a much-loved pet can cause, and we will continue to take action on pet theft. We set up the Government's pet theft taskforce, not at all to kick the issue down the road, as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport suggested, but in fact, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) indicated, because this is a multi-departmental issue. My right hon. Friend has, if I may say so, knocked around government for some time now and is aware that we need DEFRA, the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office to work together to ensure that this issue is right at the top of the agenda.

The taskforce will report by the end of July. Officials are working on the recommended actions at the moment. In the autumn, following the recommendations of the

[Victoria Prentis]

taskforce, we will work on the legislative and non-legislative measures that can help to deal with pet theft. Items that we are working on include stopping cash payments, as mentioned by my right hon. Friend; creating a new pet theft offence or offences where necessary; and considering measures on the compulsory scanning of microchips. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Jane Stevenson) said, we need to use every available tool in our response to this.

Fern's law formed part of the consultation we carried out earlier this year. It is worth reminding colleagues that the compulsory microchipping of dogs was primarily brought in to reduce the number of dogs that needed to be rehomed or put down because their keepers could not be traced. In this, it has been really successful, with an increased reunification rate for strays since its introduction. The routine scanning of strays is clearly helpful, and there is a strong imperative to do that on animal welfare grounds. The veterinary profession already recommends that vets scan cats and dogs on first presentation to make sure that animals are correctly identified when checked against the database, and that the same thing is done at regular check-ups. Where the checks raise a concern that the animal might have been lost or stolen, vets have procedures in place to handle that. All of us have a shared goal to reunite pets with their owners. Vets play an important part in the system, and it will take a whole system approach to deal with it, including but not limited to microchipping animals, effective databases, and keepers ensuring that their details are kept up to date.

I will watch the progress of the amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green closely. I know that he has been in touch with the Lord Chancellor about it. We are considering the consultation responses on Fern's law and will put forward our proposals this autumn.

On the calls for a single database, I have listened carefully to the arguments put forward, not least by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), whose constituency I was very pleased to visit. We should recognise that database operators are commercial enterprises that offer a range of services and provide a level of choice for pet owners, but I am sure that significant improvements can be made to the current system to address the issues of concern. Those include considering a single point of access for all databases, which, from the user's perspective, might be very much like having a single database. We are working on that urgently, and, once again, I will come back to right hon. and hon. Members in the autumn with the response to the consultation. The improvements will help to support the principles behind the scanning campaigns that we have discussed today.

On Gizmo's legacy—again, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly), whom I now refer to as Gizmo—colleagues also raised the issue of scanning dead cats killed by the roadside, which is the subject of this campaign. Poor Gizmo was disposed of in landfill without his microchip being scanned and his owner informed. Colleagues know that I myself lost a cat, Twilight—we still have his brother, Midnight—to a road traffic accident, and I have enormous sympathy with the aims of the campaign. All Highways England

contracts include a requirement to identify and inform owners of dead cats and dogs found by the roadside. The charity CatsMatter, which does tremendous work with local authorities to encourage scanning, tells me that all but two local authorities—I am happy to name them—have scanning procedures in place. [Interruption.] The two exceptions are, I believe, Tower Hamlets and Westminster. Still more can be done to develop a consistent and effective approach based on best practice across all local authorities. I have superb examples of best practice available to all colleagues who wish to chat to me about it afterwards, and I encourage Members to be in touch with their local authority to check that best practice is carried out across the nation.

I want to reassure hon. Members that we will have more to say on this matter when we respond to the consultation exercise later in the year. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North does not talk about Gizmo in vain. In brief, I hope that you, Mr Pritchard, and colleagues are reassured that the Government are committed to addressing the issues to ensure that the microchipping regime is as effective as it possibly can be.

5.53 pm

Jonathan Gullis: Once again, it is a pleasure to participate in a Petitions Committee debate. There is certainly unity among all Members here, and I thank them all for their fantastic contributions. We are proud of our dogs, and we have Westminster dog of the year for those of us who are pet owners. I look forward to knocking the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) off first place with Bella and Bailey. I am delighted to know that my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans), while shamelessly smouldering in his Instagram pose, does actually have a fan. [Laughter.] However, hearing from the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) that my hon. Friend has a fan means that I have just unfollowed him, because I do not want to be associated with someone whose smouldering look I cannot match and who shamelessly uses pets to get likes on Instagram, which is obviously a trick I need to learn.

Everything—the whole plethora—was really well summed up in this debate by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), who made the point that animals are not just property. They are far more than that. We have all talked about our own experiences and I certainly know Bella and Bailey mean far more to me.

My constituents in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke want to see their area made safer, because sadly a scumbag called Malachy Doherty stole two dogs outside Marks & Spencer and was sentenced to 27 weeks in prison for stealing. I think 27 weeks in prison does not send a strong enough message. His 14-year-old accomplice is sadly still on the run, but hopefully he will be brought before a court soon. I do not want Malachy back in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, quite frankly. I hope he finds a new home, in a tent in a field, maybe, so that he can be surrounded by his animals and maybe they will trample over that tent to remind him of what animals are like. Ultimately, this is the problem we face.

We have a pet theft taskforce, from which we are all waiting to see the results. We have to ensure that there are stricter laws in place and proper consequences for

those who do harm to lives. It is now over two years since Freya Woodhall, one of the people from Fern's law, lost her beloved dog. She told me that her children have sadly had to seek mental health support because of the long-term impact that losing that family member has had on them, which shows that more needs to be done.

I thank the Minister for her contribution. There is an awful lot going through the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at the moment and I am sure it has been a hectic time, on top of everything that has been going on with the global pandemic, but the sooner we act and the quicker we get these things done, the quicker that maintains public confidence in the Government, in which I have full confidence. It shows that we are listening to our constituents. Dealing with pet theft, microchipping and scanning of animals may seem small to some Members of Parliament, but it goes a massively long way to improving lives and outcomes. As Members of Parliament, this work is far more important in helping our constituents from day to day than other things that we might think are much grander when we are in the Chamber talking about convoluted issues. This is the bread-and-butter stuff that I was elected by the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke to change and deliver on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) talked about Shadow and Suzie, which touched us all. My thoughts are with her. The fact that it was so long ago, yet has stayed with her, shows how important that is. The Government have introduced a Bill on animal sentience, and that plays into what my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green said about animals being more than just pets. We have to take into account the distress that is caused to these animals when they are taken.

Sadly, some animals are so distressed that they end up having health ailments or are so scared that they quake when walking along. I was told by Dr Daniel Allen that when people are reunited with pets, the pet is never the same. In fact, they can end up dying from heart strain due to the disgusting attempts to breed them day in, day out, as well as suffering from the abuse of living in those terrible conditions.

We love our pets and our animals. We always want to do much more. I have no doubt this is an easy win for the Government. We are united across the House. All we are waiting for is the ability to walk through the Division Lobby or to give regulations a nod through a statutory instrument. Whatever is needed, let us get this thing done quickly and give confidence to pet owners across the United Kingdom. I look forward to seeing the Minister bring those recommendations forward in the autumn.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 300010 and 300025, relating to microchipping of pets.

5.58 pm

Sitting suspended.

Black History and Cultural Diversity in the Curriculum

[JAMES GRAY in the Chair]

[Relevant documents: e-petition 323808, Add education on diversity and racism to all school curriculums, and e-petition 323961, Making the UK education curriculum more inclusive of BAME history; oral evidence taken before the Petitions Committee and the Women and Equalities Committee on 5 and 18 November 2020, and 25 February 2020, on Black history and cultural diversity of the curriculum, HC 893; correspondence with the Minister of State for School Standards, relating to Black history and cultural diversity of the curriculum, reported to the House on 9 March 2021 and 27 April 2021, HC 893; written evidence to the Petitions Committee and the Women and Equalities Committee, on Black history and cultural diversity of the curriculum, reported to the House on 8 December 2020, HC 893; and summary of public engagement by the Petitions Committee on Black history and cultural diversity of the curriculum, reported to the House on 26 January 2021, HC 893.]

6.15 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 324092, relating to Black history and cultural diversity in the curriculum.

This petition calls on the Government to teach Britain's colonial past as part of the UK's compulsory curriculum, and it has received over 240,000 signatures. The petition was started by Esmie Jikiemi-Pearson and arrived on the parliamentary website on 10 June 2020. Within 48 hours, it had reached the threshold of 100,000 signatures. The speed at which the petition met the threshold for debate shows the strength of feeling across our country that change is necessary and urgent. Multiple petitions cover similar subjects, and the Petitions Committee has taken on this issue as one of our key projects for the year.

The creators of the petition, which calls to add education on diversity and racism to all school curriculums and to make the UK curriculum more inclusive of black, Asian and minority ethnic history, have also given evidence to the Committee. Holding hearings in partnership with the Women and Equalities Committee, we have heard from a wide variety of sources in this field, from the Education Minister to schoolchildren. I pay tribute to the Chair of the Petitions Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), for her commitment to the review. I am so pleased that the petitions have rightfully gained support from the public, which has allowed the Committee to investigate an area that I have long been passionate about: diversifying and improving our teaching of history in this country.

I must declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on archives and history, and I am also an honorary fellow of University of Wales Trinity Saint David. I am passionate about history and, above all, the way it is taught. It amazes me that we are so narrow in our curriculum. When I did GCSE history many years ago, we studied Adolf Hitler's Germany, crime and punishment, which was mainly about Jack the Ripper, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. That was it. I then did my A-levels, when we did the Tudors and the civil war—Oliver Cromwell, Charles I and all that. Our

[Chris Evans]

curriculum is just far too narrow. It is easy for the Government to point to the option of teaching topic 3—“Ideas, political power, industry and empire: Britain, 1745 to 1901”—at key stage 3. However, it is not mandatory; it is only one of many topics that can be chosen by schools and teachers. It is clear that the signatories to the petition do not feel that this is enough, and I must agree with them.

The Committee found that 45% of primary school teachers and 64% of secondary school teachers who responded to our survey disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that:

“The National Curriculum ensures that students in my school experience a balanced range of ethnically and culturally diverse role models.”

Our inquiry has also shown that, far too often, subjects are not being taught because teachers lack confidence and, above all, proper training. One in four teachers told us that they lack confidence and the ability to develop their pupils’ understanding of black history and cultural diversity, with 86% calling for specialised in-school training to help address this. It is leaving students unprepared when they reach degree level, which continues a cycle of a lack of confidence within the subject.

Dr Deana Heath, who teaches southern Asian and imperial colonial history at the University of Liverpool, said: “I face an uphill struggle at the start of each new academic year. Many of the undergraduates who greet me know virtually nothing about any of the subjects I teach.” Although some black and BAME history is now taught in schools, it is far too narrow in scope. Most students’ experience of racial history up until A-level is incredibly American-centric. Students learn about American slavery and the black civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and even my great hero, Muhammed Ali, are now studied at GCSE by many pupils. However, very little black British history is taught.

When students learn about the transatlantic slave trade, Britain’s role is often simplified or is just a small part of their study. Few secondary school students learn about British slave plantations or slave ships. Even fewer learn how British involvement in the global slave trade shaped domestic economics, politics, empire building and industrialisation. Black British history has largely been forgotten in the UK curriculum, even though there have been black Britons since Roman times.

A student might have a chance to learn about the Montgomery bus boycotts in Alabama, but often does not learn about the history of bus boycotts much closer to home. In Bristol in 1963, there was a successful bus boycott for the Bristol Omnibus Company’s refusal to hire black or Asian bus crews. Many in the UK will know the name Rosa Parks, but not enough know the name Paul Stephenson. On the same day in 1963 that Martin Luther King gave his iconic “I have a dream” speech from the steps of Washington, the British Omnibus Company announced that there would be no more discrimination in the employment of bus crews.

I suspect we feel more comfortable looking at discrimination perpetuated by America than we do taking a closer look at our own history. We cannot continue to whitewash the UK’s past. Students must be taught a nuanced and honest view of British history. British and

European history studied at GCSE and A-level all too often seems to be the history of white powerful men. History curriculums, especially until university, are too frequently studies of monarchs, politicians and military leaders. That creates an often Eurocentric white male, upper or middle class view of history and knowledge. That is not a full history of Britain, Europe or the world.

The roles of working classes, minorities, women and all those who have been underrepresented have not been granted the historical significance they deserve. Not only is teaching such a narrow view of history a disservice to the subject; it makes it far less accessible. Students in British secondary schools often feel too far removed from the Churchills, Napoleons or Henry VIIs. A diverse curriculum is necessary to write new entry points in history—a new standpoint from which we can understand our past and the world we currently live in.

The few women featured in the curriculum are either painted as exceptions to their sex, such as Florence Nightingale, radical, such as the suffragettes, or are monarchs such as Elizabeth I and Victoria. Very few non-white women are mentioned in history textbooks for secondary school students. Mary Seacole is one of the very few. Studies of women such as Seacole must be encouraged, to recognise the diversity of Britain’s past and the importance of such diversity, but unfortunately that has taken too long.

William Howard Russell, a war correspondent for *The Times*, wrote in 1857 that he hoped England would not forget Seacole as

“one who nursed her sick, who sought out her wounded to aid and succour them, and who performed the last offices for some of her illustrious dead.”

Yet it seems that exactly that happened for many years. In 2016, a statue of Seacole was erected across the road from this place. When the lockdown measures are lifted, I urge everybody to go over and see the wonderful statute to that wonderful woman. It took 12 years to raise the funds required and should be a symbol of pride in a black British heroine. Unfortunately, even the little act of posting a photograph of me with the statue on Twitter resulted in some terrible abuse about the role of Mary Seacole. That has no place in society. It amazes me that somebody who did so much for the people she looked after would be questioned about whether she was a nurse. That has to stop. Mary Seacole should be celebrated as an influential figure in British history. Her story, and the racism she faced, ought to be taught widely in history curriculums. We also must make sure that she does not stand alone. The history of Britain is incredibly diverse, and the curriculum should reflect that. It is not enough to pick one figure from history. The diversity of Britain and the way that attitudes to and experiences of race, sex, sexuality, disability or class have shaped history are vital to our understanding of today.

Ultimately, it all matters because of the impact it has on young people. A report from Paul Campbell, a lecturer in sociology at the University of Leicester, found:

“The lack of a sufficiently diverse or decolonised curriculum and faculty meant it was often difficult for black students to be able to connect content and assessments directly to their own lived realities”.

He found the students were multiply disadvantaged and “have to work harder than their peers to connect with assessment and curriculum content.”

The lack of diversity in our curriculum can be found throughout our education system; although the petition is focused on history, it is equally true of the likes of English literature and other subjects. The Black Curriculum, one of the leading charities in this field, says that its aim is to provide a sense of belonging and identity to young people across the UK. To me, that is the whole point of the debate. It is our duty to get this right so that all students see themselves represented in education.

6.25 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) on securing the debate. Previously—I believe it was the year before last—no subject of parliamentary petitions had received more signatories than black history being taught as part of our national curriculum. That has certainly continued with this petition. I am not surprised, because when it comes to black history, we are not given a complete picture. When it comes to British history, we are not given a complete picture, because black history, and the history of our past slavery and colonialism, are often missing. How can we truly understand this country as it is if we do not address those issues?

Like most people who have grown up in the UK over the past century, I never learned very much about that, and what I did was self-taught. The majority of the information we can find is about the US civil rights struggle. These international perspectives are important, but it was far too long before I discovered the UK's own rich civil rights history and all the information related to our role in the slave trade and colonialism. I want children in our country to learn about these things and why our country is the way it is today; about why they may, if they are black, Asian or from an ethnic minority, experience discrimination; and about important figures such as William Cuffay, Mary Seacole, CLR James, Claudia Jones, Olive Morris and so many more. I cannot stress enough how damaging it is not to see oneself reflected in what we learn and what we learn about our history. Our Government seem quite obsessed at the moment with patriotism and having children sing certain songs in schools and so on. However, when someone is constantly made to feel like they do not belong, because of rhetoric around immigration, and when that is reinforced by what they learn—or rather, what they do not learn—that can be extremely damaging.

My first black relative born in the UK was actually born in 1806, in Twyford in Winchester. His name was Thomas Birch Freeman. He was the son of a freed slave and a maid and went on to become a Methodist minister. He eventually settled in Ghana but often travelled between Ghana, Nigeria and the UK. When I read about his history, I do not hear how strange it was for a black man to be walking around in the UK at that time. Black people have been part of this country for hundreds of years, but far too often people today are made to feel as if it is very recent—in the past 50 or 60 years—and that they are still very much migrants.

We also know that history is always written by the victors, and that is one obvious explanation for the status quo, in terms of what we learn at the moment. The historical amnesia surrounding our country's own civil rights struggle and the slavery and colonialism that came before has a pretty blatant function in our political

discourse. However, obscuring the past victories of the oppressed and marginalised does not help to prevent history from being repeated.

People often refer to this sort of teaching as decolonising our curriculum, but it is important to note that it is every bit as much about class as it is about race. In school, we have other notable gaps in our history lessons about struggles that were ended—for example, the miners' strikes, the poll tax riots and the accomplishments of trade unions. The attempt to put the history of slavery and colonialism and black civil rights in the UK into the curriculum is an attempt to put the history of the working class into the curriculum. That is key.

I worry that there is an ideological reason behind resisting this change, despite the fact that we can see in this petition and previous ones just how many people want this change to be made to the curriculum. If working-class kids learn about movements for change and about just how much power they have as citizens, what is to prevent them from recognising parallels between past events and what is going on in the present, and—even more important—from mounting effective challenges and bringing about change?

We know that black history is usually confined to a month. That month is really a means to an end. That end has to be giving everybody a clear picture of our collective past. That is why we cannot keep confining black history to just that one month. Too great a burden falls on busy teachers, who often—I know this from information given to the Women and Equalities Committee—do not feel confident about teaching certain subjects, and there is not much support from the Government for them. The Government should take a lead from the brilliant teachers who do all the work themselves, and organisations such as the Black Curriculum, the Coalition of Anti-Racist Educators and the Black Educators Alliance.

It feels like subjects to do with issues of race are treated completely differently from other subjects, which is wrong. When someone wants to talk about race, it is treated as if they are taking away from talking about something else, which itself is the essence of racism. Far too often, the idea that we should teach slavery and colonialism in schools is dismissed as nonsense; we hear that all that it does is reinforce the idea that at some point people in our country did something wrong, in the process it takes children away from learning other more important things. I cannot understand why some people cannot see just how important it is for people to learn about these issues, so that they are not repeated and so that we understand where discrimination comes from.

Confronting the history of slavery and empire is not about recrimination. We need to address our shameful past to understand why we are living our shameful present, and eventually—hopefully—to change what we see and move to a future of equality. To do that, we need to understand that the process starts with education, because nobody is born racist; it is in what we learn. If racism is ignorance—I am sure that all Members would agree that it is—what is education if not the absence or ending of ignorance? I believe that if we teach these very important parts of our history, it will change our discourse, change the rhetoric and change some of the shameful things that we hear about now.

[Bell Ribeiro-Addy]

I wholeheartedly support this petition. I hope that the Government take on board yet another petition that is very clear about what we need to see in our curriculum.

6.32 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP)[V]: Children have to be taught prejudice, I agree. We know that it does not come naturally to them. We all know, too, that the best way to deal with discrimination and promote inclusion is through education, yet for much of our history prejudice was instilled at school. Children were taught that one religion was better than another, they were taught harmful myths about gay people, and they were explicitly taught that the white race was superior to other races and that colonialism had a benign, civilising influence on foreign, faraway peoples who could only benefit from our interference. That was all bile, instilled in children and taken forward into adulthood. Those were horrible views that were entrenched.

Since then, the teaching curriculum has moved on, but does it do enough to address lasting legacies? According to research by the Diana Award, an anti-bullying campaign, almost one third of children have heard racist comments at school, with most having experienced it by their 13th birthday. Prejudice may no longer be taught, but are its root causes being addressed sufficiently? Here, black history is surely key.

“When I was brought up, I was taught in American history books that Africa had no history and that neither had I. I was a savage about whom the least said the better, who had been saved by Europe and who had been brought to America. Of course, I believed it. I didn’t have much choice. These were the only books there were.”

The late, great James Baldwin said that at the Cambridge Union in 1965. When I was at school in the 1970s, we were taught that Europeans discovered America, Australia and New Zealand, and they were barren wildernesses before our arrival. Although we knew about the evils of slavery, until recently, few of us understood how deeply immersed Scotland was in the trade. We had wiped the dark period from our collective national memory, but our streets held the clues, with Wilson Street, Plantation Street, Jamaica Street and Buchanan Street in Glasgow alone.

We do far too little to learn about and teach our legacy. That is why I have welcomed the debate about statues and context. It is an opportunity for all, whatever our backgrounds, to reflect on the physical legacy that surrounds us. It is an opportunity to engage with the public. Whether it is the Cecil Rhodes statue at Oriel College, Oxford, or the Edward Colston statue in Bristol, we as nations on these islands have, as one writer put it, begun to search our souls.

That is why I was so disappointed, I confess, to read about the UK Culture Secretary’s intervention at the Museum of the Home in Shoreditch. Formerly the Geffrye Museum, it was renamed in the light of Sir Robert Geffrye’s record as a slaver. The museum went on to consult visitors and local people about whether they wanted Geffrye’s statue to remain at the entrance or brought indoors and contextualised. More than 2,000 people responded, and the majority supported removal and context, but the Secretary of State stepped in and overruled the museum director, threatening her with a budget cut if she honoured the results of the consultation. That is a deeply inappropriate

intervention by a politician in a museum’s legitimate work, and it would be unthinkable for a Culture Secretary in Cardiff or Edinburgh, where academic and curator freedom are respected, to do the same. The right-wing press and some politicians try to present the debate as about pride in our history versus national shame, but that is far too crude. We must attempt to put into context the actions of Britain abroad and the effect they had on other nations and peoples.

Inextricably linked to this debate is the history of people of colour in the UK and the massively undervalued contribution that they have made over many centuries. Teaching a history that is disproportionately white, or that whitewashes our crimes, means two things: not only do children of colour have fewer role models or people with whom they can identify, but it entrenches the stereotype that white people exclusively made our nations what they are today.

The next generation shows so much promise. They are more accepting of diversity than our generation. They are far more aware of racism, sexism and homophobia. Let us help them by teaching history that accurately reflects our role in the world, how we got here, and how every group contributed to the countries we are today.

6.38 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) on securing this important debate. I pay tribute to and congratulate the almost 270,000 people who signed the important petition that led to this debate, including hundreds of Leicester East residents.

Across the world, racism and the far right are on the rise. It has never been more important that we learn from the history of racial oppression and end the injustices that exist to this day. With the Black Lives Matter movement, we have rightly seen renewed public calls for our schools to teach the true, brutal history of the British empire and the legacy of imperialism, colonialism and racism that continue to have a generational impact today.

The national curriculum currently omits the vast contribution that black people have made to the UK and the ongoing legacy of Britain’s imperial legacy. In reality, black history is taught in only 10% of all schools. To remedy this, the Government must pick up the calls from the National Education Union for a review of the curriculum and teacher training, and the strategy to make new entrants to the teaching profession significantly more diverse over the next four years. These are not new plans. In 1999, the Stephen Lawrence inquiry called for changes to the national curriculum to help tackle and combat racism in our institutions, including making black history mandatory. I support the mandatory teaching of history, specifically including black histories on the national curriculum in key stages 1 to 4.

I congratulate the Welsh Government on making black history mandatory in all their schools. They understand that by taking on the events of the past we can forge the future. As argued by the Runnymede Trust, the national curriculum should apply to all schools, regardless of status, to prevent some from opting out. Currently, free schools and academies do not need to follow the national curriculum.

The need for these improvements to the curriculum were underlined in March 2020, when the Windrush lessons learned review recommended that the Government “tell the stories of empire, Windrush and its legacy”

Research by Teach First found that many pupils in UK schools will not have studied any novels or plays by authors who are not white. This shows how much more needs to be done to ensure that all pupils access a diverse curriculum.

When we reflect on the Black Lives Matter movement, it is crucial to recognise that the United Kingdom has been central to the historical subjugation of black people. It is estimated that until the Slavery Abolition Act 1833, Britain transported some 3.1 million Africans—around 25% of all slaves—to its colonies. When the British Empire did abolish slavery in 1807, it provided 46,000 slave owners with today’s equivalent of £17 billion, 40% of its national budget. The British Government only paid off its obligations to former slave-owning families and organisations in 2015. Until then, black British taxpayers were among those who paid to compensate those that imprisoned our ancestors. They are among those still paying the price today, with the slow and inadequate support offered to victims of racialised state violence, including the Grenfell Tower disaster and the Windrush generation.

Present day global inequalities remain permanently shaped by the horrors of extractive colonialism and racialised subordination. Former colonial powers must begin to recognise and repair the historical damage upon which their prosperity was built. One example is the unacceptable instances of appalling murder and violence at the hands of the British state that have been erased from present-day memory of empire.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Kenya. There is a collective amnesia in the United Kingdom regarding British torture camps in 1950s Kenya. This is recent history. Members of the Kikuyu tribe were systematically tortured, starved, beaten, mistreated and raped, and the Sotik people were massacred, with 1,800 men, women and children murdered in a colonial land-grab. Across Kenya, Africa and other regions forced to endure the injustice of colonialism, indigenous communities were systematically alienated from their rightful lands. Yet these massacres have been airbrushed from British history.

The brutality of modern racism in the UK cannot be separated from this history. This perverse legacy continues to affect us in all walks of life, from police use of force to unfair immigration detentions to the disproportionate number of black children who go to bed hungry. If we are to end the scourge of institutional racism and the destructive legacy of colonialism, it is vital that children and young people are taught this true history. It is therefore essential that the Government abandon its crusade against the reality of institutional racism.

This Administration is underpinned by a deep and troubling broader political project that is designed to divide working-class communities against each other and to distract from the real causes of inequality and injustice. The Government must recognise that they risk being on the wrong side of history. They must abandon their divisive culture wars and commit to introducing an accurate and diverse curriculum.

6.44 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to work under your chairmanship, Mr Gray.

History is written by the winners. However uncomfortable and however painful it is, we have a responsibility to confront the whole history of our nation, not only the things that are easy to celebrate. We must learn from the parts about which we are disturbed and ashamed. Most importantly, we need to recognise that the history of the transatlantic slave trade has thrown a very long shadow and that we are still living with the legacy of the injustices committed both long ago and not so long ago. Learning from our past should create a better future. We cannot hope to reach a place of true racial equality without having the difficult conversations about our colonial past.

Education is a valuable tool to empower young people to make change happen. We have a duty to ensure that the next generation better understands historical injustices and the way in which those injustices still play out in our society today. Teaching black history and the histories of other ethnicities and cultures adds an important layer to our overall understanding. That does not mean erasing someone else’s history—far from it. Including more in our history books can only be enriching. I find it hard to understand why some people feel threatened by that.

Last Friday evening, I had the honour of chairing a discussion panel exploring Bath Abbey’s historical connections with slavery and Empire. The event coincided with the abbey’s exhibition on the same topic—I encourage anyone visiting Bath to see that fascinating exhibition. Bath Abbey has more monuments than any other parish church in our country. Some of those monuments praise the achievements of people connected with the slave trade. I commend Bath Abbey for bravely confronting the legacy of its history and demonstrating how we should respond sensitively today.

The speakers at that moving and thought-provoking event last Friday taught us so much. Two speakers recounted their and their parents’ lived experiences of arriving in the UK from the Commonwealth and the indignities they were subjected to. Sadly, they were not alone. Irvin Campbell, chairman of local charity Stand Against Racism and Inequality, told us that the only time black history was mentioned when he was a pupil was when the diagram of a slave ship was shown. The richness of black history has been left out of our school curriculum. We need to rectify that. Irvin taught me to use the term “enslaved”, instead of slave. To call someone a slave robs them of their innate dignity. He has spoken in schools about the proud history of African culture, their kings and queens, and he has watched young people swell with pride as they learn about their history.

Education has a hugely important role to play in ending institutional racism and in closing inequalities in the UK. Our curriculum must be broadened and, where those topics are covered, reviewed. We must ensure that teachers have the resources and training they need to deliver an honest, open and inclusive curriculum, so that we see real progress in schools. One of our Bath Abbey speakers read a poem by Steve Turner, which still echoes in my mind:

“History repeats itself.

Has to.

No-one listens.”

[Wera Hobhouse]

Let us have the courage to share all our collective history. In doing so, we have the opportunity to show that we listen and that—maybe—history does not repeat itself.

6.49 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) for introducing this important debate.

The people of Manchester, Gorton care deeply about diversity in education, as shown by the fact that over 1,000 of them signed the petition. The strength of feeling on this issue in Manchester and right across the country must be a signal to the Government that now is the time for a truly radical overhaul of the national curriculum, and that we must ensure it considers the histories, lives and experiences of all people.

Towards the end of last year, working in collaboration with The Black Curriculum, I launched a new diverse curriculum charter for schools across my constituency. The charter is backed by Manchester City Council, the Runnymede Trust, Kids of Colour, Impact Reformation and the Equality Act Review, as well as a host of trade unions. The charter was developed off the back of the many conversations that I had following the eruption of the global Black Lives Matter protests and the wider concerns about systemic racism in our country that were raised last year.

Racism is still a fact of life, and young people across the UK are still growing up in a society that is plagued by inequality. Education has the power to change lives, and it holds the key to raising a new and truly anti-racist generation of young people. That is why it is so important to ensure that the curriculum reflects the experiences of all people in our society. Too often, the current curriculum omits or misrepresents the contributions of black, Asian and minority ethnic communities in Britain. We gloss over colonialism and depict racism as an historical artefact rather than a current and lived reality. In doing so, we fail our young people.

There has been fantastic enthusiasm in Manchester, Gorton for the diverse curriculum charter, and many schools have already undertaken important work in addressing diversity and inclusivity in their curriculum. Although such enthusiasm and drive from local schools is incredibly welcome, we must be under no illusion that this is enough. Without concerted Government action to embed diversity and anti-racism at every level of our education system, all our children will miss out on learning about the wonderful richness of our society.

6.52 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) for securing the debate, after 270,000 people signed the petition. It is a credit to them that we are having the debate.

I will start by quoting the Minister for School Standards, the right hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb). He is not present, but we have been upgraded with the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), who is a fellow Sussex MP. Back in 2014, the Minister for

School Standards said the following when he spoke to the Association of School and College Leaders on the importance of the curriculum:

“We all know the cliché of older generations asking their children, or grandchildren, ‘don’t they teach you that at school?’ We were determined to allow the children of tomorrow to answer such inquisitions, ‘yes, in fact, they do’.”

We should think very carefully before constructing a curriculum that is based on the schooling of yesteryear. Let us not forget that it was a Conservative Government who passed section 28, which banned the teaching of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues in schools, until it was repealed by the last Labour Government. Just because some things were taught in the past does not mean that the same things should be taught in the same way today. For that reason, it is essential that we keep the curriculum under continual review and that we ask ourselves some simple questions. Is the curriculum equipping our kids with the knowledge and tools that they need to prosper once they leave school? Is it preparing our children for life and building tolerant citizens who embody the values that we as a country aspire to? And does it reflect the brilliant and diverse history of our country, avoiding narrow interpretations of our national story at the expense of a bigger, more significant truth?

As today’s petition makes clear, generations of young people are leaving school without an informed and balanced understanding of our past. There is no requirement for schools to teach our colonial history. Nor are they required to recognise the role it has played in perpetuating barriers to many black and minority ethnic people enjoying all of the opportunities that life in modern Britain offers. Not only is that holding people back; it is a moral scar on our society that is failing to heal. The Labour party would introduce such a requirement, building a diverse curriculum, including content focused on Britain’s role in the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism. In Labour-run Wales, the Government have already committed to introducing that from September 2022, which shows what Labour in power can do and is doing.

However, this is not about trashing Britain’s history; it is about celebrating it. As the author of today’s petition states,

“By educating on the events of the past, we can forge a better future.”

The Labour party believes that a diverse and complete curriculum is one of the best tools that we have in our armoury to build the future that we all want to see: a just future, a fair future, and a future in which every individual, regardless of their race and ethnicity, feels as though they have a stake in the country that we all call home.

How can a young person benefit by missing out on learning about the Bristol bus boycott in 1963; or the 15,204 men who served in the British West Indies Regiment in the first world war; or Mary Prince, the first black woman in British history to write an autobiography; or Mary Seacole, the historic nurse from the Crimean war; or Walter Tull, the Tottenham Hotspur striker and first mixed-race heritage infantry officer in a regular British Army regiment? Yet research by Teach First has found that pupils could complete their entire GCSEs without studying a single work by a non-white author. Teaching about black scientists, authors and change makers will inspire a new generation. After all,

“You can’t be what you can’t see.”

The murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement were watershed moments that demanded real change. That need for change was accelerated by covid. Baroness Lawrence's report for Labour highlighted how black, Asian and minority ethnic people have been left over-exposed, under-protected and overlooked throughout the pandemic. Instead, the Government contented themselves with publishing an insulting document, downplaying the role of institutional racism and constructing a false binary between race and class.

The Tories want to tell us that they are interested in ending class and regional inequalities, but in reality they are not interested in ending inequality at all. After all, it was not white privilege that closed thousands of Sure Starts, early years and youth centres; it was Tory cuts. As for the 9% fall in real-terms funding for schools, and policies leading to record levels of child poverty and food bank use, the Conservatives did all of that on their own as well. No amount of cultural provocation can hide the facts.

Labour is listening to the lived experience of black, Asian and minority ethnic people. We will introduce a race equality Act to tackle racism at its root, including through proper education about our colonial past, and we will implement the reviews that the Government have failed to implement, both from Macpherson and the Windrush lessons learned review, which called for action on education, but it has been conspicuously absent. The Government will hide their lack of interest in tackling racism behind any cloak they can. Only Labour can tackle racism root and branch, and that must begin with the breadth of information and sensitive teaching that we offer our young people.

6.59 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I thank the many people who signed the petition, and I also congratulate the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) on securing the debate. Like him, we welcome the increased debate about black history in the curriculum, and I thank all Members who have contributed to today's debate. We welcome the opportunity to respond on this matter, as my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards has done on previous occasions.

This country has a lot to be proud of, and children should learn all aspects of our shared history, both the good and the bad. We must teach about the contributions of people of all ethnicities, both men and women, who have made this the great nation that it is today. The shared history of our country is one that is outward looking: a nation that has influenced the world and, in turn, been influenced by people from all over the world. It is those people who have built the culturally rich country that we have today—a true example of a melting pot. A great example of this was commemorated last Tuesday on 22 June, when communities across the country marked national Windrush day. The third national day celebrated and commemorated the Windrush community, and the nation paid tribute to the outstanding contribution of the Windrush generation and their descendants.

The national curriculum enables teaching that includes black and ethnic minority voices and experiences. A shared British history can and should be taught, whether it is events such as the Bristol bus boycott, which many

Members have mentioned today and which had a national impact, or the global impact of those soldiers from across the former empire who fought in both world wars. The theme "ideas, political power, industry and empire: Britain, 1745-1901" is statutory—I want to make sure that is on the record—but the topics within the theme are not. We believe that schools and teachers should use the flexibility they have in the curriculum to develop a more detailed, knowledge-rich curriculum to teach their pupils in an inclusive manner. It is knowledge that works to unite people and our nation by revealing the rich, interwoven tapestry of our history and enabling all pupils to see themselves in our history.

It is positive that teachers and schools are responding directly to the renewed attention on history teaching. These debates help to encourage that attention and ensure knowledge-based subject teaching—which, by the way, has changed a lot since many of us were at school. A number of Members referred to their history teaching, but I think it is fair to say it has moved on a lot since then. As a recent survey of history teachers by the Historical Association has shown, many more history teachers are reflecting in their teaching commitments to develop more content on black and diverse histories. That change at the school level will help pupils to gain more breadth and depth in their understanding of history.

The Government believe that all children and young people should acquire a firm grasp of history, including how different events and periods relate to each other. That is why history is compulsory for maintained schools from key stages 1 to 3, and it is why academies are also expected to teach a curriculum that is as broad and ambitious as the national curriculum. The Government have also strongly promoted the study of history to age 16 by including GCSE history in the EBacc measure for all state-funded secondary schools in England. Since the introduction of the EBacc, we have seen entries to history GCSE increase by a third since 2010.

The reformed history curriculum includes teaching pupils the core knowledge of our past, enabling pupils to know and understand the history of Britain from its first settlers to the development of the institutions that help define our national life today. It also sets an expectation that pupils ask perceptive questions, sift arguments, and develop perspective and judgment. It teaches pupils to understand how different types of historical sources are used to make historical claims, and discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed.

The curriculum does not set out how curriculum subjects, or topics within the subjects, should be taught. We believe that teachers should be able to use their own knowledge and expertise to determine how they teach pupils, and to make choices about what they teach. Teachers have freedom over the precise details, so that they can teach lessons that are right for their pupils, and they should use teaching materials that suit their pupils' needs.

At the same time, the teaching of any issue in schools should be consistent with the principles of balance and objectivity. We believe that good teaching of history should always include the contribution of black and minority ethnic people to Britain's history, as well as the study of different countries and cultures around the world. The history curriculum has the flexibility to give teachers the opportunity to teach about that across the spectrum of themes and eras set out in the curriculum.

[Gillian Keegan]

To support that, the curriculum includes a number of examples that could be covered at different stages and that are drawn from the history of both this country and the wider world. The examples include, at key stage 1, teaching about the lives of key black and minority ethnic historical figures, such as Mary Seacole—she has been mentioned many times today—and Rosa Parks. The key stage 2 curriculum suggests that teachers could explore the topics of ancient Sumer, the Indus valley, ancient Egypt and the Shang dynasty of ancient China, as part of the required teaching on early civilisations. It also requires the study of a non-European society that provides contrast with British history.

At key stage 3, as part of the statutory teaching of the overarching theme of Britain from 1745 to 1901, topics could include Britain's transatlantic slave trade, its effects and its eventual abolition. That could include teaching about the successful slave-led rebellions and challenges that led to the abolishment of slavery—for example, the Haitian revolution. For the UK, it could include the role played by slaves and former slaves, such as James Somerset, with regard to the Somerset ruling, and Olaudah Equiano, as well as the abolition movement and the development of the British empire.

Peter Kyle: I realise that the Minister is speaking for a colleague at the moment, but would she say that it is fair to set as the aspiration for her Department, once all the changes to the framework have gone through, that within a very short amount of time we should never have a student going through the entire educational process—as is happening right now—without ever having read a book or a text that was authored by a black or non-white author?

Gillian Keegan: Of course we want a broad variety of reading in particular—it is very important—and a wide range of books are available now in all our schools. I am sure that the hon. Member goes into as many schools in his constituency as I do in mine, and we see the broad range of books, but we cannot be taking away the teacher's role here. Teachers want to be able to come up with their own curriculum and to be able to choose the materials. There is a broad range of materials. Obviously we have the statutory themes, but within that it is up to teachers; they are empowered to decide at what point they teach things and introduce many of the black authors that we have now on the curriculum. It is up to them to decide at what point they want to introduce that; it certainly is not for me to set out what all the teachers in our 20,000-odd schools should be doing.

In the theme about challenges for Britain, Europe and the wider world from 1901 to the present day, the end of empire can be taught. For key stage 4, the Department sets out that GCSE history specifications produced by the exam boards should develop and extend pupils' knowledge and understanding of specified key events, periods and societies in local, British and wider world history, and of the wide diversity of human experience. The GCSE in history should include at least one British depth study and at least one European or wider world depth study from the three specified eras.

There is significant scope for the teaching of black history within these. Two exam boards, OCR—Oxford, Cambridge and the RSA—and AQA, provide options

to study migration in Britain and how this country's history has been shaped by the black and ethnic minority communities in the past. Also, Pearson announced last year a new migration thematic study option, which will be available to teach this September. Therefore, the sector is responding and there are many organisations that support the sector with the production of these materials.

Many of the issues discussed today are matters that can also be taught in other curriculum subjects. As part of a broad and balanced curriculum, pupils should be taught about different societies and how different groups have contributed to the development of Britain, including the voices and experience of black and ethnic minority people. Across citizenship, English, personal, social, health and economic education, arts, music and geography, teachers have opportunities to explore black and ethnic minority history with their pupils, helping to build understanding and tolerance.

We cannot shy away from the major part that this country played in the slave trade, which children need to be aware of and understand. However, the UK also has a tremendous history that we should be proud of, standing up for freedom and tolerance around the world.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the Minister for giving way, and we have a little time to debate this issue. Does the Minister agree that a lot of why we are debating this is that a profound sense of injustice lives on as a legacy of the injustices that have been committed in the past and continue to this day, which people from ethnic minority backgrounds want to be debated on a moral basis? I speak as somebody of a German background. The most atrocious inhumanities in the name of "race" have been committed by Germans. In my school days, we needed to learn that and to feel the pain, disgust and shame at what our people in Germany—my people—had committed. Do the people discussing this issue today not want the British people to also understand and do that?

Gillian Keegan: I find it very difficult to compare what we are talking about today to the holocaust, if I am honest. However, we cannot shy from the major part that this country played in the slave trade, and it is important that children are aware of that. In a lot of the debate and discussions we are having, there is a lot of movement in this area. Teachers are very much learning about new materials and embracing the opportunity to do so as well. However, the UK also has a tremendous history that we should be rightly proud of.

Wera Hobhouse: Mr Gray, may I just correct that? I am not comparing the holocaust—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. Is the hon. Lady seeking to make a point of order? Or does she seek to intervene on the Minister? Does the Minister wish to give way to the hon. Lady?

Gillian Keegan: I am happy to give way again.

Wera Hobhouse: I am so sorry, Mr Gray, but I want to put on the record that I do not compare anything to the holocaust.

Gillian Keegan: I agree that it is very good to put that on the record.

As I say, we should be proud of the UK's tremendous history of standing up for freedom and tolerance around the world, from Magna Carta to our ongoing commitment to individual rights, civil liberties and freedoms. Our rich and diverse cultural heritage has been created by Britons from all over the world and has been globally influenced. It is through this rich heritage of arts and culture that we continue to have instant global recognition, from Shakespeare to Zadie Smith. Black and ethnic minority Britons have played a fundamental part in our island's story, from the black Tudors to the Commonwealth soldiers who served with such distinction in the world wars. It is absolutely right that our curriculum ensures that children have the opportunity to learn about them at school.

I want to turn to tackling discrimination and intolerance, which a couple of hon. Members mentioned. On this matter, I say first that there is no place for racial inequality in our society or in our education system. The Department for Education is absolutely committed to an inclusive education system that recognises and embraces diversity and supports all pupils and students to tackle racism and to have the knowledge and tools to do so. Since 2016, we have provided more than £3.5 million to organisations, including the Anne Frank Trust, to prevent bullying. We are currently running a procurement exercise to fund activity in 2021 and 2022 to make sure that schools have the right support in place to prevent bullying of all pupils, including those with protected characteristics.

Our preventing and tackling bullying guidance sets out that schools should develop a consistent approach to monitoring bullying incidents and evaluating the effectiveness of their approaches. It also points schools to organisations that provide support for tackling bullying related to race, religion and nationality. Within and beyond their curriculum, schools are required actively to promote fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance for all those of different faiths and beliefs.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Islwyn for raising this important matter. I welcome the opportunity to set out how black history and diversity is already supported within and beyond the national curriculum. I am confident that our schools will continue to educate children to become tolerant and culturally and historically knowledgeable citizens who embrace the values of modern Britain, and of whom we should be proud.

7.15 pm

Chris Evans: This has been a fantastic debate, and I pay tribute to all Members who have taken part. One thing that I have always felt about history is that it is the

story of people's lives and their shared experience. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) and for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) for their very moving speeches.

I hope the Minister will listen to what my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) said about the pilot scheme on black and ethnic minority history being run there. I hope that that can be rolled out across the country. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) for his passionate speech, and I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for her speech about how, in her area, they have bravely taken on Britain's colonial past and the extremes that that history has thrown up. I also thank her for her wider campaigning in Parliament.

I pay tribute to the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for his succinct, passionate and wide-ranging speech that brought in everything that encompasses black history and the experience not just of ethnic minorities but of the working class in the last 30 years. I also thank the Minister, whom I have known since 2017, when we served together on the Public Accounts Committee, for stepping in at the last minute in place of the Minister who should have responded. She gave a very constructive and informative speech. To be honest, I was quite hopeful from the end of her speech that we can come to some arrangement with the Government to bring black history to the fore in schools. She said that the Government really get that, and there is consensus around the issue, so we can really improve the teaching of history.

Ultimately, as I said in my speech, I am passionate about history and about the way it is taught. For too long, it has been seen as a dry subject, when really, it can be brought to life because it is about the lives people have lived. The way history is taught is now more important than ever. So many people deny that so many things happened, and with the rise of fake news, it is very important that we stick to the facts and that everybody's voices are heard on our experiences of growing up in the country that we call Britain.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 324092, relating to Black history and cultural diversity in the curriculum.

7.18 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 28 June 2021

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Events Research Programme

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden): On 25 June, the Government published a report on the first phase of its groundbreaking and science-led events research programme (ERP) which is furthering our understanding of how the risk of covid-19 transmission can be reduced at large events.

The study gathered data on behaviour, movement, ventilation and testing and has shown that with mitigating factors, such as social distancing at pinch points, face coverings and staggered entry and exit times, events can be conducted more safely at increased capacities, while maintaining a lower risk of transmission.

The ERP was commissioned by the Prime Minister in February 2021 as part of the Government's roadmap out of lockdown.

The aim of the review was to build an evidence base to inform how the public could return as safely as possible to attend events such as sport, theatre, live music and business events by conducting pilots across a range of settings and sectors. These have been run in a structured, scientifically and ethically robust way to enable events in the programme to happen at a scale not previously tested since the start of the pandemic.

Phase 1 of the programme involved a total of 58,000 participants at venues across the country including Liverpool, Sheffield and London. It was supported by event organisers, local authority and public health teams, national and local government officials and nine scientific research teams from five UK universities. The work was overseen by an independently-chaired science and ethics board.

The findings in this report will help to inform both Government and industry on how they can seek to mitigate covid-19 transmission risk ahead of step 4 of the roadmap.

A full copy of the report can be found on gov.uk. A copy of the report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS127]

Events Research Programme: Compensation for Event Organisers

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden): I am tabling this statement for the benefit of all members of this House to bring to their attention the departmental minute issued today that provides the House with notice of a series of small contingent liabilities created by my Department. This is in relation to a policy to compensate event organisers participating in phase 3 of the events research programme in the event of their cancellation if public health concerns were to give rise.

The world-leading events research programme conducted 14 pilot events across two phases since April to inform decisions around the safe removal of social distancing at step 4 of the road map up to 20 June 2021. Following the delay to step 4, the Government will now run a third phase. This will provide the opportunity to gather and generate stronger data that consolidates our evidence base in order to safely get spectators back to events when restrictions are able to lift, including trialling the practical use of certification at a range of events.

The Government will provide compensation on a discretionary basis to event organisers should a pilot event be cancelled due to public health reasons.

This compensation will be capped at £300,000 per event and will cover costs incurred in relation to participation in the programme only (e.g. admission of spectators), recognising the fact that these events would have taken place in line with road map restrictions should the programme not exist. For events that have been put on specifically as part of the programme (i.e. would not otherwise have gone ahead), the Government will compensate organisers in full should an event be cancelled, but this will also be capped at £300,000.

The Government do not intend to cancel any event in the programme, however public safety comes first and therefore it is prudent to provide this assurance to the organisers assisting the Government in reopening the economy.

A copy of the departmental minute is being placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS129]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Tourism in England: Temporary Campsite Capacity

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): As England opens up and more Britons seek to go on holiday there over the summer, the Government want to support domestic tourism. To do this, we will encourage greater temporary campsite capacity over the summer through updated guidance.

Last year the Government introduced a temporary permitted development right which allows for the temporary use of land as a commercial campsite for up to 56 days, without the need to apply for planning permission. This allows businesses across the tourism and hospitality sectors to establish temporary "pop-up" campsites on their land to meet additional demand. We would like to see more of these businesses taking advantage of this opportunity over the summer, so we will encourage local planning authorities to take a flexible and proportionate approach to the enforcement of planning controls, including restrictions through planning conditions on existing campsites, which may limit the temporary extension of commercial campsites for leisure use over this holiday season. This builds on my previous statement made to the House on 14 July 2020.

Paragraph 58 of the national planning policy framework already emphasises that planning enforcement is a discretionary activity and local planning authorities should act proportionately in responding to suspected breaches of planning control.

The purpose of this written ministerial statement, which comes into effect immediately, is therefore to make clear that, in considering the exercise of their discretion over enforcement, local planning authorities should take a positive approach to their engagement with commercial campsites for leisure use to ensure planning controls are not a barrier to local tourism and hospitality's economic recovery.

In particular, unless legal obligations dictate otherwise, local authorities should not seek to undertake enforcement action against potential breaches of planning control in relation to temporary commercial campsites for leisure use which do not have an adverse impact on amenity, public health and safety or the environment.

This statement does not apply to other forms of campsites, including those for domestic use, and this statement does not stop local authorities taking appropriate action where there are significant adverse impacts on amenity, public health and safety or the environment. This position should not stop enforcement action against unauthorised encampments (such as tents or caravans) on land which the occupiers do not have permission of the landowner to camp upon, nor for non-commercial activity such as a personal dwelling.

Furthermore, this statement does not remove the legal requirement for campsite licenses under section 269 of the Public Health Act 1936. The Government will work with local authorities to facilitate a quick licensing process this summer, and authorities are encouraged to expedite new applications for licences to provide certainty for applicants.

This written ministerial statement only covers England and expires on 31 October 2021.

[HCWS128]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

UK-Singapore Digital Economy Agreement

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): Today, the Government will launch negotiations with Singapore towards a bilateral digital trade agreement, the UK-Singapore digital economy agreement (DEA).

Singapore and the UK are both global leaders in the digital economy, and our bilateral trade was worth £17 billion in 2019, with 70% of services exports digitally delivered.

This new, ambitious agreement will aim to remove barriers to digital trade and enable UK exporters to expand into high-tech markets. It is part of the Government's strategy to place the UK at the centre of a network of modern free trade agreements with dynamic countries, and to enhance our status as a global hub for services and digital trade.

The UK is the first European country to start negotiations on a digital trade agreement. This is an opportunity for the UK to take the lead in shaping these agreements, and grow our influence on global rules in areas of UK strength such as digital and services. It reflects how the UK is becoming more flexible, more nimble and less defensive in our approach to trade.

The UK is already one of the world's biggest exporters of services, with remotely delivered services exports worth £207 billion in 2019 alone. International digital trade is now a key driver of productivity and business

growth in the UK. It allows British businesses to reach a wider consumer base by selling online, to trade more efficiently and cost-effectively by streamlining shipping, logistics and other trading processes, and to connect and grow their workforce across different regions of the world—sharing the benefits of prosperity.

The DEA can expand the UK's access to Singapore's digital economy—worth an estimated £9.4 billion in 2019. Negotiations will focus on:

Securing open digital markets for exporters, allowing them to expand into new markets and sell traditional products in new ways.

Ensuring free and trusted cross-border data flows, while upholding high standards of personal data protection.

Cutting red tape for UK businesses by promoting digital trading systems such as digital customs and border procedures that will save time and money when exporting.

Upholding online consumer rights and protecting businesses' valuable intellectual property, like source code and cryptography.

Deepening our co-operation on future growth sectors such as FinTech and LawTech, while working with Singapore to strengthen our collective cybersecurity capabilities and keep our countries safe.

Strengthening our trading relationship with Singapore is also part of the Government's wider trade strategy, which aims to deepen links with one of the fastest growing regions of the world, partnering with countries who believe in free and fair trade.

The DEA can create new opportunities as a gateway to the Asia-Pacific region for tech, high-end services, and digital trade, ultimately supporting and creating high-value jobs across the United Kingdom and helping the country build back better from covid.

[HCWS124]

JUSTICE

Probation Reform

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): This Government are committed to cutting crime, by improving how we protect the public from serious offenders and by tackling repeat offending. On 26 June we took a key step forward in delivering those aims with the launch of a new unified probation service for England and Wales. The additional investment of an extra £155 million both last year and this year has been key to making these changes happen.

The new service brings together staff from the previous National Probation Service (NPS) and 21 community rehabilitation companies (CRCs). It will strengthen public protection by bringing together management of offenders of all levels of risk into one organisation. It will deliver visible punishment and reparation to communities through an overhauled approach to unpaid work. And it will strengthen rehabilitation by delivering improved better accredited programmes and other rehabilitative interventions, alongside commissioning specialist services from other organisations. New national standards for probation will set out expectations for how offenders are managed in order to reduce repeat offending and to ensure the public are protected.

I am grateful for the hard work and professionalism of probation staff in supporting the transition to the new service, as a result of which we have successfully

transferred nearly 8,000 staff and nearly 200 buildings to the new organisation and rolled out IT equipment for staff transferring.

Investment of £195 million has now been awarded to 26 organisations across England and Wales to provide those specialist services, addressing needs relating to accommodation, education, training and employment, services which help offenders with personal issues such as mental health problems and women's services.

Having completed the transition to the new organisation, my priority is now to deliver improvements in the services probation delivers. Key work to do so includes improving sentence management by recruiting a record 1,000 new trainees last year and a further 1,500 officers this financial year to supervise offenders and help cut crime. This will reduce the average case load size for probation officers so that the public can be better protected.

Other key work includes ensuring more support for victims of crime by extending and enhancing the service offered to victims. Creating a new framework for unpaid work placements will increase the value they bring to society, by cleaning up the environment and supporting communities, giving back to the communities they live in through litter picking, clearing fly tipping, removing graffiti and maintaining public spaces.

Further investment in digital services will help modernise the service, speeding up processes and helping to underpin and reinforce excellent standards of practice. I will improve support for offenders for issues like education, substance misuse and mental health issues to reduce the risk of them reoffending. Securing additional rehabilitative services to build on the contracts already implemented will help cut crime.

It is particularly impressive that we have been able to ensure readiness for transition, given the pressures faced as a result of the global pandemic. Unification represents an example of excellent delivery—a major, very complex Government project delivered on time, to budget against unprecedented global challenges and we are proud of the scale of that achievement. Our progress in delivering these crucial reforms will ensure a joined-up and improved probation service that is able to make a significant contribution to this Government's mission to cut crime. We are determined that the probation service will simultaneously offer more support to those turning their backs on crime, while using every available tool to protect the public from those who are intent on continuing to commit crime.

[HCWS126]

TRANSPORT

Spaceflight Regulator: Environmental Objectives

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): On Friday 25 June, I published the Government's response to the consultation on

environmental objectives and guidance that the Government are setting for the regulator when exercising its spaceflight functions under the Space Industry Act 2018.

This Government are committed to growing the space industry in the UK and cementing our leading role in this sector by unlocking a new era in commercial spaceflight across the UK. The Government's ambitious support for safe and sustainable spaceflight activities will drive research, innovation and entrepreneurship, exploiting the unique environment of space. The environmental objectives and guidance, along with the space industry regulations, and other instruments covering accident investigation and appeals, will pave the way for a new licensing regime for commercial spaceflight activities from UK. This will feed into our emerging national space strategy as we develop our priorities for levelling up the UK and promote the growth of this thriving sector in the long term.

The environmental objectives demonstrate the importance this Government attach to balancing the mitigation of potentially negative environmental impacts of spaceflight activities with enhancing the strong contributions that commercial spaceflight can make to both the economy and our local and global efforts to monitor the environment. The objectives and guidance build on the Space Industry Act 2018 requirements for applicants for a launch or spaceport licence to submit an assessment of environmental effects as part of their application. The objectives and guidance set out clearly how the Government expect the spaceflight regulator will take account of these assessments when deciding licence applications and setting licence conditions.

The Government welcome the thoughtful and detailed responses received to the consultation from industry, environmental professional bodies and other stakeholders. The response I am sharing today sets out the ways we have adjusted the draft guidance to reflect the suggestions and recommendations made through the consultation process. We believe that this collaborative approach will not only strengthen the licensing regime we are implementing, but also demonstrate the Government's ongoing commitment to growing this exciting sector whilst ensuring that the most significant environmental impacts are mitigated and that growth of this sector is consistent with the Government's wider sustainable development goals.

Next steps

My Department has worked closely with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the UK Space Agency and Civil Aviation Authority to legislate for a wide range of new commercial spaceflight technologies, including traditional vertically launched vehicles, air-launched vehicles and sub-orbital spaceplanes and balloons. The Government's aim is to have in place all the necessary secondary legislation and supporting guidance before the summer recess to enable the regulator to begin receiving and assessing applications.

[HCWS125]

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 28 June 2021

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Aid Budget Reduction: Covid-19

The following is an extract from Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office oral questions on 15 June 2021.

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

Wendy Morton [V]: [*Inaudible*]*—is having on the world's poorest countries. The FCDO is committed to the global effort to tackle the pandemic. We have made new public commitments worth up to £1.3 billion of ODA to counter the health, humanitarian and socioeconomic impacts of covid-19 and to support the global effort to distribute vaccines equitably, as well as adopting our programmes in 2020 amounting to more than £700 million. As we have heard, the Prime Minister announced at the G7 that the UK will donate 100 million vaccine doses within the next five years, with 5 million of those by the end of September, to ensure global vaccination by the end of 2022.*

[*Official Report, 15 June 2021, Vol. 697, c. 112.*]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton).

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham).

The correct response should have been:

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Wendy Morton) [V]: [*Inaudible*]*—is having on the world's poorest countries. The FCDO is committed to the global effort to tackle the pandemic. We have made new public commitments worth up to £1.3 billion of ODA to counter the health, humanitarian and socioeconomic impacts of covid-19 and to support the global effort to distribute vaccines equitably, as well as adopting our programmes in 2020 amounting to more than £700 million. As we have heard, the Prime Minister announced at the G7 that the UK will donate 100 million vaccine doses within the next year, with 5 million of those by the end of September, to ensure global vaccination by the end of 2022.*

TREASURY

Northern Ireland Protocol

The following is an extract from Treasury oral questions on 22 June 2021.

Jesse Norman: 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.

[*Official Report, 22 June 2021, Vol. 697, c. 736.*]

Letter of correction from the Financial Secretary to the Treasury:

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley).

The correct response should have been:

Jesse Norman: Let me remind him that, so far, the trader support service has processed something like, I think, 700,000 consignments, **39,000 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.

EDUCATION

Investing in Children and Young People

The following are extracts from the Opposition day debate on 9 June 2021.

Vicky Ford: The hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) asked about projects for children and young people in her constituency. Well, of course, Leicester was a partner in the HAF programme in 2019, and will return again as a partner in 2021.

[*Official Report, 9 June 2021, Vol. 696, c. 1012.*]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford).

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe).

The correct response should have been:

Vicky Ford: The hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) asked about projects for children and young people in her constituency. Well, of course, **Leicestershire** was a partner in the HAF programme in 2019, and will return again as a partner in 2021.

Vicky Ford: I will never forget 2010, the end of the last Labour Government and the last recession, when nearly 1 million 16 to 25-year-olds were not in employment, education or training.

[*Official Report, 9 June 2021, Vol. 696, c. 1013.*]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford).

An error has been identified in my response to the debate.

The correct response should have been:

Vicky Ford: I will never forget 2010, the end of the last Labour Government and the last recession, when nearly 1 million 16 to **24**-year-olds were not in employment, education or training.

TREASURY**Topical Questions**

The following is an extract from Treasury oral questions on 22 June 2021.

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.

[Official Report, 22 June 2021, Vol. 697, c. 751.]

Letter of correction from the Chancellor of the Exchequer

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves).

The correct response should have been:

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 **mainland** Europe other than Norway, and we are doing more.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 28 June 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
WORK AND PENSIONS	1	WORK AND PENSIONS—continued	
Benefit Cap	6	Kickstart Scheme	9
Benefit Sanctions	12	Levelling-up Agenda	10
Benefits System: Fraud and Error	13	Personal Independence Payments	14
British Sign Language.....	8	Rules for Terminal Illness Review	7
Child Poverty	1	Supporting Young People into Work.....	13
Disability Employment Gap: Covid-19	12	Topical Questions	16
In-work Poverty	11	£20 Universal Credit Uplift.....	9
Jobcentre Services	4	Universal Credit Claimants.....	15

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 28 June 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	1WS	INTERNATIONAL TRADE	3WS
Events Research Programme.....	1WS	UK-Singapore Digital Economy Agreement	3WS
Events Research Programme: Compensation for Event Organisers	1WS		
HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	2WS	JUSTICE	4WS
Tourism in England: Temporary Campsite Capacity.....	2WS	Probation Reform	4WS
		TRANSPORT	5WS
		Spaceflight Regulator: Environmental Objectives ..	5WS

MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS

Monday 28 June 2021

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
EDUCATION	2MC	TREASURY	1MC
Investing in Children and Young People	2MC	Northern Ireland Protocol	1MC
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	1MC	TREASURY	3MC
Aid Budget Reduction: Covid-19	1MC	Topical Questions	3MC

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**not later than
Monday 5 July 2021**

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CONTENTS

Monday 28 June 2021

List of Government and Principal Officers of the House

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

Loss of Secret Documents [Col. 21]
Answer to urgent question—(Jeremy Quin)

Security of Ministers' Offices and Communications [Col. 31]
Answer to urgent question—(Julia Lopez)

Covid-19 Update [Col. 45]
Statement—(Sajid Javid)

Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Bill [Col. 62]
Motion for Second Reading—(Luke Hall)—agreed to

Committee on Standards [Col. 85]
Motion—(Mr Rees-Mogg)—agreed to

Parliamentary Works Sponsor Body [Col. 88]
Motion—(Mr Rees-Mogg)—agreed to

East West Rail Route Consultation: North East Bedfordshire [Col. 91]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Microchipping of Pets [Col. 1WH]
Black History and Cultural Diversity in the Curriculum [Col. 26WH]
E-petition debate(s)

Written Statements [Col. 1WS]

Ministerial Corrections [Col. 1MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
