Tuesday
29 June 2021

Volume 698
No. 25

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 29 June 2021

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2021
This publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament licence, which is published at www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright/.

House of Commons

Tuesday 29 June 2021

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Image-based Abuse

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of legislation in protecting victims from image-based abuse. [901925]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): We recognise and share public concern over abuses of new technology to harm victims, and we are taking action. Today, new provisions on threatening to share private sexual images come into force, and we are going further. We have asked the Law Commission to review the law on image abuse to ensure that victims are properly protected. The commission will publish recommendations in spring next year, and we will consider them very carefully.

Paul Blomfield [V]: My constituent Helen Mort had the appalling experience of finding out that someone unknown to her had taken ordinary images from her social media and superimposed them on violent and extreme pornography. These were not intimate images, but they were used to create deepfakes. When she went to the police, she was told that there was no crime to investigate as the original images were not private. The Law Commission's review, to which the Minister refers, proposes extending the criminalisation of sharing intimate images to include deepfakes. Will the Minister ensure that the Government respond positively and quickly to those proposals so that people like Helen are protected in the future?

Alex Chalk: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that harrowing case. He is absolutely right to do so. We recognise that the law needs to keep pace with those who would use technology to perpetrate dreadful abuse. We have asked the Law Commission to act, as he indicated. It is doing so at pace, and we will be looking very carefully with a view to extending the law where it is appropriate to do so.

Court Capacity

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to increase court capacity. [901927]

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to increase court capacity. [901944]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Chris Philp): The pandemic has affected courts, like it has affected so many other areas of life. The Government have responded energetically and comprehensively, for example by opening 60 new Nightingale courtrooms, hiring an extra 1,600 Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service staff, injecting hundreds of millions of pounds extra into the system, and making sure that around 20,000 hearings a week can now be conducted online. These measures are designed to enable court recovery, and I can assure the House that these efforts will continue.

Alex Davies-Jones: The Minister's total failure to improve court waiting times is having a very real-world cost, no more so than for my 100-year-old constituent whose fraud case against a former carer amounts to more than a quarter of a million pounds. Despite initiating the case more than four years ago, that elderly woman is still waiting and is unlikely to see justice served in her lifetime. The Minister knows about that case, as I have written to his Department on multiple occasions, but still the delays persist. What exactly does he have to say to my constituent, along with the thousands of others like her who are once again being left behind by this Government and denied justice?

Chris Philp: Listing of individual cases is a judicial function, and there are sometimes legal reasons why cases get put off. I must say that in Wales, actually, the court system is performing particularly well at the moment. The hon. Lady talks about delays. Of course, during the pandemic some delays have built up, but in the magistrates court, for example, about half of the backlog that accumulated due to covid, which peaked in about August last year, has already been removed. The outstanding case load in the magistrates court is currently dropping at a rate of around 2,000 a week. I also gently point out that the outstanding case load prior to the pandemic in the Crown court, at 39,000 cases, was considerably lower than the 47,000 cases in 2010.

Navendu Mishra: The Crown court backlog has reached a new record high of nearly 60,000 cases. That is the result of a decade of Conservative cuts and court closures. Will the Government commit to continuing Nightingale courts until the backlog is cleared?

Chris Philp: We are continuing Nightingale courtrooms. We are also saying to the judiciary, critically, that there will be no constraint on Crown court sitting days this current financial year; the judiciary can list as many cases as they are physically able to. On Crown court numbers, clearly, jury trials and pandemics do not mix very well, but thanks to the steps taken, we have seen the corner turned just recently—in the last few weeks. Crown court case numbers are beginning to edge down for the first time, and we are committed to making sure that continues.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: I welcome the Minister's last point, because the Director of Public Prosecutions told the Justice Committee two

weeks ago that case loads in the Crown court are currently at 95% of physical capacity, making allowance for the Nightingale courts, but that the Crown Prosecution Service's total case load has increased by some 53% since February 2020. Does the Minister agree that that must mean that, to keep the backlog reducing in a sustainable fashion, we must have long-term, continued investment in increased court capacity, but also in judges and recorders, in court staff available to hear and try cases, and in CPS staff to ensure that they are ready for trial on time?

Chris Philp: The Chair of the Justice Committee is, as always, right in his analysis. We need to ensure that the capacity exists and, for the reason he mentioned, 1,600 extra staff have already been hired for Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service. He also mentioned Crown Prosecution Service capacity. I think its budget recently went up by about £80 million to enable 400 additional prosecutors to be hired.

In relation to judicial capacity, we will shortly bring forward measures to increase the mandatory retirement age for magistrates and judges from 70 to 75, which we hope will retain the most experienced judges who will be able to sit and hear these cases. In relation to physical courtroom capacity, we have clearly invested enormously in technology to enable remote hearings and, as I mentioned, about 20,000 a week are taking place. In addition to that, we have the 60 Nightingale courtrooms. When social distancing is relaxed—nothing has been confirmed, but we have a reasonable expectation that it will be in the near future—a reduction in those requirements will enable more courtrooms to be used safely than is the case today, which will also greatly assist court recovery.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The Minister has been keen to talk up the Government's efforts to get court waiting lists down, but it is vital that efficiency does not come at the expense of effective and proper justice. I hope he is aware of the controversy surrounding the use of the single justice procedure in relation to the thousands of people prosecuted for coronavirus-related offences and the fact that hundreds—the bulk in their absence—may have been wrongly charged and convicted. Indeed, 37 people have been unlawfully prosecuted under schedule 22 of the Coronavirus Act 2020, which has never been activated in England. When that problem was highlighted by Big Brother Watch and *The Guardian* newspaper, the Ministry of Justice said that

"defendants can…have their conviction voided and reheard if necessary."

Surely the Minister agrees that such incompetence adds to the burden of the courts, is more expensive, weakens justice and may well be unlawful. What is he going to do about it?

Chris Philp: First, it is important to make clear that prosecution decisions are taken by the independent Crown Prosecution Service, not by the courts system. Secondly, when it comes to maintaining standards of justice, I think the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), the shadow Secretary of State, floated the idea of having smaller juries earlier in the pandemic. Of course, we have maintained juries at 12. However, where unusual measures such as remote hearings have had to be taken throughout the pandemic, the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice has ensured that justice standards have been maintained. Judges have always had the proper discretion to direct proceedings in their courtrooms so that justice is not only properly done but fairly done.

Human Rights Act 1998 (Amendment)

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): What plans he has to bring forward legislative proposals to amend the Human Rights Act 1998. [901928]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): The Government have established the independent Human Rights Act review to examine the framework of the Act, how it is operating in practice and whether any change is required. The review is considering the approach taken by our domestic courts to the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights and whether the HRA currently strikes the correct balance between the roles of the courts, the Government and this place. The report, due this summer, will be published, as will the Government's response.

Hannah Bardell [V]: Given this Tory Government's track record of either not consulting or railroading changes without consultation, will the Secretary of State confirm that any proposals to amend the Human Rights Act will be subject to a full public consultation lasting at least three months?

Robert Buckland: The hon. Lady will be glad to know that a wholly independent review reflecting opinion from right across the United Kingdom and beyond was set up and will report in due course. Then, no doubt, there will be a consultation on those issues ahead of any legislative change that the Government might introduce to this place.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): This week, the UN's special rapporteur for human rights said that the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, the Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Act 2021 and the judicial review Bill will all make human rights violations more likely to occur. The Lord Chancellor will be aware of his special responsibilities to defend human rights both in his Department and across Government. As his two-year anniversary as Lord Chancellor arrives next month—I congratulate him on that—will he consider starting to do that part of his job? How will he respond to the UN special rapporteur's assessment?

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his kind words. With respect to the special rapporteur, I would strongly argue that in everything we do and say in this place and in Government, the necessary checks and balances are carried out to ensure that the human rights that he and I believe in are preserved. I can think of no better example than the Bill currently before the House with regard to the duties that the police will have on the need to balance freedom of expression and the rights of other people. That is a balancing exercise at all times, and I will discharge my duties in the way that I believe I have for the past two years.

Violence Against Women and Girls

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle violence against women and girls. [901929]

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to improve support in the justice system for the victims of violence against women and girls. [901948]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): We are investing in vital victim support services to the tune of more than £150 million this year. The forthcoming victims Bill will enshrine victims' rights in law and explore the provision of domestic abuse and sexual violence support. We are also working with the Home Secretary to develop new violence against women and girls and domestic abuse strategies to help to drive a step change in response to these crimes.

Darren Henry [V]: During this pandemic, we have seen an unprecedented rise in domestic abuse cases in the UK. In my constituency, the Broxtowe Women's Project has worked tirelessly to support many victims of domestic violence. Will the Minister outline what the Government are doing to ensure that they are tackling domestic abuse? Will he also set out their plans to provide long-term support, both to those who are directly affected and to their children, who often do not receive the support they need?

Kit Malthouse: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing that organisation to prominence; I am grateful to it for the valuable work that no doubt it has done, alongside others, during these dreadful past 16 months or so. For our part, we have boosted funding for specialist services by £51 million to support victims through the covid-19 pandemic and beyond. That included £20.7 million for local community-based sexual violence and domestic abuse services and a £27 million investment over two years to recruit more independent sexual and domestic violence advisers. The landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021 contains new measures to protect victims and will be followed by new violence against women and girls and domestic abuse strategies, while the victims Bill will further transform victims' experience. I hope that that will have an impact in Broxtowe, along with the rest of the country.

Florence Eshalomi [V]: Mr Speaker,

"Domestic abuse victims have to be taken seriously and listened to".

That is a direct quote from a letter to me from a constituent who suffered physical, emotional and financial abuse at the hands of her now ex-partner. She came to my surgery not to talk about him, but for help with dealing with the police, who she says mishandled her case and have not taken her seriously. Instead of believing that the red marks on her neck were from an attempted strangulation, they responded that the marks were too thin and did not look serious enough. They also did not follow up on the spy camera in her home.

Victims of domestic violence and abuse have told me that the burden of proof is on them. Can the Minister tell me what steps he is taking to bring about a culture change in the police so that victims of domestic violence are believed from the outset?

Kit Malthouse: Obviously, I am very alarmed to hear about that incident. I hope that the hon. Lady will advise her constituent, if she is unhappy, to pursue a complaint about her treatment through the provisions available to her, both through the Metropolitan police and through the Independent Office for Police Conduct. As part of our work over the next few months towards a new violence against women and girls strategy, we will be engaging the police to ensure that, as the hon. Lady says, every victim who comes forward to the police and makes allegations of such a serious nature is taken into account.

I have to say that, while I am sorry to hear about that experience, I have witnessed some very good and important work by the police, not least the Metropolitan Police Service. I recently visited its predatory offenders unit, which specifically targets those who commit domestic violence and abuse where the victim is too afraid to pursue a prosecution, and looks for other ways to apprehend the perpetrator and put them behind bars.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Minister Anna McMorrin.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Henriett Szucs and Jan Mustafa were brutally murdered, and their bodies were found in the freezer of a known violent sex offender. Their deaths were avoidable, had it not been for a catalogue of failures within the justice system—failures that allowed this man the freedom to repeatedly commit horrifying crimes—and the collapse in victim safeguarding. Two women each week are murdered by a current or former partner, and apologies simply are not enough. I do not see the necessary action being taken to prevent the next Henriett or Jan. Labour has a ready-to-go plan, including a review of domestic violence and homicides; new progress indicators, as we have in Wales; more sustainable funding; and better access to specialist support services. The Minister has the power to stop violence against women being an afterthought in the justice system, so will he work with us to achieve it?

Kit Malthouse: I obviously reject the assertion that violence against women—or, indeed, anybody—is an afterthought for this Government. I do not think anybody could look at what we have done over the past two years and think that we have done anything other than throw our entire weight behind the fight against violence. Specifically, the hon. Lady will have noted that one of the five key priorities set by the National Policing Board for the whole of the criminal justice system, including the police, has been the suppression and reduction of murders, a third of which are domestic. She will be interested to know that I am now entering the second round of homicide murder roundtables with police forces across the country and looking at their murder prevention strategies to ensure that they get ahead of exactly the kind of heinous crime that she points to. We know that the perpetrators of murder in this country have, on average, seven previous offences. That means that we should be able, as she rightly says, to identify them before they commit that catastrophic and appalling act, and that is exactly what we are trying to do.

Domestic Violence Victims

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on supporting victims of domestic violence. [901930]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): We are working across Government to transform the response to the abhorrent crime of domestic violence. We passed our landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021 in April, to be followed by the new violence against women and girls and domestic abuse strategies. The victims Bill will further transform victims' experience. We have also provided unprecedented funding to support the sector.

Robert Halfon: My constituent, a courageous woman, Ms Charlotte Budd, is a survivor of domestic abuse, but she suffered a great deal further from her experience in the family court system. Ms Budd has criticised the pro-contact nature of the family court, arguing that decisions have resulted in unsafe child arrangements. I would be extremely grateful if my hon. Friend could set out what steps the Department is taking to ensure that the presumption of contact issue does not have damaging consequences for victims of domestic abuse like Ms Charlotte Budd. Will one of the Ministers in the Department meet me and my constituent, Ms Budd, to discuss these issues further?

Kit Malthouse: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising this case, and I am very sorry to hear this distressing story. He is quite right to say that the presumption of parental contact has been a cause of concern to many, on the basis that it might expose parents and children to greater risk, and we are reviewing this provision at the moment. I would be more than happy to meet him to discuss this case—and, indeed, the review—further in the hope that we can move to an improved situation.

Pet Theft

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle pet theft. [901931]

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle pet theft. [901935]

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle pet theft. [901941]

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle pet theft. [901942]

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle pet theft. [901949]

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle pet theft. [901958]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): The Government recognise the deep distress that the theft of a much-loved pet can cause, and I have met the Home Secretary and the Environment Secretary to create a taskforce to investigate the problem end to end. That work is under way and it is gathering evidence to understand the factors that may be contributing to any rise in pet theft and to recommend measures to tackle the problem. It will report to Ministers on potential solutions by the summer.

John Lamont: I am grateful for that response. Mandatory microchipping has been a welcome step forward, and I understand that the law is now consistent across all parts of the United Kingdom. What steps have been taken to improve the microchipping process so that owners can know where microchips are being run, when and by whom?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend will know that our manifesto pledge is to extend microchipping to cats as well. With regard to dogs, over 90% of them in England are now microchipped. This year, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is carrying out a post-implementation review of the regulations that introduced microchipping in 2015, to see how the various databases can operate in a more co-ordinated way, and it will come forward with proposals later in the year.

Alexander Stafford: Pet theft is the most scurrilous crime, and residents have spoken to me about the loss they have felt when their dog or cat has been stolen from them. Does the Minister agree that each local force should have a dedicated dog theft lead? Will he join my calls for the police and crime commissioner to have a dog theft lead for South Yorkshire police, like the one for the Nottinghamshire constabulary?

Robert Buckland: I welcome my hon. Friend's commitment to this campaign. I am pleased to hear about his energetic efforts in this sphere and I wish him well. Decisions on priorities are, of course, a matter for individual forces, but I am sure he will want to work with his local force to achieve the laudable aims that his campaign represents.

Jonathan Gullis: Pet theft is a shameless and disgusting act that harms families across our country. Scumbag Malachy Doherty of Tunstall was recently sentenced to 27 weeks in prison for stealing Labradors Denzel and Welly. Twenty-seven weeks does not seem long enough to me, so does my right hon. and learned Friend agree with the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke that, as part of the pet theft taskforce, firmer punishments and vets checking microchips at the first visit will be ways to help prevent the heartache felt by many victims' families?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend always speaks with vigour on behalf of his constituents, and I wholeheartedly agree with his revulsion at this appalling type of crime. We share his deep concern, which is why the sort of ideas and proposals he outlined are very much at the forefront of Government thinking.

Jane Stevenson: I thank the Secretary of State for speaking to me recently about pet theft. In the recent local election campaign in Wolverhampton, I spoke to several constituents who are now too nervous to go out to walk their dogs, especially in the evening time. Does he recognise that, for their wellbeing, and for that of their dogs, this is an urgent matter? Can he reassure me that as soon as the taskforce reports the Government will take action on pet theft reform?

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her deep commitment to this issue. She is so right to highlight the wellbeing and mental health effects of the loss of a much-loved pet on her local residents in Wolverhampton and more widely. That is precisely why

we took action to set up the taskforce, and we will indeed be reporting as soon as possible to address the concerns of her constituents.

Mark Fletcher: Pet theft can be absolutely heartbreaking for families. I have spoken to some of the families in my constituency who have gone through this process and they warmly welcome the establishment of the pet theft taskforce. Can my right hon. and learned Friend outline what kind of solutions the taskforce is looking at?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend is right to reflect the views of his constituents in Bolsover and the wider community. We are looking at not just the consequences of pet theft, but ways in which the black market in the trade in animals can be dealt with. Lots of ideas and initiatives merit serious consideration as to how we can prevent the incentives for this sort of despicable crime from occurring in the first place. That is the work that is being carried out now.

Matt Vickers: It is clear today that pet theft is having a huge impact on so many families across the country. Indeed, if my mam had the choice between me and her beloved, slightly obese Bichon, Archie, it would be a close call and I would not fancy my odds. Pet theft is on the rise. The loss of a furry family member is having an impact on so many families. Will my right hon. and learned Friend confirm not if and how, but when we will update the law to tackle this terrible crime?

Robert Buckland: I am glad that my hon. Friend declared his interest, as is appropriate. Many other Members of this House will be dog owners. I am a cat owner, so I declare that interest. Clearly, behind that, there is a very important point about the ways in which we can help to prevent the spread of this crime. As the Prime Minister said, this is often the underbelly of more organised and serious criminality, where profit is being made on the backs of the misery of not just the pets themselves, but their owners, who suffer great distress as a result of the theft.

International Treaties on Human Rights: Obligations

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What steps he has taken to ensure the UK upholds its legal obligations under international treaties on human rights. [901932]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): The United Kingdom has strong human rights protections within a comprehensive and well-established constitutional and legal system, and a long-standing tradition of ensuring that our rights and liberties are protected domestically and of fulfilling our international human rights obligations. We have put in place a combination of policies and legislation to give effect to the international human rights treaties that we have ratified. We have a strong record before the various UN treaty-monitoring bodies and fully participate in the relevant reporting processes.

Alan Brown: By contrast with what the Secretary of State just said, the Joint Committee on Human Rights recently published a report that concludes that his Department's Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill will restrict peaceful protest

"in a way that we believe is inconsistent with our rights."

The report also singles out the provisions on noisy protests as

"neither necessary nor proportionate".

With findings like those, will the Secretary of State reconsider his assertion that the Bill is compliant with the European convention on human rights?

Robert Buckland: I am happy to repeat the declaration that I made on the face of the Bill: its provisions are indeed compatible with the convention. As a former member of the Joint Committee, I well appreciate its work, but with respect, I wholly disagree with the analysis that it has produced. The balance between freedom of expression and other fundamental rights and the need to maintain order and protect the rights of other citizens going about their lawful business is properly struck in the Bill, which I commend strongly to the House.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP) [V]: The Secretary of State recently dismissed the relevance of international treaties, so it is interesting that today he is using what he says is compliance with the ECHR to convince us that his Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill is not, as the Joint Committee said, "inconsistent with our rights." How relevant, then, is the opinion of the UN special rapporteur on human rights, who said last week that the Bill runs "counter to the" human rights "direction" that the UK

"need to be going in"?

Is the Secretary of State not just a little bit embarrassed about that?

Robert Buckland: Just as the rapporteur is entitled to express, in clear and independent terms, their view, so are we entitled to disagree with it, and we do so very strongly in this instance.

Anne McLaughlin: So the Secretary of State does not respect international treaties and is not listening to Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights; let us see whether he has a little more respect for the UK's Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. Will he join in the condemnation of the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), who branded Travellers as thieves? What does he say to Travellers who described the Bill as

"the single biggest threat to"

their

"traditional way of life"

and said that it may "entirely eradicate nomadic life"? Does the Secretary of State want to eradicate their way of life?

Robert Buckland: I have not seen what was reported to have been said by my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson). I simply say that in everything that we seek to do we uphold the principles of equality, inclusion and diversity in our society, but it is also right to remember that the interests of one group will sometimes conflict with the interests of another. It is important for us to maintain the balance between the rights of, in that instance, local residents and the rights of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community. It is all about balance, which is what this Government constantly seek to strike through their legislation.

Outcomes for Rape Victims

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve outcomes for rape victims. [901933]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): We are taking steps to ensure that we tackle this horrific crime and restore confidence in the criminal justice system, as outlined in the rape review that was published 10 days ago. We will return the volume of rape cases going through the courts to at least 2016 levels by the end of this Parliament and are taking steps to improve the quality of investigations and reduce the time taken for victims to be given their phone back during the course of investigation. Furthermore, we are going to improve the culture of joint working among police and prosecutors and hold each part of the system to account through performance scorecards.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The Crown court backlog currently stands at a record high of almost 60,000 cases, and figures show that there has been a 67% rise in the number of sexual offences cases awaiting trial. In the Secretary of State's own words, rape victims have been "failed" by this Government. The rape review accepted that court delays have contributed to the plummeting number of rape prosecutions. Rape victims deserve a criminal justice system that works for them and not against them, so why did the Government vote against Labour's amendments to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill that called for the fast-tracking of rape cases to be rolled out across England and Wales?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady is quite right that delay in the criminal justice system, both from report to charge and then from charge to court, has a significant impact on victims and is a driver of victim attrition and cases therefore not proceeding. We are very focused on compressing each of the various parts of the criminal justice system so that they work efficiently and speedily, in line with the need to get quality cases into court that will hopefully secure convictions. While we have not supported the measures that she put forward for the Bill, she will in time be able to see the performance and the timeliness of various parts of the criminal justice system through the publication of comprehensive scorecards, which will allow us to judge, over time, first, whether the number of cases in court rise, which I believe they will quite significantly, but, secondly, whether more measures need to be taken to drive further progress.

Rehabilitation of Offenders

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to rehabilitate offenders. [901934]

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to rehabilitate offenders. [901955]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): We must rehabilitate offenders by focusing relentlessly on the factors that we know drive reoffending. That is why we are working across Government to support people into a job, stable accommodation and treatment for substance misuse. We have recently announced a £200 million investment in third-sector providers that deliver specialist rehabilitation services to address those core priorities.

Bob Blackman [V]**:** I thank my hon. Friend for his answer thus far. What further measures does he intend to introduce to ensure that prison governors enable those people leaving prison to be properly trained and briefed on how they can get not only housing, but job opportunities and benefits if they qualify for them, so that when they leave prison they are not tempted to go back to their old haunts and, indeed, to reoffend?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend speaks with great authority on this matter. This House will recall well the excellent work that he did in respect of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. He is absolutely right. We are investing more than £20 million in a landmark new accommodation service, providing up to 12 weeks of accommodation for prison leavers who would otherwise be homeless. That will start later this summer in five of our probation regions in England, but we want to go further. We want to introduce housing specialists in 20 prisons to strengthen partnerships with key stakeholders such as those of local councils and housing providers and to improve the expertise in prisons. We also want prison work coaches, so that not only is the accommodation sorted, but getting into a job is as well. Why is that important? It is because those who leave with a job reduce their chances of reoffending by 9%, changing lives in the process.

Sarah Atherton [V]**:** HMP Berwyn is one of the largest and newest prisons in Britain and has been chosen as a pilot site for the Ministry of Justice's employment advisory board scheme. This scheme will bring together business leaders, prison coaches, statutory services and the MP in order to secure employment for offenders on release. I thank the Minister for backing Berwyn and invite him to Wrexham to see the businesses that are putting their faith in the justice system and to sample one of Berwyn's award-winning custodial pies.

Alex Chalk: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for her question, but I am even more grateful to her for being such a champion of HMP Berwyn and, indeed, of this important initiative. She is absolutely right: getting more prison leavers into jobs is key to cutting crime. As I have indicated before, it reduces the chance of reoffending by 9%. Of course, I would be delighted to visit her in Wrexham to see the great work of the employment advisory board. I congratulate her and all those she is working with on their fantastic work at Berwyn in the Custodial Pie Corporation, upskilling men in the hospitality industry.

Government and the Courts

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on plans to review the relationship between Government and the courts. [901936]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): Forgive me, Mr Speaker, I was thinking about the pies at HMP Berwyn.

Mr Speaker: Who ate all the pies?

Robert Buckland: Well, not me. I will leave that to others to answer.

Naturally, I do not disclose the details of private conversations that I have with Cabinet colleagues, but I can say that the Government are thinking very carefully indeed about how to make sure the balance of our constitution is right. In addition to the reviews of administrative law in the Human Rights Act 1998, I am now considering the constitutional settlement that was left by the Constitutional Reform Act 2005. I will say more about that in due course and I will be open and consultative as that work is carried out.

John Nicolson [V]**:** The Public Law Project requested a breakdown of Government spending on judicial review, but it said that the information received was "barely a fraction of what should have been published. It is not detailed or clear enough to give any meaningful insight as to how judicial review impacts Government departments".

Why are the Government so reluctant to publish everything requested?

Robert Buckland: The hon. Gentleman has expressed the view of one contributor to the consultation. I would argue on the contrary—that, indeed, we are publishing everything, consistent with our wider public duty and with our duty to maintain collective Cabinet responsibility. The current consultation has been ongoing. We are due to publish a response to that ahead of any potential legislation. That will all be done. Of course, any proposals will have the fullest scrutiny from him and other right hon. and hon. Members in due course.

Domestic Abuse: Legal Advice

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of legal advice deserts on the ability of victims of domestic abuse to access justice. [901937]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): We are committed to ensuring that civil legal aid remains accessible to those who need it, including, in particular, victims of domestic abuse. The Legal Aid Agency keeps market capacity under review to ensure adequate provision across England and Wales. We are reviewing the legal aid means test, including in relation to victims of domestic abuse. On 3 March, the Chancellor announced a further £19 million package to tackle domestic abuse, and we have made changes to the evidence requirements to make it easier to access legal aid.

Stephanie Peacock: Too many victims of domestic abuse still end up in the family court with no representation, as litigants in person. Does the Minister agree that we should make legal aid available for all victims of domestic abuse?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that legal aid is a vital pillar of support to many people, which is why we have taken steps to ensure that the evidence requirements for those who want access to legal aid have been relaxed. We have also gone further; we have supported organisations such as RCJ Advice through its Finding Legal Options for Women Survivors service, which is a fantastic digital portal to assist people in the agony of that moment—as they may be in their home circumstances—to receive the kind of support that they require so that they are best placed to get a non-molestation order or an occupation order. We are determined to stand up for victims of domestic abuse.

Independent Human Rights Act Review

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent progress has been made on the independent Human Rights Act review. [901940]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): Since January this year, the review has conducted a public call for evidence, which has received more than 150 submissions, and has engaged with a wide range of interested parties at roundtable meetings and online public roadshow events. The evidence-gathering period has now concluded. The panel is now considering the evidence and will draft its report over the summer. The report will then be published, as will the Government's response.

Mr Carmichael: What does the Secretary of State want to achieve with his review? He will be aware that as long as we remain a party to the European convention on human rights, the rights that are available to citizens as a consequence cannot be altered. Any changes to the Human Rights Act would just return us to the situation that we had before the Act, when we could only enforce the remedies for these rights by going to Strasbourg. Is that what the Government want to achieve here?

Robert Buckland: I know that the right hon. Gentleman will read the review's findings with great care. I have been clear that this is not about changing the fundamental rights themselves, as he has quite rightly observed; it is about the way in which the domestic courts implement and interpret those rights. It is about the mechanism, if you like. It is now 20 years since the Act came into force and I think it is right at this juncture to give it a careful examination. That is what the independent review is all about. As he would expect, it will be followed up by the fullest consultation, in which I know he will play a vigorous part.

Sexual Assault Victims: Public Naming

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle public naming of victims of sexual assault. [901943]

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): It is an offence to publish any matter likely to identify a person who has made an allegation of rape or other sexual assault. The prohibition applies automatically from the moment the offence is reported and has effect throughout the complainant's lifetime.

Mr Dhesi: The public naming of a rape victim who has bravely come forward is devastating for the individual concerned, but under current legislation perpetrators of this crime get no more than a mere £200 fine. At a time when 44% of rape victims are actually pulling out of the justice system before their day in court, does the Minister agree that such lax laws can deter even more sexual assault victims from coming forward? If so, why did his Government vote down proposals that would have strengthened prosecuting powers against such perpetrators?

Kit Malthouse: Those proposals were not appropriate for support, but we are having a think and will make an announcement shortly.

Medomsley Detention Centre

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure that appropriate compensation is disbursed to Medomsley Detention Centre victims. [901945]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): I have every sympathy for the survivors and victims of Medomsley detention centre, who suffered abhorrent abuse. The Ministry of Justice has been working for several years to compensate properly survivors and victims. Where necessary, claimants are able to submit medical evidence to support allegations of abuse so that damages can be appropriately assessed. That includes both physical and psychological injury. The majority of claims for compensation have now been settled under a settlement protocol.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am grateful for that answer. The compensation scheme covers physical, not sexual abuse. My constituent suffered terrible, much more serious abuse. He was drugged and raped, which has had a profound effect on his health for over 40 years—both his physical and his mental health—and that of his family. Will my hon. Friend agree to meet me, my constituent and the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Medomsley detention centre to discuss a proper compensation settlement for my constituent?

Alex Chalk: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, and he paints a truly harrowing picture. For the avoidance of doubt, cases involving serious sexual harm and psychological injury can be dealt with by the Government Legal Department, albeit outside the standard compensation scheme. Because of their seriousness and complexity, they are considered on a case-by-case basis and awards made have been significant. We take great care to ensure the level of compensation properly reflects the seriousness of the abuse. It is of course always open to claimants to issue proceedings in the courts outwith the scheme, should they see fit. I would be happy to meet to discuss the protocols, but I just say this: it is important that Ministers do not interfere in specific cases when litigation is ongoing.

Topical Questions

[901985] **Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): Over the weekend, we launched the unified probation service for England and Wales. It was the culmination of huge amounts of preparation over two years, and I am hugely grateful to probation colleagues and frontline staff for making it happen. We have invested £310 million in that time to recruit 1,000 extra probation officers, with 1,500 more on the way, alongside making more use of technology such as GPS and sobriety tags. We are determined to ensure that the millions of hours of unpaid work handed down to offenders every year are served more visibly, keeping our towns, cities and our countryside clean. I have said many times that every Department of Government should be a criminal justice department, and the new probation service will be at the heart of a more joined-up approach with police, health services, local authorities and others to cut crime and keep the public safe from harm.

Fleur Anderson: On 17 June, I wrote to the Justice Secretary about probation services, raising a deeply concerning whistleblower case in the probation service. When my constituent first joined the service, there were 10 members of staff in her team. At the end of 2020, three members of staff had left and a further three were on long-term sick leave, and the case load was overwhelming. Does the Secretary of State accept that the 60% drop in staffing levels presents an unacceptable risk to public safeguarding, the welfare of probation service officers and the rehabilitation of offenders?

Robert Buckland: I will make sure that the hon. Lady's letter is brought to my attention. She sent it just over a week ago. I will not comment about the individual case, but it will of course be looked at carefully. She will be encouraged to know that as a result of the investment we are making, 1,000 more probation officers have been recruited already. We are going for another 1,500, and that means that, together with the changes to how case loads are managed, probation officers will be supported and encouraged, and the sort of issues that she raises I believe will start to diminish, because that is my determination. I want to sing the praises of an unsung public service.

[901987] **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): I am very concerned by the number of constituents who have approached me who have been the victims of online and telephone economic crime. Can the Secretary of State update the House as to what he is doing to tackle such crime?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. The Government's response to the economic crime threat is set out in our economic crime plan, which lists seven strategic priorities for combating crime through a specially convened public-private partnership. That includes a number of specific actions, including focusing on high-harm fraud types through online activity such as courier fraud, romance fraud and investment fraud. We are considering whether further legislative changes need to be brought in to provide law enforcement with the tools it needs to combat these emerging threats.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Both the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister have apologised for the Government's failure of rape victims resulting in record low prosecution and conviction rates. In attempting to atone for these mistakes it is vital that the Government are honest with victims. Last week, in Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister claimed he was investing another £1 billion in clearing the court backlogs, but in the spending review the figure announced to address the backlogs is £275 million. I am sure that the Prime Minister was not deliberately misleading the House. Will the Secretary of State correct the record?

Robert Buckland: The right hon. Gentleman raises an issue that I think I can help to clarify for him. With regard to the specific figure, that of course relates to spending during this coming year. We spent another equivalent sum in the previous year on court recovery. Indeed, when you look at the figures that we were spending anyway on new technology in our courts, and indeed the Crown Prosecution Service expenditure as well, then the figure actually is the correct one. He should realise that it is not just the Ministry of Justice that is funding court recovery and the effects of covid; the Attorney General's Office and indeed the Home Office as well have a responsibility with regard to victims. So I am afraid that fox is well and truly shot.

Mr Lammy: I have to say that the Secretary of State's verbosity serves him well.

In March, the Lord Chancellor told the Justice Committee that he had been "played for a fool" in relation to improvements at Rainsbrook secure training centre. He was clear that

"this will not happen again. Otherwise, the consequences will be extremely serious for those responsible."

Yet this did happen again, and only a year and a half later have children been moved out of harm's way. As the saying goes, "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me." Does the Lord Chancellor feel like a fool, and what "extremely serious" consequences will he deliver to ensure that this does not happen again?

Robert Buckland: I am very glad that the right hon. Gentleman asks me that question because I can reassure him that as soon as the particular reports were received from the independent monitors I took swift action to make sure that the safety and wellbeing of children at Rainsbrook was preserved. That is why we ordered that children in the unit were moved. Indeed, work is carrying on with regard to the overall future of Rainsbrook. It would be wrong of me to speculate while discussions with the provider remain ongoing, but I can tell him this: I will do whatever it takes to make sure that the children in our care are protected and that all our institutions, including Rainsbrook, are run properly. I can assure him that the providers have had the message loud and clear from me and that there will be no second chances.

[901986] **Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): My constituent Claire suffered 13 months of abuse at the hands of her ex-husband, who continued to stalk her after the end of their relationship. He was given a 12-month restraining order. Will the Government strengthen sentences for stalking and commit to greater support for victims?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that matter. It is an extraordinary fact that 10 years ago stalking was not even an offence, but it was made an offence in 2012. I, together with my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), had a campaign to double the maximum sentence so there is a maximum sentence of 10 years imprisonment. But it is not enough to have the punishment; we have to make sure that these matters get before the courts as well, and that is why I am grateful to the police and the courts for prioritising them. Those who stalk should know that they will be punished properly.

[901994] **Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I once again place on the record my thanks to the Lord Chancellor for backing my private Member's Bill which called for specific protection and punishment for those who desecrate memorials and graves to our glorious dead. The people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke also want to know whether this change in the law will protect the statue of Sir Winston Churchill in Parliament Square, which may not be a war memorial but is an important reminder to the public of our greatest Briton.

Robert Buckland: I thank my hon. Friend for raising an issue of genuine and widespread public concern. He will note that the phraseology in the Bill talks about memorials, which of course would include memorials such as the one to Sir Winston Churchill. The important point is that we can now move away from the court determining on the mere cost of repair to criminal damage to look at the overall cultural and emotional value of statues like that one, and indeed, ordinary "unvisited tombs", to quote George Eliot, of people who have a great value to the local community and to their loved ones.

[901991] **Kim Johnson** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): The Merseyside and Vauxhall law centres in Liverpool, Riverside are extremely concerned about how constituents access the legal advice that they need in the light of the drastic impact of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 cuts on legal aid, court waiting times and availability of advice. How does the Minister intend to ensure that the sector can provide access to justice in a properly functioning legal system for those facing problems with rent arrears, welfare benefits, employment, immigration, crime and domestic violence in the wake of the pandemic?

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Lady for paying tribute to law centres; she is absolutely right to do that. They do an important job of ensuring that individuals—sometimes vulnerable individuals—can get that vital legal advice and access to justice that they need. That is why, at the beginning of the pandemic, when the message came out that they might face real threats to their viability, we stepped in. The Law Centres Network asked for £3 million and we provided that. It was distributed through the network to ensure that law centres have the funds they need to continue their excellent work.

[901995] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): The number of Albanian prisoners in jail has increased from 524 in 2015 to 1,469 in 2020 and they now represent the largest single national group of foreign national offenders in custody. Although it is very good news that those criminals have been caught and sentenced, given that we have a compulsory prisoner transfer agreement with Albania, which was signed in 2013, why are those convicts not being sent back to Albania to serve out their sentences in prison in their own country?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend is right to analyse the figures closely. It is interesting to note that some of the assumptions that people make about foreign nationals and where they are from are out of date. My hon. Friend is right to highlight our agreement with Albania, but operationally those issues are difficult because often the individuals whom we have identified, prosecuted and properly incarcerated will not be known to the authorities in the receiving country and there are issues with identity. However, we carry on with our joint work across Government to ensure that as many of those foreign national offenders as possible are repatriated as quickly as possible. I think the latest cumulative figure over the past five years is about 5,000, but of course I will correct the record if that proves to be incorrect.

[901997] **Peter Kyle** (Hove) (Lab): It was good to see the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State condemning the harassment of Chris Whitty in recent days. However, the irony seems to be lost that Chris Whitty experienced textbook antisocial behaviour of the kind that happens increasingly up and down our country in every single community. Will the Secretary of State explain why antisocial behaviour has been rising for five years, yet use of antisocial behaviour orders and measures has fallen? When he introduces a victims Bill, will it include measures to give victim status to people who suffer from antisocial behaviour?

Robert Buckland: May I put on record my condemnation of the appalling incident involving Professor Whitty in the last few days? With regard to the way in which antisocial behaviour is policed, there have been welcome initiatives and, indeed, changes to the law by Government on preventive measures, particularly for young people and children. Our youth offending teams and other diversionary teams have done a lot to ensure that those issues do not end up before a court, when the damage is already done. I take the strong view that the distinction between crime and antisocial behaviour is artificial. Of course, I will look constructively at anything that we can incorporate in the forthcoming victims consultation and, indeed, the Bill, which, I assure the hon. Gentleman, will come.

[901996] **Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Con): Death by dangerous driving is not just heartbreaking for the families left behind, but has a huge impact on local communities. I am thinking in particular of Radcliffe New Road in my constituency. Will my right hon. and learned Friend highlight what work he is undertaking so that those who cause death by reckless and dangerous driving receive tougher sentences to reflect the serious nature of their crime?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend is right to raise on behalf of his constituents in Bury the real damage that can be caused to the community by careless and dangerous driving. Through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, we will increase the maximum penalties for causing death by careless driving while under the influence of drink and drugs, and for causing death by dangerous driving, from 14 years to life imprisonment. There will also be a new offence of causing serious injury by careless driving, to close a gap in the law.

[902000] **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): If reports are to be believed, my right hon. and learned Friend has used the reconsideration mechanism to re-refer the double murderer and child rapist Colin Pitchfork to the Parole Board. Can he confirm that is true? If it is, I thank him for listening to me, my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) and the people of Leicestershire, who still feel that crime vehemently. Does he agree that the legislation was brought in exactly for heinous crimes such as the Worboys case?

Robert Buckland: I thank my hon. Friend for speaking so strongly on behalf of his constituents. Colin Pitchfork's offences were the gravest of crimes, and the families of Lynda Mann and Dawn Ashworth still live with the pain that he caused. The independent Parole Board's role is to assess whether he is safe for release, rather than whether he has been punished enough. I understand why this decision has affected public confidence. It has been reviewed by officials in my Department, and we found arguable grounds that the decision was irrational, so I have asked the Parole Board to reconsider it using the mechanism that my hon. Friend rightly identified.

[902010] **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) [V]: Can the Secretary of State tell us why the Ministry of Justice has left the Stonewall Diversity Champions scheme? Can he reassure me that his Department will continue to respect the rights of all its LGBT employees, and indeed the rights of all those with protected characteristics, including women and those who hold gender-critical beliefs?

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for that question. I can absolutely assure her that the rights of LGBTQ+ people will be respected, honoured and celebrated by my Department. We are taking the fullest and most enthusiastic part in Pride Month, which of course is now. The issue with regard to Stonewall was simply this: my officials and I were no longer convinced that the particular scheme that we had taken part in was the right use of public money. There were concerns about the direction of that organisation, which has done so much to advance the cause of people of an LGBT+ orientation. It was with great sorrow and regret that that decision was made, but I assure the hon. and learned Lady that the underlying commitment to and passion for those issues absolutely remains.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): Over 8,000 criminal cases are waiting to be resolved in Devon and Cornwall. Many of my constituents in East Devon are anxiously awaiting progress on their cases, and they feel no closer to justice. What steps is my right hon. and learned Friend taking to reducing the backlogs in Devon?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend is right to raise issues affecting his constituents. He will be glad to know that in his region, huge strides have been made in magistrates and Crown courts to deal effectively with the case load. Based on the figures I see regularly, I am encouraged by the progress being made in his local courts. That is part of a national drive to deal with capacity, which we have increased through Nightingale courts. There is no limit on sitting days in the Crown

court during the year ahead. If all is well with the road map later in July, the further easing of restrictions will allow even more cases to be listed, so that justice can be delivered as quickly as possible, both for my hon. Friend's constituents and for the wider public.

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

12.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

Emergency Covid Contracts

12.37 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the Government's use of emergency covid contracts.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez): Urgent questions are appearing like buses for me this week.

I am grateful for the chance to address the House about the Government's use of emergency covid contracts. I have previously responded to debates on this issue with as much detail and candour as I have been able to provide as someone who came to this brief last June and who has tried subsequently to understand what happened in the early months of the pandemic.

The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) will know that all corners of our country have worked together to tackle covid. The public have all too often seen division between different regional authorities but, in truth, close collaboration with the devolved Administrations has been at the heart of our pandemic response, enabling swift policy action such as the roll-out of the vaccine programme UK-wide, the furlough scheme and a rapid increase in testing capacity.

At the beginning of the pandemic, over 13 million items of personal protective equipment were distributed to the devolved Administrations. Throughout the pandemic, the UK Government and the devolved Administrations have worked side by side on sourcing and supply of PPE such as FFP3 masks, and they continue to work together on meeting future demands on frontline staff. The existing procurement rules rightly allow the Government to procure at speed at times of emergency under the Public Contracts Regulations 2015. The rules predate covid-19, and there was no need for suspension or relaxation in order for them to be used. None the less, I understand and welcome questions that right hon. and hon. Members have about covid contracts, because how we spend taxpayers' money matters very deeply to public trust.

It is true to say that the Government faced a number of challenges at the height of the pandemic, and we should be open about those. It is incumbent on all of us to understand not only the kinds of pressures that were on the system, but some of the shortcomings that desperately need to be addressed. That being the case, the Government are already adapting their commercial guidance and work. Following the first, independent Boardman review of procurement processes, looking at a small number of contracts in the Government Communication Service, 24 out of 28 recommendations have already been implemented, and the remainder will be met by the end of the calendar year. Following the second, wider Boardman review, which looked at PPE, ventilators, test and trace, vaccines and food parcels across Government, 28 further recommended improvements were identified, and progress on those is under way. Our Green Paper on transforming public procurement also sets out proposals to update the rules on procuring in times of extreme emergency or crisis.

Let me also briefly address the issue of Government polling during the pandemic. The Government regularly undertake research to support policy development, which includes work related to the impact of covid in areas across the UK. It is the sign of a responsible Government to understand the public's views on how best to keep people safe to recover from the pandemic and to ensure that we will continue to deliver for all parts of the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: I call Ian Blackford, who has got two minutes.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I welcome the Minister to her place; it is the first time I have appeared opposite her.

After the revelations and resignations at the weekend, this urgent question concerns yet another scandal at the very heart of this Tory Government. It seems that not even a health pandemic can do away with classic Tory cronyism, and the scale of this particular scandal makes it one of the biggest yet.

The Secretary of State ordered the use of a £560,000 emergency covid contract to conduct constitutional campaigning on the Union. Instead of using an emergency covid contract to order PPE for the NHS, the Minister chose to order political polling. This is not media speculation, and it is not even a political accusation. It is, Mr Speaker, a plain fact. It comes directly from official evidence that has been published in the High Court. It comes in evidence from the Cabinet Office, in a witness statement dated 24 December 2020, which states:

> "I...received an urgent request for Union-related research from the office of the Rt Hon Michael Gove...In response, I asked Public First to conduct some testing of people's attitudes"

on this issue.

Did the Prime Minister know or approve of that polling and constitutional campaigning? Who were the polling results shared with, and will they be published in full? How many other pieces of political research were ordered during the pandemic, and exactly how much public money has been spent? These are just some of the questions that the Secretary of State needs to answer. There are many, many more.

The Secretary of State was in Scotland yesterday. He held a press conference. He told Greg Russell of *The National* newspaper:

> "We don't use taxpayer funds for party political polling".

He went on to claim that the contract was assigned by others. We know from the witness statement that these things are not true. The truth and this Government are distant strangers, and that should come as no surprise when we remember the Prime Minister has been sacked not once but twice for lying.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Withdraw!

Ian Blackford: Last Wednesday at Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister said he was unaware of these contracts, and ever since he has ignored demands for a full—

Mr Speaker: Order. A serious allegation about somebody lying will have to be withdrawn—as we know, hon. Members would never lie. I am sure we would like to think about the language being used, because I am not convinced about the proof of that. I think we should withdraw the word "lie".

Ian Blackford: I have been very careful with my language, Mr Speaker, and I am pointing out the contradiction between the witness—

Mr Speaker: Order. *[Interruption.]* Order. Mr Blackford, please. You cannot criticise another Member such as the Prime Minister without a substantive motion. That is not what has been granted. The language we use is important for me to keep good order, and I am sure you could reflect on the words about another Member, who I presume has also been given notice of any criticism.

Ian Blackford: Indeed, I am relying on matters of fact, Mr Speaker. Just as the Prime Minister failed to act and sack his Health Secretary, he has failed to act on this scandal, too. But no matter how hard they might try to sweep this under the carpet, this scandal is not going away. This morning I have written to the Cabinet Secretary, urging him to launch—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are now one minute over the time that I granted. I hope the right hon. Gentleman is now going to end in the next seconds.

Ian Blackford: This morning I have written to the Cabinet Secretary urging him to launch an independent investigation into this blatant misuse of public money for political purposes. So finally, if this UK Government have nothing to hide, will the Minister join me in supporting that investigation by the Cabinet Secretary, and will she co-operate with it?

Julia Lopez: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his questions, and I will try to address them with facts, not party political allegation. First, if I may, I would like to provide some context to the direct award of the Public First contract for communications during the pandemic. In March 2020, there was no vaccine, no test and trace, and very little knowledge of how to best manage this novel disease. Strong messaging of the kind that could alter behaviours was, at the outset of the pandemic, one of the few tools in our arsenal in the battle against transmission. It was in this context that rapid decisions were made on comms contracts, including a decision that was challenged in court recently.

Public First was taken on, alongside BritainThinks, as one of only two companies in the market deemed to have the scale, expertise and experience to provide focus group testing in March last year. Both were rapidly diverted from existing work to take a snapshot of public reaction, and that allowed us to test things such as the contain strategy, the early "Stop The Spread" campaign and the "Stay Home" message, alongside an understanding of how best to tailor messages to different audiences across the UK. These key communications campaigns were seen on television and social media, and I am sure we will all be familiar with them.

Ministers had no personal involvement in the decision to award this contract, and they do not, of course, personally approve contract awards. This contract did not relate to constitutional campaigning, and any suggestion that the Government carry out party political research is entirely false.

Ian Blackford: That's a lie!

Mr Bone: Kick him out!

Mr Speaker: Order. I am trying to listen. Minister, carry on.

Julia Lopez: The Government regularly conduct research in every part of the UK to support policy development. In this case, we were testing public attitudes relating to the covid-19 pandemic. This became particularly relevant as different regions of the UK began to diverge in their approach to tackling covid, and that created understandable confusion.

Focus groups, which were conducted by Public First but commissioned by the national resilience communications hub, looked at attitudes towards the virus, upcoming recovery and the wider context in which to interpret the results, and the results were shared with relevant policy and communications teams. They were involved in developing and delivering covid policy and communications across the devolved Administrations, enabling them to differentiate their content and messages as appropriate. We do not plan to publish the full results of the polling and focus groups that have been used to inform ongoing policy formulation. However, we regularly review all the data we collect, and we intend to publish the elements that are not sensitive in due course.

Separately, the Cabinet Office carries out polling on attitudes towards the Union on a regular basis, but this work was paused during the coronavirus crisis. We are aware that the Scottish Government also conducted polling on attitudes in relation to covid. We did not see this research, nor would we expect to. The Secretary of State for Scotland has already addressed some of the questions that the right hon. Gentleman has raised online on his Twitter account.

Finally, to return to the judgment on Public First at the recent court hearing, that judgment found in favour of the Government on two grounds, which were emergency award and contract terms, including length. It was recognised that

"everyone involved was acting under immense pressure and the urgency of the…crisis did not allow time for reflection. The time constraints justified…derogation from the usual procedures required under PCR 2015. But they did not exonerate the Defendant from conducting the procurement so as to demonstrate a fair and impartial process of selection."

We have already recognised that there was an issue of process, where we could do much better. That is why we investigated what had happened to prepare for the court case. We launched an internal independent review—the subsequent Boardman review—which is published in full online. We have taken forward its recommendations in full, and have nearly delivered all of them. A steering group, chaired by our chief financial officer, has been tracking implementation.

I hope that the right hon. Gentleman feels reassured by my answers. I look forward to continued collaboration with the Scottish Government to the benefit of citizens across our Union.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): Against unprecedented global demand for vital equipment, the UK Government secured over 32 billion items of PPE, including for our devolved Administrations. Also against the odds, and against the desire of some on the Opposition Benches who wished to remain in the EU vaccine programme, the UK again successfully secured

[Mr Richard Holden]

a world-leading programme. The marketing budget for the vaccine programme was just 0.07% of the budget. Sensibly, it included work to ensure that messaging had the maximum impact in all parts of the United Kingdom to save as many lives as possible. This was rightly done at pace, and should this not be celebrated, rather than be used as a party political point-scoring urgent question by the Opposition SNP?

Mr Speaker: I think there is a question there!

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for pointing out just how fantastic the co-operation has been between all parts of our United Kingdom. The UK Government have provided huge support to the Scottish Government and other devolved Administrations—that comes in testing capacity; we have helped with PPE; we have obviously helped with the furlough scheme—and, as he says, that should be celebrated, not denigrated.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I think it is worth reiterating that the Government have been found to have acted unlawfully over the contract with Public First. Their attitude is that the rules do not apply to them. Given that the judge found apparent bias, surely this must now be referred to the independent adviser and the Cabinet Secretary. What are they scared of?

I know all too well, on the point made by the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), the need to secure PPE for our frontline NHS and social care workers, but while nurses were working in bin bags, others were filling their pockets at the taxpayer's expense. The Minister quoted the National Audit Office, but the Comptroller and Auditor General said that the evidence shows that

"standards of transparency…were not consistently met".

Perhaps the Minister can explain today why the National Audit Office found that PestFix, for example, was wrongly added to the high priority lane and awarded over £300 million after a shareholder reminded a senior official that he was a friend of his father-in-law.

The Minister claimed that a full eight-stage process always took place, but the NAO found over 70 contracts awarded before that process even existed. Can she confirm that Ayanda Capital was placed on the VIP list without that process, thanks to an adviser to the International Trade Secretary? Officials admitted that due diligence had not been carried out on Ayanda, and the bar seems to have been lowered in that case.

Mr Speaker, £150 million was spent on entirely useless PPE, so can the Minister confirm how much equipment bought this way was not fit for use? We already know that over £10 billion has been awarded without a competitive tender—for example, the £100 million given to Pharmaceuticals Direct Ltd after lobbying by the Home Secretary, with millions apparently ending up in the hands of her close associate, the "broker" to the deal. Will the Home Secretary be referred to the independent adviser—and if not, why not?

Yesterday, the Minister accepted that private emails were used by other Ministers in the process of awarding contracts, but the Prime Minister's official spokesperson denied it. Will the Minister ensure that the record is now corrected?

Finally, the Minister promised that all such emails are covered by freedom of information. We have submitted such a request, but how will the former and current Health Ministers be prevented from permanently deleting the emails first? I urge her to refer the whole issue to the Information Commissioner. Surely she can see why only an independent process can restore trust. If Ministers want to be taken seriously by the public, then, quite frankly, they need to stop taking the hit and miss.

Julia Lopez: I have listened over this past year to the criticisms and attacks made by the Opposition and campaign groups on covid contracts, and I take them very seriously. That is why I took the time, when I assumed my role after maternity leave, to understand what happened. I do not think anyone is standing here suggesting that everything went smoothly during the height of pandemic. It did not. A whole series of challenges were faced and shortcomings highlighted. I have now twice set out in some detail the problems that have been described to me, and I have set out what we are doing to resolve them.

Let me go through some of them in relation to PPE. Some 450 people from across Government were moved into the Department of Health and Social Care to become a stand-up virtual team to assist with securing PPE. That team is normally only 21 people strong. That meant a lot of people who did not know each other working remotely on a range of different IT systems, with suppliers they did not know, on product they were not familiar with, in the most highly pressured market of their careers. That has led to lags in contract publication, as paperwork has been very tricky to join up across systems.

Faced with exceptional global demand, the usual vendors in China, which service the central procurement function, very quickly ran out of supply, and the world descended on a few factories in that country to bid for available items. It was in that market context that the Government had to procure with extreme urgency. That was often through direct award of contracts. If we did not do that, we risked missing out on vital supplies. We never ripped up procurement rules. It was a situation of genuine crisis and extreme urgency, where offers had to be accepted or rejected in a matter of hours or days, and it was simply not viable to run the usual procurement timescales.

The effort to secure PPE was herculean and involved setting up a new logistics network from scratch. I have explained in Parliament on a number of occasions that the VIP fast-track lane that has been touted often by the Opposition, was actually a mailbox set up by officials during the height of the pandemic to consider some of the 15,000 offers of assistance to supply PPE. In the early months, leads were coming in a lot faster than they could be processed. When they were rejected, or if they were delayed, people started chasing them through their MPs or through Ministers. To manage that influx of offers, a separate mailbox was set up to handle this area of work and sift credible offers.

I addressed yesterday concerns about private email use and the rules governing it. Government guidance is that official devices, email accounts and comms applications should be used for communicating classified information, but that 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. We also set out that where business is conducted on non-official IT, relevant information should be recorded on Government systems, but we are keeping the guidance under review to ensure that it is up to date.

The most important thing to note, as the right hon. Lady does, is that all PPE offers, no matter where they came from, went through the same eight-stage checks. The PPE team compared prices with those obtained in the previous two weeks, to benchmark the competitiveness of those offers. Separate approval and additional justification were required for any offers not within 25% of the average that were considered for possible approval. It is also important to note that of the 493 offers that went through the priority mailbox, I understand that only 47 were taken forward—in other words, 90% were rejected.

There have been judicial reviews in respect of some of those contracts. The case relating to the Department of Health and Social Care looked not at the awarding of contracts, but at the delays in publishing their details. Health Ministers have always been clear that transparency is vital, and the court found that there was no deliberate policy to delay publication. In the judicial review relating to Public First, the court recognised

"that everyone involved was acting under immense pressure and the urgency of the…crisis did not allow time for reflection. The time constraints justified the…derogation from the usual procedures required under PCR 2015. But they did not exonerate the Defendant"—

us—

"from conducting the procurement so as to demonstrate a fair and impartial process of selection."

We recognised very quickly that there was an issue of process where we could do much better. That is why we investigated what happened to prepare for that court case and launched an internal review into the contracts that were undertaken. Public First has cross-party directors and, as I mentioned, we already have a programme of work in the two Boardman reviews.

I appreciate that throughout the pandemic the Opposition have wanted to raised questions about the contracts. I hope that I can address them as best I can. If there are any questions that the right hon. Lady feels I have not covered, I will come back to her on them.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): With nothing better to do, the Opposition continue to sensationalise the details surrounding a handful of high-value contracts that were subject to the emergency procurement procedures at the outset of the pandemic. Can my hon. Friend confirm that the Government are committed to transparency surrounding the use of taxpayers' money and that all new contracts over £10,000 are published online for anybody who wishes to see them?

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say that it is my decision to grant a UQ? You are now questioning my judgment, and I am not going to have my judgment questioned.

The other thing to say is that I do feel sorry for the Minister being set up. I am sorry that Minister Gove was not here to take some of the questions, because most of them are named for him, but this House will not be taken for granted. When statements continue to be made outside the House, I will continue to grant UQs, so let's get used to it. If the Government do not want to come here, I will ensure that they are heard here.

Julia Lopez: Thank you, Mr Speaker; I appreciate your zeal and I think you are right.

I thank my hon. Friend for her question. We have tried throughout to be transparent, but I have set out some of the very good reasons why it has been difficult sometimes to publish the contracts in a timely way. This has been a very complex process where we have had to surge teams at very short notice and go back through all the paperwork, looking across different IT systems across different Departments. That has been a challenge that I have tried to address, as has the Department of Health and Social Care. My understanding is that all PPE contracts are now transparently published. We are working through them all in relation to comms and have a programme of work under way to make sure that we have transparent publication. I completely agree that it is important that we offer reassurances to the public on how taxpayers' funds are used.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Government were able to award contracts using their high priority lane because this House gave them the power to do so. We did it, effectively, on trust. Will the Minister now repay the trust that this House placed in the Government by publishing the details not just of the contracts that were put through that high priority lane, but of those who introduced the contractors to the Government, the basis on which it was thought appropriate to put them through the high priority lane and the economic outcomes of those decisions?

Julia Lopez: I thank the right hon. Member for his inquiries. As I say, 47 went through the high priority lane, and discussions are under way on the extent to which we can be transparent about that because of commercial sensitivities. However, as I said, all PPE contracts have now been transparently published.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): Our vaccine programme is a fantastic example of how the best of the British science industry and Government have worked together to tackle the virus. Does my hon. Friend agree that without the expertise, willingness to take risk and innovation of our private sector, the success of the vaccine programme would not have been possible?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is quite right to point out that we absolutely need commercial expertise in times of pandemic and any similar crises that may come along. As we look at how we can do things better on procurement in the future, we must guard against crowding out external expertise and taking an overly cautious approach to risk. While I absolutely accept that there are questions to be asked after the event, the priority in times of crisis must always be delivering on the ground, and that is what we have always sought to do.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister's tone in coming to the House in that she has acknowledged that mistakes were made and that the Cabinet Office has accepted both Boardman reviews and the National Audit Office's

[Meg Hillier]

recommendations on procurement. However, we are in a whole different ball game when members of her Cabinet are having private email exchanges and neither we nor officials know what is in them. She says that the Cabinet Office is reviewing guidance. Is it not time that she just said, "This must stop," because nobody—not the National Audit Office or officials—can see what is in those conversations, and that is a very real concern for the taxpayer?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Lady, who has done tremendous work through the Public Accounts Committee in scrutinising this area. Sometimes I think she has been leading the opposition—not the Opposition—on this. It is important that we focus on where we had problems and the very genuine concerns that need to be addressed. She raises matters in relation to emails. I cannot comment on email conversations that I have not seen.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): That's the point.

Julia Lopez: But those are relevant only when officials are asked to take any action, and that is the point at which official process and procedure come into play. I know the hon. Lady does not want to listen to this, but that is why the eight-stage process that officials undertook is so important; that is the aspect that should reassure the public that there are procedures that ensure that taxpayers' money is spent correctly.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): Normal contract procedures for PPE take months to navigate—months that patients and staff simply did not have last year—so criticising the Government for abbreviating procedures to save time and lives seems a poor use of hindsight. Is my hon. Friend aware that exactly the same decision to abbreviate processes in the name of speed was taken by Labour in Wales and by the SNP in Scotland, the only difference being that the SNP wanted to suspend freedom of information requests at the same time?

Julia Lopez: My hon. Friend is right that the devolved Administrations also use regulation 32 to procure in an emergency. It is important to note that the Government are dissatisfied with the procedures at our disposal. That is why, in our procurement Green Paper, we are looking at what measures we can take to procure with greater transparency and success in times of crisis to give us a better option between a full-fat procurement, which takes too long, or a direct award, which raises concerns about transparency.

Mr Speaker: Let us go to Liz Saville Roberts.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC) [V]: Diolch yn fawr, Llefarydd. Let us call this out for what it is: a gross misuse of public money. The shady deal to award a half-a-million-pound covid contract to Ministers' friends at Public First is yet another example of Tories putting Tory interests first. Given that focus groups were held in Wales, did the Secretary of State for Wales consent to the decision to use the Public First contract for political research purposes?

Julia Lopez: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. As I said, we do not use public money for political campaigning purposes.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) on securing the urgent question.

The Minister seems to be auditioning for the role of Minister for the Cabinet Office; I do not know whether he has been kidnapped but he does not seem to be about at the moment—but my hon. Friend is doing very well. Is this urgent question not an opportunity to highlight the fact that if the Government had not used emergency powers, we would not have established the world-leading vaccination programmes, which have saved not just hundreds of thousands but probably millions of lives across the globe? They used the emergency powers to develop the vaccine programme, rather than go through the red tape and bureaucracy that the European Union did and did not develop a programme.

Julia Lopez: I assure my hon. Friend that I am not auditioning for that position; the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has not been kidnapped. He is in Scotland, as part of our efforts to make sure that we are less Whitehall-centric as a Government—we have offices now in Glasgow.

My hon. Friend is right about the importance of being able to take sensible risks that save lives in times of crisis, which is what we did in a number of these areas, and that was the right decision to make.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The question is not about the emergency use of funds to buy lifesaving vaccines and equipment; it is about the deliberate misappropriation of those funds for political canvassing purposes—it cannot be disguised as anything more than that. It is noticeable that none of the fake outrage from Conservative Members has attempted to address that question as yet.

If the Minister is so concerned about knowing what Scotland's attitude to the Union is, may I point her to the biggest opinion survey ever conducted in Scotland? In May, the people of Scotland voted by a majority for pro-independence parties. The Scottish Parliament has a pro-independence majority yet again. Does she accept that that is a proper demonstration of the will of the people of Scotland to be rid of this corrupt Union, once and for all?

Julia Lopez: There was a proper demonstration of the will of the Scottish people when they had their referendum on Scottish independence and made their views clear. Interestingly, Scottish National party Members never seem to accept that.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that this was not a PPE contract; it was a contract about communications and the important role they played in managing the pandemic at a time when we did not have the vaccine, the testing capacity that we wanted or other measures that we needed to tackle the pandemic. Communications, in this context, were extremely important in making sure the public understood the behaviours they needed to adopt to keep themselves safe.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Ministers are not actually in charge of checking contracts—the civil service is. Does my hon. Friend agree that any contract, whether urgent or not, always requires due diligence by the civil service, even after the decision, and that that happens within every Department? I find accusations of cronyism to be normally very wrong indeed—does she agree?

Julia Lopez: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question, and I do agree. As I set out, there are a number of assurances the public should take from the way in which contracts are managed and handled; these things are quite separate from Ministers, which should provide the public with the comfort they want.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: It is clear that nothing is clear about the way this Government are procuring goods and services with public money, and it is these dodgy deals that anger my constituents who play by the rules while Government fails to. Following the National Audit Office report and the Boardman review's recommendations on process and practice, process in governance, and conflict of interest and bias, what progress has the Minister made in implementing those recommendations? Will she publish an update on the Government's actions and place it in the House of Commons Library? In auditing these contracts, will she ensure that they have fulfilled what they promised to do?

Julia Lopez: Yes, I believe that the Public Accounts Committee will be updated on the second Boardman report in July. With regard to the first Boardman report on communications contracts, we are working through all the recommendations. I believe we are up to 20 of 24, but we will endeavour to complete that process by the end of the year.[1]

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): From the onset of the pandemic, the contracts we have signed have allowed us to procure billions of items of PPE and secure vital lifesaving equipment at a time of unprecedented global demand. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we had dithered and delayed, if we had not explored every possible opportunity, and if we had not tried to take advantage of every olive branch that was offered, the public would never have forgiven us and the Opposition would be sitting here today saying exactly the opposite: that we did not act quickly enough?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I believe that the Opposition asked us to strain every sinew at the time of the pandemic, and that is what we did.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP) [V]: Can the Minister clarify the exact total of taxpayers' money abhorrently used to conduct political research throughout the pandemic?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. There was no money used on political campaigning.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for the answers she has given thus far. At the start of the pandemic, we were competing across the world for the supply of PPE and other lifesaving equipment and for developing vaccines. It is quite clear that the Government had to make instant decisions on that procurement, competing against other nations. The key now is learning the lessons that come from that process, so will she undertake to ensure that there is a full review of the emergency procedures that may be needed, in case there is another pandemic or a requirement for us to set aside normal procurement rules?

Julia Lopez: My hon. Friend is quite right to set out some of the challenges we faced at the height of the pandemic. When it comes to procuring PPE, for instance, we were competing with every other country in the world for PPE from just a few factories in China, and that was extremely difficult. Frankly, if we had dithered and delayed, we would not have secured the supplies we needed. In terms of learning the lessons that he wishes us to learn, I can assure him that we are already doing that. That is why we conducted the Boardman 1 and 2 reviews, and the National Audit Office has looked over these matters in fine detail. The public inquiry into covid will begin next spring.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): It has been revealed that a handful of Conservative party donors who gave the party £8.2 million have won Government covid contracts worth £881 million. It was also recently revealed that just three days after a Conservative billionaire donor was made a Lord—with the Prime Minister overruling his own appointments watchdog to push that decision through—the donor gave the party half a million pounds. What does the Minister say to my constituents who ask why the pandemic has meant growing poverty for them, while for Tory donors it has been an opportunity to line their pockets through dodgy deals?

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Lady for her concerns, and I wish to assure her that a link to the Conservative party was not one of the criteria that needed to be fulfilled when those PPE contracts were being undertaken.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab) [V]: The National Audit Office report on PPE procurement made it clear that there was a lack of transparency in the documentation relating to key procurement decisions. We now know about the routine use of private emails to conduct Government business, which raises the question whether the NAO could not find all the documentation because it was hidden away in private email accounts. Can the Minister now give us an assurance that all relevant private emails were handed over to the NAO as part of its investigations? If she cannot give us that assurance, can she ensure that all those private emails will now be passed over to the NAO?

Julia Lopez: In relation to the challenges we faced in trying to transparently publish all the contracts, I have set out some of the reasons for them. It was partly because a team of 450 people had to be surged across Government, and they were all working on different IT systems. Going back and trying to look at all the documentation relating to PPE has been a real challenge, and those challenges have been acknowledged in the various court cases that have been brought. I wish to assure the hon. Gentleman with regard to the emails that, in so far as freedom of information requests are made, they will be looked at in the relevant way.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Every week, SNP Members come to this House with the sole focus of tearing our country apart, while every week this Government are focused on delivering on the British people's priorities and building back better from the pandemic. Does the Minister agree that if the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) wants to use this time to explore conspiracy theories, he should instead go and look for the Loch Ness monster?

1. *[Official Report, 12 July 2021, Vol. 699, c. 2MC.]*

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his question about the Loch Ness monster, whose existence I can neither confirm nor deny. He is right to highlight the fantastic ways in which our Union has worked together during the pandemic, whether that be on vaccine procurement, on the schemes that have been run out by the Treasury, or on some of the testing capacity that we have provided. We should not overlook the fantastic Union story that we have seen during this pandemic.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: It is absolutely gobsmacking that, in the middle of a pandemic, Tory Ministers secretly redirected funds from an emergency covid contract to carry out political polling to benefit the Conservative party and its Unionist cause. Following the humiliation of the High Court case, will the Minister now commit to a full public inquiry into this gross misuse of public money? Does she take any responsibility for this failure and will she apologise for it?

Julia Lopez: As I have set out on numerous occasions this afternoon, that was not political campaigning; it was important work that was being undertaken as part of our response to the pandemic.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): The Opposition parties are accusing the Government of corruption—of deliberate and systematic corruption. They are claiming that Ministers used the biggest peacetime challenge that this country has ever faced for the simple purpose of enriching a few distantly connected contacts. As my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General put it in answering the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) a few weeks ago, this is an absurd charge. It is simply unbelievable. Everybody knows it; we know it, they know it and the public know it. It is a conspiracy theory on the level of the anti-vax campaign. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking the businesses that stepped up to supply the NHS with what it needed rather than smearing them?

Julia Lopez: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out the importance of what business achieved with the Government in relation to the pandemic. Some fantastic commercial expertise has been brought into Government. One thing we want to do is to set up a secondments unit to make sure that we can get that private sector expertise into Government when it is needed. There are also a number of other initiatives, such as civilian reserves, that can be used so that we can get that expertise as and when we need it in times of crisis.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Mr Speaker, here is how it works. Lord Bethell, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, held a private undeclared meeting with Abingdon Health, which then won an £85 million contract. Andrew Feldman, the former chair of the Tory party, became an unpaid adviser to Lord Bethell and he managed to lobby and get a client a PPE contract for £23 million. We have had David Cameron, the former Prime Minister, lobbying the Government direct. We know that the Minister for the Cabinet Office was found in court to have acted unlawfully with apparent bias with regards to an award to Public First. That is why we need a full proper inquiry not just into the awarding of contracts, but into the lobbying that goes on in the background for companies that have no track record in delivering the kinds of contracts that were awarded.

Julia Lopez: I set out the reasons for the court case and what the judgment actually said, rather than what the hon. Gentleman is implying that it said. It was in relation to some procedural issues that we have addressed via the Boardman recommendations.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Does the Minister agree that what the people of this country want to see is all politicians coming together to get this country back on its feet, rather than the party political squabbling around PPE contracts that were absolutely necessary and needed at speed to save lives? Let us put people first.

Julia Lopez: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I have already said in this Chamber, tremendous work has been done with every corner of the UK and every devolved Administration, whether that is the vaccine programme, the furlough scheme or the rapid increase in testing capacity.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con) [V]: Has the Minister read the allegations made by Dominic Cummings that Ministers and officials would take procurement decisions and then subsequently a meeting would be arranged to pretend to retake them and go through the paperwork properly? Can she confirm that such behaviour would be completely unacceptable and that any investigation is taking place to determine whether these allegations are true?

Julia Lopez: I am afraid that I do not know in relation to the private meetings that Dominic Cummings had when he was in Government, but I know that he has set out concerns about our response to procurement in relation to getting the wrong answers after the event. I think he is concerned about whether we then create too much process around important decisions that need to be made in the heat of the moment, and he is right to set out those concerns. We need to make sure that our Green Paper on procurement makes us have better decision-making processes in times of crisis that can be properly scrutinised.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba) [V]: Last week at the Dispatch Box, the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), bragged that the Government were

"unleashing the potential of our whole country"—

countries—

"by backing British industry"—[*Official Report*, 21 June 2021; Vol. 697, c. 672-673.]

He derided China for "trade-distorting practices" and dismissed trade deals with China. That all sounds good, except it is just not true. Today in a covid briefing, the Government's position on the US Food and Drug Agency judgment that the Innova tests were deadly was that it is down to an overreliance on the manufacturer's data, and that the tests are being tested at Porton Down to disprove the Chinese manufacturer's own data that they are unsafe. All the while, the UK diagnostic industry across the countries of the UK has been utterly betrayed.

Can the Minister tell me: why are this Government using trade-distorting practices to prop up discredited Innova lateral flow devices made on the cheap in China but at massive expense to the UK? Why are UK diagnostic contracts and the hundreds of jobs that Lord Bethell—

Mr Speaker: I think the Minister has got the question; come on, Minister.

Neale Hanvey *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman may shake his head or his hands, but he ought to realise that Members have the right to be heard, and not just him for the length of time that he thinks is appropriate; I will make the decision on that.

Julia Lopez: I am enjoying your zest today, Mr Speaker.

The hon. Gentleman raised with me the importance of onshore manufacturing capacity in Westminster Hall last week. I have asked for a briefing on the issue and shall get back to him, because he raised an important issue about the extent to which we have key manufacturing capacity in this country. Project Defend in the Department for International Trade aims to ensure that we have the capacity that we need.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister and the Government for their massive and positive response to covid-19, and for a vaccine roll-out that is second to none. Has the Minister made an assessment of the sustainability of the Government's use of emergency covid-19 contracts with large firms, and will she confirm whether the contracts have been beneficial to the UK, given the potential and alleged anomalies that occurred at their procurement?

Julia Lopez: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight how fantastically the devolved Administrations have worked with central Government on some of the critical issues that have faced us during the pandemic. He raised the issue of large firms. One hope in our procurement Green Paper is that our procurement reforms will make it much easier for small and medium-sized enterprises to bid for key Government contracts.

Angela Rayner: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the last 24 hours, we have had two urgent questions; the Minister for the Cabinet Office has not appeared, although the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), has done her best. In the last hour, we have heard media reports that No. 10 has confirmed that Lord Bethell used his private email address in regard to procurement. I seek your advice as to how we get clarity on this matter, because there have been misleading reports over the last 24 hours. How can we get an independent inquiry so that we actually get to the facts of the case?

Mr Speaker: Obviously, I am not aware of what has just been announced. If we are going to criticise, there needs to be a substantive motion, but the right hon. Lady is asking about the internal arrangements. Her point is now on the record; I hope that people have been listening to her request. We will take it from there. I am sure that this will not be the end of the matter being raised. I know that she will use her best endeavours and offices to ensure that the issue continues to be addressed.

We are going to suspend the House for two minutes so that the necessary arrangements can be made before the next business.

1.23 pm

Sitting suspended.

International Travel

Mr Speaker: Order. I wish to make a short statement before we take the next urgent question. Last Thursday evening, the Government announced changes to the countries listed on the green and red travel lists. They also announced that they intended that fully vaccinated UK residents returning from amber list countries would not have to isolate from later in the summer. These are important announcements. They should be made to this House first. The fact that Transport Ministers were answering oral questions in the Chamber that morning only strengthens the case.

Although I do not have to explain my reasons for allowing the urgent question, in this case I want to say to those on the Government Benches that if Ministers choose to make important announcements outside this Chamber first, they must not be surprised that I will grant urgent questions on those matters. In fact, I will just continue to grant them on the basis that there may be a statement, because it seems that this Chamber is being ridden over roughshod. I will continue to make sure that this House gets an opportunity to scrutinise the Government, but it would be better for all concerned if the Government simply followed their own ministerial code and made important announcements to this House, to which Members are elected to represent their constituents and to ensure that Ministers and Secretaries of State can be scrutinised with questions—not via the media, but via MPs.

I call Jim McMahon to ask the urgent question.

1.28 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the Government's plans for international travel.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): After 15 months of restrictions and lockdowns, I know that everybody in the House is determined to get this pandemic behind us, so that we might finally begin to think about returning to some sort of normality. Decisions over how to control our borders during these unprecedented times are of course never easy. In everything we do, the overwhelming priority is to protect the public and the hard-won gains that have been made.

Last week, in recognition of the hugely successful vaccination programme, we were able to confirm that in the future, when I will certainly return to the House, fully vaccinated people will be able to avoid quarantine when they return from countries on the amber list.

I want to be realistic with the House: this is a complicated policy that requires time to work through. First, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has yet to opine on whether children should be part of a vaccination programme. They are not at present, and we must resolve how children would therefore be treated under a programme that enabled people to travel without vaccinations.

Next is the question of what to do for people who cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons or are perhaps on one of the non-standard vaccine trials. That accounts for around half a million people and we need to work out what to do in that respect.

There is also the question of how to recognise vaccine status at ports and airports. That is easier for people who have been vaccinated in the UK, because the main NHS app—I should stress that I am not talking about the test and trace app—can already display a person's vaccine status, but it is less easy to prove for someone coming from overseas, particularly if their country has a paper-based system.

As a result of all this work, we will announce to the House when we are ready to make these decisions in order to bring this system into place. It will most likely be phased in for UK residents first.

As has been said, we have confirmed changes to the traffic light system, which take place tonight, at 4 am. That will change the countries that are on the red and the green lists. There are some complications with establishing the list on a UK-wide basis, including with the devolved Administrations. Once the decisions have been made, it is also very difficult not to have them escape from the various different Administrations, so I apologise to the House for not always being able to get here first before I start to read of them in the newspapers. In this particular case, I heard them instantaneously—or within an hour or so, I should say—from the devolved Administrations elsewhere in the UK, meaning that the story was already out there. Malta, Madeira, the Balearic islands and several UK overseas territories and Caribbean islands will be added to the green list, while a further six countries will move to the red category, as we continue to adapt our system.

Our border regime is one of the toughest in the world and I know, from chairing meetings of the G7 Transport Ministers, that it is closely tracked and in some cases followed by other countries. We are now focused on the long-term issue of how to keep our country safe while getting international travel back up and running. These decisions are not easy and will not be enhanced by simplistic calls to stick countries on either a red list or a green list without providing the level of detail that the amber list helps to provide. In comparison, this Government are taking a cautious, evidence-based approach. I will return to the House with more information once we are aware of the details.

Jim McMahon: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. As you pointed out, it was unacceptable that the Government were not willing to come to the House to make the announcement when the traffic light system was reviewed last week. Thank you so much for your robust defence of Parliament on this matter.

Passengers and the industry want to see a clear plan of action, supported by transparent data and with measured interventions to balance the urgent need to keep our borders safe with the desire to support aviation and tourism.

First, on data and country-by-country assessment, I urge the Secretary of State to publish not only the decision-making criteria for the traffic light system but, importantly, the analysis that underpins it.

We have been pushing for the Government to show international leadership, but so far they have failed to step up. Why will they not bring forward concrete plans for an international vaccine passport that will be accepted by key destination countries?

International co-operation is key to getting travel back up and running again, yet the Prime Minister missed a golden opportunity at the G7, including with the US. What progress has been made on reaching an agreement to see the safe return of transatlantic travel?

As much as we want to see more countries added to the green list, we also want to see a robust red list. Given that the easing of restrictions has been delayed throughout the country, will the Secretary of State now commit to reviewing the decision not to place India on the red list, so that lessons can be learned?

Labour's position is clear: we have set out a sectoral deal and a simplified red and green list, supported by clear country-by-country assessment that shows the clear direction of travel. The Government also promised a sectoral deal, so when can the industry expect to see that promised sectoral deal? In the early days of this pandemic the public were willing to support the Government as they learnt on the job but, frankly, patience has run out. It is important that action is taken, and taken now.

Grant Shapps: First, it is worth saying that I keep hearing the hon. Gentleman calling for the data to be published. For his ease, I have been to the gov.uk website and checked it for him. The JCVI and Public Health England do indeed publish their methodology and the data behind it for each of these countries. It is already published. For the sake of the time of the House, I will not run through it, but it is there for him to see.

The hon. Gentleman calls for a passport that could be used for people who are double-vaccinated, yet at the same time his policy is to put every single country in the red list. That would mean that somebody who was able to visit a dying relative in an amber list country would now have the cost and expense of returning to Government quarantine in order to just go on that mercy mission. I think that what he is suggesting is quite cruel.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the progress on the US-UK working group. I can confirm that it took place for the first time last Thursday and progress is being made. That is an officials-level meeting and they will say more when they are ready to. There is a whole series of complexities to resolve. For example, the US does not currently recognise AstraZeneca because AstraZeneca has not applied for the licence. On the other side, we do not have any particular system to recognise vaccine status from the United States, because it does not have a digitised system, as we do with our NHS—it has 50 separate systems—so there are complexities.

India has been discussed many times, but I remind the hon. Gentleman again that it went on our red list a week before it became a variant of interest and two weeks before it became a variant of concern, so it is simply not the case that it was not already on the red list. Even when it was on the amber list, people had to take a test before they came here. They had to take a test when they got here, on day two and on day eight. They had to quarantine. It is worth looking at those facts.

The hon. Gentleman again calls for the red and green list. He wants to scrap the amber list. He wants to simplify it, no doubt before claiming that we should publish yet more detail, but it simply does not make sense. He cannot stand up and call for further support for airlines and the aviation sector while deliberately trying to ensure that pretty much every person who comes to this country has to go to Government quarantine hotels. It simply does not stack up.

The hon. Gentleman asks about support for the aviation and travel sectors. They have indeed been at the forefront of this pandemic and £7 billion of support is being provided. We are continuing to do our bit. But the best support of all that we can provide is to get international travel running again. That means not taking all the countries in the amber list and sticking them in the red list.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker, for giving us this opportunity to scrutinise. You have constituents who are impacted and they should know that you have given them a voice in this place.

I also thank the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) for giving us this opportunity. I disagree with his suggestion that we turn the amber list to red. I believe it should be turned to green, because we have a successful vaccination programme and our NHS app. We know that the Secretary of State is pushing for that to happen later in the summer, and therein lies my question. For the domestic restrictions being eased, we have a road map with data and dates. For international travel, can we have the equivalent—a flight path—so we know what is going to happen, when and by what measure? Perhaps I could ask him to give us a little more detail now, but also consider whether he would be willing to give a little more certainty to industry and passengers alike.

Grant Shapps: I will certainly be very pleased to return to this House with further details as soon as next month. I explained in my opening remarks that there are quite a number of complexities to do with how we treat children and younger people who have not yet had the opportunity to have two vaccinations. Although we will have everybody on a single vaccination, promised by 19 July, there will still be significant numbers who would not be able to travel under that system, so there are a lot of fairness issues to resolve too. However, like my hon. Friend, I share the absolute desire to return international travel as soon as we practically can to something as close as possible to normality, while recognising that it is important that we ensure that variants of concern are properly monitored and not brought into this country. One of the problems that we have is that no other country in the world sequences the genome at the rate that we do, which means that it is sometimes very difficult to tell what is happening in other countries, so we sometimes have to be cautious, but I will return to this House.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) [V]: Aviation is the hardest-hit sector, according to the Office for National Statistics. One third of the 6,000 jobs based at Glasgow airport and countless more in the supply chain are gone, a proportion that is common in the sector. In business travel, 60% of workers have gone and of those who remain, 80% are on furlough, and that is the key point: hundreds of thousands of jobs have gone while there is a job retention scheme in place.

This is the 36th time I have asked about support for the aviation sector since the start of the pandemic, back in the day when the Secretary of State was boasting of

[Gavin Newlands]

saving Flybe and the Chancellor was promising a sector-specific deal. With many parts of Europe now wary of the UK delta variant outbreak, five bleak winters in a row beckon for the sector. Are the Government finally considering keeping their word on grant support and extending its limited and capped business rates support to at least match the duration of the unlimited cover in Scotland? Crucially, is the Secretary of State lobbying the Treasury to extend furlough for the sector? Finally, does the clinical advice given to the Government fully support these decisions on double vaccines for travellers and travel to amber list countries?

Grant Shapps: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman, who often speaks up for aviation, given the airport-constituency connection that he has. I point out again that we have provided billions of pounds of support for the aviation sector, including to the Scottish aviation sector, through money that has gone from the furlough programme, for example.

The hon. Gentleman asked a series of questions, and I fear I may have to redirect him in some cases to his own Scottish Government, because I have the Scottish airports constantly on the line to me complaining about the actions of the Scottish Government, who seem to do everything they possibly can to make it harder for airlines and airports to see a route to a recovery. That said, there was a strong degree of work together to bring in the latest changes to the traffic light system.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con) [V]: If we do not have a meaningful summer of transatlantic operations, it will cost the UK economy an estimated £2.5 billion and mean up to 52,000 jobs are lost, so may I encourage my right hon. Friend to make sure that we press for that UK-US taskforce on opening up international travel to conclude as soon as possible?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend, who has done a great deal to support the aviation sector, is absolutely right. The Prime Minister and the President announced the working group. As I mentioned before, it has already met, and it is working on the details of trying to reopen international travel. We are faced with a section 212(f) executive order that was brought in by the previous American Administration and has not been rescinded by the current one. We need to see that removed, in addition to sorting some of the complexities of accepting vaccine status both ways around. Our officials are working on that at pace, and I look forward to further developments.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD) [V]: Does the Secretary of State agree that restrictions on UK citizens' travel is not just from the rules from his own Department, but from the entry requirements imposed by some of our international partners? Malta, for example, may well be on our green list, but it will not allow in anybody over the age of 12 who has not received both jabs. As he will know, no one under the age of 18 in the UK can receive both jabs yet. There are reports this morning that the negotiations on the UK-US air bridge have faltered because of concerns in the US about rising rates of the delta variant in the UK. Can the Secretary of State confirm what conversations he is having with the new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about attempts to combat the rise of the delta variant in this country, so that we can give greater confidence to our international partners and enable them to relax some of their restrictions?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to be concerned about the delta variant, but the reason we know about the delta variant in this country is that we sequence around 50% of all the positive PCR cases we pick up. No country in the world is getting close to that. It is just a few per cent. in, for example, France, Germany and elsewhere, so I suspect that some of the delta variant is simply knowing about the delta variant being present. We are working with partners internationally to encourage more to sequence the variant and then upload it to the GISAID website, which is internationally recognised, so that everyone can see what is going on. By doing so, we will be able to have a more transparent system to get aviation going faster.

The hon. Lady also asked about conversations. I have already spoken to the new Health Secretary. We are both very keen to open this up, but we must do so in a way that is as safe as possible.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): This morning I caught up with owners Heidi and Andy from Oasis Travel, an independent travel agent in Tunstall, to hear what they need from my right hon. Friend to help them to recover from the pandemic, and the key thing was clarity. So will he reassure Heidi and Andy from Oasis Travel that we can make the guidance more simple and clear, giving confidence both to travel agents and the residents of Stoke-on-Trent, Kidsgrove and Talke about the rules when going for a long overdue summer break?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about clarity on this. That is why a traffic light system—followed, as I have mentioned, by other countries; France, for example, has introduced one since we introduced ours—makes sense. Everyone understands red, amber and green. We have talked about the desire to bring in a system that also uses the benefits of double vaccination that will overlay that. For the benefit of his constituents at Oasis Travel, we are looking not only at the country but at individuals' status in order to provide greater clarity and to be able to open up as much as possible for summer.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The travel sector, particularly the business travel sector, sees the reopening of US-UK travel as vital to being viable. Will the Secretary of State update the House on who sits on the US-UK travel taskforce, when it will publish its recommendations, and whether the reports of concerns over the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine in the press this week will have any impact?

Grant Shapps: Yes, I can provide a bit more detail. The group is chaired at Cabinet Office level and the equivalent in the United States. It was, as the hon. Lady will know, set up by the President and the Prime Minister at the G7. There has not been a specific date provided for publishing the group's work, but it meets on a weekly basis. I urge her and others to discount what they read in the newspapers. I did not recognise the output that I saw in the stories this morning other than that it is true that there are issues that I have mentioned at the Dispatch Box about recognition in both directions.

These are very real problems. There are 50 states in America and they all use different systems for showing whether people are fully vaccinated—to throw another one into the pot. However, we are working very closely together and the desire is there between the US and the UK to normalise travel again.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con) [V]: The Government's intention to scrap quarantine restrictions for fully vaccinated people arriving from amber list countries is very welcome, but can I stress to my right hon. Friend how important it is to have clarity over the timings now instead of later in the summer? Ideally we need this in place at the start of the school holidays to give families the confidence to book and to ensure that it has the maximum impact in helping the travel sector to recover. I do not have to tell him that if it is delayed for too long, the summer for the travel sector will be lost, and that will have huge financial implications for the sector.

Grant Shapps: I do recognise the desire to see the system clarified. I went to some lengths in my opening remarks to explain that we have some issues that we need to resolve, including what the JCVI is going to recommend when it finishes opining over whether children should be vaccinated, and, without knowing the answer to that, what alternative system would be in place. As Members have mentioned, we have already seen Malta, for example, putting in place its own restrictions on children at the particular age of 12. There are complexities to deal with. However, I hear what my hon. Friend and others have said about the desire for clarity. I will return to this House once we have made progress and make sure that he is here to hear it first.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): UK airlines, excluding the wider aviation sector, have announced over 30,000 job cuts so far, and that is before we even consider the wider supply chain in the aviation sector. British Airways and General Electric are based in my constituency and are major employers for Pontypridd and Taff-Ely. Both have had to make significant job cuts in difficult circumstances, and I fear that there could be more on the horizon. Labour has consistently called for a sectoral deal that secures jobs and protects the aviation supply chain. Thousands of jobs depend on it. Why will not Ministers give aviation the support that they promised?

Grant Shapps: I have to say, we are providing £7 billion of support. The hon. Lady says that the Opposition have consistently called for support, but that is not the case. The former shadow Chancellor, the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), said:

"we can no longer accept public funds paying for projects that make the shift to zero"

carbon harder. In other words, she was not prepared to support the aviation sector, as we have done. *[Interruption.]* It is on record. I understand the perspective of the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), and I agree with her as it happens, but the Opposition's policy has been all over the place.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): Travel companies in my constituency such as Full Circle and Comfy Class are understandably keen to have more countries on the green list. I appreciate that there is a balance, because I have also had emails from constituents concerned that if we move too quickly, we could end up with further restrictions here. However, will my right hon. Friend reassure the companies in my constituency and elsewhere that it is still his aspiration to get as many countries on the green list as soon as he can, provided it is safe to do so?

Grant Shapps: That is absolutely the case. I want to reassure my hon. Friend and the whole House that I wish to see travel reopened—I am the Secretary of State for Transport; I want to see transport operating. No one comes into this job to try to close down travel. We have to be realistic about the pandemic, which is global in nature and is still running at record rates around the world beyond our shores. It is tempting to think it is over because we have managed to vaccinate such a high proportion of our own population, but no other major economy has done the same thing. However, I can provide my hon. Friend with the reassurance that we are moving on this as fast as we possibly can. Subject to the expert advice, I am looking forward to working with my right hon. Friend the new Health Secretary to move things along.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What I picked up on a recent visit to Heathrow with the Home Affairs Committee was that the Government always seem to be behind the curve. They always seem to be having to deal with the current crisis and not thinking ahead to what the next crisis will be in travel, particularly at the borders. We have heard lots of reasons today why it is all very difficult for the Secretary of State to come with a plan, but can he give a firm date for when he will have a clear plan, which is what the public are really calling for, along with the travel industry?

Grant Shapps: I hear the calls for clarity, and I appreciate what the hon. Lady is saying, but is she suggesting that we should leave children behind this summer? Should people who have not been vaccinated be able to travel? How would she know whether an inward traveller coming here from another country had been vaccinated if we do not have a digital certificate from them? These are not abstract questions; they are real questions that have to be added to what the scientists know or do not know about the ability of somebody with coronavirus to get it again and/or carry it—just ask Nick Robinson what happened to him. Make no mistake: I want to get things opened up as quickly as possible—that is my intention and desire—but we cannot throw caution to the wind and risk going backwards by bringing in a new variant of concern because of all the calls to simply ignore the facts.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for that last answer, and I accept it. However, I went to Gibraltar for the weekend of 11 to 14 June and was astonished by the hoops I had to go through on return from the green Rock. I had to take three tests and fill out a very complex passenger locator form to come home. Given that nearly 49% of our population have now been double vaccinated, will my right hon. Friend have a look at reducing the cost, the bureaucracy and the time wasting that occurs when people return to the UK from even the safest countries, such as the Rock of Gibraltar, which is a green area?

Grant Shapps: I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that he should not have needed to take three tests. Returning from a green country, he would simply be required to fill in his passenger locator form, take a pre-departure test and then a single test on day two. That is used for sequencing the genome, which we have spoken about a lot—I know that other countries are not as interested as we have been in that subject.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right about driving down the cost. I was pleased to see on the website yesterday that there are now costs in the £20, £30 and £40 range, rather than the very high costs previously. We have now organised the website so that people can search by region and cost, in order to buy a package that suits their pocket. I agree with him about driving down the costs and driving out the bureaucracy, linking up the passenger locator form with the gates, so that when he comes through the border, he is not stopped specifically because of his travel.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) [V]: Mark Tanzer, of ABTA, told the Treasury Committee that 44% of ABTA members anticipate more redundancies as furlough tapers off. This is an avoidable harm, so may I ask the Transport Committee what conversations he has had with the Chancellor on continuing furlough at the full 80% rate, at least for travel and tourism?

Grant Shapps: I always have ongoing conversations and that is one thing that has led to furlough being available—and not only that, but a scheme that has, in essence, paid the business rates for all the major airports in this country, apart from the very largest two or three. That has been extended again for a further six months as well. The best way we can get this resolved is to get travel going again, and our level of vaccination means that that can happen; thanks to the UK Government, everybody throughout the UK is enjoying the highest level of vaccination of any major economy.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): Our historic vaccine programme has meant that we have been able to begin safely reopening international travel, and I must add that my constituency has truly led the way on the vaccination programme lately, and I must thank all those involved for that. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is right, however, that we take a cautious approach, so that we do not jeopardise the enormous sacrifices and gains made by the British people in the past year? Of course, that will mean that next year we can travel safely for the World cup, as, I hope, the rightful winners of the euros this year.

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and the only caveat I would add is that I am really keen to see us open up—we want to see it happen and we are going to put all the measures in place to try to do that. One frustration I think we all feel in this House is that because we have managed to get ourselves vaccinated and because we are sequencing the genome to such an extent, it is tempting to think that the entire world is already there. Sadly, that is not the case; we are waiting for others to catch up. So she is right to say that we need to take a cautious approach, but none the less it is one that will start to see benefits for this country and people who want to travel.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The threat to the travel and tourism industry is very real. Just this week, I met constituents who normally work on aircraft but now have either been furloughed or in some cases made redundant several months ago and they are extremely concerned about the ongoing future of the industry. So it is regrettable that the Transport Secretary should seek to misrepresent the position of my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) in terms of recognising an increase in the number of nations on the green list, seeking clarification of the system and calling for international co-operation on vaccine passports, which can give real certainty to the industry and confidence to holidaymakers, so that we can try to save some of these crucial jobs in our industry.

Grant Shapps: On the contrary, I have been listening carefully to what the hon. Member for Oldham West has had to say from the Front Bench. A few days ago, he was challenged about how many countries should go on to the green list and he said, "Well, from our point of view it has got to be about the science." He said that he cannot give an exact number and that we have to take the expert advice—what on earth does he think we have been doing all these months?

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): My constituency has a lot of aerospace manufacturing, which is suffering the knock-back from the lack of international travel. At a recent meeting with pilots from my constituency, I was told that the additions to the green list will up their business to only 10% of their capacity, so they really are struggling. They asked whether we could avoid any last-minute changes to policy and give people as much notice as possible. I need to stress that they were asking for a date on which double-vaccinated people would be able to travel a lot more freely. I said I would pass those messages on, which I have done.

Grant Shapps: I am grateful for the direct message. Sadly, the pandemic and the virus do not give us much advance notice; we often find that a country is on the green list and we need to move it, as we saw with Portugal and Spain with the travel corridors last year. One thing that we have done to provide a little more forward guidance is use the green watch list, the purpose of which is to help my hon. Friend's constituents to see when a country may be a bit closer to the amber border and when they would therefore want to be more aware. I hope that that provides a bit of additional guidance, but I will return to the House next month with more details of what double vaccination can mean for people and for the travel industry.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Prime Minister has acknowledged that this summer will not be typical with regard to international travel. Regional airports such as Newcastle International rely on the summer season to generate the bulk of their revenue and tide them over during the quiet periods in the winter. Will the Secretary of State look particularly at regional airports this winter? What support can they be given to ensure that not generating revenue over the summer does not lead them into difficulty later in the year, once international travel has opened up?

Grant Shapps: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out the struggle for regional airports in particular. They do not have pockets as deep as those of some of the very large airports, which of course are also struggling. They have had their business rates paid, as in the case of Newcastle, for the entirety of the pandemic so far; that has been extended for a further six months and they have also had the furlough scheme and various loans available. The best thing that we can do for them is get travel reopened, and that is everything we are focused on now.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Over the weekend, we had the full panoply of the Stasi state with its pettifogging prying into people's private lives, including show trials, denunciation, hidden cameras and inevitable hypocrisy and rule-breaking. Like the Secretary of State, I would like a lot more international travel and I am very relaxed, but as the Government seem to panic at the slightest rise in infections, when the Secretary of State argues his case in the Cabinet, will he please not put freedom day at risk? Will he please not risk any return to these fatuous restrictions over the winter? There has to be a balance. Better controls at the border than destroying our freedom at home.

Grant Shapps: I think it is true to say, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, that people are fed up with the restrictions. The good news is that the evidence clearly shows divergence between the number of cases, the number of people going into hospital and—thank goodness—the number of deaths, so I have high confidence that 19 July will be the date. I look forward to people being able to regain some of the freedoms that have been too sadly lost over the past year and a half.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Secretary of State said in his statement that

"this is a complicated policy that requires time to work through",

but today he has pointedly and repeatedly failed to commit to additional support for the beleaguered travel sector until the return of free travel can be re-established. Does he understand the disappointment and anger at the failure to extend additional support to the travel industry to prevent the potential loss of tens of thousands more jobs?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady perhaps did not hear me mention that we are paying the entirety of the business rates bill for every airport—I must check the facts here—in England. I hope that the same is happening under the Scottish Government in Scotland. We are paying the bills through the furlough scheme of all the employees in the sector, both in airports and in the airlines. We have been providing financing—billions of pounds, in fact—to enable airports and airlines to keep themselves afloat through this crisis. I have to say that when it comes to these discussions, invariably the people who most do not want to restart travel tend to be the Government in Scotland, so I am a little surprised to hear the hon. Lady's comments.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con) [V]: The travel sector has had to deal with more disruption from the pandemic than most as countries are added and then taken away from different coloured lists. Travel agents have been particularly affected as customers book, then cancel their holidays. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that they receive the support that they need to enable those businesses to survive at this most difficult time?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Businesses across the travel industry have been drawing on the £350 billion-worth of grants and loans, VAT deferrals, the furlough scheme and much else besides. The best thing we can do is get the country flying again and get people moving again. Our exemplary progress with the vaccination roll-out gives us the best opportunity of that happening sooner rather than later.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): As the vaccine rolls out and as international travel increases, if we are to prevent new variants from sending us back to square one, there needs to be an effective surveillance system with transparent analysis built in so that there can be swift action. We do not have that effective system at the moment, as we have seen from the fact that the delta variant has whipped around the country and is now closing schools and preventing UK residents from travelling abroad because people do not want it to spread. We must improve that system and not be in a situation whereby so many cases can arrive in a country before preventive measures are taken. Will the Secretary of State agree, as part of improving that system, to finally start publishing the Joint Biosecurity Centre's analyses—not just the arrivals data, but the analyses of what is happening in other countries? The Scientific Group for Emergencies papers are published. We have been calling for the Joint Biosecurity Centre's papers to be published for almost a year. Please publish them now. What has the Secretary of State got to hide?

Grant Shapps: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right about the need to prevent the variants. Our surveillance system, which involves our sequencing the genome more than any other country in the world, as I know she appreciates, is a big part of that. We frequently find that we know about overseas variants before the host country and consequently we often tell them about it first.

I want to ensure that the record of the House is entirely accurate. I talked about the risk assessment methodology that is already published online. The methodology includes variant assessment, triage, risk assessment and outcomes, which inform ministerial decisions. Under each heading, there is tremendous detail. For example, triage includes testing rates per 100,000, weekly instances, test positivity, evidence of overseas variants under investigation and much else. Then we publish the data on both the Public Health England and the JBC websites. I invite the right hon. Lady to look at that data. I think she will also appreciate that there are times when, for diplomatic reasons, it would be difficult to publish other countries' data before they have done so. However, she will find a wealth of information, which we are already publishing, on the JBC and PHE websites.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend, who is clearly putting in the effort to try to reopen international travel, but I also echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), the Chair of the Select Committee. We need the equivalent of the domestic

[James Cartlidge]

lockdown road map for reopening international travel. I appreciate that there are complex issues to resolve on opening travel to the amber list for those who have been fully vaccinated, but I am sure he realises that if we take too long to do that, there are travel sector businesses in our constituencies that will not be there to capitalise.

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I want the issues that he raised to be resolved as soon as possible. Perhaps I should mention that through the G7 and the OECD, we are working to create internationally recognised systems. At the moment, every country is going off in its own direction, even among the EU27, where there is no agreement on the basic standards for people moving around the world. He is right and I will be happy to return here to provide that further clarity.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) [V]: May I refer the House to my interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Pakistan? Along with Bangladesh, Pakistan was placed on the red list at the start of April despite a clear disparity in cases with other nations on the green list that had high infection rates and variants of concern. I and other APPG colleagues have requested disclosure of the figures behind that decision, which we have still not received. The coronavirus positivity rate in Pakistan has now dropped to 1.78% and there are no reports of a variant of concern from the nation. Pakistan has also recently developed the PakVac, which will help in the fight. First, will the Secretary of State give me a full answer on why Pakistan was placed on the red list in the first place? Secondly, when will Pakistan be taken off the red list and placed on the amber or—ideally—green list?

Grant Shapps: The point that the hon. Lady and the whole House will wish to recognise is that last year we were able only to look at the level of infection, which she rightly mentioned, as the indication of a country's position in what is now the traffic light system. However, as she will see when she looks at the JBC methodology, it is now far more complex. Many more factors are taken into account, including in particular the extent to which a country freely uploads its data to GISAID, the extent to which sequencing is carried out and the extent to which a country has vaccinated its domestic population as well as much else besides. All of that is available on the JBC website. I am happy on her behalf—I make this offer across the House—to put the authorities in Pakistan in touch with our scientists in order to better understand what a country might need to do to find itself back on the amber or, indeed, green list.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the efforts he is making to open international travel. However, will he look at the rules associated with passengers entering the United Kingdom from international hub airports and the added complexity that often brings? Doha, and Qatar Airways in particular, support many of the regional airports. He talked about the difficulties in regional airports and the support needed for those without the capacity of some of the larger UK airports. Will he consider the status of passengers who traditionally fly out of those regions?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That follows from the last question, really. It is no longer about just looking at what the infection rate is in a particular country; we need to understand who travels through that country. That can change a country's rating, even though otherwise it would be perhaps a green list country. I refer him to the JBC's advice, which sets out in considerable detail the various factors it is looking at. I extend the offer to countries and territories across the world to be in touch with us to better understand how we assess their data. Much of the time, a good hint for them is to be entirely transparent with the data and upload it to GISAID for sequencing so that we know that they know their level of variants of concern.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab) [V]: The communities around Heathrow are hugely dependent on aviation for jobs, so they have been devastated by the pandemic's impact on international travel. Hounslow borough alone has lost 43,000 jobs, with lower-income communities hardest-hit, and 22,000 Hounslow residents are still furloughed and worrying about the end of the scheme in September. Aviation and its supply chain is not in a position to recover by September, and the Transport Secretary repeating figures from the general schemes from which the sector has received support is of no help for the future. When will Ministers announce the specific sector support they promised? Will that include a sector-specific extension of furlough?

Grant Shapps: I am concerned about the position of airlines and airports and of the aviation sector generally—the House will be interested to know that I track it every single week. I am a little concerned about the hon. Member dismissing £7 billion of support as if it is not a significant figure as well as, indeed, the bespoke work done to help airports in particular to pay their rates. She will appreciate that it is for the Chancellor to come to the House to explain whether further measures will be taken, and I am sure he will return to the House when the next Budget and autumn statement come round.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. As I have the pleasure of chairing the all-party parliamentary group on business travel, I particularly welcome the Department's recent announcement about quarantine exemptions for business travellers, but my right hon. Friend will know that they are restricted to a very small number of jet-setting multinational executives. The business travel ecosystem is much wider than that, so will he look again at the criteria for significant economic benefit, and instead look at just economic benefit, and set out when he might be able to widen the exemption to all business travel?

Grant Shapps: I am very happy to take a further look at it, and my hon. Friend is right to point to the exemptions that have been provided for large job-creating travel under very specific and restricted circumstances. To answer his question, we are best to pursue fully vaccinated status in order to open up travel further. Of course, that would apply to businesses as much as it would apply to everyone else. None the less, that is the route to getting business and other travel going again.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): From the Secretary of State's response, it is clear he was not listening to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), who said that Labour supports an expansion of the green list and that we want the rapid introduction of covid passports. The Secretary of State claims that it is complicated, but other Europeans and Americans are already free to travel with a vaccine passport, a negative test or proof of infection in the last six months. Why are we less free than they are and less free than we were last summer, when we did not have the vaccines?

Grant Shapps: I am tempted to say that we cannot have it both ways. We have to be vigilant and aware of the risks of travelling to every single country in the world. Without exception, other countries do fewer tests of sequencing, so they do not know about variants. I see that the right hon. Gentleman does not agree, which is fine, but because they are not doing the sequencing it opens us up to an unknown degree of risk. *[Interruption.]* He says "Germany", but 1.3% of their positive cases are sequenced, whereas we sequence nearly 50% of our cases—that is a good case in point.

Of course we are looking at what other countries are doing. We are also making sure that we are talking to them all; I speak to my counterparts on a regular basis. However, the fact of the matter is that we have a traffic light system. We need those countries to be able, ideally, to get into the green category and, if not, to be able to use the fully vaccinated route in order to open up travel further.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I was a travel agent and tour operator before I came to the House, and I have great sympathy for the industry. The Secretary of State will realise that travel is not just about holidays. I was made aware yesterday of a very sad case of people needing to travel as soon as possible following a sudden death of a young relative in the United States of America. In a state of shock, they wanted to know what they should do. If the Secretary of State can bring forward travel bridges, especially with the United States of America, it would help people in such circumstances.

Grant Shapps: I want to let my hon. Friend know that, in the very sad case that he talked about, America's being on the amber list would allow them to travel. There is a wider issue with the United States around executive order 212(f), which prevents travel from the UK, European nations and many other countries within the previous 14 days, so people may well require special arrangements on the US side as well. That is not the British Government's doing, of course, which is why we are working with the Americans through the working group to try to remove such impediments.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab) [V]: The "wait and see" statement last Thursday just has not given the vision for international travel that many were hoping for, and it is not good enough to leave major airports, such as Newcastle International, in the dark. The outlook looks extremely challenging, and the Government cannot delay their aviation recovery plan any longer. The sector needs a comprehensive package of support to ensure that it can increase global connectivity and drive growth in our region in a planned way, and we need Newcastle airport to thrive for that. The Government say they are committed to global Britain, but when will they start acting like it?

Grant Shapps: I urge the hon. Lady to talk to her own Front Benchers, who are trying to remove the amber list entirely and chuck all those countries, presumably, into red; the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) is not able to tell us how many would go into green. Meanwhile, we are supporting Newcastle airport; as I mentioned, we have paid the entirety of its business rates throughout this crisis. The best hope of all for it is to get travel going again.

I have said this several times and I do not want to labour the point, but I will be returning to the House with full details of exactly how a double-vaccinated—fully vaccinated—status could help with international travel. I have also tried to explain why it is not quite as straightforward as the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) might imagine; for example, what do we do about children, who have not yet had their vaccination status confirmed?

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): I welcome the decision to loosen travel restrictions on double-jabbed Brits, but I also agree with other speakers regarding the need for a clear road map. However, whatever that road map contains, it will take time for passenger confidence to recover. Thousands of jobs in the travel industry are still at stake, so what will my right hon. Friend do to explore all options for further financial support for the travel industry?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend will know that I have been working with the Chancellor throughout this crisis, which is how £7 billion-worth of support has been provided to the travel sector. I also think it is very important, as my hon. Friend and others have said, to be able to set out as clear a path as possible to the reopening of international travel, notwithstanding the fact that, unfortunately, the virus is raging in different parts of the world and new variants of interest, at least, and sometimes variants of concern, are coming about on a monthly basis. We will do everything we can to put in place a system that involves both the traffic lights and the double-vaccinated status in order to provide a sense of certainty—as much as can be done in a global pandemic—for the aviation sector.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): With greater restrictions being placed on UK travellers to Spain, Portugal, Germany and Hong Kong, there is no doubt that the aviation and travel sectors are still in a difficult place. We have already heard today the chief executive of the Association of British Travel Agents, Mark Tanzer, tell the Treasury Committee that 44% of ABTA members anticipate more redundancies as furlough tapers off. That is on top of 37% of those jobs already having been lost or being at risk, so action is plainly necessary. Does the Minister agree that there must be a tailored package of financial support, crucially including furlough extension, for the travel sector, as called for by the Travel Day of Action campaign?

Grant Shapps: I think the hon. Lady is aware that these are matters for the Chancellor, and I know that he will be coming to the House at some point to set out his future plans as we get through this pandemic.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): My constituent Tom Williams kindly agreed to participate in the Novavax trial. He was promised that that would not disadvantage him in any way. He is now fully vaccinated with Novavax and, restrictions willing, is hoping to go to France this summer with his family. As the European Medicines Agency has not yet certified the Novavax vaccine, the trip is now at risk. Will my right hon. Friend investigate this case as a priority and do all he can to ensure that Mr Williams can travel with his family?

Grant Shapps: Yes, I certainly will.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The changes announced by the Secretary of State will make a properly functioning test and trace system even more important. Last week, however, we saw the damning report of the National Audit Office on the English test and trace system, and just yesterday responses to a series of freedom of information requests made by my friend and colleague the MSP for North East Fife suggested a cover-up by the Scottish Government of failures in their test and protect scheme. What steps are being taken to work with the devolved nations on the functioning of testing regimes, and how will the Secretary of State ensure that those schemes are not overwhelmed as a result of the changing picture?

Grant Shapps: One of the very important things that we have been doing is automating the process of being able, essentially, to track people no matter where they have come back from. With regard to international travel, for example, the passenger locator form now automatically links with someone's passport and provides confirmation as they enter, either through an e-gate or through a Border Force inspector, of where they have come from and therefore whether they need to self-isolate or quarantine. Those conversations are ongoing, and I keep in touch with the devolved Administrations about that on an ongoing basis.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The Opposition do not seem to be able to name any countries or destinations they want to add to the green list, but may I suggest a couple—the Greek islands and the Canaries? Both have very low infection rates, they are very popular destinations for UK travellers, and they seem, potentially, to qualify under other criteria. When might they be added to the green list, and will they stay there until a variant of concern has been properly identified?

Grant Shapps: One thing I know for sure is that it is very difficult to give guarantees about any countries staying on the green list forever. That is how I ended up going to Spain and coming back two or three days later, after I had myself put it in the no-fly category, as it was at the time. However, I can tell my hon. Friend for sure that both the Canaries and the Greek islands were looked at in the last review. The fact that they did not qualify, as my hon. Friend rightly identifies, is a matter not simply of their infection rates, but the other criteria clearly set out by the JBC and available to him and others on the website. It is more likely to be to do, for example, with their ability to sequence the genome. We are working hard with countries across the world, particularly holiday destinations, to let them know what would be required, and we welcome further contact from them for them to be able to understand the system we are applying.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) [V]: The Secretary of State will no doubt agree with me that the support packages provided by the Government—furlough, grant packages, low interest loans—have been essential in supporting businesses and industry through the pandemic. With the continued impact of covid-19 on the aviation and travel industry, can the Secretary of State outline what representation he has made to the Chancellor on the part of the travel industry for the extension of furlough and a much-needed specific tailored grant support scheme to be provided to sustain jobs and protect the future of this industry?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady is absolutely right about how essential the package has been to date, and my conversations with the Chancellor are of course, as with all Cabinet Ministers, ongoing.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: While we all have huge sympathy for travel companies with very little income, what action is the Secretary of State going to take to help people such as my recently widowed constituent who has had no refund for the holiday she was due to have with her husband, and not even an acknowledgment of receipt of her husband's death certificate?

Grant Shapps: I am very sorry to hear about that particular case. I have been putting pressure on the whole sector to do the right thing, and to provide either vouchers or refunds where people require them. An essential part of being able to get travel back together is that people feel, when they book, that they would be able to rebook, should they need to do so for coronavirus reasons. I am not familiar with the individual case, but I would be very happy to follow it up for my hon. Friend.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Throughout the pandemic, the Transport Secretary has treated the travel industry as an afterthought—delaying decisions, making vague promises, creating chaos and confusion. Nearly 200,000 jobs have been lost or are at risk, and countless well-established high street agencies are now boarded up. Over a year ago, the Government promised a sector-specific support package. He keeps referring to £7 billion, yet he knows that that was purely for the aviation industry, not for travel agencies. ABTA wrote to him just this week about the lack of support. Why has he failed to deliver for them?

Grant Shapps: I have to say that that is a rather disingenuous thing to say about a Government who have provided furlough for absolutely everybody in every sector, including the ones the hon. Lady identifies. The support that the Chancellor has provided has been incredibly generous. I keep very closely in touch with travel agents, in my own constituency and across the country, and I understand the pressures they have been under. No one can pretend that it has been easy or straightforward, but I strenuously disagree with the hon. Lady if she is saying that that support has not been there, because the very fact that we are having this discussion demonstrates the extent to which we have been out there working to make sure that people are supported through this crisis.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): I know that virus detection equipment from Kromek in Sedgefield is being trialled at both Newcastle and Teesside airports at the moment, and we hope it will be a valuable tool in the future. While I appreciate the sacrifices being made by our whole population to shield the most vulnerable and keep our NHS from being overwhelmed this year, I do not believe that economic growth and business should be held back until every adult is able to travel. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, although those not fully vaccinated may find it frustrating, we need to open up international travel for those who are fully vaccinated and safe to kickstart the rebuilding of the travel economy, for both businesses such as Mel's Travel, a recently opened travel agency in Ferryhill, and workers in places such as Teesside airport? Where testing is required, the costs need to be reduced very substantially, especially for children.

Grant Shapps: The good news is that costs have been coming down, really quite dramatically, in the past couple of months. I share my hon. Friend's enthusiasm and anxiety to get the sector to open up as quickly as possible.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Just this morning, the Department for Transport snuck out the news that senior business executives will be able to dodge the quarantine rules relating to the amber list. I am sure the Secretary of State will want to take this opportunity to advise the House of the medical miracle that means that the wealthiest in society are unable to contract or, indeed, transmit covid-19. Or perhaps he can tell us what we already know: that on the watch of the Tories, it is simply one rule for the super-rich and another rule for the rest of us.

Grant Shapps: What a load of nonsense. I expect that the hon. Gentleman does not want to see—just taking a random example—the thousands of jobs created in car plants, just because of his vindictive and really very narrow view of how the world should operate. It is absolutely ridiculous. Anybody who is able to come to this country, for whatever reason, will be under very strict restrictions. They will require testing and they will be able to carry out only that specific piece of business. To my mind, if this helps thousands of people to keep their jobs and get new jobs, it is well worth while.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am particularly concerned about travel to France. My delegation to the Council of Europe, most of whom have been double-vaccinated, and despite having diplomatic status themselves, are having to wait to represent the UK in person until France has gone green. What changes does my right hon. Friend anticipate that could make our travel easier?

Grant Shapps: I am most anxious to enable my hon. Friend to travel to the Council of Europe, and I will undertake to speak to my opposite number, Jean-Baptiste Djebarri, to find out what can be done to encourage a regime that enables travel to take place more easily, but we are having to work with what is available to us at the moment. As France also has a traffic light system in place, I will do my best to ensure that the two of us can help that visit to take place.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his responses. It is very difficult to know all the answers to these questions.

There have been mixed messages, with amber or green travel acceptable for some countries in the EU, while Germany says that the EU should get together and prevent UK nationals from travelling. The USA has stated that UK citizens may not travel to the States before August and may not be able to do so for a period of time after that, causing much uncertainty. Will the Secretary of State tell those who book holidays and then have them cancelled, or those who are on holiday and then have to quarantine on their return, just when there will be a direct, honest and clear strategy? With great respect, I have to tell him that, at this moment, my constituents do not know what they can or should do when it comes to booking an overseas holiday.

Grant Shapps: The reality of the situation is that this virus just does not give us those answers. I wish it would. I hope the hon. Gentleman can see that, through the combination of the traffic light system and the forthcoming double-vaccination system—so that it is not only the place but the individual that can be looked at—we will get to a position where people are able to travel more freely than they have been up to this point. However, I have to remind the House that we are still living through a global pandemic, and things are not quite so straightforward as has been suggested in one or two of the interventions, although not that of the hon. Gentleman.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I will now suspend the House briefly so that arrangements can be made for the next item of business.

2.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

EU Settlement Scheme

2.39 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will provide an update on the EU settlement scheme.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): I am delighted to have this opportunity to mark and update the House on the huge success of the EU settlement scheme. As of the end of last month, more than 5.6 million applications had been received by the scheme, with more than 5.2 million concluded. As these number demonstrate, the dire warnings about our willingness to deliver an effective scheme to safeguard the position of millions of our friends and neighbours have proven totally unfounded.

Today, I invite all hon. and right hon. Members to play their part in communicating tomorrow's deadline and encouraging those who are eligible, but who have yet to apply, to do so now. The Government have mounted a massive public information campaign to raise awareness about the scheme, investing almost £8 million in communications encouraging eligible EU citizens and their family members to apply by the deadline. We have also made extensive support available to applicants who need it, including providing £22 million in grant funding to organisations that have so far helped more than 300,000 vulnerable people to apply for the status that they deserve.

While the deadline is tomorrow, we will take a pragmatic and flexible approach to considering late applications made after the deadline. Our priority will remain to encourage those eligible to secure their status, and the examples of reasonable grounds given in the guidance that we have published are non-exhaustive. Each case will be considered based on its unique circumstances.

To confirm: a person's existing rights will continue to be legally protected pending the outcome of an application made by the deadline of tomorrow, plus any appeal process that may follow. In the meantime, they will be able to rely on their certificate of application as proof of their right to work or rent when that is verified by the Home Office employer and landlord checking services.

We also expect the EU to uphold its obligations on citizens' rights. We are aware that some UK nationals in the EU have faced difficulties in securing and exercising their rights. We are engaging with the EU through the specialised committee on citizens' rights to address this.

The people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union in June 2016. We opened the EU settlement scheme in March 2019 on a basis much more generous than the withdrawal agreement requires. By contrast, most EU countries have an application window of around 12 months. Our position has remained clear throughout: EU citizens are our colleagues, neighbours, friends and family. We want them to stay and to get the status that they deserve under the EU settlement scheme. The fact that so many have already chosen to do so is something to celebrate, and I encourage anyone who is eligible, but yet to apply, to join the millions who have already secured their rights through our scheme, with support available online, on the phone and through our fantastic grant-funded organisations.

Paul Blomfield [V]: The Prime Minister promised EU citizens "absolute certainty" of their rights to live and remain in the UK, but the day before applications to the EU settlement scheme close, serious questions remain unanswered, so may I press the Minister on some of them? Reports suggest that the Government have estimated that up to 130,000 of those eligible for benefits have not applied for settled status. What assessment has the Home Office made of the total number of eligible EU citizens still to apply, and how has it reached out actively to those people? What support has been given to older and more vulnerable people who have yet to make applications, particularly those in social care? There is concern that some parents have thought it unnecessary to apply on behalf of their children. How is the Home Office identifying those children and enabling their applications?

Government figures show that applications have been made for only one in three children in care, so what has been done for the others? The Home Office has said that late applications on reasonable grounds will be considered, so will the Minister confirm what status those applicants will have while the reasonableness of their case is determined?

Victims of domestic abuse whose traumatic circumstances have prevented an application will lose rights to support and a place in a refuge. What has been done to protect them? One in three landlords are not aware of the settlement scheme. Business groups think employers do not know enough about it. What has been done to ensure that nobody is wrongly excluded from housing or work?

Almost half—around 2 million—of those who have applied for settled status have not received it. Instead, they have pre-settled status with no long-term rights. What are the Government doing to ensure that they can overcome the barriers to full status?

There is a real risk of a new Windrush-type tragedy in the future if we do not get this right now. The pandemic has affected Government capacity and communication, so will the Minister reconsider his previous statement, follow the lead of countries such as France and the Netherlands in relation to UK citizens and extend the deadline for applications?

Kevin Foster: The promise of absolute clarity is exactly what the EUSS is there to deliver: the absolute clarity that a person will be able to prove, demonstrate and have recorded their rights in this country not just for the next couple of years but for decades to come. That is why we are delighted that we have had so many applications and have already managed to give that certainty to millions of our fellow residents here in the UK.

On the work that has been done with the Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, we are keen to reach out to all who could be eligible to apply, hence the letters sent to those for whom there was no record of an EUSS application. Further work will be done after the deadline to encourage those identified in that way to make an application. As has been said before, anyone who is already a British citizen or has indefinite leave to remain under systems that predated free movement does not need to apply—although those with ILR under previous systems may choose to upgrade, for free, to status under the EUSS.

In my opening response I touched on the work we are doing not only to advertise the scheme but via the grant-funded organisations based throughout our United Kingdom that have been working with many of the most vulnerable to ensure that they can apply. More than 300,000 applications have been directly supported by that network, which works with, for example, those with chaotic lifestyles or those who may have been rough sleeping.

On children in care, I am not sure whether I heard the hon. Gentleman say that he thought Government figures showed that only a third of them had applied. In fact, the most recent survey of local authorities, which went to the end of April, showed that 67% of such applications had been made where settlement had already been granted. We continue to work with local authorities and are grateful for the support shown not just for children in care but for adults in care who may need support.

On the position in other countries, I gently make the point that by the day that France opened its system for UK nationals living in France, the EUSS had already received 4 million applications and literally millions of statuses had been granted. We need to have that in mind when we make comparisons.

We have already seen 147,000 people convert from pre-settled to settled status, even though they did not need to do that immediately—they qualified by hitting the five-year period. Again, there will be support and reminders, and there will be reasonable grounds for a late application to go from pre-settled to settled status in a similar vein as for those who miss the deadline tomorrow.

Significant support is available, and if there are compelling or compassionate circumstances after the deadline, we will work with agencies, particularly those that deal with the most vulnerable, to look at expediting applications through the process where needed. My core message today is very simple: if you are eligible, apply now and secure the status that you deserve.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Government are to be congratulated on the remarkable success of the scheme—there have been 5.6 million applicants, against an estimate of just 3 million qualifying people in this country—but I share the Minister's concern about the lack of energy and urgency in respect of reciprocal arrangements for British citizens in EU countries. Does he have an estimate of how many British citizens have so far applied and how many cases are outstanding?

On the specific issue of children in care, I am glad to hear that the number of applications has now been raised to two thirds, but is his estimate still that some 10,000 children in care would qualify? That would mean that something like 3,500 very vulnerable children have still not been registered and, if they are not, could be the subject of a future Windrush-type scandal.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I shall start with his last point first. We are working hard with local authorities. The figure I gave was from the end of April. We are now coming to the end of June, and we know that a significant number of applications have been lodged in support of children in care. I have often given this example, but if, for the sake of argument, a child in care aged five today discovers in 13 years' time, when they become an adult, that their application had not been made on their behalf—when, for example, they get their first job—we will consider that reasonable grounds for a late application.

In terms of the schemes in Europe, we encourage EU member states to look at the progress we have made in the UK with the EUSS and at how their systems could replicate it by being free and relatively simple, with plenty of support available. Similarly, we encourage all UK nationals in the EU to check their status and ensure that they submit their application in in good time.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I welcome the Minister back to the Dispatch Box.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) on securing this urgent question. There could not be a more powerful warning to the Government of what happens when innocent people are deprived of their right to be here than the Windrush scandal. Twenty-eight-day warnings advising people to apply for settled status have been issued, despite an estimated 400,000 applications still awaiting processing. As my hon. Friend said, leaked documents suggest that 130,000 people in receipt of benefits have yet to sign up, and that support could be taken away. The Children's Society has estimated that applications have not been made for more than 2,000 children in care or care leavers. That is why the Opposition have called for an extension of the European Union settlement scheme to the end of September. The Government must then do everything possible to sign up eligible people, with a strategy focusing on the vulnerable, children in care and care leavers.

Will the Minister confirm what is being done to support those who are unable to use or access the internet? More widely, how many eligible individuals does the Home Office believe have yet to sign up, and precisely how many applications are still being processed? Put simply, the Government have not done enough to prevent people from falling through the cracks. To avoid the risk of terrible injustice, surely the Government must extend the deadline to the end of September and use the additional time to ensure that all who are eligible are signed up.

Kevin Foster: What I would say is that the EUSS itself is the lesson learned from Windrush. Granting people status via an Act of Parliament, with no record taken and no document to prove it, might work for a few years while people can still easily prove where they were living on a particular date, but many years down the line it produces the outcomes we saw. That is exactly why we have been keen to make the EUSS relatively simple and open, with criteria that are basically based on residence, not on exercising specific free movement rights, which would have been far more restrictive and complicated for applicants to prove.

Intensive work is being done to support the most vulnerable, with 72 grant-funded organisations being funded up to the end of September to continue supporting applications and those with status beyond the deadline tomorrow. Again, we have been working closely with local authorities to reach out to those in care—not just children in care, but adults as well.

Literally millions of applications have been received, although it is hard to give a precise figure for how many applications are currently outstanding, given that literally

[Kevin Foster]

thousands are still coming in every day—and we very much welcome that. To reassure the House, we have dealt with much larger surges of applications. For example, around Christmas, we were receiving literally tens of thousands of applications. Also to reassure the House, the vast majority of those have already been resolved, with all but a small percentage having been granted status under the EUSS.

We believe that we have made great progress, but, as we have touched on before, we have published non-exhaustive guidance on what we will see as reasonable grounds for a late application, including for many vulnerable groups. We have also published guidance for employers—and landlords—on what their approach should be to an EEA national they had employed before the deadline and how the first resort should be to look at supporting them in making an application.

The hon. Gentleman said that 28-day warnings have been issued. To be clear, those have not been issued. We have not got to the deadline; what he was referring to is the approach we will take when we encounter people who may be eligible for EUSS status after the deadline.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I have a very substantial and thriving European community in Kensington, with South Kensington being the home of the French community in the UK. I welcome the success of this scheme, with 5.6 million applications and 5.2 million already approved. May I ask my hon. Friend a very specific question? I have certain residents who, during the pandemic, have had to go back to their home European country. Will he assure me that this will not prejudice their application?

Kevin Foster: I can reassure my hon. Friend that we have already published some quite significant guidance on the exact position for people who have had to go home to their country. To be clear, if someone has settled status, they can actually be outside the UK for up to five years without losing that status. For those with pre-settled status, there are provisions that allow them to be outside the UK for an important reason during the qualification period. Reports that people would lose that entitlement if they were out of the country for more than six months during the pandemic were not correct; we have published guidance on that. If someone has gone home to be with their family, having been resident in the UK before 31 December, there are a number of provisions in place to ensure that they can still secure the status they deserve under the European settlement scheme.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP) [V]: The hospitality sector, among others, has long warned that Brexit would mean it lost much of its workforce, and it has; but worse, more than 100,000 people who want to stay are waiting more than three months for a decision. Does the Minister realise that after this week employers will be scared to employ those workers? In a recent debate, he told me that everyone receives a certificate of application and that this would suffice. Well, the3million advised me today that many have never received this certificate. Why not? I have seen one, and it does not tell employers for how long it remains valid. Again, why not? The process also requires applicants to go through 14 stages on a website—if it is working.

I do not envisage a big bang on 1 July but I do foresee huge problems in the coming months, with people willing to work and employers desperate to employ, but too much uncertainty about the legality of doing so. I appreciate the desire to go digital, but until that digital is working properly, why will the Government not provide physical proof for people, as they can apparently do for covid vaccination status? If it is too difficult, please just do what the Scottish Government and others have called for and extend the deadline—or, better still, scrap the scheme and have a declaratory scheme, which is what was promised by many of the Minister's colleagues, including the Prime Minister, in the first place.

Kevin Foster: I have already pointed out exactly the issue with declaratory schemes. They sound good in theory, because everyone gets a status; the problem is that if no record is taken and nothing is issued to prove that status, in later years it is extremely difficult for people to prove their rights. That is the key lesson learned from the experience of those who were granted a declaratory status back on 1 January 1973.

Let me make it clear from the Dispatch Box that those who have made an in-time application and have a certificate of application retain a right to work here in the UK while their application is being considered. We have been clear in our guidance about what employers should do if they have any queries or issues. There is no requirement for employers to undertake retrospective checks; they maintain a statutory excuse in relation to the right-to-work checks and legislation, if they accepted an EEA passport or national identity card as proof of a right to work before 30 June. That is the clear position.

This morning, we have sent a detailed reply to the3million regarding some particular queries it had about those who are yet to receive a certificate of application. Given the length of this session, I will arrange for that to be placed in the Library for Members' reference.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con) [V]: Although I welcome the fact that so many citizens of the EU are voting with their feet—and they are welcome here—could my hon. Friend explain how previous Governments left us in a situation where an estimate of 3.8 million applications has turned into an actual figure of 5.6 million, without a single word of contrition? What a failure of the state.

Kevin Foster: In terms of the position we take as the Government today, anyone who is entitled to and deserves status under the EUSS will be granted it—there is no limit, there is no target and there are no quotas. It is interesting to note the number of applications we have received versus the impact assessments done back in 2004, but we have a new points-based system that allows us to better decide and better set in place what type of positions we want to have in terms of migration and ultimately judges people by their skills and talents and what they have to offer the UK, rather than fundamentally by what passport they hold.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Minister said that help was available on the phone. As of today, it still is not for most people; the phone line simply says, "There is no space left on the call queue", because there are obviously not enough people able to respond, and I understand that was the

case last week and the week before as well. May I just press him on the situation for children who may not have applied at this point? The guidance states:

"Where a parent, guardian or Local Authority has failed by the relevant deadline to apply…on behalf of a child…that will normally constitute reasonable grounds for the child…to make a late application".

Clearly that is welcome, but why does it not say that that will always constitute reasonable grounds for a late application? For those children, it is clearly not their fault; somebody else should have applied for them. Will he strengthen that guidance and reassure them and say that will always be reasonable grounds?

Kevin Foster: I appreciate the question and how the right hon. Member has put it. My understanding is that we would adopt the approach that if it was someone who was under 18 or who was lacking mental capacity and was over 18—for example, power of attorney was in place and someone else should have made the application—we would accept that as reasonable grounds for a late application being made. I make it clear, as I have said before, that the guidance is non-exhaustive. People do not have to meet one of the many reasons listed; we will always look at the individual's circumstances to see whether they had reasonable grounds. I am happy to pick up the point concerned, because our general principle is that if someone else should have made the application, whether due to someone's age or mental capability, or for example because there is a deputyship in place or they were in the care of a local authority, we would usually see that almost certainly as reasonable grounds for a late application.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement and the work that the Department has been doing to secure the rights of EU citizens here in the UK and, as he mentioned, the reciprocal case of British citizens out in the EU. Does he agree that the success of the EU settlement scheme showcases the UK's commitment to a firm but fair immigration system now that we are a sovereign nation in charge of our own borders?

Kevin Foster: What it shows is that we can deliver a scheme that secures the rights here in the United Kingdom of millions of our neighbours, friends and colleagues, and it also shows how we can deliver using better technology. The vast majority of people have applied literally from the comfort of their own home and have not had to go off to a visa application centre, for example, to prove their identity. With simple rules and criteria—for example, residence, not exercising free movement rights—we could grant a large number of applications fairly quickly. It not only welcomes EU nationals who came in the time of free movement, but it gives some strong lessons that we can take over into the reform and simplification of the rest of our immigration system. We have applied many of the lessons from the EUSS to the start of the British nationals overseas visa route that we created earlier this year, such as online application from home, simple criteria and a digital status that is quickly and easily issued.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I say to the Minister that I did exactly what he has enjoined others to do? Some weeks ago, I wrote to all the EU nationals I could identify in my constituency. We publicised the looming deadline in the press, and I have to tell him that it turned up a disturbing number of glitches in the system, not least one involving the inadequacy of certain mobile smartphones for uploading documents. I would have hoped that by this stage of things, those sorts of bugs would have been ironed out of the system, but my experience is very much that they have not.

On the figures that the Minister has given the House today, there remain something in the region of 400,000 unprocessed applications. Making allowance for the fact that there is bound to be a late surge, we might anticipate that there will be some half a million by the time of the close of the deadline. He will be aware that only once an application has been granted is the applicant entitled to the right to healthcare, to work and to rent. They could be liable to charges within the NHS. What does he intend to do for these possibly half a million people while we are waiting for the applications to be processed?

Kevin Foster: I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman is not correct. Those who have an application—*[Interruption.]* I am not sure why we have Wimbledon on the screens, but anyway—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It should be noted that there is a mistake in the broadcasting. I will just pause the House for a moment. Can we have it stopped immediately? It is not fair to the Minister to have his audience distracted, although of course nobody would think that Wimbledon was more exciting than what he has to say.

Kevin Foster: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think what I have to say is actually quite crucial given the reference to the position of half a million people in this country. Let us be absolutely clear: a person who applies by the 30 June 2021 deadline will have their existing rights protected pending the outcome of their application, including any appeal. That includes the right to work and the right to access healthcare. This is achieved not just by me saying it at the Dispatch Box but by the Citizens' Rights (Application Deadline and Temporary Protection) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020—a law passed last year. The firm message that I would give is that people should get their applications in by the deadline tomorrow, but if they have made an application in time, before that deadline, their rights are protected pending the outcome. Therefore, those half a million people will not be exposed to some of the issues that the right hon. Gentleman set out.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Was what we just saw, Madam Deputy Speaker, a preview of what is going to happen at 5 o'clock so that people who are here for the estimates day debate can do two things at once? The great success that the Government have had with the EU settlement scheme contrasts rather heavily with the failure to stop illegal immigrants coming across the channel escorted by French naval vessels. Does the excellent Minister have any reassurance for this House that that will be the next item on the agenda to be dealt with?

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I can reassure him that this time next week we will be introducing in the House legislation to do just that and to fix our broken asylum system.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) [V]: Many in Hornsey and Wood Green have called the UK their home for decades, but they have yet to hear back from the Home Office. A 62-year-old man is waiting, anxious and fearful of being separated from his family. Will the Minister today fix the Home Office telephones, get through the backlog and calm the nerves of constituents who fear a Windrush-style scandal of falling through the cracks and being excluded from vital support?

Kevin Foster: I have said that those with in-time applications waiting for decision have their existing rights protected. To be clear, the vast majority of applications are dealt with within three months and those that have been outstanding for over a year are mostly ones where there are issues relating to criminality.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Many businesses in my constituency have been struggling to find the staff that they need as our economies reopen, whether that is in tourism and hospitality, construction, food processing or horticulture. Part of the reason is that many EU citizens who were granted settled status went back to their home countries as a result of the pandemic. Yet this workforce will be essential to help to rebuild our economy, so can my hon. Friend confirm that anyone who has received settled status will not only be entitled to come back to the UK but will be welcome back here to help us to rebuild our economy?

Kevin Foster: Absolutely. I fully endorse the comments my hon. Friend has just made about people being welcome when they come back to the UK. People who have settled status can be absent from the UK for up to five years and still return, and pick up their entitlements on return, including the right to work.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]: "Data not dates" is the Government's mantra for lockdown easing, so should it not be the same for settled status? The data clearly shows that tens of thousands of EU citizens, to whom the Government promised the right to stay, will become undocumented overnight, criminalised for working, renting accommodation or opening a bank account. They may be young or elderly, have insufficient language or digital skills, or have been unable to return to the UK because of the pandemic. In Newcastle, we value our European residents, so will the Minister not extend the deadline? Or does he want another Windrush?

Kevin Foster: The EU settlement scheme has already granted millions of people secure status in this country and is granting it to thousands more people every day. That is the key focus for us: getting people to apply before the deadline. However, as we have said numerous times, we will accept late applications where there are reasonable grounds for that, including from the most vulnerable.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): I thank the Minister for updating the House on the progress of the EU settlement scheme. Does he agree that with time running out, the best thing we can be doing is encouraging people to make sure they have applied, rather than engaging in the doomsaying, naysaying and the putting down of the entire scheme we have heard from those on the Opposition Benches?

Kevin Foster: I could not agree more. I suspect that a few years back we were getting lots of predictions that we would never manage to grant millions of statuses to people who are our friends and neighbours, but we have managed to do that and we have had applications come in. I agree that now is the time to encourage people to get their applications in and secure their rights, and join the millions of people who have already done so.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It has been clear that the Government have no idea how many EU citizens were in the UK, or how important they are to the NHS, the economy and our cultural and educational institutions. It is also clear that the settlement scheme is overly bureaucratic and unwieldy, so I am going to press the Minister again: will the Government at least extend the deadline by six months so that the mess they created can be sorted out?

Kevin Foster: The many people who found it was a simple application using an app would be surprised to hear the comments about it being unwieldy and everything else. The fact we have managed to grant millions of statuses already and have hundreds of thousands of applications received, and be granting thousands more statuses and receiving thousands more applications every day, would not suggest that this is a particularly unwieldy system to deal with.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement on the EU settled status scheme today as a great example of how legal immigration routes can be effective, but what progress have the Government made on preventing illegal immigration, such as the kind we continue to see on the English channel?

Kevin Foster: I appreciate my hon. Friend's comments. He is right to allude to the fact that our system needs to be not only firm, but fair, as we have seen with the millions of statuses we have granted under the EUSS. As I have already mentioned, next week we will bringing before the House new legislation to reform our broken asylum system and help break the business model of those heinous people-smuggling networks. Just for background, I should say that just so far this year over 5,000 channel crossings have been prevented, and we continue to work with French authorities to crack down on the criminal gangs behind this disgraceful trade.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba) [V]: During the Brexit campaign, the Prime Minister promised automatic settled status for EU nationals living across these islands. What we have got is a vague reassurance of consideration of reasonable grounds. My concern is about the most vulnerable people in my communities and across these islands: those in care homes and the care system and those who are very hard to reach. When the guillotine falls tomorrow, will the Prime Minister have made liars of us all? What will happen to those people? What is the mechanism for establishing reasonable grounds and how will people be treated? Will they lose their homes? Where will they be held? Will they be deported?

Kevin Foster: The hon. Gentleman might want to review some of the answers that I have already given and some of the guidance that has been published on, for example, employment. To be clear, there is nothing vague about the fact that we have granted millions of solid statuses, that there are people who have status while their applications are being considered—

Neale Hanvey *indicated dissent.*

Kevin Foster: The hon. Gentleman may shake his head, but those are incontrovertible facts.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) [V]: I very much associate myself with the comments about the need to promote the success of this programme, especially to those critical workers, who many in my constituency have told me they want to see returning as part of reopening. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is worth considering introducing a series of measures to encourage public bodies to refer EU citizens to support services so that they can ensure that they apply before any restrictions come in? Those who apply late are most likely to be encountered when being refused housing by local authorities. It would be enormously helpful for measures to be taken to ensure that public bodies that encounter those who may not have applied are encouraged to refer them to make their applications as soon as possible.

Kevin Foster: I agree with my hon. Friend. We have already done some close work with public bodies. For example, getting EUSS status can be very helpful to someone with a chaotic lifestyle who may have been homeless, because it gives them a firm status and identity. We are working on those systems. We have been working closely with local government, particularly in the last two years, to get applications in and we will continue to do that. That includes work on provisions for expediting late applications when there are compassionate or compelling circumstances.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate the Minister on what has undoubtedly been a successful campaign, which he has looked after. However, I am sure that he accepts that there are anomalies in the system, specifically in Northern Ireland because of the land border that we share with an EU state, namely, the Republic of Ireland. That land border, which allows free movement across the whole island, between Northern Ireland and southern Ireland, can at times undermine some of the good work that the Department is trying to do and affect and undermine commercial interests in Northern Ireland because of the different status that now applies. With that in mind, and given that the Minister has written to me about a number of those issues, is he willing to meet me to discuss those anomalies to see whether there is a way of addressing some of the problems that have been identified?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his overall comments. I would certainly be happy to meet. As he knows, Irish citizens do not need to apply. The frontier worker system has been open since January. That is more likely to apply to the Irish land border than perhaps it is in other parts of the UK. I was pleased to be in Northern Ireland last week to meet our two grant-funded organisations and someone who is a famous former Member of this House, who is the CEO of one of them, to discuss their work to reach out to more vulnerable citizens.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con) [V]: I welcome my hon. Friend's encouragement to people to make their applications, something that my constituent and his family, who have been in the UK since 2008, did together. His wife and children are among the 5.2 million people who have already received settled status, but my constituent has yet to hear. To provide certainty and reassurance to families, can the Minister arrange for a priority in cases where members of a family have been treated separately?

Kevin Foster: First, to reassure my hon. Friend's constituent, all those who have applied by 30 June will have their existing rights protected pending the outcome of their application. To be clear, we deal with linked family applications together as far as we can. Those who apply after another family member may be doing so in their own right and may need to be assessed individually. However, as I have already touched on, our goal is to get as many outstanding cases completed as possible. Those that have been outstanding for over a year are mostly related to pending prosecutions or serious criminality.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I will now suspend the House for three minutes so that arrangements can be made for the next item of business.

3.18 pm

Sitting suspended.

Bereavement (Leave and Pay)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

3.21 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about leave and pay for employees of whom a close family member has died.

This Bill is designed to address the need for statutory paid bereavement leave for all employees on the sad loss of a close family member or partner. In recent years, I was privileged to be one of a number of MPs who worked cross-party to secure paid bereavement leave for parents on the loss of a child up to the age of 18. That effort showed this place at its best, and that work was finally enshrined in law as of April this year. As that work was going on, however, I said in this Chamber that, groundbreaking though that achievement was, it simply did not go far enough. That is why I am presenting this Bill.

According to research commissioned by the charity Sue Ryder, a third of employees who experienced a bereavement in the past year did not receive any communication from managers or the leadership of their organisation about bereavement. Only 32% of employees are aware of whether their employer has a bereavement policy, despite the fact that we are in the middle of a global health pandemic, with covid-19 linked to more than 152,000 deaths across the UK so far. Of those who felt well supported by their employer after experiencing a bereavement, 60% cited being allowed enough time off and not being pressured to return to work before they were ready as key actions that their employer took.

This Bill is timely, as the global health pandemic, which has touched us all in various ways, has sharply reminded us about the fragility of life and the profound and cruelly random nature of loss and bereavement. The line on employer discretion with regard to time off for employees following a profound event such as a bereavement is simply unfair. People deserve a level playing field. After all, death is the great leveller. Across the UK during this health pandemic, we have experienced bereavement on a distressing scale, and it has touched us all. Many of us have lost or feared losing a loved one. This has had a significant impact on our workforce, with 7.9 million people in employment—that is 24% of all employees—having experienced a bereavement in the past 12 months.

It is estimated that, for every death, six people experience intense grief. Taking into account the number of deaths in the UK each year and employment rates, we can say that bereavement causes nearly 2 million working people to suffer from intense grief each year. Such a profoundly life-changing experience brings with it potential long-term consequences for a person's mental and physical health, and in some cases it can trigger mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders, as well as being linked to an increased likelihood of heart attacks, diabetes and increased mortality.

The impacts of grief on society are huge and must no longer be left to the discretion of employers to manage in the workplace. We all know that many employers are supportive and understanding when an employee suffers a close bereavement, but we also know that many employers are not as supportive as they could be. Sometimes those who are grieving are pressured to return to work when they are still in the midst of the initial shock and trauma of loss. Without any statutory rights for employees to paid bereavement leave, the time and space to grieve for too many people is determined by the good will of their employer. That cannot be right and is counterproductive in a number of ways.

Typically, UK employers offer three to five days' compassionate leave for the death of a close relative, but the discretionary nature of this leave means potentially that thousands of employees are unable to take leave without fearing that it would undermine their job security. In addition, we know that those in less well-paid jobs are far less likely to receive any discretionary time off with pay when they suffer a bereavement, or have any compassionate leave at all, which is grossly unfair.

We all need time and space to grieve without worrying about loss of pay or pressure to return to work too soon. Those on low pay are much less able to absorb the losses associated with unpaid leave and the immediate financial burden of bereavement. They are also at greater risk of being dismissed from work for taking time off, or of not being able to focus on their work due to the fog of grief. That increases the pressure and financial stress on employees who are trying to cope with the loss of a close family member. There is also some evidence to suggest that those in more challenged socio-economic circumstances are more likely to experience complicated or persistent grief, because they are likely to face more difficulties accessing appropriate services and information to help them to cope with their feelings of loss and grief.

As well as compassionate reasons for statutory bereavement leave, there are also economic reasons for this change. Research shows that grief experienced by employees who have lost a loved one costs the UK economy £23 billion per year and costs the Treasury nearly £8 billion per year. However, those costs could reach as high as £49 billion to the economy and £18 billion to the Treasury.

Most of the considerable economic impact arises from grieving employees being unable to work at their normal levels of productivity while they deal with the emotional, practical and financial aspects of coping with the loss of a close relative. That in turn leads to a cost to the Treasury in lost tax revenues and the fall-out of reliance on NHS support such as mental health and social care needs that can often follow. So although statutory bereavement leave for all those who lose a close family member will involve costs, this is actually preventive expenditure, as it will lead to a significant saving for the UK economy and the Treasury and a more productive and resilient workforce with reduced staff absence. Such support will mean less reliance on NHS services or perhaps even social security support in the case of those employees who drop out of the workforce altogether following a close bereavement. Of course, there is a cost attached to this, but there are also significant costs to not doing this. It is in our interests as a society, and it is in the Treasury's interest, to take full cognisance of the profound debilitating effect that grief can have on those who lose a loved one. Statutory paid bereavement leave is a progressive and enlightened measure for any society to have in place.

Statutory bereavement leave for the loss of a close relative is something that people across the UK support. In fact, 62% of people across the UK believe that it is the right thing to do. The current arrangements, allowing leave for family emergencies, carry no statutory obligation that such leave should be paid, and it very often is not. We need to put bereavement leave for all who lose a close relative or partner on a statutory footing. That is what the Bill seeks to do, and that can be achieved if the political will is there to do it. Support for this measure certainly exists in wider society.

I urge the Government to study the proposals contained in the Bill carefully for the sake of the wellbeing of our workforce and our economy and support the progressive and compassionate measures that would give the profound effects of bereavement the statutory recognition they need and deserve. If they were to do so, as we emerge from this global health pandemic, that would send a signal that the Government have true empathy with all the losses suffered. We need to look after each other. This Parliament and this Government should take the opportunity to lead the way.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Patricia Gibson, Marion Fellows, Kirsten Oswald, Carol Monaghan, Brendan O'Hara, Joanna Cherry, Jonathan Edwards, Ian Mearns, Jim Shannon, Liz Saville Roberts, Bob Blackman and Jamie Stone present the Bill.

Patricia Gibson accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 29 October, and to be printed (Bill 134).

Estimates Day

[1st Allotted Day]

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION

Education Recovery

[Relevant documents: First Report of the Education Committee, Session 2021-22, The forgotten: how White working class pupils have been let down and how to change it, HC 85; Third Report of the Education Committee, Session 2019-21, A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution, HC 278.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2022, for expenditure by the Department for Education:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £53,229,742,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 14 of Session 2021-22,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £16,078,449,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £56,969,129,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—*(Nick Gibb.)*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call the Chair of the Education Committee, can I say that, as Members will notice, Back-Bench contributions are for up to six minutes? I remind all Members, whether they are physically here or speaking remotely, that if they are going to withdraw for whatever reason—and I understand there are competing loyalties for people on this day and some may wish to withdraw—I hope they will notify the Speaker's Office in the usual way. We all wish England well in the match tonight.

3.31 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I do not intend to detain the House for too long with my remarks, given what, as you have just reminded us, Mr Deputy Speaker, is happening not long after this debate.

I thank the House for agreeing to this debate on the estimates in relation to the Department for Education's recovery package. It is right that Members should consider the amount and distribution of funding allocated to lost learning. I want to talk about the damage to our children and young people's education and progress, and about how Department for Education funding can be put to its most effective use to mitigate this damage, to encourage innovative methods to recover the learning lost as a result of this dreadful pandemic and to enrich the lives of those truly disadvantaged in this country.

Of course, we should all recognise that schools remained open to disadvantaged and key worker children even when closed to other pupils. For that, we pay tribute to the school leaders, teachers and, of course, all the school support staff, who are often forgotten, but who actually make the running of schools possible.

We are all aware that pupils at all stages of their education experienced lost learning as a result of national lockdowns, school closures and the need for individuals, classes and whole year groups to self-isolate. The impact of each of these periods of absence from school continues to be a significant and ongoing issue. Research commissioned by the Department in May 2021 found that all year groups experienced a learning loss of

[Robert Halfon]

between two and three months in reading and mathematics. We also know that there are regional disparities in the level of learning loss in reading, with pupils in the north-east and in Yorkshire and the Humber seeing the greatest losses.

Even more alarmingly, while the pandemic has impacted on children and young people differently—for example, remote learning was especially difficult for children with special educational needs and disabilities—disadvantaged pupils have, overall, experienced greater learning losses of as much as seven months in both reading and maths.

A further wretched outcome of this pandemic is that school closures have reversed some of the progress we have been making in reducing the attainment gap. It was already stalling before coronavirus came upon us, but it has made reducing the attainment gap for disadvantaged children over the past decade much worse. Lost learning has structural consequences for these pupils that could result in lost earnings of as much as 3.4% in their lifetimes. That translates to a loss of between £26,500 and £52,300 in their earning potential, which is a tragedy on an individual and societal basis. Sir Kevan Collins, who came to the Education Committee this morning, said that he had worked with the DFE and that the overall loss to the country could be up to £100 billion.

Alarmingly, this week the Centre for Social Justice published findings that, at the end of 2020, almost 100,000 pupils—some as young as primary age—were still absent from school. No amount of proposed covid catch-up funding can help those children if they are not attending school. I worry that we are creating a generation of ghosted children, lost to an education system that does not know where they are, which is damaging their life chances and denying them a chance to climb the education ladder of opportunity. I urge the Minister, who I know cares deeply about these things, to implement rigorous methods of tracking where these children are and assessing what educational standard of learning they are receiving.

Over the past few days we have learned that a few hundred thousand children are being sent home from school because of covid bubbles. That has got to stop. Our children must be in school and learning, because every day they are out of school we are destroying their life chances. Every day they are out of school we are stopping them climbing to the top of the ladder that is supposed to bring jobs, prosperity and security for themselves and their families. I urge radical action not just in tracking the 100,000 ghosted children currently lost to the education system but in ensuring that whole bubbles of children are no longer sent home. Whether it is mobile vans, like blood donor vans, sent up and down the country to test pupils, setting up special test hubs inside or outside school or whatever it may be, we have to keep our children in school.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chair of the Education Committee for bringing the debate forward and for his knowledge. I followed him last week on young Protestant males' underachievement, which is important for us in Northern Ireland and certainly here for the Minister as well. Does he agree with me and, I suspect, many others inside and outside the House that there is a big crisis coming in relation to the mental health of children who are unable to cope with life as a result of covid-19 in the last year and its impact on life at home with all the restrictions? Does he feel that the Minister needs to have a strategy in place along with Health Ministers to address children's mental health from primary school all the way through to secondary school and college?

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman, whom I regard as a friend, gets it exactly right. People often focus just on the loss of academic attainment, but there are also the mental health problems facing children during the pandemic. We know that eating disorders have gone up by 400% among young people, which is a pretty horrific figure. We also know that one in six children has mental health difficulties when it used to be one in nine. The Minister is putting a lot more money—many millions of pounds—into mental health, and I welcome that, but I would like to see a mental health practitioner or counsellor in every school in the land, with proper time not just for the kids but for the parents and teachers as well. We have almost a mental health epidemic sweeping through the younger generation because of covid and many other factors that are much more complex.

To go back to the ghosted children, we must implement rigorous methods for tracking where each of these children is and assessing what educational standard of learning they are receiving. I applaud the investment that Ministers and the Government have made so far to address lost learning. The £3 billion of additional support for children to make further progress in the curriculum after a significant amount of time away from school during the pandemic is a genuine commitment to this generation—it is a significant amount of money that should not be sniffed at—but we need to ensure that there is further funding down the track. Let me tell hon. Members about two wonderful schools in my constituency to showcase how that funding can translate to on-the-ground catch-up offers in schools. Abbotsweld Primary Academy has allocated the additional funding to allow for four days of 8 am starts for year 5 and 6 pupils. The start of the day includes a free breakfast alongside physical education lessons, and there is additional time for English and mathematics during the school day. Burnt Mill Academy is using £5,000 of its catch-up funding to offer summer schools to support students' literacy and numeracy skills, ensuring that the gaps in learning are closed through enrichment activities. Our teachers and support staff all around the country are working hard to put the money to good use so that it has the most significant impact possible, and we give them our thanks.

Let me remind the House that the objectives of the measures to support education recovery are to recover the missed learning caused by coronavirus and to reduce the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. As I have said, I commend the Department for the money that has been put in—the £3 billion and the increase in pupil premium funding to £2.5 billion for 2021-22. However, will the Minister confirm whether changing the date of the school census in 2020 from October to January has meant a loss of £90 million to schools, as 62,216 children became eligible but did not attract pupil premium in 2021-22? I also ask him whether the catch-up funding proposed by the Government is

not new money, but funds repurposed from existing budgets, which are now being shared out among all students instead of focused on those who suffer the most disadvantage and are at the most threat of lost learning. Will he confirm that this is really new money for catch-up and recovery?

As I have argued before, the Government should set out a long-term plan for education and education recovery, with a transparent funding settlement, much as we see from the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Defence. If the Department of Health and Social Care can have a 10-year plan and a secure funding settlement, and the Ministry of Defence can have a strategic review and a long-term funding settlement, why can education not have a long-term plan and a secure funding settlement?

I really welcome the catch-up programme, and I campaigned for it, but my worry is that just 44% of the children who are using the tutoring programme are eligible for free school meals. The Sutton Trust also says that 34% of pupil premium funding is being used to plug gaps in school budgets—to fix leaky roofs, for example. The funding is not always used for the purpose it should be. The whole reason for today's debate is to shine light into the darkest corners of budget allocation and highlight where we can concentrate funding in the areas that are often overlooked.

My Education Committee's report, "The forgotten: how White working-class pupils have been let down, and how to change it", draws attention to how white British pupils eligible for free school meals already suffer from persistent and multi-generational disadvantage and disengagement from the curriculum, from early years through to higher education. That is compounded by place-based factors, including regional economics and under-investment, and family disengagement from education, all of which combine to create a perfect storm of disadvantage. Carefully allocated catch-up funding can support those pupils to weather that storm.

What Sir Kevan Collins was proposing, as he set out again to the Education Committee this morning, was more from the catch-up offer, to extend the school day, providing enrichment and sporting activities to promote soft skills such as teamwork, negotiation and problem solving, which have all fallen by the wayside during remote learning.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way on that point. During the last education debate, he intervened on me and the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), in his characteristically inquisitorial way and pressed us to say whether we agreed with the extension of the school day and, if so, whether we agreed to an academic focus in that extension. I responded that we did support the extension and out-of-hours activity, but we wanted it to be more creatively focused and used quite imaginatively.

I noticed that Kevan Collins said today, in response to the right hon. Gentleman's questions, that he wanted to create a space for children to be involved in a much broader range of experiences—the things they have missed, such as sports, drama and art. I know that the right hon. Gentleman is a reflective person. Does he now agree that the approach for any extended time at school needs to be along those lines, rather than the purely academic lines that he was proposing before?

Robert Halfon: If the hon. Gentleman looks at everything that I have said in the House, in the Select Committee and in newspaper articles, he will see that I have made it very clear from day one—the Minister will vouch for this, because I have nagged him about it often enough—that I absolutely believe in a longer day. It should be not just for academic catch-up, but for enrichment activities, mental health support and sporting activities; I have made the case and cited statistics to show that those also increase educational attainment. The reason I said what I did to the Opposition was that Opposition Members had been in the media giving quite confusing messages about whether they supported a longer school day. If they support a longer day now with both academic and enrichment activities, I strongly welcome that.

The mental health of young people has sustained worrying damage as a result of extended social isolation during a critical stage of their development. A longer school day provides opportunities to socialise and interact with many more peers than just having lessons can offer. The Department should leave no stone unturned to find underspend in its budget and re-channel the money into catch-up to make Sir Kevan's vision a reality.

I present a proposition to the Minister. Schools and teachers have carried out the marking and assessment that exam boards normally undertake and are paid handsomely for. Of course, exam boards spent money on exams before they were cancelled, such as on creating and printing exam papers, but substantial refunds to reflect the lack of exam marking are likely to be given to schools and colleges. Last year, OCR gave back a total of £7.9 million, while AQA—the UK's largest provider of academic qualifications—returned £42 million to schools and colleges, a rebate of approximately 25%. It is suggested that as much as 50% will be refunded this year. There is a strong ethical argument for that rebate to be used to fund pilot schemes in secondary schools to extend the school day, which will help to make the case for funding from the Treasury. Given that the Minister and the Secretary of State have said that the Government are seriously looking at this, I hope that something will come out of the comprehensive spending review.

I have made clear my feelings that the catch-up money is a welcome starter, or possibly what the French refer to as an amuse-bouche—a small bite, or even a big bite, before the main meal—but it should not yet be considered as a nourishing main course. I urge the Department to look at the recommendations in the Education Committee's report on white working-class children to offer tailored funding at local and neighbourhood level and, as the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities also recommends, to level up educational and extracurricular opportunities.

The Department could start by combining the catch-up funding and the pupil premium in one almighty package, an approach that Sir Kevan Collins supported at our Committee evidence session this morning. Money would be available for pupils whom schools identify as in need—such as SEND students and those who struggle with mental health problems as a result of the lockdowns, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out—but there would be money clearly ring-fenced

[Robert Halfon]

in the estimates memo for the most disadvantaged, and it would be microtargeted to reflect regional disparities in learning loss.

Only by ensuring that the catch-up programme achieves value for money and is focused on disadvantaged pupils will the Government head off the four horsemen of the education apocalypse that are galloping towards our young people: attainment loss, mental health damage, vulnerability to safeguarding hazards through persistent school absences, and a loss of lifetime earnings. Let us get these children back on the education ladder of opportunity.

3.48 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who chairs the Education Committee, of which I am a member. This is an important debate. I thank all the school caretakers, secretaries, heads, support staff and teachers who have maintained our education system and educated our pupils throughout this very difficult time.

There have been major challenges, compounded by an unforgivable lack of planning by the Department for Education that often left children high and dry, without being able to go online for months. There was such confusion over reopening and exams in the first two terms of the year. Children across London have missed an estimated 103 days of in-person school—more than half a normal school year.

The Conservatives' catch-up plan is not only woefully underfunded; it includes nothing on children's wellbeing or social development, despite parents saying that this is their top concern for their children after the isolation of lockdown. The failing tutoring programme currently reaches less than 2% of school pupils. Of course we need the tutoring programme, but it must reach all the pupils who need it. Across the country, there is a large and growing disadvantage gap between children, and that must be the focus of the funding. A disadvantaged child in Wandsworth will be an average of four months behind others in the early years, before they start school; six and a half months behind in primary school; and 10 months—a whole school year—behind in secondary school.

Schools in Putney, Southfields and Roehampton have already suffered massive real-terms cuts since 2010, with a shortfall of more than £15.1 million in Wandsworth schools. That is £519 per pupil. One secondary school, for example, has a shortfall of more than £880,000, which is £841 per pupil. Schools really want to rise to the challenge of the catch-up. They do not want to see any child left behind, but they cannot do it without the funding.

In the Education Committee this morning we heard from former education recovery commissioner Sir Kevan Collins. As an MP but also as a parent, I heard his evidence with alarm. He said that the failure to invest in a successful catch-up plan now will set the course of the education system for the next 10 years, that inequality gaps are widening, that there is a huge impact on individual life chances and a huge impact on our national economy of up to £100 billion. He felt that he had to resign from that position because of the entrenched lack of political will to fund a catch-up plan that is needed—to fund the quality of teaching, to fund more tutoring for three to five years, and very quickly to manoeuvre this funding settlement in pace with the school year, not the normal funding cycle.

Labour's catch-up plan would deliver: breakfast clubs and new activities for every child; quality mental health support in every school; small group tutoring for all who need it—not just 1% of children; continued development for teachers; and an education recovery premium, providing additional support for the children who need it most. It would also ensure that no child goes hungry, by extending free school meals over the holidays, including the summer break.

I want to focus quickly on the early years. State-maintained nursery schools are the jewel in the crown of our early years provision, but there are only 389 left in the UK. I welcome the Secretary of State saying in the Education Committee last week that he will "go in to bat" for them at the Treasury for multi-year funding. I welcome the possibility of increased funding for our state-maintained nursery schools and hope to hear the Minister reiterate those remarks in this debate, because state-maintained nursery schools are often left out. They were left out of additional personal protective equipment funding and cleaning costs, and the covid catch-up plan. They have even had to pay business rates during the last year. They are too often left out and neglected; we need to save them.

Special educational needs are another particular concern. I hold weekly surgeries, and almost every week I hear from a parent of children with special educational needs; they feel left out of the current system and are battling the system with the extra impact of covid. Recent research shows that more than 80% of support for families of children with special educational needs has declined during the pandemic. What is the Minister doing to tackle those deep-rooted inequalities?

I am disappointed that the Education Secretary is treating covid catch-up like another pot of funding for another cause, instead of realising the full implications of inaction now. Schools are ready to take up the challenge, but they cannot do so without the funding they need. There needs to be a far more extensive change in the way of working and far more funding. We really need to rally a national effort to ensure that no child, wherever they live, suffers any long-term disadvantage because of the pandemic.

3.54 pm

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con) [V]: I am pleased to participate in this important debate on the education estimates. I have in the past worked as both a teacher and a lecturer, so I know from personal and professional experience just how important a good education is. On a personal level, education and social mobility have characterised my life. My family originated in the east end of London and moved out to Essex. Fortunately, they understood how vital education is to obtain the knowledge and skills required to succeed. Education gives us an understanding of the world around us and changes it into something better. It develops in us a perspective on life, it helps us to build opinions and points of view and it is very important for improving social mobility.

Since 2010, this Conservative Government have made excellent progress on education standards and opportunities. We should be proud of what has been achieved so far. However, as reported by the Chair of the Education Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), there are still some serious areas of concern, including the underperformance and underachievement of white working-class children. The Government need to address that. I fear that that group and others will have been further disadvantaged by school closures. I also fear that the attainment gap has increased because of the pandemic, with so many children's education damaged by lost learning. An extension of the school day, with academic and non-academic content, should be seriously considered.

I am proud of the Government's approach to skills and training, as well as the levelling-up agenda, which will unleash an individual's full potential and increase job opportunities. I look forward hopefully to the levelling-up White Paper, which I am sure will include bold policy interventions and increase and spread opportunity throughout the UK. The Skills and Post-16 Education Bill will also transform access to skills throughout the country, ensuring that people can train and retrain at any stage in their lives, supporting them to move into higher-quality, higher-skilled jobs, and equipping the workforce with the skills that employers need. This will be vital as we deal with the consequences of the ongoing covid-19 pandemic and for the future, post-Brexit Britain.

The pandemic has had a profound effect on not only our health but how we learn, work and live. School closures over the past year have had such a huge impact on all students, and a number of children are at risk of falling further behind and facing additional barriers. There is, of course, the issue of children being deprived of physical learning opportunities and a lack of facilities at home—whether in respect of limited access to IT equipment or a lack of study space—to enable adequate learning. I welcome what the Government did to increase investment, with more than £400 million to provide internet access and more than 1.3 million laptops for disadvantaged children. Young people have been helped during this pandemic and, hopefully, those in need have been helped the most.

Despite the Government's work, there is so much more to be done and we must continue to do everything possible to ensure that no child is left behind. So far, the Government have committed more than £3 billion for catching up. That includes a £650 million universal catch-up premium for schools; £200 million for face-to-face summer schools this year; a £302 million recovery programme for the coming year; £18 million to support early years language development from next year; and £550 million to fund small-group tuition. All those things are very welcome and we praise the Government, the Secretary of State and the Ministers for what they are doing.

All that is, of course, on top of the £1 billion to support up to 6 million 15-hour tutoring courses for disadvantaged schoolchildren, as well as the extension of the 16-to-19 tuition fund—which is targeted at key subjects such as maths and English, which are so vital to all children—and the £400 million to help train and support early years practitioners and 500,000 teachers throughout the country. The recovery programme will mean that the average primary school will receive more funding than the average secondary school, to further support pupils to catch up.

All the things I have mentioned are very welcome, but the teachers and parents have done a superb job and we should praise them for the home schooling and all they have done over the past 12 months. Yet we know that the best place for children is in school. An extensive programme of catch-up funding and an ambitious long-term education recovery plan will deliver vital support to the children and young people who need it most, making sure that everyone has the same opportunity to fulfil their potential. Much more needs to be done, and I know the Government will be looking at that in any way they can in the future. What we have in the estimates is very good news. We applaud and praise what the Government have done. They know that the most disadvantaged children need extra help, but all our children need the opportunity to be back in school. We must make sure they have the opportunity, through education, to develop their skills and talents so that, in the future, they can do whatever they want with their talents, abilities, demands and desires. Education is so important, and we cannot let the pandemic destroy ambition and opportunity for our young. I know the Minister appreciates that and will do all he can with the Secretary of State and the Department, and I wish them well. Our children are vital for our nation and the future.

4 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD) [V]: The pandemic has generated unprecedented financial demands on the Government, but time and time again they have drawn a red line when it comes to supporting children and young people. The former Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield, calls it

"an institutional bias against children",

and Sir Kevan Collins today described the Government's response as "feeble". When will this Conservative Government wake up and realise that they are failing an entire generation of young people?

Let us start with those living in poverty. Some of the poorest families had to fight the Government to get free school meals during holidays, not just once but twice. Children living in digital poverty had to wait months and months to get a digital device because the DFE could not get its act together. After receiving independent advice from Sir Kevan Collins that the Government needed to spend £15 billion on educational catch-up, they committed to just a tenth of that. Just last week, the Government confirmed that they would go ahead with a planned cut of some £90 million to pupil premium funding, which helps the most disadvantaged children. That is not levelling up; it is a crushing blow. Why are the Government ignoring their own education advisers? When will they commit to a serious catch-up package? When will they take child poverty seriously?

Let me turn to school budgets more broadly. I welcome the fact that the starting salaries of newly qualified teachers will increase to £30,000 by 2022, but schools are being asked to meet those costs from their already overstretched school budgets. One school in my constituency tells me that 91% of its budget is already committed to staff salaries at existing levels. Simply put, it needs more funding to pay staff what they deserve while still investing in other areas of the school. We already know that the increased work pressure on school staff is leading to a

[Daisy Cooper]

retention crisis and a real fear of burnout. What will the Government do to address the chronic shortfall in schools funding?

Finally, I turn to the current covid crisis in schools. Covid-related pupil absence in state schools has skyrocketed: 375,000 pupils—about one in 20 children—are out of school for covid-related reasons. That is the highest rate since schools fully reopened in March. That is why I am calling on the Government to establish a rapid taskforce with a mandate to keep schools open safely. That taskforce, if set up today, should do its work in July, produce guidance by the end of July and give school leaders time at the start of term in September to get measures in place before bringing children back.

If the Government simply say that they are done with bubbles and self-isolation, transmission rates could go through the roof, opening us up to the risk of new variants, so that is not the answer. Instead, we need ventilation, testing, contact tracing, face coverings and a review of bubble sizes to make them as small as possible. The Association of Directors of Public Health has already indicated that it too wants to see a root-and-branch reform of the current measures. If asked by the Government, I am sure it would move heaven and earth to help them do that.

I want the Secretary of State to make sure that children do not lose out on any more valuable time, so I ask today for the Government to commit to setting up a rapid taskforce with directors of public health, and to put a proper plan and funding in place to keep our schools open safely.

4.4 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I commend and congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on securing this debate and on all the work that he and his Committee do. He set out very effectively the extent of the differential impact on children over this past year and a little. Like him and other colleagues across the House, I pay tribute to school leaders, teachers and staff, in East Hampshire and throughout the country.

I am speaking in support of the main estimate and the subsequent announcements from the DFE, which we anticipate will be reflected in the supplementary estimate. I also note that the Government have said that we have not heard the last word on support for education catch-up or acceleration, and of course that is not only about money. We cannot, for example, will into existence many more tutors who are suitably qualified and of the quality we would expect.

There is clearly a role for extra time but that, too, requires careful application and needs to recognise that there is no common starting point. Different schools in different places currently have very different school days. There is, by the way, room in extra time for academic catch-up. In spite of his extensive intervention on my right hon Friend, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), who speaks for the Opposition, still managed—rather skilfully—to avoid taking a position on that question. Extra time is clearly not only about academic catch-up, because so much of what has been missed is about enrichment—about character building, personal development, and the sheer joy of growing up and being with other children.

To address those challenges we need a broad approach. I have talked about a whole-of-society response, but there are obviously multiple strands required from Government as well. That needs to include an acceleration of the measures in the children and young people's mental health Green Paper for example, a refreshed school sports and activity plan, and much more. This is about children at all stages and all phases. I welcome the additional resourcing in the estimate for early years, and also the funding for the extra learning time for T-levels, as part of the upgrade of our technical and vocational education.

My right hon. Friend has long campaigned for a long-term plan for education. We talk a lot about building back better, and I think this should be the moment when we put that long-term plan in place, particularly on funding. School funding in this country by international standards is relatively high, and every year the OECD publishes tables that show that. There are many different measures, and although whichever one we pick, people will say, "You've picked the wrong one," they all show that this country's spend on state education at primary and secondary level is relatively high. However, there have been three issues with the way that we fund schools.

First, the Department for Education has been dealing for some years now with historical disparities between different parts of the country. In some ways that is a painful process to go through, but it does result in a fairer outcome.

The second issue is strains in the high-needs block. The reforms introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) in the Children and Families Act 2014 extended rights to extra support, but the strains on high-needs funding go wider and are longer term. Steps have been taken, but we need to do more. That includes, in capital terms, state special school places, but it also includes early intervention support within mainstream settings, including in early years, and a complete reappraisal of the way that financial transfers and some of the potential disincentives work within the system. There is also a case for looking again at how assistants who specifically look after and assist children with special educational needs are employed, so that it is easier for them to move between schools, and so on, as children themselves move on.

The third problem has been that the formula itself sometimes makes long-term planning harder for schools and is therefore less efficient. It does not reflect fully year-to-year swings in pupil numbers and the fact that although some costs are fully variable with the number of pupils in school, some are fixed at different levels—at the level of individual classes or of the school. The approach is not sufficiently long-term to enable schools, which are relatively small financial units in the public sector, to plan properly. It would be good to have rolling three-year or five-year budgets. Obviously, I know that the Treasury dislikes that and that, historically, whoever has been in government, we have operated through spending review periods, but there is a good case for re-examining that.

As we come out of this pandemic, children must of course be at the very top of our list of priorities, but it is also an opportunity to put many things that we do and the way that we do them on a surer, longer-term footing.

4.10 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak after the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds). I will be making some similar points in relation to a different part of the education system. It is important that we consider the challenges facing the sector in its widest sense, in dealing with the consequences of the pandemic, and I would like to make a few comments, as chair of the all-party group on students, about higher education.

As we approach the end of a second academic year disrupted by the pandemic—and it looks likely that we are heading for a third in which some aspects of blended and online learning will continue—it is important that Ministers recognise the issues facing university students, who feel powerfully that they have been forgotten in this crisis. Universities and their staff have worked hard to offer the best possible learning experience over the past 16 months, but clearly in a pandemic the best possible inevitably falls short of what might otherwise have been available. Although the blended learning ahead may be partial, and flexible, Ministers must assist universities by providing as soon as possible clear guidance to both institutions and students on what to expect in the year ahead, as too often advice and guidance have been offered too late. Such guidance is necessary so that they can plan properly and, for instance, so that students can make informed decisions about accommodation.

The Government must also support universities in addressing those areas where the student experience has been diminished over the last year, and it is not just about teaching. A recent survey reported that up to a quarter of students do not have friends at university, over half feel lonely every day, and four in 10 reported a deterioration in their mental health over the last year. Those challenges are beyond the capacity of conventional or established university services to deal with.

Alongside the mental health impact, we also need to consider the fact that not all learning can take place online. Our all-party group ran an inquiry at the start of this year that took evidence from students all around the UK and on a wide variety of programmes. We expected those studying some practical subjects to talk about the limitations of online teaching, but we were struck by the breadth of the problem. One student, for example, told us:

"As a student of an art subject (fashion), I have found it incredibly difficult to get the same level of teaching during this pandemic as I would in normal circumstances. Without access to studio spaces and essential equipment such as sewing machines how am I supposed to learn how to draft patterns and make garments?"

Although, obviously and rightly, public health has come first throughout the pandemic, we need to address the diminished learning experience and ensure that practical skills are not significantly impacted in the long term. Our report therefore recommended to the Government that they establish a covid student learning remediation fund to assist universities to provide access to experiences, specialist facilities and equipment, for skills development and more—those things that students have missed out on during the pandemic.

We should also recognise that many new students starting university this year will have missed school experiences and learning, which will need to be bolstered by an enhanced offer when they arrive at university in September.

The fund that we recommended should both enable student participation and support additional university costs, recognising the pressures on staff and the workloads that they face. As vaccinations rise and universities prepare for more in-person learning, the Government will need to support them in addressing the lost learning experiences. I was disappointed that Ministers have not yet acted on our recommendation, just as they have fallen well short on the hardship support that we felt was necessary, but as we look forward to the next academic year, they have a fresh chance to establish such a fund.

Throughout the pandemic, students have sadly been treated as an afterthought by Ministers. They have been forced to pay for accommodation that they were not permitted to access because of covid restrictions, they have lost crucial income to support them at university because of jobs lost in hospitality and retail, and their experience has been diminished through limited online learning. All of this has meant that students have felt neglected. Ministers now have an opportunity to put this right, and I hope that they will do so.

4.16 pm

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): It says on the Centre for Early Childhood website set up by the Royal Foundation:

"Advances in brain science have shown that early childhood—pregnancy to five—has implications for our development that go far beyond our physical abilities. In fact, this represents one of the best investments we can make for the long-term health, wellbeing and happiness of our society."

In commending my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for his comments on the main estimates day, I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister to take into account where it all begins.

Lockdown has been a painful time for many new parents during the pandemic. The "Babies in Lockdown" report, produced by the Parent-Infant Foundation, Best Beginnings and Home-Start UK, laid bare the experiences that families have faced. Some 70% found that their ability to cope with their pregnancy and beyond had been impacted on by a result of covid, and only one third of parents expressed any confidence in being able to access mental health support.

Through chairing the early years healthy development review, I can tell colleagues that we heard directly from parents and carers about their experiences of having a baby in lockdown. We heard from dads and partners who did not feel that they could access any support at all for their own mental health, as they felt that the services were there for the mums and not for them. We heard how, in some cases, this damaged the relationship with both their partner and their new baby. We heard from a young single mum who contacted her GP, who said she should speak to her health visitor, but she had not been assigned one. When she contacted the local team, no one could tell her who to speak to. She did not hear from a health visitor until after her baby was born. I know that is not a DFE issue, but does it not highlight the importance of joined-up services?

We heard from a foster carer who felt sure that the baby she was caring for was suffering from foetal alcohol syndrome, but she was unable to get access to any information about the baby. We heard from mums who

[Dame Andrea Leadsom]

struggled to breastfeed because their babies suffered from tongue tie, and they could not understand why this had not been picked up.

Among the heartbreaking stories, however, the pandemic has given us the benefit of learning what could be improved and has cast a light on some areas of hope. For some parents and carers, a real lifeline during the pandemic was the opportunity to text their health visitor, to receive virtual advice from their GP, to take part in Zoom parent and baby groups, or even to receive breastfeeding support and advice on screen. The feedback that my review team has received suggests that, while every parent and carer longs for the return of face-to-face support, the vital playgroups and advice sessions, there is also clearly a role for the convenience of virtual services. Faced with the prospect of a bus ride to the nearest children's centre, a mother with a new baby or toddler in tow can find it difficult to take advantage of the support on offer. Home visits and virtual support must form part of a new start-for-life offer for every family.

That is why the vision for the 1,001 critical days that has come out of the review that I am chairing includes the concept of placing in every local area family hubs that are both physical places with multidisciplinary support that is open access and universal, and virtual hubs that provide the convenience and immediacy of support for a family without having to leave their home.

Robert Halfon: I strongly welcome the support and campaign for family hubs, which are something that our report on disadvantaged white working-class boys and girls recommended last week. May I just mention this important statistic to my right hon. Friend? We know that disadvantaged pupils are 18 months behind their better-off peers by the time they get to GCSEs, and that 40% of that attainment gap starts in early years.

Dame Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is exactly right: it all begins in the very earliest period of life. The later we leave it, all that happens is that we compound the problem more. Then we end up firefighting instead of preventing. Prevention is so much kinder and cheaper than cure.

To help every family give their baby the best start in life, we need family hub networks that bring together physical, virtual and home visiting services that put the baby's needs at the centre of everything that we do. The babies born in lockdown and the toddlers who have had so little company and variety in their young lives need our support for their development. We all want them to be school-ready at four years old, able to learn and concentrate, as well as to play, share, and communicate clearly.

When my right hon. Friend the Minister is considering his Department for Education's priorities for covid recovery, I urge him to be ambitious for these excellent new family hubs, encouraging every local area to adopt best practice in joining up their start-for-life services between health bodies, local authorities, and DFE policies. Let us bring it all together, putting the baby at the heart of everything that we do. Let us make sure that there is a real focus in Government on the 1,001 critical days—the period from conception to the age of two, when the building blocks for lifelong physical and emotional health are laid down for every human being.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The time limit has been reduced to five minutes forthwith. I am sorry, Mick, that we could not give you more notice.

4.23 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab) [V]: The Prime Minister claimed that education was his top priority, yet when the man he put in charge of education recovery sent in his report, he casually tossed it into the nearest Whitehall waste paper bin. Sir Kevan Collins recommended that, in the light of the damage that the covid storm had caused for our schools and colleges, there was an urgent need of a catch-up injection of funds to the tune of £15 billion. In his response, the Secretary of State for Education, on 2 June, announced that there was a meagre £1.4 billion on offer. That equates to £50 per pupil compared with the £2,500 per child that the Netherlands has allocated. Poor Sir Kevan was put in the position of a latter-day Oliver Twist, pleading for more, sir. Like Mr Bumble in the book, the Government rudely dismissed Sir Kevan's request. His resignation is an indictment of the Government and their record.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies reported that total schools spending per pupil fell by 8% between 2010 and 2019. It was, the report stated, the biggest fall in education spending since the 1970s. In my constituency of Birkenhead, home to two of the most deprived wards in the entire country, this fiscal savagery plays havoc with the lives of a generation. To give one example of many, at Cathcart Street Primary School, there was a fall in spending of £117,000, equating to a reduction of £625 per pupil. These cuts created one lost generation of children. We must not let covid lead to another.

Our children have endured unprecedented disruption to their education. Many lacked the laptops and internet to be able to learn at home. They have had to cope with lockdowns and the exam fiasco, their free school dinners being whipped away from school canteens, and a health and safety regime that led to confusion, chaos and closures. The impact on their wellbeing, their mental health and their learning has been dramatic.

Labour's child recovery plan addresses that. It sets out a programme, with £15 billion now, that can prevent an entire generation from being consigned to an educational equivalent of the dark ages. It can provide for breakfast clubs and new activities for thousands. It can provide support to deal with the mounting mental health problems that children face. It can provide extra support for early years education and put an end to the scandal of children going hungry. Spending this money today is not a drain on this country's resources; it is investment in the future. My party's plan can provide us with the teachers, doctors, nurses, care workers, builders and engineers who will rebuild this country in the years to come. I call on the Government to adopt the Labour plan in full and with immediate effect.

4.25 pm

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): The backdrop to this estimates day debate is, understandably, one of a Government Department that has seen its workload, resource and structural capacity dominated by the

pandemic, with all the profound implications of that for children, schools and families across the country. It is an inescapable truth that despite the immense efforts of teachers, nursery staff, social workers and so many others, not forgetting parents and children themselves, the past 16 months have been a torrid time, including for many people in my constituency. But now we need to turn the page and push on with our recovery.

To that end, in supporting today's estimates, I acknowledge the not insignificant additional funding to date of £3 billion for education recovery. With new tutoring programmes, teacher training and development, including £184 million for national professional qualification summer schools, enrichment activities, catch-up and recovery premiums, there is real cause for optimism that we can now turn the tide on lost learning. Although I know that Ministers will want to go further, including looking at time spent at school, this package leaves plenty to be getting on with.

I particularly welcome the £153 million of new funding to provide for evidence-based professional development programmes for early years practitioners, including in the absolutely vital area of speech and language development. With research from the Education Endowment Foundation showing that measures taken to combat covid-19 have deprived the youngest children of social contact and experiences essential for increasing their vocabulary, this is all the more important.

Another key aspect of education recovery is physical education. You will be pleased to hear, Mr Deputy Speaker, that last Monday, 21 June, the taskforce I chair on the future of physical education, with the support of the Association for Physical Education and, among others, the England rugby union world cup winner Jason Robinson OBE, published its report on the future of physical education, which sets out the benefits of high-quality, well-taught PE and how there has never been a clearer or more compelling case for it. As the springboard to a life of physical activity and sport, regular PE not only improves children's physical, mental and emotional health but has a positive impact on their ability to concentrate, socialise and perform better academically. What is not to like?

That is why the Government's continued commitment to the £320 million per year PE and sport premium recently confirmed for the next academic year is so vital. It provides the foundation for ensuring that there is great PE and a great PE teacher working in every primary school in England. To embed its legacy, I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister to do all he can to secure a multi-year settlement for the premium at the next comprehensive spending review, and wish him good luck with that. However, the recommendations of our report provide the blueprint for going further to really ensure that PE is at the heart of school life, that it is accessible to all, and, crucially, that it can play a significant role in our children's recovery from the pandemic. I hope that he has read, or will read, the report, which is mercifully short, and will perhaps meet me and some of the taskforce members to discuss the recommendations in more detail.

I also welcome the consultation and call for evidence launched today by the Department for Education on behaviour management strategies, in-school units and managed moves. This is in order to inform new Government guidance on behaviour, discipline, suspensions and permanent exclusions due to be published later this year, and it represents an active response to recommendations made in my own review of school exclusions of May 2019.

Finally, as we have heard, last week saw 375,000 pupils off school—I can vouch for two of those—with only 15,000 of them with a confirmed case of covid-19. I am aware also of schools now closing early to comply with current isolation rules. That unfortunately means more lost weeks of education on top of the 19 already gone. Clearly the situation is not sustainable. Sending so-called bubbles home is, I am afraid, causing disproportionate disruption to too many children's education, and that is not to mention the social, emotional, physical and mental health consequences, so I am pleased that the Health Secretary and my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards have indicated their desire and determination to develop the plans needed for schools—and, I hope, for colleges, universities and nurseries as well—to be able to return for the new academic year in September as normal. By then, teachers and staff will be double-vaccinated, and, subject to the science, I think there is a strong case for secondary pupils to be afforded the same protection, as is happening in France, Spain, Austria, Israel and elsewhere. In my view, we cannot afford, and our children cannot afford, another disjointed, disrupted, difficult year of education. Thanks to the near victory of the vaccine, we now have the chance to forge a better future for our children—let us make sure we take it.

4.30 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Our country faces a tremendous challenge. How do we recover from covid, not only in terms of our health and wellbeing, but in terms of jobs, our economy and, crucially, our education system?

I welcome the Department's education recovery fund, which was announced at the beginning of this month, but what the Government have pledged falls far short of what we need to support our already cash-strapped education system. The Education Policy Institute recommends that £13.5 billion is needed to tackle lost learning caused by the pandemic. Let us remember that the recovery fund intended for the whole of the next academic year amounts to only slightly more than the funding given to eat out to help out, a scheme that lasted only a month.

Education is key to our future. It is right that we invest in it, and any covid recovery strategy must recognise the value of further education. My constituency is fortunate to be home to the excellent Bath College. All education settings have faced challenges throughout the pandemic, but it is institutions such as Bath College that I fear will continue to miss out on the funding, attention and respect they deserve. Further education colleges and sixth forms have seen the largest fall in funding of any education sector over the past decade. As providers' funding is based on previous student numbers, many colleges could face a significant financial challenge should their pupil intake increase.

It is a positive step that the Government have recognised the inadequacy of college funding in the "Skills for Jobs" White Paper, but that recognition must be backed up by long-term, multi-year, simplified funding. The White Paper could go much further and introduce a

[Wera Hobhouse]

statutory right to lifelong learning to ensure that young people and mature learners are supported to engage in education.

Despite recent uplifts, further education funding still falls far short compared with university and school funding. For many colleges, that has meant narrowing their curriculum just at a time when we need to skill up more people than ever to enter the workforce.

For adult learners, funding is yet more unpredictable. Total spending on adult skills has fallen by about 45% in the past decade. A recent CBI report suggests that nine in 10 UK employees will have to reskill by 2030 as a result of the pandemic. Clearly, our workforce and our economy must be ready to adapt to a post-covid world, and further education will be crucial to making that happen. Institutions such as Bath College are already showing the innovation to meet that challenge. It has partnered with Bath Spa University and the Institute of Coding to create a programme to support learners to build and develop skills in resilience, problem solving, creativity and communication—all the skills that have already been mentioned during this debate.

Further education is about lifelong learning. I urge the Government to ensure that further education is at the heart of our covid recovery strategy for education. This is not just about catch-up funding, but about a long-term funding settlement for the further education sector.

4.34 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): As a former special adviser in the Department for Education, it is always great to see a few of the details in the debates on estimates days, and it is great to see my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards in his place.

Obviously, there are several big issues I would like to raise that relate to my constituency, but there are a couple of overall points that many hon. Members have raised. The first, as highlighted by the Chair of the Education Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), is the impact that the coronavirus pandemic has had on the most disadvantaged in particular. It has had that impact over the last couple of years, and it is still having that immense impact now, with so many children being kept away from school, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) mentioned. That is in addition to the 100,000 so-called ghost pupils, who really have not been engaging at all in the education system over the last 18 months or so.

I know the Minister cares deeply about standards in our education system, and has really made it almost his mission—his mission as a Minister anyway—to drive those standards. I am really worried, as I know hon. Friends and hon. Members across the House are, that we could see the attainment gap increasing again because of the impact of coronavirus. I think the £3 billion so far is very welcome, but I would ask him to really press the Treasury to ensure that we do not end up going backwards.

On the measures that have been talked about in the press in the last couple of days, with the Health Secretary and the Education Secretary speaking to each other about how we can stop sending huge groups of pupils home, which has been happening in my constituency—whole year groups in some situations—we really need to get that sorted out. I welcome the discussions for later in the year, but the sooner they could happen, the better so far as I and the pupils and parents in my constituency are concerned.

I would like to acknowledge—this is for the Minister to reflect on a little—the impact that the coronavirus pandemic has had on many teachers, school leaders and support staff. Many, particularly my primary school leaders, have been helping by doing one-on-one checking up on pupils throughout the pandemic when they have had to be at home. In secondary schools, they have often essentially acted as a test and trace facility, putting huge pressure on the evenings and weekends, particularly of the senior management teams in secondary schools, when they have been having to find out not only who is in whose class, but who is on which bus going in. In a large rural community and a semi-rural area such as mine, that can be very difficult, and can cause a cascade effect which impacts on many children's education.

The issue of rural and semi-rural transport brings me to a couple of issues in my local area. First, I would like to thank the Secretary of State for intervening earlier this year with the regional schools commissioner to stop the formal closure of Wolsingham School sixth form in my constituency. It would have been a big secondary school without a sixth form. It has pupils travelling huge distances at the moment to get the sixth-form education they need. I hope to be able to work with the Minister to look at what possibilities there are to enable particularly children between 16 and 18 who may have to travel up to two hours each way from parts of my constituency to get such an education, and to see if something can be done to help support some sixth forms in very rural areas.

One of the other issues I know has been mentioned recently, and again I turn to the Select Committee, is that of white working-class boys. This is a particular issue in my constituency, and toxic talk of critical race theory and white privilege really does not cut any mustard in Consett, Delves Lane, Dipton, Crook, Tow Law, Burnhope or Willington, where, particularly at secondary level, we need to keep driving educational standards.

Locally, I have been visiting a lot of my primary schools, including Ebchester and Bishop Ian Ramsey in Medomsley, but also a small primary school at a place called Witton-le-Wear. It was built for 50 children, but currently has 100 on the roll. I would welcome a meeting with the Minister, if at all possible, to find out what can be done to help provision there.

There is much more I would like to speak about today, particularly the further education sector. We have an excellent college—Derwentside—in my constituency, which is putting in a funding bid. However, I know time is tight, and I am sure that plenty of people would like to go and watch the football at some point.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The wind-ups will begin at 4.53 pm and we have three speakers left, so if you could divide the time between you until then, that would be quite fair.

4.39 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): This debate has some big themes, and it seems to me that the two biggest ones are, first, whether the Government are responding

to the huge impact that the pandemic has had on pupils, their education and their life chances; and secondly, whether the additional resources pledged by the Government will be enough to make a difference to those who need help the most.

I want to focus first on the response. There is a big package of help that should be incredibly useful to quite a large number of our constituents, but the big issue at the moment for so many families is undoubtedly the business of bubbles having to self-isolate. I saw this at first hand last Friday when a secondary school called off a visit that I was going to make. A primary school has also called off a visit that I was going to make this Friday. My caseworker's daughter has had to self-isolate four times in the past few months, and my chief of staff—my senior researcher, if you like—is also off again today and for the next few days because one of her children has had to self-isolate.

I have been trying to get the precise figures for the whole of Gloucestershire, but I am in no doubt that the figure has increased hugely over the past two to three weeks, and that many children are self-isolating for an average of a week each as a result of being in a bubble—often a large bubble—with someone who has tested positive. This is thoroughly unsatisfactory, particularly for younger children, on whom the pandemic does not have any considerable effect. It is disruptive to pupils' progress, and given that we have now changed the rules somewhat for quarantine for business meetings, we should be able to do the same for our pupils, to give them the best possible chance to catch up at school by having regular lateral flow testing and being able to carry on until they test positive. That, therefore, would be my first big ask of the Minister today. I appreciate that it is not entirely in his control, but a rapid decision on all those in school bubbles having to self-isolate would be incredibly helpful.

On the second point, about resources, the Opposition have made great play of the fact that Kevan Collins asked for £15 billion and the Government came up with £1.5 billion, but actually, if we take into account all the additional parts of the package, we see that it comes to rather more than £3 billion. Clearly, the more money we throw at a particular issue, the better the results we should be able to get, but that seems to be a very large sum of money by any standards. The key to the exam question, therefore, is who will determine who is going to meet the classification of "disadvantaged" schoolchildren, so that the money goes to the right places?

In this context, words such as "disadvantaged", "poor" and "deprived" are all incredibly sensitive, and they often ignore the fact that some of our poorest communities are actually the most resilient in terms of community strength. I refer here to some of the wards in my constituency, including Matson, Coney Hill, Podsmead and Tredworth. The schools in those wards are often rated "outstanding", or have been "outstanding" and are now "good". That just shows that the success of a school is not wholly contingent on how well-off the families of its pupils are. Great things can be achieved in some of our poorest communities, and the phrase "white privilege" is just very odd to anyone living in three of those four wards. The fourth one is Tredworth. The ward of Barton and Tredworth is entirely multicultural, and there is not a great deal of privilege there. Everyone is just getting on with their lives as best they can. Let us not try to pit one community against another. Let us recognise that there are lots of people who need help, often in very similar ways, in schools today.

That is the key to what I want to mention today. I want to give the Minister all encouragement to allow pupils to get back to school without self-isolating in bubbles for too long, and to give us some idea of how the term "disadvantaged" will be defined so that we can be sure that pupils in our constituencies get that extra help.

4.44 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): I shall try to be brief to allow my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) to take part in the debate. Also, we all clearly want to see whether football is still coming home.

I start by taking the opportunity to put on record how grateful I am to all the teachers, headteachers and support staff, especially those in Radcliffe, Whitefield and Prestwich in my constituency. Ministers and Department for Education staff have also worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic, especially in my constituency, which has over 50 educational institutions.

I echo many of the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), the Chairman of the Education Committee, of which I am a proud member. He set out in his opening speech a wide range of the issues that are involved. I know how difficult it is to launch into the estimates day debate after having to introduce it last year in my right hon. Friend's absence.

The Department for Education has a special responsibility to improve the life chances of all children in our country and to ensure that the most disadvantaged children reach their fullest potential. I have always argued that our education system plays a major role in the growth and progress of our society. It is the engine of our economy, the foundation of our culture and essential preparation for adult life.

Over the past 12 months, the Government have provided more than £3 billion in funding to tackle the devastating effects of lockdown on children's education and wellbeing. I particularly welcome the Government's national tutoring programme, which will provide 100 million hours of tutoring for five to 19-year-olds by 2025. That is exactly the sort of Government scheme that the country needs to ensure that our disadvantaged children receive the adequate support they need to catch up on what they have missed due to covid.

The national tutoring programme will be important for constituencies such as mine because Bury South is in the top 40% of constituencies with the greatest literacy need. Indeed, a third of the wards in my constituency are among the highest-ranking in the country in terms of literacy needs.

My colleagues and I on the Education Committee have maintained that support should focus on closing that advantage gap and ensuring that those left-behind pupils, who have suffered enormously during covid-19, can catch up. I repeat my request to the Minister to meet me and providers from the NTP to ensure that everyone can take part in the scheme, especially those who specialise in online training.

The Department concluded last autumn that all year groups had experienced a learning loss in reading. In primary schools, that loss has averaged between 1.7 and

[Christian Wakeford]

two months. That was before the second and third lockdowns, so it is safe to assume that the position has worsened since then. We can only expect the level of need to have increased and we really need to take that seriously.

Furthermore, children with poor language skills at the age of five are more likely to experience social, emotional and behavioural difficulties later in life. Early language skills are therefore a crucial determinant of later success. Initial data from the second lockdown shows that any progress that was made when schools could open in the autumn was lost when they closed to key workers and vulnerable children in the winter. I am most concerned about the regional variation in the figures, with the north-east and the east midlands being worst affected and the north-west very close behind.

The new decade will be challenging indeed. Although the ambition of an education recovery plan is a good start, we need a long-term plan to tackle the attainment gap and falling literacy rates. I look forward to continuing to scrutinise the plans both in my role on the Education Committee and as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on literacy. We are keen to come up with viable solutions to address the severe effect of covid-19 on our children and young people. That should start now.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The clock is not going on for you, Mr Gibson, but please be seated by 4.53 pm.

4.48 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): Schools across the country have faced stark challenges over the last 15 months and once again, I put on record my thanks to the headteachers, teachers, support staff and parents in Darlington.

I am proud of the Government's work to help disadvantaged students in the north-east, whom we know have been among the hardest-hit. From talking to teachers and governors throughout the last 15 months, I know the challenges they have faced and every day, I am conscious that we must do all we can to support them. I am therefore glad that the Government are providing funding in the form of the national tutoring programme among other investments.

On top of that, the Department for Education has announced the allocation of £483 million of investment for the condition improvement fund. Those funds will benefit Rydal Academy, Mowden Infant School and Corporation Road Community Primary School in my constituency.

As the Government consider their response to the Education Committee's recent excellent report, I ask the Minister to pay particular attention to the needs of the Gypsy, Romany and Traveller community alongside those of white working-class children.

I am proud to support the Government today as they invest in education recovery for pupils across the country.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Thank you very much. Earlier than we thought, we have the winding-up speeches. I call Peter Kyle.

4.49 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): It is nice to follow the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson), and his pithy but thought-provoking speech. I am also grateful to the Chair of the Education Committee for giving us a wide-ranging and thoughtful introduction to the whole debate, and for setting the tone so very well.

The pandemic has swung a wrecking ball through our schools and the Government have left students and teachers to do the heavy lifting of recovery alone. A student I spoke to just last week reported having sat through 54 assessments in order to help their teachers determine an appropriate grade. Rather than complain or give up, they carried on, despite incoherent and panicked changes to the Government guidance right to the last minute. From the chaotic mishandling of exams last year to the lack of timely guidance to teachers this year, and from the huge covid absence rates made worse by the lack of mitigation measures to forcing kids back to school for a day and then announcing the January lockdown, this Government continue to fail young people who simply want to get on with learning.

This Government are failing to match the ambition that young people have for themselves. In March this year, we thought that the Government might have listened. They appointed Sir Kevan Collins, a highly respected educationalist, to lead an education recovery review. They even told the press that our children were the Prime Minister's No. 1 priority. The difference between the Government and the Labour party is that when we say children are our No. 1 priority, we actually mean it. Ninety per cent. of the recommended funding was slashed by the Chancellor. He happily butchered plans to help state-educated students, but found all the money in the world to fund a super deduction for the wealthiest companies in the land.

There was no investment in wellbeing after a year of intense stress, and no investment in social recovery or creative activity. As for the promise to address this in the spending review, Sir Kevan Collins said before the Education Committee today that he wanted to break out of this cycle. "Children cannot wait for another year", he said. According to Sir Kevan, the attainment gap may grow by as much as 20% due to the pandemic. He warned the Chancellor and the Prime Minister that failure to act would make the situation worse, yet the Chancellor says that he cannot give money to every cause that "comes knocking" at his door. Why should students, in their time of greatest need, have to knock on the Chancellor's door Oliver-style, saying, "Please, sir, can I have some more help to learn?" No Government with their priorities straight would need students to come knocking at the door in the first place.

The Chancellor likes to talk about levelling up, but all we have seen is hammering down. Which students are being hardest-hit? Those from deprived backgrounds. Which regions are suffering most? Those in parts of the midlands and the north of England that have had the longest lockdowns. Levelling up should be about people, not just bricks.

The Treasury's refusal to fund educational catch-up is not just morally reckless; it is fiscally irresponsible too. According to the Education Policy Institute, pandemic-related learning loss could cost the economy between

£60 billion and £420 billion. That burden far outweighs the multi-year £50 billion that Sir Kevan was asking for and the Labour party has backed.

According to the Government, we have entered an era of global Britain. Our economy needs people with the knowledge—technical, social, academic, skills—to compete with South Korea, Germany, Singapore and the United States. Instead, the Government are throwing a spanner in the works of educational recovery and the transformation in skills development of the students who will be the workers, entrepreneurs and wealth creators of tomorrow. We cannot have global Britain without global skills. The Government have been set a test by students: will they work across the political divide to help students overcome the current challenges and unleash their potential into the future? Labour's educational recovery plan shares many similarities to the Collins report, and we stand ready to help find areas of common ground and to work constructively with the Government to make it happen.

The one programme that survived the Treasury cuts was the national tutoring programme, which was awarded to a provider with little experience of education. The Secretary of State for Education promised sessions for 6 million children; not only was he contradicted by his officials, but so far only 173,000 have actually begun tutoring. Big promises; little delivery—and all because kids do not matter as much as VIP contracts, tax breaks for the 1% of biggest businesses or royal yachts.

The Government's failure to prioritise schoolchildren is having a disastrous consequence here and now. Just last week, 250,000 students were forced to self-isolate. Each of the families affected deserves an apology for the Government's refusal to secure our borders back in April. They failed to prevent the delta variant from arriving into England in such volume as to rip through communities and threaten the entire recovery.

Because of past failure, we have no margin for error when it comes to the future. If the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation approves any vaccine for use among children, every student must be offered it this summer, before the next academic year starts. Such a programme needs to be accompanied by plentiful information so that parents can make informed choices in the best interests of their child, family and whole community. A child's development and future success are badly affected by school absence, and that is a factor that parents need to consider. Such a programme can happen only if the Government start to plan now and are ready to act the moment that the JCVI issues its guidance.

We also need the Government to get a grip on next year's exams right now and to lay out a proper plan for 2022 before schools return from their summer break. Students going into exam years have missed mock exams in halls and months of in-school education. We cannot return to a pre-pandemic norm in an instant. Teachers need to know what they are preparing students for at the start of term, not after Christmas, like this year.

The Labour party Front-Bench team is united in its goal. We have an education recovery plan in which investment in tutoring sits alongside wellbeing and teacher development. We have planned for additional time at school that is enriching, creative, healthy and active—and that includes school facilities being open over the summer, too, not slammed shut to most students, as they have been by this Government. For students, teachers and staff, this is their hour of need. I ask the Minister: please, do not let them down again.

4.57 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on opening this debate in such a measured way.

I would of course be delighted to arrange meetings with my hon. Friends the Members for North West Durham (Mr Holden) and for Bury South (Christian Wakeford). They are both passionate about education in their constituencies and I would be happy to work with them to tackle the issues that they want to raise with the Government.

Throughout this pandemic, the Government have prioritised education. No child's long-term prospects should be damaged by this pandemic, which is why we want schools to be open and have, since June 2020, announced a series of measures to help children to catch up. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham was right to highlight the incredible job that teachers have done during the pandemic in their multiple roles, not only teaching remotely and in class but taking on all the other test and trace and covid responsibilities they have taken on.

Raising academic standards for all pupils has, of course, been the unifying vision that has driven education policy since we came into office in 2010. In the estimates debate a year ago, I spoke about closing the disadvantage gap by driving out a culture of low expectation. Between 2011 and 2019, the attainment gap closed by 13% in primary schools and by 9% in secondary schools. Ending the culture of low expectations is key to addressing the concerns raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow and his Education Committee in its report on white working-class pupils.

We want all children, regardless of their background, to have the same opportunities and quality of education that children from more advantaged backgrounds take for granted. That is why we attach such importance to the EBacc performance measure, which holds schools to account for the proportion of pupils taking the core academic subjects at GCSE that provide the widest opportunity for progression—English, maths, at least two sciences, a humanity and a foreign language. That is why we are investing in family hubs. I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) that, yes, we will be ambitious. That is why we are transforming technical education and strengthening teacher training.

The Government also welcome the Education Committee's report on adult skills, which are key to supporting the economy and tackling disadvantage. That is more important now than ever, as people live longer and technological changes shake up the jobs market, and as we look to recover from the impact of covid-19. The Government recognise the economic, social and wellbeing benefits of lifelong education and training outlined in the Committee's report. In September 2020, the Prime Minister announced the lifetime skills guarantee, which will help adults develop new skills and find new opportunities at every stage of their life.

[Nick Gibb]

Last year, I spoke about the fact that, when we came into office in 2010, 68% of schools were judged by Ofsted as "good" or "outstanding". Today, that figure is 86%, but there is more to do as we drive forward our plans to level up opportunity throughout the country, tackling the 14% of schools still judged as inadequate and needing to improve.

In 2021-22, the Department for Education's resource budget is about £89 billion, of which £59.9 billion is for estimate lines relating to early years and schools, £28.4 billion is for estimates relating primarily to post-16 and skills, and £1 billion is for other critical areas, including children's services and departmental functions. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire was right to emphasise the importance of early years. The Government share that view. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) is right that further funding is being provided through the supplementary estimate process.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow asked about the impact of the change of the census date from January to October. He is right that it is £90 million, but pupil premium will increase this year by £60 million, up to £2.5 billion.

Since the early months of the pandemic, we have been addressing the hugely important issue of ensuring that children are able to catch up on education missed during the lockdown period. Although we have spent £400 million on providing 1.3 million laptops and tablets, as well as internet access and advice, and although schools have responded swiftly and effectively in moving the curriculum to be taught remotely, children learn better in a classroom led by their teacher. In June 2020, the Prime Minister announced £1 billion of catch-up funding, £650 million of which was paid directly to schools as catch-up premium, and £350 million of which was for tutoring programmes, including establishing the national tutoring programme, which by the end of this term will have seen 250,000 enrolled, and the establishment of the 16 to 19 tuition fund. In February, we announced a further £700 million of catch-up funding, and in early June an additional £1.4 billion, bringing the total to over £3 billion.

Half of that money is being spent on tutoring programmes, which will mean that five to 19-year-olds will receive up to 100 million hours of tuition by 2024. It is targeted at those who need it most. As we speak, that money is providing a tutoring revolution, which we know from the evidence will have a significant impact on students' education. No longer will tutoring be the exclusive preserve of families that can afford it.

This is an evidence-based approach that we know will achieve between three and five months' progress for every pupil who takes one of these 6 million courses.

Richard Graham: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend will have to forgive me. We all want to get to the football match later.

We are providing £200 million for secondary schools to provide face-to-face summer schools this year, giving pupils access to enrichment activities that they have missed out on during the pandemic. We are investing up to £220 million in our holiday activities and food programmes.

In line with our evidence-based approach, a significant amount of that £3 billion will also be invested in teacher training. Building on a commitment since 2010, through the national professional qualifications and early career framework, we are putting £400 million into supporting teachers with 500,000 places over the next three years to help the profession be the best it can with all the benefits that great teaching has for pupils and catch-up. Some £153 million of that £400 million will provide professional development for early years. My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) warmly welcomed that focus on early years, and I welcome his welcome.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow referred to the length of the school day. We are looking at the evidence behind extending the time that children spend at school and the benefits that could deliver, and we will be consulting parents, teachers and pupils about whether to introduce reforms. It would be a big change, which is why we are right to take a short period to review the evidence. That review will be ready in time for the spending review later this year.

We want all children back in school, because that is where they receive the best education. Schools across the country continue to have robust protective measures in place, including regular, twice-weekly testing to break chains of transmission, as well as smaller group bubbles. I reassure the House that we are also taking additional measures in areas where there is a high prevalence of the virus, including increasing the availability of testing for staff, pupils and families, and working with local directors of public health. Absence in schools continues to reflect wider community transmission, and where students have to self-isolate, schools are providing high-quality remote education.

The Government are providing the biggest funding increase for schools in a decade, which will give every school more money for every child. Following an increase of £2.6 billion in 2020-21, we are increasing core schools funding by a further £4.8 billion in 2021-22 and £7.1 billion in 2022-23, compared with 2019-20. We have put record funding into high needs, increasing funding for special educational needs and disabilities by £1.5 billion over the last two years, a 24% increase.

During the pandemic, the Government have attached the highest priority to education, schools being the last to close as we tackle the spread of the virus and the first to open as we cautiously travel along the route of the road map. Would my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) like to intervene at this point?

Richard Graham: The Minister is very kind. I was simply going to ask him for a little elucidation on who will decide which pupils get what help, and whether he will share more details with us as soon as possible.

Nick Gibb: All our schemes are targeted towards the disadvantaged, but we also give schools flexibility so that they can use their pupil premium money and covid recovery catch-up money to help those pupils who are in most need. We give flexibility to schools because they know their pupils best.

We continue to progress our education reforms as we seek to level up opportunity across the country. We will continue to drive the academisation programme,

which is delivering high academic standards through greater professional autonomy, accompanied by strong accountability. We will continue to ensure that no child suffers long-term damage to their prospects as a result of the pandemic, ensuring that young people move on to the next stage of their education and careers. We will ensure that schools continue to be able to support children in catching up lost education caused by the lockdown. The most vulnerable children are always at the heart of our concerns and central to our policy making and decisions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Robert Halfon to wind up briefly.

5.8 pm

Robert Halfon: I will be very brief, given the events that are going on. There is actually a lot of unity in the House on this issue, behind the inevitable political barney. I thank all Members who spoke in the debate, particularly my fellow Committee members, the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), who is an expert member of our Committee, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford).

I will just say that there must be a focus on a long-term plan for education with a secure funding settlement, on which there has been a lot of agreement across the House. I really welcome the Minister's remarks, especially what he said about the longer school day, but I urge him to look at these 100,000 ghost children and make sure that they go back to school and we do not destroy their life chances; to focus the covid package on the most disadvantaged; to do everything he can to reduce the attainment gap, and—he knows that this is where we possibly have a slight disagreement—to ensure that the curriculum prepares pupils for the world of work and does not just focus on knowledge.

Question deferred until tomorrow at Seven o'clock (Standing Order No. 54).

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

5.9 pm

Sitting suspended

MINISTRY OF HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Safety

[Relevant documents: Seventh Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2019-21, Cladding Remediation—Follow-up, HC 1249; Fifth Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2019-21, Pre-legislative scrutiny of the Building Safety Bill, HC 466; and Second Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2019-21, Cladding: progress of remediation, HC 172.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2022, for expenditure by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £15,676,146,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 14 of Session 2021-22,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £2,820,587,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £16,461,164,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—*(Scott Mann.)*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call Clive Betts, the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, to open the debate, let me inform the House that, as there are clearly a lot of Members who want to speak, there will be a five-minute time limit on speeches, which will be on the screens.

5.11 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for finding time for this important debate. I realise that the whole of the nation will be watching their television sets this afternoon, totally interested in the proceedings in the House on this important issue—but, seriously, four years on from Grenfell, the one thing that we should be able to agree on is that we should do everything necessary to ensure that a tragedy like Grenfell never happens again.

We have had the Hackitt review and the draft Building Safety Bill on which the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee did pre-leg scrutiny, both of which are welcome steps forward. I will ask many questions this afternoon. I probably will not be able to put all of them on the record, but the Committee will write to the Minister afterwards and set out a list of questions in the public domain, if that is helpful. First, when will the Building Safety Bill in its final form be published? Can we have a timetable for that? Four years after Grenfell, thousands of families are still living in unsafe homes and facing bills they cannot afford. In many cases, their lives are put on hold because they cannot sell the homes they live in and move on. That puts enormous pressure on the mental health and wellbeing of those families.

The Committee has produced three reports about building safety and cladding issues, and I have with me the most recent one, "Cladding Remediation—Follow-up", which we published in April. Because it is an estimates day, I will concentrate on resources and Government funding—or sometimes the lack of Government funding. Do the Government yet know how many homes are unsafe and what the estimates are to put them right?

[Mr Clive Betts]

There is a second, general point that we have repeated over and over again in our reports. We ought to be absolutely clear that we establish

"the principle that leaseholders should not pay anything towards the cost of remediating historical building safety defects"

for which they are not responsible. One of the questions we will probably ask—the second question—is: will the Minister confirm that that is still the Government's policy? It has changed from time to time.

In recognising that significant funding has been made available by Government, let me go through the funds. On the £600 million funding to remove aluminium composite material cladding—the cladding that was on Grenfell—progress has been a little disappointing. Could the Minister explain, probably with an answer in writing at some point, when the removal of all ACM cladding will be finished and why there are still 33 buildings with ACM cladding where remediation work has not started?

The Select Committee was also at the forefront of pushing for funding to remove other forms of dangerous cladding. The first £1 billion building safety fund was clearly not adequate: it was on a first come, first served basis, which was not appropriate. It is therefore welcome that the fund is now £5 billion, but why are only buildings over 18 metres covered? What risk assessment has been done to determine that? Has an estimate been done of whether the extra £3.5 billion will be sufficient? Why is the £3.5 billion not so far covered in the estimates? Has the funding profile for that money and the years that it will be spent over now been agreed? If so, can we know what it is? Why have 2,000 registrations for the fund not progressed? Are the Government satisfied that those buildings are safe even though their claims on the fund, having been registered, have not moved any further forward?

Have we any further information on how the loan scheme for buildings between 11 and 18 metres will work? Ministers have been unable to explain any of it in previous discussions. They have said that neither leaseholders nor freeholders will be responsible for the debt for the loan, so who will be responsible? Have Ministers any idea what the total cost of the loan scheme will be? How many buildings will it cover? Do they accept that for some buildings it will mean a debt of several thousand pounds, running over many years, before the final costs are paid off?

Does the Minister accept that buildings under 11 metres, which are not covered by the building safety fund or the loan scheme, could still be at risk? How many such buildings are there? What risk assessment has been done on them?

Why has social housing been excluded from all the funds apart from the original ACM fund? Does the Minister accept the National Housing Federation's figure that it could cost £10 billion for housing associations to put right building safety defects in their homes? If that is to be done without any Government support, do the Government accept that that money will come out of commitments that would otherwise have been made to build new homes or refurbish existing homes? What assessment have the Government done of the impact of not allowing social housing to claim against the building safety fund?

One of the biggest issues is that, apart from cladding removal, the building safety fund does not cover building safety defects. We know that there are faulty balconies, faulty fire doors, missing fire breaks and faulty insulation. Why have those issues been omitted from the fund? What risk assessment has been done of that? Do the Government accept that some leaseholders are facing bills of £50,000 to put right defects in their home other than cladding? Does the Minister accept that buildings that have claimed and received money from the building safety fund to put right cladding problems are being left with other defects that make their homes unsafe? In some cases, we are spending enormous sums of public money and the end result will still be homes that are not safe, because other defects remain that the leaseholders simply cannot afford to put right. Is that an acceptable situation?

Does the Minister accept the Select Committee's proposal that we should now have a comprehensive building safety fund that covers all safety defects, not just cladding; all buildings, not just those above 18 metres or above 11 metres; and all tenures, including leasehold and social housing?

We believe that where individual developers, architects or contractors can be held accountable for defects in a particular building, they should be held accountable properly in law and made to pay. However, we know that those legal battles can go on for years and years, so essentially Government have to step in first to fund this work, putting the money into a comprehensive building safety fund, although we believe that industry in general should also pay. That includes the development industry, as well as suppliers of products, because often faulty products have been a cause of these problems.

We welcome the principle of a tax and a levy on the industry, which the Government have announced. That is a good step forward. To confirm, will the tax and levy produce money in addition to the £5 billion, or are they part of that, reducing the Government's cost? Do we know when the money from the levy and the tax will start to arrive? Presumably the tax will need legislation, and perhaps the levy will as well. Is it true that a levy, if introduced, will be applied only when planning permission is granted? If so, it could be years down the road before a building on which the developers are due to pay the levy is actually built and the levy is handed over; we could be years away from getting any money. Will the Government confirm the likely timetable?

This issue will not go away until all homes are safe in this country. It is an issue that we will come back to as a Select Committee and, I suspect, that we will come back to over and over again in this House. This is a major challenge, and so far, bit by bit, the Government are moving steadily towards addressing it. All I would say to the Minister today is that, although progress has been made, there is still an awfully long way to go. I hope we will get a positive response from him to the recommendations in the Select Committee report. We will write to him further to list all the questions we would like answers to following the debate.

5.21 pm

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Select Committee, who is always thoughtful and well informed.

The Building Safety Bill will be a landmark piece of legislation. I would like to see it introduced as quickly as possible, post summer recess. It will transform the regulatory system for buildings and put the safety of residents in high-rises at the heart of the regime. It will make it clear who is accountable for the safety of buildings, all the way through their life, from design to construction and occupation. I would also like it to drive a change in the culture of the building industry, because I have been shocked by some of the revelations that have come out of the Grenfell inquiry, particularly about the conduct of the building products industry.

Given that this is an estimates debate, I want to welcome the funding that the Government have made available. Of the £5.1 billion, if we add the £3.5 billion announced in February to the £1.6 billion that had already been announced, and if we also include the subsidised loans scheme, the tax on property developers and the levy on high-rises, it looks to me like a package of £5 billion to £10 billion, and it could well be in the mid to upper end of that range. However, it is clear that there are still an awful lot of outstanding issues that we need to resolve with a sense of urgency.

First, leaseholders in intermediate-height buildings of 11 to 18 metres need clarity on the financing scheme, and they need it as soon as possible, because uncertainty is not good. I understand that the loan will go with the building, as opposed to the leaseholder, but sometimes the freeholds of these buildings are not worth a lot, so if the loan exceeds the value of the freehold, how will that work?

I have tremendous sympathy for the plight of leaseholders who are facing extenuating circumstances and who are in this position—let us never forget—through no fault of their own. Every time I talk to a constituent about a new building, it exposes another complex set of problems, so I beseech the Minister to get dedicated teams at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government drilling down into the detail, building by building, and trying to resolve some of these very difficult and complex issues.

I also ask that there is some discretion. To give a quick example, there is a building in my constituency where the leaseholders paid for the remediation of ACM cladding in the expectation that the building's owner would then apply to the fund. They have now been told that the building's owner does not want to do that, but they find that they cannot apply to the fund because they are a third party. I would love to see discretion in that situation.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an outstanding case, and she clearly knows this subject from every angle. Does she agree that no matter how much money the Government allocate to this issue, unless it is combined with a resolution or rule that prevents leaseholders from being charged straightaway, there is little chance of leaseholders escaping the unfair financial punishments that she described so eloquently?

Felicity Buchan: What I would like to see is a rigorous approach, building by building, so that we can come to solutions, because there is no question but that we need a sense of urgency and that the situation is taking a huge toll on leaseholders.

I am conscious of the time, so I will make a few other points. I am very conscious that we need to hire and train way more professionals—building assessors and fire assessors—who can get on with the work. Insurance is another huge issue. I have talked to constituents who have seen their insurance bills triple or go up fourfold. We have the template of a solution with Flood Re and the solution that we got to flood insurance. Let us be creative and see whether we can do something similar with high-rise buildings and fire risk. It is incumbent on the industry to take a balanced and sensible approach, however; in reality we will not be able to nullify every single risk. I have called previously in the Chamber for the Government to consider a tax on the building products industry in the same way as they have done on the property development sector, and I make that appeal again.

In summary, I welcome what the Government have done, but there is so much still to be done. It needs to be done with a sense of urgency, and we need to resolve these issues for buildings and leaseholders once and for all.

5.28 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of a Select Committee, who has made some excellent points that I wholeheartedly endorse. I recognise many of the issues that the hon. Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) has just raised, because they affect my constituents too. It is really important to recognise that this is of course a UK-wide problem and that many of the regulations under which these buildings were built predate devolution, so even though some of the responsibilities now sit with the Welsh or Scottish Governments, this is a legacy of failure within the building and construction industry, in the way that leasehold operates, and on many other issues that we have discussed in the House on a number of occasions.

I have been contacted yet again in the past few weeks by residents in Cardiff South and Penarth. I have thousands of apartment units in my constituency. Let us recognise that this issue is not just about new builds; it is also about conversions. I have many old docks buildings in Cardiff Bay and docks communities that have been converted into apartments, and I have heard from residents in a number of those buildings who are affected in the same way as those in new builds. That is why I am somewhat disappointed by the approach that the UK Government have taken in not working constructively, as they could be doing and as they have done on some related issues, with the devolved Administrations, and with the Welsh Government in particular. I will come on to that again in a moment.

I just want to reiterate here that leaseholders should not have to pay for this. Obviously the primary responsibility lies with the developers and those who built these defective buildings. On the point made by my hon. Friend the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, this is not just about fire safety. I have heard horror stories about flats that have been flooded with sewage because a foul water pipe, which was not even connected, was propped up behind a wall on a Starbucks cup. I have heard about sewage flooding into apartments, balconies that are not safe to go on, windows that are not safe to open, rendering that is not suitable for the maritime environment of the Cardiff Bay area falling off buildings on to cars, let alone the whole

[Stephen Doughty]

litany of fire safety issues relating to compartmentation, doors, fire alarm systems and, of course, cladding and insulation.

This is an extraordinary situation and the issues are very wide ranging. The situation in which residents find themselves is completely unacceptable. It is worth emphasising the mental health toll that it is taking on many of my constituents—those who have bought properties in good faith and then find themselves facing extraordinary bills while they have been going through the same difficulties that everybody in the country has been going through in the past year. Many of them face difficulties around their own jobs and incomes, and this has been an additional pressure on top of that.

First, I would like the Minister to speak to his colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and in the Treasury to urge them to sit down with the Welsh Government and answer some of the very reasonable questions that are being put to the Department by the Minister for Housing and Local Government in Wales, Julie James. On 23 June, she had to write again to the Secretary of State to get some basic answers. Let me quote from the letter that she sent:

> "In my previous correspondence, I raised the importance of joint working and meaningful engagement on this topic. I urgently requested details of the level and timing of consequential budget allocations, following the large announcements that the UK Government made about the Building Safety Fund."

The Secretary of State had previously replied and said that the Barnett formula would apply in the usual way, yet the Welsh Government have not been able to get any details of the actual amounts of money, or when it would come through. The Housing Minister is rightly asking for the amount of consequential funding that Wales will receive from the additional amounts announced by the UK Government and when it will receive it. That is a perfectly reasonable question to ask, and I find it extraordinary that officials and Ministers have not been able to sit down with the Welsh Government, who want to work constructively with the UK Government on this issue for the benefit of leaseholders to answer those questions.

I hope that we will not only get an answer on that, but some further clarity on how the proposed tax and levy will work. Again, the Welsh Government are willing to work with the UK Government on this, as they did on the Fire Safety Act 2021. Again, we are not getting the communication that we would expect.

Secondly, on EWS1 forms, I recognise what the hon. Member for Kensington said. I am concerned that much of the new guidance is not flowing through. It came into effect on 5 April, but I am still being contacted by residents who are not getting the right answers on that matter from lenders, freeholders or estate management companies. What is happening on that? How many of the new chartered fire engineers and surveyors who are supposedly being trained are now in place and able to deal with the backlog of surveys?

I have two other points. One is that we need to look at the international examples. This situation faces many other cities and jurisdictions around the world. I think of Vancouver, which I know very well. The provincial government there had to pay out $3 billion to $5 billion to cover what was called the leaky condo scandal, with many similar issues around building safety defects. What are we learning from those examples around the world?

Lastly, just to be clear, this is not just about fire safety, critical as that issue is, but about all of those other issues, which is why we need to have the Building Safety Bill and answers to these questions as soon as possible.

5.33 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The passage of time does not always heal wounds or lessen the pain and anger that people feel over wrongs done to them, to their loved ones, or even to their communities. Grenfell will not and should not be forgotten. The failure of Governments to ban the use of flammable cladding will be an issue that will echo for quite a while yet, and I hope that the Government now find that their conscience directs them to ensure that the people who have been adversely affected by that failure to properly regulate will be compensated adequately.

Stark, too, is the impression that profits have come before people. There have been reports that the less expensive cladding was used in some buildings in spite of concerns over its safety. I cannot quite decide whether the people making those decisions felt that fire was so unlikely that it was a risk worth taking so long as it was not their houses the stuff was going on, or they do not concern themselves all that much with possible future events in the buildings they are commissioning. This is perhaps one of the great divides in society and in politics —do you place people above profit or profit above people? Do you value people for the contribution they make to the economy or value the economy for the contribution it makes to society? I do not expect us all to find common ground in the near future, but we can at least agree that profits should not come at the expense of people's health and wellbeing. Many of us have constituents who find themselves deeply affected by the shaking out of these issues—people who are finding it difficult to sell their flat, who need additional certification to get mortgage decisions in their favour, and who have found that some insurers are backing out of these properties or, alternatively, are demanding substantially increased premiums. I would be interested to hear from the Minister what discussions the team in the Department have been having with insurance companies on these matters.

There is a case to be made for people who find themselves stuck, through no fault of their own, being helped by Government and by the regulatory agencies. There is a case for the Government to provide moneys for the surveys needed to clear mortgage agreements and to provide the resources to clear the substandard cladding from buildings. It would also be good if those who decided that it was good business to install it were pursued to pay the penalty for it.

A good start from the perspective of good government would be to copy the example set in Scotland, where a programme of whole building inspections—it is being referred to as a single building assessment—is to be carried out, saving individual property owners the expense and worry of arranging their own inspections for an EWS1 clearance. That programme has been funded by the Scottish Government and the first phase is about to start. The safety assessments on buildings with flatted

properties will provide the evidence needed of the extent of remedial works required. The programme covers low-rise as well as high-rise, and it will mean that people in whose properties no issues are revealed will be released from safety concerns and mortgage lending problems. The programme will then move on to remediation of the buildings in need, starting with those most at risk. It was not the Scottish Government who put these homeowners in this position—in fact, this cladding has been illegal in Scotland for some years—but the mark of good government is stepping up to solve a problem for people. I am at a loss to understand why there is not, or does not seem to be, a similar Government initiative in England.

That leads on to a point about making sure that the people who put this stuff on buildings in the first place are held responsible for their actions, not only where it caused death and injury, as in Grenfell, but where it has cost homeowners financially. All too often, any homeowner who seeks financial redress finds that the firm that built the properties is no longer in existence: the people behind the project are still building, but the company no longer exists. The company, firm or legal entity is dissolved at the end of construction, leaving no one responsible should problems become evident later, with homeowners having to pick up the tab or be stuck with negative equity while those who took their profits are in no way inconvenienced. Making it easier to pursue the companies or individuals who have built those properties would be a step in the right direction.

There is also a case for regulators to be given the powers to step up. The Prudential Regulatory Authority should be looking at the performance and behaviour of insurance companies when dealing with people in properties that may or may not have cladding of questionable flammability. I have heard of some demands being made that are simply not credible. The retrofitting of wider staircases stands out as a particularly ridiculous example. If the regulator needs to be given additional powers, that can be done. That is what this place is for, surely. Perhaps it is time to start asking for reports on the behaviours of the companies involved in the construction and maintenance of properties, including the insurance companies. Let us not leave it until there is another scandal. Let us not leave it to journalists to dig out the horrors that some families may be facing. Let us do the job here before it becomes another emergency.

5.38 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I start by thanking all the builders who have continued to work on construction projects, including building safety measures, throughout the pandemic.

We need more homes in Stoke-on-Trent—affordable, safe and compliant with the strictest standards, as well as in the right places. I welcome the commitment of Staffordshire's new police, fire and crime commissioner, Ben Adams, to develop and deliver a fire plan that addresses some of the urban challenges in Stoke-on-Trent. Sadly, those challenges include sunset landmark industrial heritage buildings, many left in a perilous, unsafe and sorry state. I hope that the heritage action zone partnership we have developed in Longton with the city council and Historic England will particularly help to address this and improve the condition of buildings in the town centre conservation area. I am particularly keen to see the redevelopment of the Crown works, a short walk from my constituency office in Longton, which are unfortunately in a very dangerous state. It is important to see new housing uses on the site, and I hope we can also preserve some of the most prominent historical features. I hope the levelling-up fund bid that we have put in to catalyse a safe and sympathetic redevelopment of town centre heritage sites such as that is successful.

Indeed, there are a number of such conversion schemes across Stoke-on-Trent, where we have opportunities to repurpose redundant industrial heritage sites that are currently in an unsafe condition and high street buildings to modern housing in historic settings. In addition, multiple hectares of brownfield sites need support to safely clean up the effects of past heavy industrial uses. We have the capacity to build without eating into the green belt or protected green spaces, and we have a strong track record locally, with 99% of new housing on brownfield sites in Stoke-on-Trent over the past year. This was particularly thanks to housing infrastructure funding, which has helped bring forward work on more challenging sites in in the north of the city.

We are only too happy as a city to relieve some of the pressures across the rest of the country, but we can do that only with the right sort of financial support to address the viability constraints we face: the higher remediation costs of contaminated heavy industrial land; the heritage deficit in converting historic properties; and the wider challenges of making development work in lower-value markets. Significant new development will happen in cities such as Stoke-on-Trent only with focused investment, but this will catalyse far greater private investment on top. The market, although starting from a lower base, is extremely buoyant—it is busier than almost anywhere else, according to Zoopla—with an increased appetite for good-quality, safe development. I urge the Minister to fully support our bids for levelling-up and brownfield funding for cities such as Stoke-on-Trent, so that we can deliver on the potential of our area as well as helping to relieve wider national pressures.

I particularly welcome the 5% mortgage, which will help more first-time buyers in Stoke-on-Trent South to own their own home. We need to keep this success going, providing better opportunities locally too, with good, skilled employment for good wages. We need to plan for the necessary infrastructure improvements as well. Let me take this opportunity to ask the Minister to support our Restoring your Railway fund proposal to reopen the Stoke to Leek line, as well as further developing our plans for a new station at Meir and increasing investment in local bus services. Of course, building safety is a fundamental concern and I welcome the £5.1 billion so far allocated to the safety remediation schemes. There is always a tension between the urgency of aims and the delivery of the right remedy, so I understand the need for the Government to get the measures absolutely right as far as possible.

One final issue I must raise is the danger posed by illegal cannabis farms in residential areas. The landlord guidance issued by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has rightly been focused on covid safety of late, but I hope the Ministry will look carefully at how building safety encompasses the prevention of illegal uses of buildings, including to farm drugs and fund wider criminality. Power supplies are illegally tapped into and fire hazards are caused, and the human cost is

[Jack Brereton]

considerable. Landlords who are at best naive about it and at worst complicit in cannabis farming in their properties are a live issue in Stoke-on-Trent. One residential street in my constituency has seen two cannabis farms uncovered within nine days of each other, and in Longton town centre, for a second time in two years, the derelict Woolworths building has been busted by Staffordshire police, with 1,500 cannabis plants found. MHCLG, working with the Home Office, police commissioners and local authorities, must redouble efforts to keep communities safe from buildings that have been made unsafe through illegal uses.

In conclusion, the Government are committed to higher standards of building safety, and the draft Bill stands as a testament to that, but I ask that we also see that investment in places such as Stoke-on-Trent.

5.44 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) [V]: I welcome the opportunity to be part of this debate about estimated Government spending on building safety, which is of course essentially about public safety. It is a very timely debate, given that the deadline for applications to the building safety fund is tomorrow. It is a fund that, this time last year, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee found to be seriously lacking, and it falls far short of the estimated £15 billion needed to address all fire safety defects, not just combustible cladding, in every high-risk residential building.

The problem goes even deeper, however, and is equally about the current height and product-based approach. Fire does not discriminate between buildings based on their height. It is illogical and nonsensical to exclude buildings of under 18 metres in height from applying to this fund. Eight blocks in my Brighton, Pavilion constituency are under 18 metres, and many more right across the country fall into this category. No wonder the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee is advocating a comprehensive building safety fund, alongside remediation that applies to all high-risk buildings of any height, irrespective of tenure; covers all fire safety defects, including combustible insulation; and covers all associated costs.

The Minister will be aware that the Committee, in common with many MPs and groups such as End Our Cladding Scandal, is also calling for a holistic risk and evidence-based approach that prioritises occupants who are most at risk and for the cost to be met by Government and industry, not pushed on to leaseholders. Yet we have constituents left in limbo and in fear, waiting for further details of the flawed loans scheme the Government announced earlier this year. The sums needed to ensure leaseholders do not pay more than £50 a month, as has been promised, simply do not stack up. Leaseholders in a block of below 18 metres in Manchester have been sent bills of over £100,000 each. It would take 169 years to pay back a loan that size if payments genuinely are capped at £50 a month without interest.

The reality is that the Government's so-called solution will saddle people with debilitating debt and push them into bankruptcy, so the loan scheme needs to be scrapped and the gaps in existing support closed as a matter of priority, with responsibility falling where it is due. For every day that passes without the Government keeping their promise to leaseholders about fixing historical safety defects that they did not cause, remedial work is still not happening and people are still living in dangerous homes. I have so much correspondence from residents who are struggling to get responses and clearer information from their housing providers, which in turn are crumbling under the volume of inquiries and struggling to get responses from the developers they are in dispute with about defects.

Back in 2019, it was simply good luck that none of my constituents lost their lives at a fire in a block of below 18 metres in Pankhurst Avenue in Brighton. Residents lost everything, and many are still displaced and living in temporary accommodation. They are rightly horrified, as am I, that the Government's approach has been characterised by doing the bare minimum. I invite the Minister to meet some of my constituents to hear directly from them about the impact of the building safety crisis and how that makes them feel.

That brings me, finally, to waking watch. In my constituency, I am aware of 11 blocks, totalling 686 flats, where there are questions about building safety. Two blocks with waking watches have to date incurred costs that exceed £703,000 for waking watch patrols alone. That figure increases every day that the Government do not intervene in disputes over remedial work and liability between housing providers and developers. In any case, the name of the waking watch fund is, frankly, a misnomer, given that it often does nothing more than cover the cost of alarms being installed in blocks with unsafe cladding. It does nothing to help my constituents who have been unable to get alarms installed in their blocks, and instead continue to pay for 24-hour patrols to alert residents in the event of a fire. Put simply, the waking watch fund does not cover waking watch costs.

In conclusion, the Government must absolutely deliver on the removal of all dangerous cladding from buildings by 2022 at the latest, but building safety is about more than cladding. More than four years on from the Grenfell Tower tragedy, the Government must ensure people are safe in their own homes, that buildings are remediated when needed, and that those who are affected can move on with their lives without being saddled with lifelong debt.

5.49 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): First, I would like to join my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) in thanking all the builders and construction workers who have worked throughout the pandemic in Stoke-on-Trent. It is great to see new affordable, social and Help to Buy properties being completed. We need more homes that are affordable, safe and compliant with strict standards, including on non-combustible cladding, to avoid another tragedy as we learn the lessons from the heartbreak of Grenfell. We all agree that safety must come first in legislating for improved building standards. However, measures must also be proportionate. I have raised the concerns of flat-owners in my constituency who were facing real challenges with the requirement for an ESW1 form, even though their building had no cladding, and I welcome the agreement that the Government have reached to waive the need for flat-owners to have an ESW1 form when selling their properties, if their building does not have cladding.

The homes that are built need to be safe and in the right place, and for that we need to shape places to make them right. Stoke-on-Trent has no equal for friendliness,

and the city's economy is growing. With the right investment, we can deliver plenty of brownfield sites both for housing and for modern industrial development, but there are up-front costs to brownfield regeneration, and in our relatively low-value property market it is not currently commercially viable for developers to meet those clean-up costs.

Part of the reason for low property prices in the city is that our place has lost its shape, by which I mean that a raft of our potteries has closed, including some of the very biggest names, lost in the 2008-09 financial crash. Those heritage sites are now in urgent need of repurposing. What we do have is resilience and public support for regeneration that preserves and celebrates our unique industrial heritage assets. The regeneration of Spode works is particularly exciting, providing residential growth and saving much loved and authentic built heritage, including as a hub for the cutting-edge games industry.

The legacy of the pottery industry is also present in former clay pits, and in that context I must once again raise the ongoing saga in Etruria in my constituency of a terrible sinkhole in Boatman Drive and the safety of homeowners, many of whom have not been able to access their properties by road for over a year. There are several hundred houses built on the site of an old marl hole, or clay pit. Homeowners are facing increased insurance premiums or are unable to sell their homes while the situation remains unresolved. I have raised it with the Minister for Housing, and I regret to report today that the subsidence is getting worse.

Where multiple agencies are involved, a clear process for resolving such complex situations is needed. I have met Baroness Vere, the Roads Minister, and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to discuss the matter, but regulations governing the residual and ongoing responsibility for the adequate remediation of brownfield sites and subsequent protections for new homeowners when catastrophic issues arise are within the scope of the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Part of the task of levelling up is to address the legacy of the past. The scars of deindustrialisation continue to make the task of regeneration complex, as places such as Stoke-on-Trent address abnormal site issues, such as land contamination, decaying industrial structures and the enduring misuse of brownfield land and old buildings.

We used to have a specialist national organisation to support local areas in dealing with these sites. English Partnerships, set up by a Conservative Government, did fantastic work in supporting areas around the country in resolving these conundrums, unlocking latent commercial value. I am very uncertain where that help and support come from today, so I ask my hon. Friend the Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government to consider whether there is a case for recreating an expert body that is properly resourced to support places like Stoke to resolve these problems and therefore accelerate economic recovery.

Cities like Stoke-on-Trent with lots of brownfield sites can be unlocked for affordable housing programmes. The city council is committed to powering up the city, and we are determined that our best days are ahead of us. We are already affordable, and with the right help for tackling site abnormals and connecting development sites, we could do even more. Building affordable and safe new homes and creating more and viable commercial sites; cleaning up and greening our city by repurposing even more brownfield sites; offering new homes and new employment opportunities locally; helping other parts of the country to protect their green belt—that is what levelling up is all about. I support the Government's investment in building safety and welcome any future investment in ensuring the safety of developments on brownfield sites.

5.54 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab) [V]: We learned this month of the anger in Chesham and Amersham over Government housing policy. My constituents who face massive bills for waking watch and to repair defects in their leasehold homes are angry as well. Their anger is well expressed by Liam Halligan in the current issue of *The Spectator*, which was once edited by the Prime Minister. Liam Halligan's article explains how the big house builders—Barratt, Taylor Wimpey and Persimmon—have used their excessive profits from the broken housing market to buy off the Tory party with donations in order to successfully maintain the current rigged system. Those firms have built tens of thousands of shoddy, dangerous homes and are now passing the cost of fixing the problem to leaseholders, and the Government are refusing to stop them. And then there is Help to Buy, which *The Spectator* says is

"a government subsidy focused on new builds which has overwhelmingly gone to the big operators, juicing up both house prices and profits further, while making new homes even less affordable for the majority who are unable to access the scheme."

All this has been compounded by Tory failure on regulation. In January 2012, David Cameron made it his new year's resolution—with a frankly chilling phrase, in hindsight—to

"kill off the health and safety culture for good."

Tory Housing Ministers, seeing growing evidence of the need to tighten fire safety regulation, steadfastly refused to do so; it would have upset the house builders. The upshot was Grenfell Tower. NHBC, the privatised building control provider favoured by house builders because it is easier to satisfy than local authorities, signed off shoddy, defective buildings with minimal inspection, if any. It has been utterly discredited. Far from killing off the health and safety culture, Ministers have had to hand the Health and Safety Executive—the embodiment of that culture, which the Tories fortunately did not manage to "kill off"—the crucial new Building Safety Regulator role.

The *Spectator* article finishes by pointing out:

"Powerful vested interests benefit mightily from this high-price, low-build-quality gridlock"

and calls for

"a full Competition and Markets Authority inquiry into UK housebuilders".

Unlike other Members in this debate, I do not want to thank those house builders. Competition is absent from this market. The Government must now finally side with leaseholders and would-be homeowners, and take on not the building products industry, but the house builders.

5.57 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The deadline for applications to the building safety fund is tomorrow, but it is very clear to me and to many other people I have been speaking to—people who are leaseholders in affected properties—that there is a lack of information about the scheme and the deadline. Surely we should therefore be asking the Minister to look at flexibility regarding applications for those people who may be eligible but are not aware that they are.

The crucial issue is that the building safety fund has had £5.1 billion committed to it, but we recognise that the cost of making safe all the buildings that are unsafe because of their cladding is in the region of £15 billion. Of course, that means that nobody in a building smaller than 11 metres would get any support whatever. I point out that nobody in my constituency lives in any building as high as 11 metres, and that is also the case in many much more urban areas than mine. But when we think that there may be up to 1 million people living in affected properties and that a few tens of thousands may get something out of that scheme, we realise that this is surely a despicable state of affairs.

Leaseholders who have done what Governments of different colours, but especially of the blue colour, have encouraged them to do over the last few decades—become homeowners, and specifically those homeowners—find themselves stuck in unsafe homes that they cannot afford to make safe, and which they have no chance of selling because of that. They are utterly stuck and, in many cases, as good as ruined. There has been lots of talk about whether things might get better through the Building Safety Bill, and there have been lots of hopeful remarks from colleagues, particularly those on the Government Benches, but do they realise the impact that waiting for any news, good or bad, is having on people in that situation—people who are stuck and cannot move, people facing ruin, people afraid that the place they live in is unsafe and unsaleable?

The Government could agree to the principle of the matter today by agreeing to underwrite the cost of making safe all those buildings and ensuring that those leaseholders are not punished for something that was not their fault, particularly given that we know whose fault it was. In the first instance, the fault lies with the developers that built unsafe properties and Governments of all colours who neglected to ensure that the regulations were good enough in the first place and that they were kept to. Governments of various colours neglected the people and did not stand up for their safety, so it is right that the Government should underwrite the cost of dealing with the cladding scandal and recoup the money from the developers thereafter.

I want to refer to another matter relating to building safety that is of enormous and growing importance in my constituency in particular—the issue of Airbnb. I do not want to denigrate that whole model, the company or the people who make use of it, but it is clear that the standards that apply to people who use their homes for Airbnb are not the same as those that apply to people who are offering a holiday let. As I said last week—this is so important that I will keep repeating it until the Government do something about it—there has been a 32% increase in the number of holiday lets in the Lake district over the past few months. As hon. Members can imagine, my constituency was pretty full of them to start with. Perhaps 80% of all houses bought in my community during the pandemic have gone into the second-home market, so there is an issue with the safety of houses and properties. We must ensure that those that easily get into the letting market are held to the same level of safety as those that were historically within it.

The Government need to get a grip of this growing crisis, because it is about not just the safety of the houses but the sustainability of communities. Villages and towns throughout Cumbria are becoming ghost towns. People who were paying an affordable private rent of £600 or £700 a month are being turfed out of their flats in Grange-over-Sands, Ambleside, Kendal or Sedbergh, which then go on the market for £1,000 a week. I referred to it last week as the lakeland clearances: the clearing out of our communities, because there are ways of making more money from them, rather than having a resident population.

I ask the Minister to take note of what I have said about the building safety fund. His Government must take immediate action to change planning use for rental and second-home properties. They should become a separate category of planning use so that local authorities and national parks can do something to save their communities before it is too late.

6.2 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Between April 2019 and March 2020, councils in England spent almost £1.2 billion providing temporary accommodation for homeless families. There has been a staggering 55% increase in the past five years. Temporary accommodation is now big business: 87% of that taxpayer funding went to private landlords, letting agents and companies, and every single penny was badly spent. It went to places such as Connect House in my constituency —a converted warehouse in the middle of one of south London's busiest industrial estates, which housed 86 homeless families at an astronomical cost of up to £40 per night for squalor.

In 2010, there were 50,400 households in temporary accommodation. Fast forward through 11 years of Conservative government, and that number has almost doubled, and it now includes almost 60,000 children. For families stuck in that so-called temporary limbo, the only thing that appears temporary is the revolving door of Housing Ministers who fail to bring the rocketing number down.

This taxpayer-funded industry is completely unregulated. I want to draw the Minister's attention to four examples that emphasise the regularity with which temporary accommodation law is broken. First, the law states that families with children must not be housed in B&Bs for longer than the six-week legal limit. Why, then, will 490 families with children spend this evening in a B&B where they have already been for longer than six weeks?

Secondly, on out-of-borough accommodation, the homelessness code of guidance makes it clear that local authorities must secure accommodation within their own borough,

"in so far as is reasonably practicable".

It seems a fairly obvious requirement to ensure that parents can still go to work and children to their school, and that any local support and healthcare can be retained. Why, then, are 28% of households—a proportion that

has doubled in the past decade—moved away from their home borough? Ross Kemp's ITV investigation found that homeless families travel approximately 400,000 miles each year to get to their temporary accommodation. That is 16 times round the globe—hardly so far as is reasonably practical.

Thirdly, when households are moved out to different boroughs, the receiving local authority must legally be informed of their arrival. That same Ross Kemp investigation discovered that 60 councils—and, I suspect, even more—are failing to notify the receiving council.

Fourthly, any authority must, by law, ensure that any accommodation is fit for human habitation, but when I highlighted the appalling conditions at Connect House to Bromley Council, it confirmed,

"we do not currently visit and screen each individual property that we use as temporary accommodation. I'm afraid the scale of the numbers involved means this has proven not to be possible."

How on earth can the accommodation be deemed safe and suitable if it has not been checked in the first place?

I say to the Minister that the law on temporary accommodation is broken—constantly. Everywhere. That is why I am calling for a regulator—an Ofsted, if you like, for temporary accommodation. We need an authority that will proactively enforce the law and rules that are already in place, because we know that services respond when they know that somebody is watching. I am under no illusion that this would build a single new social house for all those families who so desperately need one, but I believe that the widespread failings that a regulator would identify would encourage adequate funding and support from the Government and ensure better practice from local authorities, to make sure that the law that currently exists for taxpayer-funded temporary accommodation is finally upheld.

6.7 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am going to talk about Sulgrave Gardens, a set of blocks of flats in my constituency, not because it is unique—if one goes round the country, one sees it is certainly not—but because it illustrates a range of perils that have not only emanated from Grenfell but ramified endlessly since then, beyond, I am afraid, the reach or competence of this Government.

One of the leaseholders wrote to me just in the past week and said this:

"Sulgrave Gardens, a modern purpose built eco-friendly development, the first large scale Passivehaus development in the UK. A modern day utopia where children can run and play, families live happily in a safe and secure setting, well it would have been had the developers and builders not…chosen to use the cheapest form of cladding, flammable ACM, they covered most of the development with it".

He went on:

"Despite both blocks being over 18m high they fail the government requirement that the height of the floor of the top most habitable level be above 18m and so are not eligible for government funding. We have families living in terror and people's lives put on hold due to unsaleable properties, the chaos this has created for residents of Sulgrave is immense."

For many people—not just owners, but tenants—the hope of a dream home has been sold short by the appalling standards in the building industry. It is not just about cladding or other materials; it is about construction, design, inspection, the competence of a whole industry and its negligence over a period of time. Perhaps the Minister will explain what the 18-metre rule is about. How would he feel living, as some of my constituents are, on the fourth or fifth floor of blocks that are below 18 metres but clad in ACM cladding? They still live in terror every night. That rule has to go.

We have quite rightly heard a lot about leaseholders who suffer the triple whammy of living in unsafe premises, having to pay up huge amounts of money and being unable to sell their properties and move on with their lives, but there is no guarantee that they will be compensated, even when they have responsible and identifiable landlords, let alone when they have freeholders who are offshore.

This identifies a separate problem, which is true of Sulgrave, because the owner of Sulgrave is Octavia Housing, a well-known and long-established social landlord. It has said that it will remove the cladding and that it will seek every way it can not to charge the leaseholders, whether that is done through the National House Building Council or the builder or the developer. Of course, it cannot apply for grants because the buildings are below 18 metres. However, if it fails in that, if the Government will not provide any money, and if it does not wish to charge its leaseholders—it does not wish to charge them, but it has not ruled it out—who will pay?

The answer is that its tenants will pay. They will pay out of their general funds, and the consequence of that, as the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), has said, is that their development budgets, their repair budgets and their operational budgets will go through the floor. The four largest social providers have already said that they will cut their programmes by 40%, and that is with only a fraction of the problems discovered, so could we have an answer to this as well? How is the already lamentably small social house building programme going to be assured as a consequence of this, or are the Government going to play divide and rule between leaseholders, tenants and social landlords, which is what they seem to be doing at the moment?

There are other risks that social tenants have to suffer as well. Social housing has a disproportionate number of vulnerable people in it. Also, a large number of fires start accidentally in those premises. They often contain cheap and unsafe electrical products. That was true of Grenfell, and it was true of Shepherd's Court in my constituency, where there was a serious tower block fire almost five years ago involving a cheap Whirlpool tumble dryer. Unless the Government are prepared to get a grip on this situation, to at least admit the scale and variety of the problems and to take the course that our Front Bench and the Select Committee have taken in providing a comprehensive solution, they will be only tinkering and playing at the edges. That is a huge disservice to my constituents in Sulgrave Gardens, to many other constituents of mine and to hundreds of thousands of people around the country.

6.12 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I would like to thank my fellow Select Committee member, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for opening the debate and for leading the Committee in its efforts to hold the Government to account on the national cladding scandal. There are many issues in the building safety crisis that the Government

[Florence Eshalomi]

have failed on, and that failure is turning the lives of leaseholders in my constituency into a living nightmare, but today I want to focus my comments on one of the root causes of the problem: the requirement for an external wall survey, or EWS1. Buildings are deemed to be unsafe only when a leaseholder tries to sell their flat and they are asked by their mortgage lender to provide an EWS1 form to show that the building has passed its fire safety assessment. This assessment is not overseen by the Government; nor is it a legal requirement for building owners. This means that most unsafe blocks are discovered only by chance. Four years on from the Grenfell tragedy, the Government still do not know exactly how many unsafe buildings there are in this country.

The first step in solving any problem is to correctly diagnose it, but this Government have outsourced that task to individual leaseholders. As a consequence, the Government have consistently underestimated both the scale of the problem and the personal and financial cost to individual leaseholders. Costs are spiralling because the people who are deciding that the works are needed are not the ones paying for them. Private fire assessors have no interest in keeping costs down and managing agents have no incentive to complete the works quickly so long as they are still liable for any cost. Without anyone with professional experience taking charge, leaseholders are left to navigate the system alone.

Labour is calling on the Government to establish a building safety works agency: a team of Government-appointed engineers with an expert in direct charge of resolving the crisis, going block by block, assessing the problems, commissioning remediation works, paying for them and signing buildings off as safe and sellable so that homeowners can get on with their lives.

Without effective Government action to address this, I fear that an ever-growing number of leaseholders will have their lives plagued in crisis for years to come. That is why the Government must act now to end the cladding scandal.

6.15 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab) [V]: I thank my fellow Sheffield MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Select Committee, for the excellent way in which he comprehensively framed the issues about building safety that we need to consider. I also thank all members of the Committee for their consideration of cladding and other safety issues in multi-storey buildings, many of which are in my constituency.

Today is the first opportunity to debate the issue properly since the Government ordered their MPs to vote down cross-party proposals to protect leaseholders. My hon. Friend was right to remind Ministers that the issue will not go away, partly because many Members on both sides of the House will continue to press it and also because of the impact on the lives of hundreds of thousands of people across the country.

Only last week, I was contacted by a mother who shared her son's situation with me. He is also one of my constituents. Trapped by owning a home in an unsafe building and facing unaffordable financial demands, he has considered taking his life to get out of that nightmare. Now in his late 20s, he was 14 when the building where he lives was built. How is he responsible for the faults of developers and the failure of regulators?

Colleagues will know that that is not an isolated case and that many of us represent leaseholders who face bills that they cannot afford and live in unsafe properties that they cannot sell. They are under intense mental strain, not just because of the huge financial pressures, but because their lives are on hold. They are unable to move, start families or begin new jobs.

The Prime Minister recognised the problem when he pledged in February that

"no leaseholder should have to pay for the unaffordable costs of fixing safety defects that they did not cause and are no fault of their own."—[*Official Report*, 3 February 2021; Vol. 688, c. 945.]

Like so many of his promises, it was casually made and casually ignored when we debated the Fire Safety Bill. Ministers must recognise that the situation is untenable. Any settlement that requires people to pay unreasonable amounts of money will not only break them but is doomed to fail.

The loan scheme that Ministers proposed is unfair and fails to cover everybody in that situation, as others have pointed out. It is also unworkable. Remediation will not happen and buildings will remain unsafe. Four years ago, many of the risks facing buildings were not fully understood. They are now, so the continued failure to act is simply unforgivable.

I met affected constituents from across my constituency again last week. They had heard the Prime Minister's promise and they watched the Fire Safety Bill pass unamended with bitter disappointment. They asked me to make it clear to Ministers that their campaign will not stop until they see the action they deserve. They are victims of comprehensive regulatory failure, which we have a responsibility to address. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East said, it should be addressed by using the full resources of the state and then recovering the costs from those responsible.

Ministers mark the anniversary of the Grenfell Tower every year, but then bury their heads in the sand in the hope that history will not repeat itself. It is not good enough, and it is time for the Government to act and put an end to the nightmare facing so many of our constituents.

6.19 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) [V]: My reason for speaking briefly in the debate is that I promised my constituents currently affected by the cladding scandal that I would use every opportunity I could to raise their plight. To recap my past interventions, the largest number of those constituents live in properties constructed by Ballymore—they are homeowners, private renters, leaseholders and housing association tenants—and as with many other high-rise properties around the country, cladding inspections have revealed a range of other safety risks resulting from the construction techniques used in the development of those properties, including a risk from the wooden balconies. That also reflects the regulation and inspection regime in place when the buildings were constructed.

My constituents bought, leased or rented their homes in good faith and with various assurances from developers, builders, landlords and regulators about the quality of their homes' construction. Now, they remain trapped,

fearful for their safety, unable to sell and move on and still facing potentially huge bills to make their homes safe. There are heartbreaking cases, and this is impacting on people's health—their mental health in particular—and the stability of their relationships.

Ballymore informed my constituents that it has applied for building safety fund grants, but they will not cover the range of safety defects, which will cost thousands of pounds per property. After Ballymore residents staged protest demonstrations and there was a fire in a Ballymore property in east London, the company made noises that those additional costs would be covered. We await legally enforceable commitments from the company.

It is rumoured that Ballymore threatened to withdraw any assurances to cover costs if the residents' demonstrations continue. I hope that is not the case, but let me make it clear to the Ballymore company that I will not tolerate any threat to my constituents and their right to expose and protest against the way in which it has treated them. I expect the company now to bring forward urgently legally enforceable agreements to secure the safety of my constituents, firmly based on the principle that the developer—the perpetrator—must pay.

Finally, in my constituency there is a massive construction programme of up to 4,000 new properties in central Hayes. I am concerned that the design and intensity of the developments, and, yes, the lack of community facilities, may well mean that we are witnessing the construction of the slums of tomorrow. I am also concerned that more than a decade of savage cuts in local government funding has resulted in a lack of planning officers and building inspectors to ensure that these new developments comply with basic environmental, planning and safety standards. I have a real fear that what is being stored up is the same risks we saw at Grenfell and elsewhere, and a new generation of hazards and potential tragedies. I urge the Government to take swift action to give my constituents the assurances they need, to join me in condemning Ballymore if it threatens to withdraw the assurances it gave simply because my constituents are publicly expressing their concerns, and to look again at local government funding so that we have proper building regulation and planning controls in place with sufficiently staffed local authorities to enforce whatever regulations are available to them.

6.24 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). All the speakers today have been very clear in their request for improvement and for things to be done better. I know that the Minister will respond to that in a positive fashion; that is in his nature, and no doubt it is his intention too.

This is an important debate because we have all, undoubtedly, been watching the events unfolding in Miami, where there was a terrible tragedy last week when a high-rise apartment block collapsed. That brings home to us all how fickle life is. I understand that the death toll has risen to nine and that 150 people are still missing. What has happened in Florida is a human tragedy in what should be unthinkable circumstances, but as we here in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland all know only too well, such tragedies are real. The memory of Grenfell and its impact is still fresh.

We have a duty to ensure that the Building Safety Bill meets not only current but future requirements and that there are no conflicts between its provisions, particularly regarding the gateways, and the proposals in the Government's planning White Paper. The Local Government Association has expressed deep concerns arising from the draft Bill's publication on the retention of the benefits of gateway 1. I support the LGA in urging the Government to ensure that those benefits also apply to developments under permitted development rights. The building safety system is broken, and it has been for a long time, so that legislation is long overdue. I believe that debating the move to reform this process presents opportunities to enhance the safety of the buildings that we live and work in.

The LGA has also expressed concern that there is a lack of expert capacity to address safety issues. Any reform and new legislation must call for risk-based assessments to be more robust than just "suitable and sufficient". The problem with that is that it can be open to a level of interpretation. We need to set down the parameters and the criteria very strictly, because what might be suitable for one property may not be suitable for another. Assessments must be tailored to each specific premises, and resources must be proportional to the risk to life and limb.

I am particularly concerned by the LGA's report of a lack of fire engineers, and there has been a chronic shortage of surveyors and assessors with sufficient knowledge of both high-rise structural safety and cladding systems. Fire risk assessments are easy enough to do, but they are hard to do properly. Almost anyone with a background in the fire industry can set themselves up as a professional fire risk assessor and visit premises around the country, giving out advice to building owners. Even though there has been an increase in the training and prevalence of certified fire risk assessors in recent years, there is still a need for this country—the UK—to invest in addressing that skills shortage as soon as possible. Perhaps the Minister can give us an assurance that certified risk assessors will be recruited and that the dearth that there is at present will be addressed.

It is important that while we learn from past mistakes, any reform of the legislation is as relevant in the future as it is intended to be today, because it is the future of building safety that we are considering. I am my party's health spokesperson, and I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary groups on respiratory health and on healthy homes and buildings. I see a need to address the way that buildings are ventilated through air-conditioning and in general; I would like to see not only better ventilation, but measures for houses that are riddled with damp. Again, perhaps the Minister can give us some assurance that landlords of properties that are not up to standard will be required to do the upgrading that is necessary. I would like to see living standards raised.

The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in America has made numerous recommendations for improving the ventilation of buildings during covid-19. I wonder whether the Minister has had a chance to look at those recommendations. We should also consider the risks from other airborne contagions, such as Legionnaires' disease, as we look to reform the building regulations and make buildings safer for residents and workers. I believe that there is scope for making buildings not only structurally sound but healthier places to be.

[Jim Shannon]

Remember that we are looking at building safety for the future. Buildings must be safer in all respects. We know how strong the message was that fresh air was a key factor in fighting covid-19. Eventually, workers will move back into office buildings. I suggest that, as part of improving the structural safety of buildings, we should also consider investigating the link between ventilation and the spread of contagions via air-conditioning. I believe that we should be looking at that seriously, and that we should include it as part of any new risk assessment framework.

6.29 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): In the interests of transparency, I declare that my husband owns a flat that may potentially be affected by this issue.

This has been a very interesting estimates day debate on building safety. The cladding crisis, about which we have heard much in the debate, has made a mockery of the aspiration of a property-owning democracy, as families and young professionals find themselves literally trapped in unsafe buildings as they face life-changing bills to remove cladding that they had no say in installing. I know that the Minister will be keen to point out the £5.1 billion that his Department has announced to remediate this issue, but it is becoming clear with every speaker and every day that passes that this will fall woefully short of what is required to address this issue fully.

At this juncture, I congratulate *The Sunday Times* on its excellent campaigning on this issue and on showing the human cost to this crisis, because it is not about cladding. It is about people, and it is about families whose lives have been put on hold and whose plans to start or add to their families have been put on hold indefinitely—people facing eviction notices, people whose mental health has been adversely affected, and people who feel suicidal because they look to the future and cannot see a way out of a crisis that is not of their own making.

The Association of Residential Managing Agents and the Institute of Residential Property Management have published new data that looked at more than 750 buildings, concluding that leaseholders must still pay impossible sums of £20,000 each to fix smaller blocks, and more than £14,000 for unfunded fire risks in tall buildings. Although a fifth of those affected were contemplating bankruptcy, 23% had taken out loans. What is clear is that not enough due diligence has been done by the Government on the true costs of remediation; they seem to have reckoned the costs on the basis of guesswork. However, the real costs are now being revealed to those affected. The financial costs are life-changing; the human cost is incalculable.

The Government have said that their £5.1 billion fund covers only buildings that are taller than 18 metres or six storeys, with a 30 cm tolerance, because they wanted to prioritise unsafe cladding that was a greater risk in taller blocks. However, *The Sunday Times* reports that a key civil servant was recorded telling fire engineers that 18 metres was the cut-off point because the Government

"haven't got time to come up with a better number."

We are now seeing the reality for those who live in blocks that do not reach the 18-metre threshold. They face bills for stripping flammable cladding from their flats, which costs more than the flats themselves. As for those applying for a state loan to help cover costs, about which we have heard much this afternoon, leaked letters from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Treasury show that, under the plans, loans will be low-interest—they will not be interest-free—and that, at an annual rate of 1%, the interest alone on a £100,000 loan would cost £80 per month, which means that the loan would never be repaid but would grow over time, making such flats even harder to sell. In any case, it seems that the state loans, which were announced in February, will not be launched for at least another two years.

Additionally, there is the complication of flammable insulation, flammable balconies and faulty cavity barriers. There is no funding for those building dangers, despite the fact that properties cannot be sold, or even insured for a reasonable cost, until the remediation work is carried out. Will the Minister explain why those particular areas were not included in the funding? What is clear is that more urgent and direct Government intervention is needed. The Barnett consequentials in Scotland—£97.1 million to address the cladding issue—are woefully inadequate, just as the sums allocated in England are inadequate. Remediation of cladding must not be left to householders and leaseholders. With eye-watering bills, they cannot afford to remove materials for which they have no responsibility.

Following the publication of the recommendations from the ministerial working group on mortgage lending and cladding, property owners in Scotland who live in buildings where safety concerns had been determined submitted an expression of interest in participating in the first phase of the single building assessment. Over 300 expressions of interest were submitted. The selection of the buildings to be included in the first phase has been completed, and building owners are currently being notified.

The single building assessment will provide clear evidence of the total need for remediation. All flatted properties will be covered: 770 high-rise buildings and many more at lower heights. This approach allows the Scottish Government to identify buildings that are at risk. If no risk is identified, that will release people from safety and mortgage-lending concerns; it may also save homeowners the hundreds of pounds that they might otherwise have faced paying for an individual external wall fire review form. The cost of the single building assessment will be met by the Scottish Government. Once it has been established, remediation can be targeted at the buildings most at risk.

It is also important to have a holistic approach and learn the lessons of the past about the use of sprinklers and interconnected fire alarms, which are important for managing risks and potential fire outbreaks. This process must ensure that support is delivered fairly and that remediation is delivered on a level playing field so that the risk of people being left out—as we know happened in England under the first support scheme—does not arise in Scotland.

In addition, there are ongoing concerns about extortionate building insurance costs. The Secretary of State is aware of them: he said on 10 February that

"as with the lenders, the insurers are faced with assessing a new and heightened level of risk. None the less the Association of

British Insurers now needs to step up and take a proportionate risk-based approach...Insurers should be pricing that risk correctly and not passing on those costs or even profiteering".—[*Official Report*, 10 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 341-42.]

Will the Minister update the House on the matter? Anecdotally, we have all heard about householders receiving letters telling them that their insurance is to be terminated or that its cost will be raised so dramatically that it becomes unaffordable overnight. The Secretary of State said in February that the Government were prepared to step in as a last resort if engagement with the insurance industry did not improve matters. Is that still the case? If so, how bad do matters have to become before the Government step in?

We need more funding. That cannot be said too often, because the sums set aside are simply not adequate to the task at hand. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee indicated as much in the report that it published in April, putting the full cost of fire safety remediation at up to £15 billion and calling for the establishment of a comprehensive building safety fund to cover the cost of all remediation works on buildings of any height, to be fully funded by Government and the industry. As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) pointed out, it is really important that the industry takes its responsibility on the issue seriously. That sounds eminently sensible, and I hope that the Government's response to the Committee's report is positive; I know that it is due to be published soon.

I say to the Minister that this is one of the great scandals of our generation. How much misery do those affected have to go through before there is a fair and comprehensive solution to this crisis? When will sufficient funding be made available so that all who have been conned by poor cladding, flammable insulation and faulty cavity barriers can access the level of support that they need so that they can just get on with their lives?

6.38 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I thank all hon. Members for their contributions today, particularly the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee—my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who introduced the debate very powerfully—and other members of my former Select Committee.

Before I talk about the building safety scandal on our shores, I want to echo the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and Grenfell United in recognising the horror of what happened at Champlain Towers in Miami last Thursday. My thoughts go out to the families of those who lost loved ones and to the rescue teams now tasked with working around the clock to find the 150 people who are still missing.

As we have heard this afternoon, four years on from the Grenfell fire in which 72 people lost their lives, hundreds of thousands of people the length and breadth of our country and in Wales and Scotland are living in buildings still wrapped in flammable cladding, constructed with missing fire breaks and insulated with inappropriate materials. They are still paying thousands of pounds for round-the-clock waking watch schemes, with insurance premiums out of control. These are just elements of the day-to-day nightmare that is the building safety scandal, a horror show amplified by the inertia of Ministers and the incumbent of No. 10.

Today's debate, with passionate and informed contributions from 18 hon. and right hon. Members from across the House, has reminded me of two principal questions that I asked of Ministers some time ago. First, are buildings and the people living in them markedly safer four years on from the Grenfell tragedy? The answer, I am afraid, is again no. Secondly, has the Government's response been extensive and at pace? We have heard from across the Chamber that that is certainly not the case. It seems that an intergalactic black hole has more transparency than the workings of the building safety fund. The fact that only 10p in every pound has gone out of the door adds another dimension to this scandal for leaseholders. Although, as has rightly been pointed out, social housing providers are excluded, the Government, quite frankly, need to get a grip.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) highlighted, residents in his constituency are faced with threats from the developer Ballymore and have been jumping through hoops to apply for the building safety fund. My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), who speaks very passionately on these issues, raised the heartbreaking cases of her constituents who are unable to sell flats; young families trapped by the EWS1 chaos, which still hinders over 1 million people, despite Government promises that that is no longer the case—just not reality. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) cited the mother of his young constituent who dreamed of buying a home, but is now faced with an unaffordable bill and has considered taking his own life—real stories.

In addition, we heard from the hon. Members for Kensington (Felicity Buchan), for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon), for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), for Strangford and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), and my hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). All echoed the same stories and everyday experiences, bringing hundreds of thousands of voices alive in the House and shining a light on those trapped in this scandal and crying out for justice.

Another real-life story is one that was highlighted by the Chair of the Select Committee, and which I am sure the Minister can only confirm today. The Government still do not know the number of buildings truly at risk because they have failed to create a risk register, a priority that the Opposition call for once again today. We also call for the establishment of the building works agency to turbocharge this process, with a crack team of experts to take hold of the crisis from start to finish.

The Government's response to this crisis has been one of dither and delay, with legislation coming down the line—who knows when?—and the building safety fund as a reaction to determined campaigners and strong voices in Parliament from across the piece. However, the size and scope of the fund, as echoed across the Chamber today, is not sufficient, and the remediation of buildings has been carried out at a snail's pace. Some

[Mike Amesbury]

2,820 applications have been made to the building safety fund, with only 156 fully approved so far, and with the extended deadline coming to an end tomorrow. We have a system of first come, first served, with gagging orders and chaos hardwired into it. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of people wait to hear about the details of the unwanted loans to pay for this toxic mess of deregulation. It is developers and donors—many to the Conservative party—who are responsible for this mess, not leaseholders.

To make matters worse, we now have the ludicrous situation where some management agents, from Manchester to Birmingham to London, are siphoning off up to £500 million in fees, which could fix up to 250 blocks. Others say that their experience of the application process has been like knitting fog. The Secretary of State is not just Bob the bad builder, but Captain Chaos when it comes to the public purse.

In conclusion, the Government have the opportunity today to reset their approach and get a grip of the building safety crisis; to respond to advice from the Select Committee and its Chair; to stand up for leaseholders and protect them with deeds, making good on the promises repeated 17 times that they would not pay historical remediation costs; to establish a building works agency, with experts in the field; to get a grip on this crisis from start to end, building to building; to provide holistic risk assessments; and to fund works up front, sign them off, and recover from what has been done by those who are responsible for this mess, including the donors who have given £11 million since the Conservative Prime Minister came to power. That is the way that we create pace while protecting the public purse and leaseholders. That is the way that we do the right thing to make people and buildings safe.

6.46 pm

The Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government (Luke Hall): May I begin by putting on record my thanks to all hon. and right hon. Members who have contributed to today's debate? It has been a passionate and extremely well informed debate. I know that everybody here agrees that we all want every home built in this country to be decent, to be safe and to be secure, and that has been echoed right across the House today.

It also feels especially poignant to be speaking on this subject shortly after the fourth anniversary of the tragedy at Grenfell Tower. No community should ever have to go through what victims and their families have suffered. That is why we have been taking action to ensure that remediation takes place as fast as possible, with funding targeted to where it is needed most. It is why we are taking action not just to make existing homes safer, but to fix the system to ensure that new homes are designed, built and kept safe to ensure that a tragedy such as Grenfell never happens again.

I thank the Chairman of the Select Committee for opening the debate in such a rounded and informed manner. He did so in comprehensive style, providing a long list of questions, which he very kindly suggested that he might put to me in writing. I will try to address some of them in the course of my response, but if I do not catch all of them, I will ensure that they are answered in writing.

A number of colleagues raised the issue of cladding remediation. We believe that it is unacceptable for leaseholders to have to worry about the unaffordable cost of fixing unsafe cladding systems, which, through no fault of their own, were put on their buildings. That is not proportionate and it is not fair. I understand the frustration, the worry, the heartache and the anger that the issue must cause to so many people. Wherever we are able, we will provide support to protect leaseholders from large-scale cladding and remediation costs. It will protect them from the costs of replacing unsafe cladding and make sure that people are safe and feel safe in their homes.

Andy Slaughter: Will the Minister give way?

Luke Hall: I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, but I must get through the many points that have been raised. I want to try to answer as many as I can and leave time for the Chairman of the Select Committee to sum up. If I get through all the questions, I will certainly give way.

We are trying to take a safety-led approach. We have prioritised high-rise buildings of 18 metres and above, a point that was raised a number of times today. We have put in place a funding package of more than £5 billion for the building safety programme. That is the largest ever Government investment in building safety and it has been designed particularly to accelerate the pace of work on remediating the highest-risk and most expensive defects related to unsafe cladding such as ACM cladding and high-pressure laminates, first filling in where developers or building owners have been unable or simply unwilling to pay. Despite many of the challenges of the past months, we have made significant progress. Over 95% of high-rise buildings with unsafe ACM cladding identified by the beginning of last year have now been remediated or works are on site right now getting on with the job. Some 15,000 homes are now clear of unsafe ACM cladding, with the work finished.

Support goes well beyond ACM cladding removal. Where there are buildings that have other unsafe cladding systems, we are taking measures to protect residents' safety and their exposure to disproportionate costs. Our building safety fund will remove unsafe non-ACM cladding on high-rise buildings, get that cladding replaced, and get it done as fast as possible. Over 1,000 decisions have been made. Despite many building owners failing to provide the basic information required, we have already allocated over £400 million, with 685 buildings now proceeding with a full application. With the announcement in February of an additional £3.5 billion of funding being made available, we will soon be able to extend that support to even more affected households. The public funding does not absolve the industry of taking responsibility for failures that led to unsafe cladding materials being put on these buildings in the first place. We expect responsible organisations to live up to their obligations. Where they have not, we have supported, and will continue to support, enforcement actions to compel them to do so.

We are also determined to ensure that these high-rise buildings are somewhere decent, safe and secure, and that flats can be bought with a mortgage sold without unnecessary red tape and insured at a fair price. The lending and insurance industries continue to be risk-averse

when it comes to high-rise residential buildings. That is why we are working to inject a more proportionate approach into the market, and that is bearing fruit. The majority of lenders—about 80% of the mortgage market—now take a less risk-averse approach to the assessment of high-rise buildings.

I am pleased that the guidance from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors means that nearly half a million flat owners will no longer need to go through the onerous process of requesting an EWS1 form. Recent data from one of the major lenders suggests that an EWS1 already exists for 50% of mortgage applications where one has been requested, and we are working to ensure that this picture continues to improve. Lenders are also reporting that fewer flats require an EWS1, and that of those that do, many do not need expensive remediation work to be carried out. This will make a huge difference to house owners and potential buyers as well.

For buildings that might need further investigations, we are making that easier by providing nearly £700,000 of funding to train up to 2,000 surveyors, working with the British Standards Institution to set standards and develop a bespoke insurance model to ensure that surveyors can continue to pick up this work. We recognise that access to affordable building insurance for high-rise buildings is an issue, and we are working with the industry to support market solutions. Some have already decided to step into the market for new customers, and of course we want others to follow.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) raised the issue of building industry contributions. We have been clear that building owners and the industry should make buildings safe without passing costs on to leaseholders. Owners should consider all routes to meet costs, protecting leaseholders where they can—for example, through warranties and recovering costs from contractors for incorrect or poor-quality work. We have seen many responsible developers and building owners doing this. Taylor Wimpey has set aside £165 million, Barratts £82 million, Persimmon £75 million, and Bellway £130 million. But where companies have not lived up to their responsibilities, it would be unfair for taxpayers, many of whom are not homeowners themselves, to foot the bill. That is why we have announced a new developer levy and a new tax ensuring that the industry makes a fair contribution to the cost of remediating historical safety defects. That will target developers seeking permission to build higher-rise buildings in England under the new regime that we are introducing through the Building Safety Bill, and we have already set out to consult on a new tax that would be levied on the largest housing developers.

I note the suggestion by my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) of a tax on building products. I thank her for that and I am happy to discuss it with her further. A number of hon. Members mentioned the Building Safety Bill, and the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) asked when it will be published. I know he hears the word "imminent" many times, but this truly is imminent, and I can assure him of that.

We must ensure, as we look to the future, that nobody is put at risk by unsafe homes again. We must put in place proactive mechanisms for managing fire and structural safety risks, as well as ensuring that residents and leaseholders are kept safe and feel empowered to tackle safety defects and shoddy workmanship. That is what the Building Safety Bill aims to deliver through the biggest improvement to building safety for a generation. It will ensure greater accountability and responsibility for fire and structural safety issues throughout the life cycle of buildings.

Building on the Fire Safety Act 2021, the Building Safety Bill will establish a new Building Safety Regulator to swiftly hold to account anybody who does not follow the rules. It will ensure that products used in the construction of buildings are bound by rigorous safety standards, and it will give residents a stronger voice in the system through the creation of a statutory residents panel, which will empower residents to influence and contribute to the work of the Building Safety Regulator. Additionally, a new building safety charge will give leaseholders greater transparency about the costs incurred in maintaining a safe building in the new building safety regime, and the new homes ombudsman will improve redress for new build homebuyers, avoiding the need to pursue costly redress through the courts.

It is right that we have prioritised action on high-rise buildings, but where the risk to multiple households is greater when fire spreads, we are also acting decisively to remediate lower-rise residential buildings of between 11 metres and 18 metres. My hon. Friend the Member for Kensington again raised this issue, among many others. We are establishing a finance scheme to ensure that that cladding can be remediated where that is needed. It means leaseholders will never have to pay more than £50 a month. We are working now to develop the details of the scheme to ensure that it protects leaseholders, prioritises affordability and accelerates remediation. We will provide more detail on the scheme as soon as we are able to, and we are working hard to make progress now.

The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) talked about waking watch. We absolutely recognise that some leaseholders have been unjustly left picking up the bill for interim safety measures. That is why the Secretary of State announced a £30 million waking watch scheme. This is paying for the installation of alarms in between 300 and 460 buildings, benefiting over 26,500 leaseholders, who are expected to save over £137,000 a month.

The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) talked about engagement with the Welsh Government. The letter he sent on 23 June raised a number of issues, and I will absolutely make sure that it is responded to.

My hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) talked about the need to invest in Stoke-on-Trent to make sure that regeneration opens up brownfield developments in the city. They took this opportunity to outline the components of their levelling-up fund bid. I absolutely note that and their enthusiasm for the success of the bid, and I thank them for it.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, we have made progress. We have accelerated support to drive forward the remediation of unsafe cladding systems. Over 95% of high-rise buildings identified at the beginning of last year as having unsafe ACM cladding are now having it removed—the works are under way there. We have strong Government support to protect leaseholders from unaffordable costs. We want to be fair to taxpayers, while reassuring lenders that remediation costs will not become unmanageable. This will be a complete overhaul

[Luke Hall]

of the regulatory framework for fire and structural safety, led by a once-in-a-generation change to the building safety framework, with sanctions to tackle irresponsible behaviour to ensure that people are safe and feel safe in their own homes. We will continue to work tirelessly to bring in the lasting change we need, so that everyone in our country lives somewhere that is decent, safe and secure.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The House may wish to know that England have beaten Germany 2-0.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

6.58 pm

Mr Betts: Perhaps we could hope for the same result for the Select Committee vis-à-vis the Government when we come to their response to the Building Safety Bill.

We have had a wide-ranging debate, and this is clearly a very important issue. We should also think back to Dame Judith Hackitt's report, in which she identified a legacy of building regulatory failures in this country, but also identified a fundamental problem of culture in the construction industry. That culture is about cutting costs, a race to the bottom and conflicts of interest, and that is fundamentally at the heart of many of these problems, which eventually will probably take longer to address.

When we debated the Fire Safety Bill, the Government said that it was the wrong Bill to be used for amendments to bring building safety matters to a conclusion. They said that the right Bill was the Building Safety Bill. I am pleased that the Minister has now said that the Bill is imminent. I hope that means it will be before the recess and is quicker than "soon" or "shortly", which Ministers often say.

The first duty of a Government is to keep their citizens safe. The only way to keep people safe in their homes is to remove all safety defects, and I say to the Government that the only way to remove all safety defects is to adopt the comprehensive building safety fund, as recommended by the Select Committee.

Question deferred until tomorrow at Seven o'clock (Standing Order No. 54).

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

Contracting Out

That the draft Contracting Out (Functions in Relation to Space) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 24 May, be approved.

Space Industry

That the draft Space Industry Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 24 May, be approved.

That the draft Space Industry (Appeals) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 24 May, be approved.

That the draft Spaceflight Activities (Investigation of Spaceflight Accidents) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 24 May, be approved.

Town and Country Planning

That the draft Town and Country Planning (Fees for Applications, Deemed Applications, Requests and Site Visits) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, which were laid before this House on 27 May, be approved.

Immigration

That the draft Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 (Juxtaposed Controls) (Amendment) (No. 2) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 20 May, be approved.—*(Rebecca Harris.)*

Question agreed to.

HUMAN RIGHTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

Ordered,

That Karen Buck be discharged from the Joint Committee on Human Rights and Florence Eshalomi be added.—*(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)*

NHS Integrated Care System Boundaries

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Rebecca Harris.)*

7.1 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am sorry that this debate is unlikely to be the penalty shoot-out that some people may have been looking for.

We know that the Government are about to publish a new Bill on the NHS, but it is not widely known or understood that the NHS in England is being prepared for a major reorganisation. The clinical commissioning groups established by the Lansley reforms have gradually been subsumed into groups called integrated care systems. These ICSs are not legal entities, but single executive teams that have effectively merged the CCGs. Their boundaries are established according to the local health economies. For example, the North East Essex CCG has been merged with two Suffolk CCGs to form the Suffolk and North East Essex ICS, which commissions all NHS services across the whole area. This enabled Ipswich Hospital NHS Trust and Colchester Hospital University NHS Foundation Trust to be merged. I have to say that this is highly effective. In my nearly 30 years as a Member of Parliament, I can honestly say that the NHS in our area has never been better led.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I know that my hon. Friend will agree that we have had a fabulous football result this evening.

Going back to the days when my hon. Friend's father was a Health Minister, when the noble Lord Fowler was Secretary of State and when the late Lord Moore was Secretary of State, would he agree that we have had far, far too many of these reorganisations, and that we need to halt the process in our area at the moment?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I will come to that point later; I shall not want to repeat myself.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on having secured the debate on changes to the NHS integrated care system boundaries on the night that England have beaten Germany and qualified for the quarter finals of Euro 2020. Does he agree that although these plans may satisfy the political ambitions of some, they do not deliver the best outcomes for our constituents, including my Slough constituents, who are already well served by the successful Frimley ICS, which should not be broken up? If something is not broke, why needlessly try to fix it?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I was anxious to give way to the hon. Gentleman to show that there is cross-party concern about this matter; I am sure that his point will be enlarged upon by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May).

All this is being put at risk at a time when the NHS is still reeling from the impact of covid-19. The new Bill will place ICSs on a statutory footing, which is a good thing, but there is also a proposal that the ICS boundaries should be redrawn to be coterminous with upper-tier local authority social care boundaries, and that is what we are questioning.

I am most grateful for the way my right hon. Friend at the Dispatch Box has listened recently to MPs affected by these proposed changes and has consulted us. He therefore already understands why I and others remain so concerned, but I must put it on the record that the rest of the consultation process has been not just inadequate but in defiance of proper transparency and accountability.

Sir David Amess: Absolutely outrageous!

Sir Bernard Jenkin: My hon. Friend says that is outrageous.

A firm of organisational consultants, Tricordant, was instructed by NHS England and NHS Improvement East of England to host roundtables in recent months with all the stakeholders in and around the NHS in the east of England. For some reason, it was told to exclude the MPs. Tricordant has produced several drafts of its report, which have been shared among existing ICS leaderships, NHS providers and tier 1 local authorities, but not with MPs. A few of us were eventually briefed by NHS England at the Minister's behest, but I am mystified as to why we were not positively engaged at the outset.

The White Paper produced in February 2020—incidentally, just as we perhaps should have been anticipating the pandemic, instead of planning an upheaval of the NHS—talks about this coterminosity of boundaries, but it also has a whole section on the primacy of place. I will explain this, but those two objectives are fundamentally incompatible. The consultation exercise then appears to have been driven by that dogmatic insistence on coterminosity, and has been further confused by a lack of clarity about the problem that actually needs to be solved.

In Essex and Suffolk, areas larger than single counties were ruled out so Ministers will be presented only with a choice between the boundaries as they are and two county ICS areas—one for Essex and one for Suffolk. Discussions concerning the future of the Suffolk and North East Essex ICS have been strongly weighted towards the county councillors and their officers. Not all relevant NHS stakeholders have been consulted, which is why NHS Providers, which represents NHS leaders across the country, has spoken out on their behalf. Individual NHS leaders are understandably reluctant to criticise proposals in public, but they are known to be against the change, including the leaderships of the acute trusts across the east of England.

I understand why the county councils want this change, and I completely respect their ambition. Essex has made clear to me its frustration at making time for meetings with three different ICSs. I can also see that the new boundaries are superficially attractive, because they align NHS commissioning with the boundaries for the health and wellbeing board and other statutory public services, such as the Essex police and the local resilience forum. Essex County Council acknowledges the extremely successful place-based working implemented by Suffolk and North East Essex ICS, which incidentally has been complimented by the Care Quality Commission, the King's Fund and the National Audit Office.

The new legislation is intended to extend place-based working to all areas. None the less, the Tricordant report would be misleading if it did not express the clear preference of NHS leaders in Essex to retain the existing

[Sir Bernard Jenkin]

ICS boundaries, primarily in recognition of the long history of operating as a single health economy, the significant flow of patients across the county border, the strength of existing relationships in the system, and the progress that has been made locally in integrating health and care services.

There are practical difficulties with the changes for Harwich and North Essex, which are replicated in other parts of England. Enablers of effective place-based working—the leadership, the philosophy and having all the partners sitting around one table—are essential to build effectiveness. A place—I use that term advisedly—that has thrived as part of one system will not necessarily thrive as part of another. Superb progress has been made in north-east Essex in recent years and, more recently, in mid and south Essex. These systems are now working not just because commissioning reflects what is called place but because people have grown into their roles and developed relationships of trust across different organisations. All that will be discarded by the wholesale changes to NHS commissioning by imposing coterminosity.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, because Members of Parliament in Nottinghamshire, Berkshire, Hampshire, Suffolk, Essex and beyond have not been adequately consulted on these proposals, we should pause any decision with a view to looking more objectively at what is on the table?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: My hon. Friend anticipates what I might say later.

The foundation trust for the Ipswich and Colchester hospitals will have two different commissioners, or Suffolk will have to take over the commissioning role for Colchester Hospital, leaving north-east Essex GPs, mental health services and so on with a different commissioning authority from that of the local hospital. NHS England told the MPs:

"We still do not know how the funds will flow".

We certainly will not have all the partners sitting around a single table. The constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) will be reabsorbed into Suffolk, even though it is half of the wider Great Yarmouth and Waveney place.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very good point. The Waveney area of Suffolk has been in a health administrative area with neighbouring Great Yarmouth for a very long time, and with the rest of Norfolk for a reasonable time as well. Any change would be highly disruptive, a distraction and demotivating for hard-working staff. I have written three long letters to the Department of Health and Social Care and have had a meeting with the Minister for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), but does my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex share my concern that there is a perception among those working in health and care in the local area and East Anglia that changing the boundaries is a done deal? Can the Minister confirm in his response that that is not the case?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I very much hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will confirm the latter; I have been assured that it is not the former, which is why I thought it was worth having this debate. The problem that my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney has is that the local population will continue to have acute services commissioned and provided from Norfolk. The imposition of separate Norfolk and Suffolk ICSs would compromise place-level integration for that population.

The west Essex population, which may be close to your heart, Madam Deputy Speaker, has acute services commissioned and provided predominantly from Hertfordshire, London or Cambridgeshire, and very little from the rest of Essex. That means west Essex will become part of an Essex ICS when it does not even include many of the key partners responsible for delivery of acute services to that population, and of course there is to be a new hospital, which may well be outside the Essex border. The proposed county-based arrangements would fragment NHS commissioning for places in north-east Essex, Waveney and west Essex. There might be different commissioners for acute, community and primary care. These places can only fully realise the benefits of integration if they have the flexibility to align all NHS commissioning. Other parts of the country will be similarly affected.

The idea of coterminosity for the administrative convenience of county councils is, I am afraid, a bit like the tail wagging the dog. In 2018, across the UK as a whole, we spent £149 billion on the NHS, but only £22 billion on social care. How can it make sense to align NHS commissioning with social care boundaries? That is not integration with social care; it is disintegration of NHS commissioning, and why do it now, of all times? We would be destabilising our health and care infrastructure while we are not yet out of the pandemic, let alone free of the aftermath.

The focus needs to be on the recovery of services. Elective treatment waiting lists increased to 5.12 million in April—a record high. There are other options for Essex and Suffolk, and I dare say in other parts of the country as well, such as a two-county proposal, as many Essex and Suffolk MPs set out in our letter to the Secretary of State two weeks ago.

In conclusion—I want to give time for others to contribute—the new legislation could provide the opportunity for ICSs to build on their successes, but that will be impossible with the level of disruption that a change of boundaries would bring about. Conservatives should have learned the lesson that NHS reorganisations usually fail to deliver the benefits promised. That will be especially true if reforms are rushed through again, tearing up what has been so recently established. Boundaries are the contentious part of the reforms. It would be better to allow the current ICSs to implement the new legislation and then look at whether boundary changes are necessary, rather than trying to do both at the same time.

So often I have seen it happen: structural and organisational reform is imposed from above as a substitute for a full understanding of what is really going wrong and why. It is always hard to improve leadership and to promote the right attitudes and behaviours in large and complicated organisations, particularly the NHS, but the slowest way to achieve this is to have another structural organisation. Everyone stops thinking about the job they are doing and thinks only about what new job they are applying for. After the reorganisation everyone has to re-learn how their job works and to re-establish new relationships, but nobody has challenged the attitudes

and behaviours, which are still holding the organisation back. So often the problems are about poor leadership, poor employee engagement and lack of stability, which yet more structural change just makes worse. I therefore urge my right hon. Friend to delay the decision concerning future ICS boundaries until after the pandemic, and to consult and explore alternative boundary proposals after the legislation has settled down.

7.15 pm

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on securing this debate, and thank him and the Minister for their courtesy in agreeing that I could speak briefly in it.

I want to focus, first, on my local integrated care system. The majority of my constituency is covered by the Frimley ICS, as is the rest of east Berkshire. I know that the comments I am going to make are supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland), the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) and my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Adam Afriyie). Frimley ICS is one of the best performing and most effective ICSs in the country—arguably, it is the best performing and most effective ICS in the country. That has been achieved by partnership working across county boundaries and across local authorities. It has been achieved by people coming together, working together in a network of partners whose aim has been to provide the best possible outcomes for our constituents. Yet now the Government want to break it up—why? It is because it is bureaucratically neater to align an ICS boundary with a local authority boundary. I understand that in this instance one local authority leader argued that his local authority should be covered by a single ICS and therefore the boundaries should be the same.

I refer the Minister to the White Paper, which says:

"Frequently, place level commissioning within an integrated care system will align geographically to a local authority boundary".

It says "frequently", not in every case, at every occasion or in every ICS we are looking at, so it is not necessary to align every ICS with a local authority boundary. Frimley ICS is supported by all the GPs and healthcare providers in east Berkshire, and by GPs and others in Hampshire and Surrey, which Frimley ICS also covers. Frimley ICS is supported by all the east Berkshire local authorities, all the east Berkshire MPs, who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex pointed out, were not consulted as part of these proposals going forward. Our message collectively to the Government is a very simple one: Frimley ICS is working well, it provides excellent services to our constituents, do not break it up. Far from breaking it up, Frimley ICS should be a template for ICSs across the rest of the country. The message can be put more simply: if it ain't broke, don't fix it. That is particularly important at this point in time. The NHS has been under intense pressure during the pandemic, but as we come out of the pandemic it is also under increased pressure with the backlogs in surgery and in the provision of other services, and with the increasing pressures there will be on mental health services. Are we to say at this time to people working in the NHS, "What we want you to do is to go away and break up this thing that you've brought together and worked very hard to ensure is working so well, and create entirely new ones"? In the case of Frimley, three ICSs would probably be created as a result. That can only lead to a disruption in services. Who suffers from a disruption in services? The people who suffer will be our constituents.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex and in interventions, Frimley is not the only ICS that is under threat where Members of Parliament are concerned about the impact on their constituents. That brings me to the concept that underpins the White Paper—primacy of place. "Place" is not defined simply by a local authority boundary. A local authority boundary defines the area of the local authority, but primacy of place has a deeper meaning. It involves people's behaviour and natural networks. In east Berkshire, our acute hospital is Wexham Park in Slough and is part of the NHS Frimley Health Foundation Trust. The natural geographical area for east Berkshire to be part of is the Frimley health trust area. That makes common sense to people—those working in the NHS and our constituents.

So much hard work has gone into ensuring that we have an ICS in our area that delivers for our constituents. I hear the same from other hon. Members in the debate this evening. I therefore ask the Minister to do what reflects the natural networks that define primacy of place and not to destroy the good will that has gone into making those partnerships work. Do not break up Frimley ICS. Just for once, let common sense prevail.

7.21 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on securing this timely debate about potential changes to ICS boundaries—and indeed on elevating me to the Privy Council, for which I am grateful. He and I have known each other for a long time and I always listen carefully to what he says. When there was the prospect of extra time, our friendship might have been in doubt had I been in here and unable to see the final result, but we got the result we all wanted just in time, so it is a pleasure to be here today.

The subject is important, not only for my hon. Friend, who works tirelessly for his constituents, but for all hon. Members who have spoken. The provision of healthcare goes to the heart of what many of our constituents care passionately about.

In his remarks, my hon. Friend expressed his concerns about the future of Suffolk and North East Essex ICS as one of the areas included in the NHS England ICS boundary review. I am grateful that he has called the debate, not only to allow fellow parliamentarians to express their views before any decision might be made on the Floor of the House, but to let me listen once again to them. I am equally grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). She and I have known each other a very long time and she knows that I have huge respect for her opinions. When she speaks, I always listen carefully.

As has been said, in the recent White Paper, we set out proposals to place integrated care systems in statute. We are working with NHS England and the Local Government Association to deliver and develop those proposals. At the outset, it is important that I highlight a key point. Members alluded in their remarks to the feeling that something here is predetermined. If there is such a feeling, that is a challenge for us to overcome

[Edward Argar]

because I want to reassure hon. Members that nothing is predetermined in any of the specific situations that they have outlined.

As has been set out, ICSs aim to strengthen partnerships and joined-up working between the NHS and local authorities. Local authorities therefore have a key role in ICSs. We know that coterminous boundaries can support more joined-up working between the NHS and local government, but I take on board entirely from my time as a local councillor—indeed, as a cabinet member for health and adult social care—the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead made that sometimes natural geographies of place can mean a lot more to our constituents than administrative boundaries to which we as politicians might pay a lot of attention.

For the reasons I have given, earlier this year the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), asked NHS England to conduct a boundary review to understand what the options—I emphasise options—were to achieve alignment in the small number of areas where coterminosity was not already in place. He set out to do that in two stages: NHS England and its regional teams have led on the review at a local level, engaging with local NHS and local authority stakeholders to determine options for alignment, local views and concerns, and to put forward a fair reflection of what they had heard, while in parallel I, as a Minister of the Crown, have held multiple meetings with parliamentary colleagues. I think I have met well over a dozen colleagues in person or virtually—in this day and age—and held almost 10 different meetings.

I thank NHS England for all its engagement and work on the review. As I say, over the past six months its regional teams have worked closely with local NHS and local government stakeholders to consider, with an open mind, the options available for the areas identified in the review.

As right hon. and hon. Members have made clear, it is important to recognise where things are working well irrespective of coterminosity and serving Members' constituents well. As I say, the review is without prejudgment and I would not wish to pre-empt what may be either recommended or even just set out as options. In that context, keeping the current arrangements would of course be an option to consider. I reassure Members that the Secretary of State and I do have at the forefront of our minds the need primarily to ensure the best health outcomes for local people when any decision is taken. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex will recognise the sincerity with which I say that.

Before I conclude, let me turn to a couple of specific points that my hon. Friend mentioned. I wish to clarify that were any changes made to ICS boundaries as a result of the review, they would not impact on the patient's right to choose or use services outside of their ICS or current patient pathway flows.

On funding, I wish to try to reassure my hon. Friend a little more than perhaps he was reassured in the meeting to which he alluded. Once ICSs are placed on a statutory footing, the allocation of resources to each integrated care board will be determined by NHS England based on the long-standing principles of ensuring equal opportunity of access for equal need and reflecting the considerations that currently inform how moneys flow to areas when following the patient.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will my hon. Friend allow me to intervene on one point?

Edward Argar: Briefly, because I want to give my hon. Friend the reassurance that he seeks before the time runs out.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: What my hon. Friend has said does not address how Suffolk would be funded to commission services for Essex patients at an Essex hospital, and it does not address what will happen to the distribution of deficits, which is uneven across the existing ICSs.

Edward Argar: I would try to address that point briefly, but I think my hon. Friend would rather have the reassurance that I can give him. Perhaps I can pick up that point separately with him, because I do not want to run out of time.

Finally, and most importantly, I reassure my hon. Friend and other Members that no decisions have yet been made regarding the outcome of the ICS boundary review. As he would expect, the newly appointed Secretary of State will want to consider carefully the background to this issue, the options before him and, indeed, the views of right hon. and hon. Members before any decision is made. I have discussed this matter with the new Secretary of State and wish to extend his clear commitment to meet my hon. Friend, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead and other Members before he makes any decision and decides how to proceed in this matter.

My hon. Friend knows me well, and my preference is generally for evolution, not revolution. I hope that, he knowing me well and in the light of what I have said today, he will recognise the sincerity of what I say. I also hope it is helpful that I have put on record, once again, that no decisions have been made and that Members will be consulted and have the opportunity to speak to the Secretary of State. I hope that commitment reassures my hon. Friend, at least in the short term, that nothing will happen without him and other Members having their say clearly on the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I normally thank the Minister politely at this point in the day, but I really do thank the Minister for what he has just said on this particular occasion.

Jim Shannon: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier, you announced the excellent, historic victory of England over Germany. How can I record my congratulations to the English team on behalf of all the people of Northern Ireland, not just in my constituency of Strangford but across from Newry to Londonderry and from Portrush to Enniskillen, where the Union flags are flying? I have one flying at the end of my farm lane. It could be that those flags are flying in celebration of the forthcoming 12 July celebrations, but I believe that they are flying to support England, so how can we send our support from Northern Ireland and wish England well for the quarter finals and for this competition? Our team, England, are playing in the quarter finals, and that has got to be good news.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I think the hon. Gentleman has just done what he was endeavouring to do. I fully understand his position. As one who supports Scotland whenever I can, I am absolutely delighted to be totally, enthusiastically in support of England going forward.

Question put and agreed to.

7.31 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 29 June 2021

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Designated Settings: Indemnity Support (September extension)

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): Further to my written statement on 25 March 2021, I am tabling this statement for the benefit of hon. and right hon. Members to bring to their attention the undertaking of a contingent liability. This relates to an extension of the designated settings indemnity support (DSIS), which offers targeted and time-limited state-backed indemnity arrangements to care homes registered, or intending to register, as "designated settings", and which are unable to obtain sufficient insurance cover.

On 18 January 2021, the Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment announced in a written ministerial statement, and accompanying departmental minute, provision of these temporary indemnity arrangements under the DSIS. The DSIS includes cover for clinical negligence, employer's and public liability where a care provider seeking to become a designated setting is unable to secure sufficient commercial insurance, or where an existing provider has been operating without sufficient cover. Employer's and public liability is covered under the new coronavirus temporary indemnity scheme; clinical negligence is covered by the clinical negligence scheme for trusts. The DSIS is supervised by DHSC and administered by NHS Resolution, and, to date, has proved to be an effective package of support to designated settings.

DSIS initially provided cover for designated settings until the end of March 2021 and was subsequently extended for a further three months until the end of June 2021. Following a further review of DSIS, it will now be extended until 30 September 2021, in order to maintain the current level of support for these vital settings. This extension will benefit current DSIS participants, as well as any additional settings who may wish to apply for the support and who meet the criteria for inclusion. We will review the progress of the support ahead of this end-date.

I regret that in this circumstance, due to the need to ensure that there are no gaps in DSIS cover after the current 30 June end-date, the normal 14 sitting days for consideration has not been possible. A departmental minute will be laid in the House of Commons providing more detail on this contingent liability.

[HCWS130]

TRANSPORT

European Motor Insurance Directive (Vnuk)

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): On 21 February 2021, the Government announced they intended to remove the effects of the 2014 European Court of Justice's ruling in the Vnuk case from GB law. The Government have been clear since the ruling in 2014 that they do not agree with it. The decision directed the unnecessary extension of the provisions requiring motor insurance to private land as well as a greater range of vehicles that potentially includes motorsports, agricultural machinery and light electric vehicles. This has led to excessive liabilities on the insurance industry, and to potential increases in motorists' insurance premiums. Delivering on this commitment is a priority for the Government and we will continue to explore bringing forward the necessary legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) has introduced a private Member's Bill, the Motor Vehicles (Compulsory Insurance) Bill, which aims to deliver the necessary legislative change. The Government will follow passage of this Bill with interest.

Background

Vnuk is a 2014 European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruling on the case of a Slovenian farmer—Mr Vnuk—who was knocked off his ladder by a reversing tractor trailer on a private farm in 2007.

The ruling directed that the compulsory motor insurance requirement must be extended to include vehicles being used on private land, as well as a greater range of vehicles—potentially including those used in motorsports, agricultural machinery and light electric vehicles (LEV).

This contrasts sharply with the scope of the domestic compulsory insurance requirement (in GB) under the Road Traffic Act 1988 (RTA) which is limited to accidents on roads and other public places and has a narrower definition of "motor vehicle".

Implementing Vnuk would have been costly, in the region of £2 billion (covering existing motorcars, existing motorcycles, existing business vehicles, motorsports and other business) according to the Government Actuary's Department (GAD).

Focusing just on existing motorcars, GAD calculate that insurance policyholders could face an estimated additional cost of £1.227 billion if Vnuk was implemented—expressed as a potential increase in individual insurance premiums of c. £50 for 25 million consumers.

In order to remove the impact of the Vnuk decision from GB law, primary legislation is required and a slot to introduce this will be sought at the earliest possible opportunity.

[HCWS131]

HS2 Phase 2a Local Consultation: Government Response

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): I am today publishing a Government response report as required under section 60(3) of the High Speed Rail (West Midlands to Crewe) Act 2021. The report sets out the Government response to the issues raised in the HS2 phase 2a local consultation held between 1 February and 26 February 2021 and which were summarised in the consultation report published on 13 May 2021 and prepared by the independent research company, Ipsos MORI.

I am placing copies of the report in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS132]

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 29 June 2021

TRANSPORT

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Transport Topical Questions on 24 June 2021.

[901698] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I welcome the new flexible season ticket that was introduced this week. It will save someone travelling from Stanford-le-Hope into London three days a week more than £120, and someone travelling from Basildon more than £100. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as more and more people move to hybrid working, it is important that we have flexibility in our public transport systems?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I saw some coverage of the flexible season tickets, and it is true to say that ticketing is complex across the network, but, compared with somebody who would otherwise buy a regular ticket, somebody travelling two or three days a week will always be at least 20% better off with a flexible season ticket.

[Official Report, 24 June 2021, Vol. 697, c. 1007.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Transport, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps).

An error has been identified in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe).

The correct response should have been:

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I saw some coverage of the flexible season tickets, and it is true to say that ticketing is complex across the network, but, compared with a **monthly season ticket, a flexible season ticket** will always be at least 20% **cheaper.**

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 29 June 2021

	Col. No.
JUSTICE	101
Court Capacity	101
Domestic Abuse: Legal Advice	113
Domestic Violence Victims	106
Government and the Courts	112
Human Rights Act 1998 (Amendment)	104
Image-based Abuse	101
Independent Human Rights Act Review	114
International Treaties on Human Rights: Obligations	109
JUSTICE—*continued*	
Medomsley Detention Centre	115
Outcomes for Rape Victims	111
Pet Theft	107
Rehabilitation of Offenders	111
Sexual Assault Victims: Public Naming	114
Topical Questions	115
Violence Against Women and Girls	105

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 29 June 2021

	Col. No.
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	7WS
Designated Settings: Indemnity Support (September extension)	7WS
TRANSPORT	7WS
European Motor Insurance Directive (Vnuk)	7WS
TRANSPORT—*continued*	
HS2 Phase 2a Local Consultation: Government Response	8WS

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Tuesday 29 June 2021

	Col. No.
TRANSPORT	5MC
Topical Questions	5MC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

not later than
Tuesday 6 July 2021

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

Volume 698
No. 25

Tuesday
29 June 2021

CONTENTS

Tuesday 29 June 2021

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 101] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Justice

Emergency Covid Contracts [Col. 123]
Answer to urgent question—(Julia Lopez)

International Travel [Col. 139]
Answer to urgent question—(Grant Shapps)

EU Settlement Scheme [Col. 159]
Answer to urgent question—(Kevin Foster

Bereavement (Leave and Pay) [Col. 171]
Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Patricia Gibson)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Estimates (1st allotted day)

Education Recovery [Col. 174]

Building Safety [Col. 202]
Questions deferred

NHS Integrated Care System Boundaries [Col. 233]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Written Statements [Col. 7WS]

Ministerial Correction [Col. 5MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers]