

**Thursday
8 July 2021**

**Volume 698
No. 31**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 8 July 2021

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr SPEAKER in the Chair]

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

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

Mr Speaker: What a great result it was last night.

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Union in Scotland: Public Opinion Polling

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): What public opinion polling his Department has collected since 2017 on attitudes to the Union in Scotland. [902385]

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What public opinion polling his Department has collected since 2017 on attitudes to the Union in Scotland. [902397]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): As you quite rightly point out, Mr Speaker, football is indeed coming home. I cannot possibly understand why attendance is so scant on the Government Benches this morning.

The Government regularly commission research across the United Kingdom to understand public attitudes in order to inform and help to deliver relevant policies, and to ensure that we have strong, UK-wide, cross-Government communications campaigns.

Allan Dorans: Last month, the first-tier tribunal on information rights ruled that the Cabinet Office must release polling information that it has gathered on attitudes to the Union in Scotland within a month. Will the Minister confirm that he will be releasing that information, as he has been ordered to do, and whether he will also release the details on how much that information cost to collect?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman refers to a case that was brought to the first-tier tribunal by the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). We are reviewing how we can comply with the first-tier tribunal's judgment.

Marion Fellows: In the Chamber last month, the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) astutely summarised, speaking of his own Tory UK Government:

"When the Government do not publish something, it is normally because it is bad news and they are trying to hide it away."—[*Official Report*, 22 June 2021; Vol. 697, c. 761.]

Will the Minister say whether that holds true for his Department's intended-to-be-secret polling on the Union? If it does not and the Union is indeed as strong as he and his ministerial colleagues agree, what reason do the Government have for fighting the release of this information for years?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady refers to my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper). He is a former Chief Whip, and, as a member of that brotherhood, I know that there can sometimes be a tendency to prefer discretion rather than transparency, but in my current role I am all in favour of transparency. Indeed, we do not need to look anywhere other than the current public opinion polls, which show that support for independence is declining and support for the United Kingdom is increasing.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The High Court ruling by Justice O'Farrell concluded that the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster acted with "apparent bias" in the "unlawful" action when he awarded contracts to his chums at Public First, who had previously worked as advisers to him, to the Prime Minister and, of course, for Dominic Cummings. How can the Minister justify siphoning off many tens of thousands of pounds from covid recovery work to fund this highly political research, which is obviously designed to inform the no campaign in the next independence referendum?

Michael Gove: I hesitate to correct the hon. Gentleman, but Lady Justice O'Farrell did not find that I had operated with any form of bias—apparent, actual or otherwise. That is a misreading of the court judgment.

The Scottish Government have received more than £180 million from the UK Government in covid recovery funds and it is not yet the case that the Scottish Government have published how a penny of that money is being spent, so before asking for greater transparency from this Government, I think it would be appropriate if the hon. Gentleman were to ask his colleagues in the Scottish Government to publish accounts for every single penny that has been received and how it has been spent so that we can be assured—as I am sure will be the case—that the Scottish Government have used their resources appropriately to fight covid.

Stewart Hosie: The question was about the Minister's actions, not about anyone else. It would be better if he paid attention to his own work. Given that we already know attitudes, and that, over time, support for independence has risen considerably and support for the Union has declined, is it not more than passing strange that the Minister was so desperate to hand Public First these contracts without competitive tender, were there not to be a second independence referendum? But, more importantly, given that the contract was not restricted to immediately required work, is it not hugely suspicious that such subterfuge was used to funnel taxpayers' money so quickly to Public First, effectively using taxpayers' cash as a bottomless Unionist slush fund?

Michael Gove: A bottomless Unionist slush fund sounds like a great thing, but unfortunately it does not exist. I am afraid that I refer the hon. Gentleman again to the judgment. The contract was not awarded by me and it is not the case that I was found to have acted with any actual or apparent bias, because I did not award the contract. I recommend that he has a close look at what Lady Justice O'Farrell actually concluded.

Civil Service: Skills and Training

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve (a) skills and (b) training within the civil service. [902386]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez) [V]: As we set out in the declaration on Government reform last month, we are deeply committed to investing in training across the whole civil service, as we have to do better at providing public servants with the skills they need to serve others and tackle future challenges. Our new Government Skills and Curriculum Unit is in the process of establishing a campus for Government skills and will be focusing on creating a cross-civil service induction, a data masterclass for senior civil servants and transforming the fast stream so that it remains among the best graduate schemes in the world.

Bob Blackman [V]: Clearly, there is a time and a place for employing contractors and other consultants, but does my hon. Friend agree that alongside that we have to provide better training for civil servants and better recruitment of individuals with the skills that are needed by the civil service so that they can be retained within the civil service as a preference to its spending considerable sums of money on outside consultants and communication firms?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his important and incisive question. The civil service, as he acknowledges, has historically used contractors to provide specialist skills and to manage short-term requirements. We really want to drive that down by improving our own capability. We are developing a pipeline of secondments into major organisations through a new secondments unit. We are building an in-house consultancy, we are creating a civilian reserve, and we are working with the Civil Service Commission to review how we attract entrants with specific high-demand skills, particularly scientists and engineers.

Levelling-Up Agenda

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to implement their levelling-up agenda. [902387]

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to implement their levelling-up agenda. [902393]

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to implement their levelling-up agenda. [902401]

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to implement their levelling-up agenda. [902413]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): Levelling up is at the heart of the Government's covid recovery agenda, and I am in daily contact with Cabinet colleagues. Through the levelling up fund, we have already committed £4.8 billion of support for local projects that will spur regional growth and improve the lives of local people across the whole United Kingdom. Later this year we will publish a levelling up White Paper.

Mrs Miller [V]: If you are in a low-paid job in our country, you are still more likely to be a woman than a man. That is no good for a country that values aspiration, no good for productivity and no good for our economy. Given the focus at the G7 on equal opportunity for women at work, will the Government's White Paper on levelling up recognise this problem and focus on levelling up for women throughout the United Kingdom?

Michael Gove: As a distinguished former Equalities Minister and former Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right: more must be done as part of levelling in order to ensure that women have the opportunities that they deserve and are paid fairly, and that we make use of everyone's talents across the whole United Kingdom.

Jacob Young: The Tees valley is already beginning to see the Government's levelling up agenda in action through its plans for the northern economic campus in Darlington, the UK's largest freeport in Redcar, and the continued work in collaboration between the UK Government and Tees Valley Mayor Ben Houchen. When will we start to see the civil service jobs relocated to the Tees valley, and does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be wrong to cut train services between Teesside and London at a time when our area is growing again?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention Ben Houchen, the Gareth Southgate of local government. It is appropriate that, as the Treasury and the Department for International Trade are recruiting new roles in Darlington and there is more investment in Teesside, we must make sure that we have proper connectivity, including first-class rail travel as well as improved digital connectivity.

Giles Watling [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for his earlier answer. The Government's levelling-up agenda is laudable, and in Clacton some progress has been made. I am doing the best I can to inform residents in the area of what the Government are doing. There is a feeling of being left behind locally, however, so what are the Government doing to communicate more widely what they have been and will be doing for the people of Clacton and other left-behind communities? Will my right hon. Friend come back to the sunshine coast and join me to raise awareness of the Government's important work?

Michael Gove: I absolutely will. There is nothing left behind about Clacton and Frinton and the communities that my hon. Friend so ably represents, and I look forward to visiting them. I understand that there is a fantastic local community theatre that he has played a part in championing, among many other local endeavours. Levelling up is about culture as well as connectivity. I look forward to coming to Clacton and making sure that it is firmly on the map and at the centre of our levelling up plans.

Sir David Evennett [V]: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government's ambitious plans for levelling up are for the whole of the UK, including London and its economy, which has been especially badly hit by the pandemic?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. He is a brilliant advocate for south-east London and for business. I look forward to working with him to ensure that there is improved connectivity and that London, which has suffered particularly badly as a result of the pandemic, is at the heart of our plans for economic recovery.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab) [V]: Labour believes that it should be an explicit priority of this Government that when it comes to public procurement we should be buying more from British companies. In the Government's document, "National Infrastructure and Construction Procurement Pipeline 2020/21", the procurement contracts in the pipeline are worth £37 billion. Can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster tell the House how much of this was awarded to British companies? If not, what does that say about the Government's priorities for British business?

Michael Gove: I am delighted beyond words that the hon. Lady believes that we should procure more, buy more and invest more in Britain. All that is now possible as a result of our departure from the European Union and our liberation from its procurement rules. The procurement Green Paper brought forward by my noble Friend Lord Agnew will ensure that more UK businesses—more Scottish businesses, Welsh businesses and Ulster businesses—get Government pounds to do even better for all our citizens.

Public Bodies: Transparency in Service Delivery

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What steps his Department is taking to increase transparency in the service delivery of public bodies. [902388]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez) [V]: Accounting officer system statements already set out which public bodies a Department is responsible for, and their spending is set out in each Department's annual report and accounts. Public bodies data is also published in the public bodies directory. The recent declaration on Government reform reasserts our commitment to transparency in government. The declaration includes specific commitments on public bodies, including increasing the effectiveness of departmental sponsorship of arm's length bodies.

Neale Hanvey: As legislators, we have an important and indeed necessary relationship with upholding the spirit and the letter of the law. However, in my experience hon. Members seem more likely to be sacked for their attempts to uphold such a principle. What message does the continued opacity, prevarication and law-breaking of this Government's most senior Ministers and advisers give to our children, public bodies and industry, or does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster simply have no shame over his own unlawful conduct?

Mr Speaker: Order. We do need to try to keep it calm and be more temperate in our language.

Julia Lopez: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I appreciate your comments on language in this House. I am afraid I disagree with the hon. Member's characterisation of this Government. As the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has already set out, there is a nuanced judgment from the Public First case in particular which does not agree with the way the hon. Member has characterised how the Government conduct themselves.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It would appear that my lack of donations to the Conservative party makes my chances of becoming a Government non-executive director rather slim, but my question to the Minister today is this: how many non-executive directors currently in post on those Government Department boards to scrutinise Ministers were appointed by Ministers? Will the Minister commit to overhauling that current system for appointing non-executive directors, so that these roles stop just being cushy jobs for friends of Ministers who are being paid over £1,000 a day each of taxpayers' money?

Julia Lopez: I can speak for the Cabinet Office non-executive directors. We have a fantastic team that is drawn from across party political affiliations. She will be aware that we have Baroness Stuart, who is a former Labour Member. We also have people with no political affiliation whatever, including people such as Anand Aithal. We have Henry de Zoete, and we have Lord Hogan-Howe, who is a former Metropolitan Police Commissioner. They were appointed because of their merit, not because of their party political affiliation.

Fleur Anderson: I think that made my point for me, thank you.

Last month, an information tribunal said that there is "a profound lack of transparency about the operation" of the freedom of information clearing house. Can the Minister confirm categorically that every single freedom of information request received has been treated in exactly the same way, with no different approach for certain journalists or campaigners?

Julia Lopez: I can confirm that we treat those information requests on a case-by-case basis, and the background of who is asking is not a criterion for how we treat that request.

CCTV Cameras: Ministerial Offices

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Which Minister is responsible for authorising the installation of CCTV cameras in ministerial offices; and who receives notification of the installation of those cameras. [902390]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The placement of security cameras in Departments is a matter for each individual Department.

Clive Efford: This issue came to light because of a bit of kiss and tell, and I am not really interested in that, but it does bring out the question of just exactly who has access to this sort of surveillance and the security of Government. When can we expect some sort of a response from the Government to explain just exactly what has been going on?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman raises an important and serious issue. The permanent secretary at the Cabinet Office and the head of the Government Security Group are looking at precisely this question because, as the hon. Gentleman quite rightly points out, it has a bearing on the security of Government business, and indeed on the possibility of malicious actors, abroad or elsewhere, who may wish to use information garnered in that way to work against the interests of all our citizens.

Civil Contingency Plans: Preparedness for a Future Pandemic

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the (a) adequacy of the Government's civil contingency plans and (b) preparedness for a potential future pandemic. [902392]

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): We regularly assess contingency plans and preparedness for major risks, including pandemics. In December 2020, we updated the national risk register to include new risks. We are currently reviewing the Government's national risk assessment methodology with external partners ahead of refreshing the internal national security risk assessment early next year.

Ellie Reeves [V]: Exercise Cygnus, carried out in 2016, found:

"The UK's preparedness and response, in terms of its plans, policies and capability, is currently not sufficient to cope with the extreme demands of a severe pandemic".

Key recommendations from the exercise on surge capacity, school closures and protecting care homes were not acted on, which ultimately led to the Government's chaotic handling of covid-19. Given that the warning signs had been identified in this report, why did the Government handle the pandemic so woefully, and what is being done now to prevent this from ever happening again?

Penny Mordaunt: The flaw with Exercise Cygnus was with regard to the risk methodology that sat behind it, and I have given evidence to a number of Select Committees on that basis. The hon. Member will know that we have rectified that now by changing the methodology, so rather than just focus on high-risk situations that would have an incredible detrimental impact and are likely to happen, we also look at situations that would have such an impact but are less likely to happen. It is not just pandemics we have to prepare for; it is a whole raft of possible events. I think that methodology and the new risk register put us in a much stronger position.

Discussions with the Welsh Government: Ministerial Responsibility

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Welsh Government on matters within his ministerial responsibility. [902394]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): Cabinet Office Ministers regularly engage with the Welsh Government and all the devolved Administrations as part of the Government's continued collaborative working arrangements. I have had recent discussions with Welsh Government

Ministers on subjects such as covid-19, the G7 summit and, of course, elections. Since 2021, all ministerial engagements between the Governments of the United Kingdom are published in quarterly reports.

Alun Cairns [V]: The Welsh Government recently proposed the most radical constitutional change for the whole of the United Kingdom, seeking to change our Union of four nations to a federal structure. Can my right hon. Friend tell me whether he was part of those discussions in any way, in view of the impact they would have for every part of the United Kingdom? Does he share my dismay that the Welsh Government are focusing on constitutional change during a covid pandemic when our focus must be on recovering healthcare, improving education standards and creating jobs? Does he agree that our Union of four nations and constitutional stability offer the best prospect of delivering those outcomes?

Michael Gove: Yes, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have the highest regard for the First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford, and I enjoy working with him. I do not doubt his commitment to public service, but we do disagree on this question. I think my right hon. Friend is absolutely right that the Welsh Government's focus, as the UK Government's focus is, should be wholly on the covid crisis and on economic recovery at this time.

Road Map out of Lockdown: the Immunosuppressed

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on the potential implications of the road map out of lockdown for people who are immunosuppressed. [902395]

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): The Department continues to work with the Health Secretary on these issues. When we set out the details of step 4 regarding those who are immunosuppressed, there will be new guidance that GPs will be able to use when working with those patients.

Duncan Baker: My constituent Sue Gresham is a tireless campaigner for all those who are immunosuppressed, and she has raised this many times. It was highlighted just last week that those with blood cancer feel there is little information being given about the efficacy of the vaccine being lower for the immunosuppressed. It would be very reassuring if my right hon. Friend could tell me that the Government will write urgently to everyone in the UK whose medical condition requires immunosuppression to advise that they may not be protected and what precautions they can take themselves as we unlock.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend's constituent for all the work she has done on these matters. I can say to my hon. Friend that we are in a much better position because of the work that we have previously done on shielding and gathering data on people who might need further protections. In addition to the new guidance I announced for GPs, there is obviously work going on with the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, particularly focused on that group to ensure that they are a priority for receiving booster injections.

Civil Service: Jobs Outside London

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to deliver civil service jobs outside London. [902396]

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): What plans he has to move departmental civil service roles outside central London. [902398]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The Government are committed to relocating 22,000 civil service roles from London by the end of the decade. Our “Places for Growth” portfolio is a vehicle to ensure that between now and 2030 the civil service becomes better connected with the people and communities it serves. A number of Departments have already made announcements about relocation, and further announcements will be made in due course.

Peter Gibson [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Whether because of the 750 civil service jobs in the Treasury, the 500 senior civil servants from the Department for International Trade or the 100 Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy officials, the Westminster-on-Tees new economic campus is set to be a busy place. Does he agree that moving civil service jobs outside London is vital to ensuring that communities across the country are reflected in national policy decisions?

Michael Gove: “100%”, as they say on “Love Island”. My hon. Friend is completely right. We must ensure that we make use of the fantastic local talent that there is in the north-east and County Durham so that people whose voices have not been heard loudly enough in the corridors of power are properly represented.

Mr Holden: I welcome the moves to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson), but the new joint administration just up the road in County Durham has been left high and dry with a £50 million county hall bequeathed to it by the previous Labour administration. To prevent it from becoming an enormous white elephant—a totem to Labour’s hubris in its administration of County Durham for over 100 years—will my right hon. Friend commit to working with the new joint administration in Durham County Council to explore all the possibilities that this new facility might have?

Michael Gove: I absolutely will. It is horrific that so much public money has been misused by the former Labour administration in Durham County Council and that the people of that county have been so poorly served. I will of course absolutely investigate that, but I should say that if it was a choice between Durham and Consett for the relocation of Government jobs, I would choose Consett every time.

Small Business: Government Contracts

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase opportunities for small businesses to bid for Government contracts. [902400]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez) [V]: The UK spends £290 billion on public procurement each year. Now that we have left the EU transition period we want to make it simpler, quicker and cheaper for small and medium-sized enterprises and social enterprises to bid for Government contracts, as set out in our ambitious procurement Green Paper. We have already introduced a policy that will allow below-threshold contracts to be reserved for smaller UK suppliers, and we hope that our new approach to social value will secure wider public benefit, allowing us to contract with firms that deliver more apprenticeships, local growth opportunities and environmental benefits.

Henry Smith [V]: Many companies in Crawley and across the UK have been forced to adapt because of the covid-19 pandemic. Does my hon. Friend agree that they should have greater opportunity and access to bidding for Government contracts over outside competition?

Julia Lopez: I agree with my hon. Friend. We want a much greater variety of companies, including those in Crawley, to deliver Government contracts from every corner of our country, not just because it benefits local economies and communities but because it helps us to diversify our risk, create a more resilient supply base and deliver some of our critical priorities. We are going to be requiring contracts to be divided into smaller lots, publishing contract pipelines more transparently, and improving our guidance to small businesses that are looking to bid.

Voter ID: Levels of Enfranchisement

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect of the introduction of voter ID on levels of enfranchisement. [902407]

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect of the introduction of voter ID on levels of enfranchisement. [902409]

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): Voter fraud is a crime that we cannot allow room for, and we must stamp out any potential for it to take place in elections. Strengthening the integrity of our system will give the public confidence that our elections remain secure well into the future, and everybody who is eligible to vote will be able to continue doing so.

Rachel Hopkins [V]: At the last general election, 14 million people who registered to vote did not do so, and the Electoral Commission estimates that 9 million eligible citizens were not registered to vote. Do the Government believe that higher turnouts of eligible voters in elections is a good sign for democracy? If so, why are Ministers putting their energy into making voting harder by introducing voter ID?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I do agree that turnout is incredibly important—and what is more, this policy will not affect it. The evidence of that is in the record from Northern Ireland, which Labour Members appear to be forgetting. The measures will tackle electoral abuse effectively without disadvantaging honest voters. The Government have no intention of taking away people’s democratic right to vote. Mr Speaker,

“If we believed that thousands of voters would not be able to vote because of this measure, we would not be introducing it at this time.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 1 April 2003; Vol. 646, c. 1248.]

Those are not my words but those of a Labour Minister in 2003, introducing photo ID in Northern Ireland.

Rosie Cooper [V]: If the Minister, in spite of all the data, is determined that our elections would be made more secure by voter ID, does she not accept that the Government should provide ID free to all citizens of voting age, or is she quite content to price some people out of democracy?

Chloe Smith: The hon. Lady is a long-standing Member of this House and I am looking forward to debating with her enormously, but she simply has not read the papers. What she proposes is exactly what we are doing. I would like to make it absolutely clear here at the Dispatch Box that there will be a free local voter card. It will be free, it will be local, and it make sure that anybody who does not have photographic identification can still vote. I welcome that.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab) [V]: The Minister has previously advised me and the House that polling staff will be given appropriate training on checking photo IDs of individuals who wear headscarves or face coverings. Although the Government have apparently guaranteed the use of privacy screens at polling stations to facilitate private ID checks, many voters will not feel comfortable at the prospect of having to show their face or hair to a polling clerk of the opposite sex, and indeed may not vote. Will the Minister confirm whether her plans include provisions to ensure that there are both male and female staff all day at every one of the 35,500 polling stations across the country, to ensure that voters are not placed in an inappropriate position? How much would she expect that to cost?

Chloe Smith: The hon. Lady picks up on a very important point. We intend to do this properly. We are making sure that there is the right provision of training in polling stations, as she has already acknowledged, and with that, the right provision of communication to help voters be aware of this very reasonable and proportionate new requirement. All that is detailed in the documents that we put before the House this week. I look forward to debates on this subject, because we are being very honest and straightforward in our approach. We have put the documents there, we have done the research, we have done the pilots, we have done the modelling, we have done the evaluation and we have done the equality impact assessment. All that together will show how this policy is the right thing to do, and the elections integrity Bill protects our democracy, keeping it secure, modern, fair and transparent, as we would all expect it to be.

Covid-19: Ministerial Correspondence

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): If he will take steps to ensure that all ministerial correspondence relating to the Government's response to the covid-19 pandemic is made available to the forthcoming public inquiry. [902411]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): As the Prime Minister has already confirmed, the public inquiry into covid-19 will be established under the Inquiries Act 2005, with formal powers to compel the production of relevant material and to take evidence in public under oath. The Government will, of course, co-operate with the inquiry fully.

Andrew Gwynne [V]: Can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster confirm whether using private email accounts to discuss sensitive Government business is in breach of the Freedom of Information Act, the Official Secrets Act, the Data Protection Act or the Public Records Act, which make requirements on the use of Government information? Will he guarantee today that all Ministers' private email accounts will be available to the public inquiry into the Government's mishandling of the covid pandemic?

Michael Gove: Any information that the inquiry needs, it will receive.

Verify Scheme

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of the (a) viability and (b) value for money of the Verify scheme. [902412]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez) [V]: Verify continues to work well and it supports 18 services. More than 8 million Verify accounts have been created, with over 2.6 million added since the start of the pandemic as citizens access critical online services. Building on the lessons and experience of Verify, and as we announced in last year's spending review, the Government Digital Service is collaborating with other Departments to develop a new login and identity assurance system that will make it much easier for more people to use online services safely. While the new system is being developed, users and connected services will continue to rely on gov.uk Verify, so that means that the Government have decided to extend the current service until April 2022.

Daniel Zeichner: It has actually been a shambles—a huge waste of public money, an absolute Conservative failure. In the light of the recent report from the so-called regulatory reform taskforce sponsored by No. 10, which recommends reducing the protections for citizens under the GDPR, will the Minister assure the House that there will be no use of personal data for any purpose other than that which it has been explicitly given?

Julia Lopez: How we use citizens' data is going to be absolutely critical to building trust in the new system that we are building. That new system will reuse parts of Verify, but we must have an open conversation about what we will do to protect people's data. There will not be any data lakes, for instance, and we will be building a new Government data exchange that will look at these areas very carefully, because, as I say, any new system has to be based on trust between Government and citizen, and that will be key to its success.

Ministerial Code: Enforcement

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): If he will take steps to help ensure the enforcement of the ministerial code. [902418]

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): Ministers are personally responsible for deciding how to act and conduct themselves in the light of the code, and for justifying their actions and conduct to Parliament and the public. The Prime Minister is the ultimate judge of the standards required and the appropriate consequences of a breach of those standards.

Mary Glendon: Sadly, the Government have shown time and again that they cannot be trusted to work within the system as it stands. Will the Government commit to placing the ministerial code on a statutory footing and give the adviser on Ministers' interests powers to instigate his own investigations?

Chloe Smith: We think it is the right thing, in the context of our constitution, that the ministerial code and its enforcement and expectations sit with the Prime Minister, because he is, appropriately, the appointer of the Executive and is accountable to the sovereign for that. That is the constitutional set-up that we are talking about, so we think it is the right thing for the code to reflect that and therefore not be based on a statutory system. I add that the Prime Minister appointed Lord Geidt recently as the independent adviser on Ministers' interests and spoke with him about the second point that the hon. Lady raised—whether there might be initiation for that adviser. The Prime Minister has set out his response to the recommendation that there might be the ability to advise the PM on the initiation of investigations.

Topical Questions

[902355] **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): My Department, along with the Leader of the House, has been reviewing the English votes for English laws procedure. The procedure has been suspended since April 2020 and, having reflected on the procedure, the Government believe that it has not served our Parliament well and that removing it would simplify the legislative process. It is a fundamental principle that all constituent parts of the United Kingdom should be equally represented in Parliament. Any changes, of course, would be for the House to decide and we will bring forward a motion in due course.

Steve McCabe [V]: How would the right hon. Gentleman reassure a member of the public who thinks that a Minister using a personal mobile phone to conduct Government business is trying to evade scrutiny because they have something to hide?

Michael Gove: I would reassure them by saying that all Government business is transacted through civil service colleagues, and that in order to ensure that a single penny of taxpayers' money is spent, or that a single decision is taken, that might infringe, or enhance anyone's liberty, it has to go through the process of review, legislation and action, which civil servants and Ministers do together in a way that is always clear, transparent and publicly accountable.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): In the inquiry by the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs into the collapse of Greensill

Capital, many of our witnesses so far have prayed in aid the advice given to them by Sue Gray, who at the time was director general for propriety and ethics at the Cabinet Office. She was invited to attend our Committee on Tuesday; her office initially accepted that invitation, but I am told that she has now declined it on the advice of those more senior at the Cabinet Office. It is vital that the Committee be able to hear from Ms Gray, given that she was mentioned so many times by others. May I therefore ask my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to ensure that she will attend on Tuesday as planned?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend chairs the Committee brilliantly, but there are rules—the Osmotherly rules. They stress that serving civil servants act only in accordance with the wishes of Ministers and therefore it is rarely appropriate for them to appear to be questioned in the way that my hon. Friend would like. So I am ready, willing and able to appear in front of the Committee, but it is my view that it would be inappropriate for a serving civil servant to appear in the way that my hon. Friend requests.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Football is indeed coming home, but I also think that the chickens are coming home to roost for this Government. The Government's spokesperson said last week that "there was no high priority lane for testing suppliers...and there was no separate 'fast track process'".

Can the Minister for the Cabinet Office tell me what exactly the role was of the consultant to the testing procurement programme who described his role as "to lead VIP stakeholder engagement with...Lord...Bethell", who is still somehow a Minister. If there is no fast track, why did the right hon. Gentleman's own procurement director order officials to mark bids that came from Ministers' email addresses as "fast track"?

Michael Gove: There were lots of interesting questions there. The first thing that I should say is that Lord Bethell is doing a fantastic job in the Department of Health and Social Care. I think that it is quite wrong for the right hon. Lady to cast aspersions on his dedicated public service and the work that he has done as Minister for Innovation.

The second thing that I should say is that every single procurement decision went through an eight-stage process in order to ensure that every single piece of personal protective equipment, or everything—[*Interruption.*] Useful commentary there from the Alan Hansen of politics, but the truth is that actually we have always been in compliance with the rules, unlike the Scottish Government. Audit Scotland has pointed out to the Scottish Government that they need to do better, and indeed they must.

Angela Rayner: I listened to the Minister's answer, and I can tell him that Lord Bethell is no Sterling. The Prime Minister's official spokesperson stated last week that no Ministers had used private emails to conduct Government business. Surely the Minister now accepts that that is untrue. Will he tell us when the Prime Minister will correct the record?

I listened to the Minister's response to my hon. Friends the Members for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe).

We have already submitted freedom of information requests to seek the publication of emails, but will the Minister agree now to publish every such email about Government contracts? Can he make a guarantee to the House today for bereaved families—including my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), who made a very passionate speech at Prime Minister's questions yesterday—that every single one of those emails is secured for the public inquiry?

Michael Gove: The right hon. Lady quite rightly refers to the very powerful question from the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), and I think all of us deeply sympathise with the family loss that he has had to endure, as so many others have had to. It is precisely because we take these things seriously that we took steps to ensure that we could source personal protective equipment as quickly as possible. Of course, we did so in a way that was entirely consistent with good procurement practice. We used the measures that were used by the Labour Government in Wales and by the SNP Government in Scotland to ensure that we could get things to the frontline as effectively as possible and in accordance with fair procedure.

[902358] **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): I was pleased to see the Elections Bill introduced to the House earlier this week. Like many of those who voted in 2016 to leave the European Union, I was concerned by the actions taken by the Electoral Commission following the referendum and the malicious way in which it treated individuals, completely casting into doubt its impartiality. Does my right hon. Friend share those concerns? Will he outline how the reforms in the Bill will seek to address them?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we reflect on how public-spirited individuals such as Alan Halsall and Darren Grimes were treated, I think it was quite right for the new head of the Electoral Commission to issue an apology. The Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission is a means by which parties across this House can ensure that the Electoral Commission does its important job, and the Elections Bill will ensure that the Speaker's Committee and others play an important role in making sure that the Electoral Commission does its job properly.

[902356] **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab) [V]: I have heard from a number of HGV drivers in Newport West who are deeply concerned about the shortage of drivers and the impact this shortage is having on the movement of food and goods from Europe to the UK. The Government have now announced that they will extend the driving rules from 12 July, which will mean overworked drivers working even longer hours and getting more tired, which is no help at all. What discussions has the Minister had with our European neighbours and his colleagues across Government about how to get this serious driver shortage sorted?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady raises an important question. Action is being taken by the Transport Secretary, and the issue was discussed earlier this week at Cabinet. I am also working with Lord Frost to ensure that we can have free-flowing freight and that we get the goods that we need to consumers in a timely fashion.

[902360] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con) [V]: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, alongside civil service reform in terms of places and personnel, digital and data reforms are also at the heart of the Government's agenda to drive real improvement and deliver on the Government's priorities, which will transform our communities?

Michael Gove: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely correct. In a former life he was a distinguished leader of West Sussex County Council and, as such, he knows how important it is to the delivery of public services to ensure that one has appropriate metrics, one shares data and that one uses digital innovation to improve service delivery. I look forward to working with him to improve Government delivery in just that way.

[902357] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): A simple question: can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster tell us how many Government Ministers have been using personal email addresses for Government business?

Michael Gove: It is not my job to monitor the personal emails of all my colleagues. If I did, I suspect—*[Interruption.]* Well, it might be quite interesting, actually; quite entertaining. The key thing is you cannot conduct Government business from private email to private email. The only way you can conduct Government business is through civil servants.

[902362] **Paul Howell** (Sedgefield) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that that relocation of Government Departments is a key part of levelling up? Could I ask him to encourage his friends in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to consider placing the Advanced Research and Invention Agency in the new county hall being built in Durham, which the new administration are reviewing the options for, as stated by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) earlier? This could be the perfect location, linking Durham University and the innovative businesses on NETPark in Sedgefield. Doing this could encourage the local team to share more of their staff around places such as Bishop Auckland, Consett, Crook, Newton Aycliffe and, of course, Sedgefield.

Michael Gove: And indeed Peterlee. My hon. Friend makes a very important point. As we heard earlier from my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham, it is a pity that the Labour administration in County Durham have squandered County Durham taxpayers' money in the way that they have, but the point that my hon. Friend makes about the Advanced Research and Invention Agency's potential location in the north-east and in Durham is a very good one, and I will discuss it with the Business Secretary.

[902359] **Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab) [V]: The Government tell us that voter ID will secure our elections against apparently rampant voter fraud. That is a worrying claim indeed, so as a matter of urgency will the Minister provide the Government's data on how many ballots have been confirmed to have been fraudulently cast in recent elections?

Michael Gove: We are only following what the Labour party does. It was the Labour party that introduced the requirement for voter ID in Northern Ireland, as the Minister for the Constitution and Devolution, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith)

pointed out earlier. It is also the case that one can vote in internal Labour elections only by using voter ID. I do not know whether there is an internal Labour election coming up soon. The shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), will be better informed on that question than me—[*Interruption.*] Sorry! Anyway, to vote in a Labour election, you need voter ID.

[902364] **Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend and his colleagues are all passionate feminists, and I am sure that he would agree that it is difficult to justify the fact that an eighth of the seats in the upper House are reserved effectively for men, because of the laws of primogeniture and the hereditary peers. Does he have plans to reform that anomaly?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We do not currently have plans to do that, but she makes a fair point. As everyone knows, for the remaining hereditary peerages in the House of Lords, when an hereditary peer in any one of the party or Cross-Bench groups passes away, there is a by-election among those who are eligible, but at the moment in nearly every case the franchise and candidacy is restricted to men. That is something we should definitely look at.

[902361] **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: With many lacking ID, the Government's voter ID plans are set to systematically exclude Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people. Why are Ministers, instead of working to improve accessibility, putting their energy into creating barriers to voting for this already marginalised community?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady raises an important point. There is much that we need to do to ensure the more effective inclusion in civic life of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller individuals. First, we must start with making sure that they receive a higher quality of education than is currently the case. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are among those with the worst educational outcomes and we need to address that in order to make sure that they play their full part in public life. But there is absolutely no evidence that the requirement for voter ID will do anything to discriminate against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller individuals.

[902367] **Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con) [V]: On his recent visit to Scotland the Minister will probably have heard concerns that the Scottish Government have not made full use of the additional funding provided by the UK Government to support businesses, individuals and communities through this pandemic. Will he outline what mechanisms are available to the UK Government to ensure that the Scottish Government make full use of the support available?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. When I was in the north-east and the Western Isles recently, I heard individuals and businesses crying out for economic support. When I explained that the UK Government had given significant sums to the Scottish Government in the covid crisis to deal with the emergency, the question was, "How has it been spent?" Because there has been no accountability and

no transparency on the part of the Scottish Government. We have no idea how that money has been spent and the Scottish Parliament does not yet have the powers necessary to get that information. However, Her Majesty's Treasury can ask tough questions and require information to be shared, and unless the Scottish Government are more transparent, I will have to consider how I can work with Ministers and with my hon. Friend to make sure that Scottish taxpayers know where their money has gone.

[902380] **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba) [V]: Polled public attitudes towards the Union may be hidden, but the private attitude of the Prime Minister to devolution is clearly known and is hostile, as shown by his former senior adviser Dominic Cummings. Does that not confirm that the choice for Scotland is between an integrating Union under the Tories and independence?

Michael Gove: No. This Government are committed to devolution. Like the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats, we believe in a United Kingdom that gets the best of both worlds: a strong Westminster Government working with strong devolved institutions. Of course, I recognise that, in the spirit of providing the Scottish people with a choice, the hon. Gentleman decided to leave the Scottish National party in order to set up, with Mr Salmond, the Alba party. One reason he did so is that he believed that the Scottish Government were doing a poor job, that they were not making the case effectively for independence and, indeed, that the way in which they were discharging their responsibilities actually corroded the case for independence. On the final point, the hon. Gentleman and I are as one.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster outline what collective approach has been taken by BEIS and the Cabinet Office to address some of the issues affecting small businesses with regard to the import of hundreds of products to Northern Ireland? I know that he has a particular interest in this issue. Businesses are being prevented from trading normally, as things were pre-31 December 2020; they are under stress and it has reduced their income. Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster agree to grant funding for a loss of income, as business have been impacted through no fault of their own?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. As a result of the particular interpretation of the Northern Ireland protocol on which some in the European Commission have insisted, businesses in Strangford and elsewhere have faced additional costs. We have already devoted money through the trader support service and other means to support businesses, but I will talk to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Treasury and Lord Frost to see what we can do to ensure that businesses in Strangford and elsewhere in Northern Ireland are not further disadvantaged.

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

10.24 am

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

Mr Speaker: Obviously, many Members will want to congratulate the great team last night—England. We look forward to Sunday, and we wish them well. Let us now start business questions. I call Thangam Debbonaire.

10.30 am

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 12 July will include:

MONDAY 12 JULY—Second Reading of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill.

TUESDAY 13 JULY—Remaining stages of the Armed Forces Bill, followed by a motion to approve the draft Health and Social Care Act 2008 (Regulated Activities) (Amendment) (Coronavirus) Regulations 2021, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to terrorism, followed by a motion relating to English votes for English laws, followed by a motion relating to the appointment of the chairman of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.

WEDNESDAY 14 JULY—Second Reading of the Health and Care Bill.

THURSDAY 15 JULY—Debate on a motion relating to the Northern Ireland protocol, followed by a debate on a motion relating to the Peking Winter Olympics and Chinese Government sanctions. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 16 JULY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 19 July will include:

MONDAY 19 JULY—Second Reading of the Nationality and Borders Bill (day 1).

TUESDAY 20 JULY—Conclusion of the Second Reading of the Nationality and Borders Bill (day 2).

WEDNESDAY 21 JULY—Second Reading of the Building Safety Bill.

THURSDAY 22 JULY—Debate on a motion relating to the fifth report of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee entitled “A public inquiry into the Government’s response to the covid-19 pandemic”, followed by matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee and the Liaison Committee.

At the conclusion of business on Thursday 22 July, the House will rise for the summer recess and return on Monday 6 September.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the business and look forward to our debate on ending all EVEL next week.

Gareth Southgate inspires his players to be the best they can be and to do it for their country. He backs them in their campaigning for social and racial justice, even under criticism. He instils relentless focus on hard work. He inspires them to be gracious in victory, as well as to learn from experience. He has rightly identified these values as patriotism. I would love us all to learn

from the Gareth Southgate model of patriotic leadership. We all congratulate England on their amazing success last night. We cheer them on for Sunday and, yes, it will probably be just my parents listening to me on “Westminster Hour” on Sunday evening. Caring about the world’s poorest is a British value. People’s support for an England team proud of its belief in social justice shows that that is true, so will the Government honour them and grant a proper debate and a vote on international aid-?

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con) Hear, hear.

Thangam Debbonaire: Thank you.

Caring about the NHS is a British value, and people showed that as they marked its birthday this week. Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) spoke movingly for so many who have had the pain of not being with a loved at the end of life because of covid rules. Will the Leader of the House ask the Health Secretary to reward the dedicated NHS and care staff, who stepped up for their country to care for people’s loved ones, with a pay rise that we know they deserve?

Building a better world for our children is also a British value. British people care deeply about protecting animals, nature and the planet. Yet despite recent warnings, such as the devastating heatwaves in the Pacific north-west, the Prime Minister’s 10-point plan to deal with climate change, announced seven months ago, appears to be just talk and is nowhere on the Order Paper or in the forthcoming business. He talked of home insulation, so when we will have a replacement for the Government’s failed green homes grant? He talked of his plan creating hundreds of thousands of jobs. How many jobs has it created so far? The Climate Change Committee says:

“This defining year for the UK’s climate credentials has been marred by uncertainty and delay”.

It warns:

“With every month of inaction, it is harder for the UK to get on track.”

The Leader of the House said a few years ago that he would rather his constituents had cheap energy than windmills. Is it possible that his failure to notice the value of wind energy is connected in any way to any investments that his company may or may not have in fossil fuels? Does he understand that an ambitious heat and building strategy, which was due last year, would make his constituents’ homes warmer and cheaper? The committee said:

“Only five of 34 sectors assessed have shown notable progress in the past two years, and no sector is yet scoring highly”,

and that we should be

“learning from the COVID-19 response.”

That Government said to the Environmental Audit Committee that they want to do that, but how can they do it if they refuse even to examine the covid-19 response? When will the British public get our public inquiry?

Shining leadership is another proud British value exemplified by Gareth Southgate. The UK will be in a unique position this year when world leaders come to Glasgow to discuss climate change. We have the chance to shine. If the UK showcases strong policies to cut emissions and improve lives, it could set the standard globally, but if the Government are unable to follow through on their own commitments, they are letting us down and other countries may falter.

Fairness is also a defining British value. There is a motion from Labour on the Order Paper to sort out the unfair loophole that allows the MP found to have sexually harassed staff to avoid recall from his constituents. Everyone knows this needs sorting. I know the news is reporting that he has been warned to stay away, but there is nothing to stop him returning and staff have concerns. Things can be done retrospectively and quickly when the Government want, as they showed this week with the Building Safety Bill and the regulations for late pub licensing, so why should the people of Delyn be denied their right to the value of democracy because of a technicality that we know we will fix?

As I said last week, the Prime Minister consistently does not do his homework. Yesterday, he could not answer vital questions from the Leader of the Opposition and later at the Liaison Committee about critical covid data. Will the Leader of the House ask the Prime Minister to be frank with the British public and show his working for such life-changing decisions?

In contrast to the Prime Minister, Gareth Southgate and the England team value hard work, discipline and preparation, and the British people seem to appreciate those qualities. For the sake of our country and the wonderful people who live and work here, I hope the Prime Minister spends some time over the next few days studying at the Gareth Southgate school of leadership. The British people will be asking themselves who they want to lead them. Do they want someone who works hard and has a relentless focus on embodying British values, or do they want the current Prime Minister? I know what I think, and I am pretty sure the British people will be telling us that soon.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Everyone, I think, is rejoicing at the football success. I think the line to take is from Mr Barnes:

“You’ve got to hold and give

But do it at the right time

You can be slow or fast

But you must get to the line”.

May I reassure you, Mr Speaker, that

“We ain’t no hooligans

This ain’t a football song

Three lions on my chest

I know we can’t go wrong”?

As another John—John Dryden—put it:

“For they conquer who believe they can.”

I think, for the record, that Dryden was translating Virgil in those comments, but the point is exactly the same: it is indeed the excellent leadership of Mr Southgate that led to such a good triumph yesterday against Denmark. Let us hope for the same on Sunday. I say to right hon. and hon. Members that they can always listen to the “Westminster Hour” on playback, and they can enjoy listening to the hon. Lady’s dulcet tones on that unmissable and particularly well-hosted programme.

Let me come to the hon. Lady’s points. I think everyone was impressed and moved by what the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) said yesterday. It was a very powerful intervention, and it is what the nation has endured for the past 15 months. It is a reminder of why it has been endured: it was to protect lives. Fortunately, the vaccine is now protecting lives, which allows us to

reopen, but that does not begin to lift the sorrow from the families who have been affected, and the hon. Gentleman was right to raise that in the House yesterday.

The NHS is recognised across the country, and the award of the George Cross was a symbolic recognition of that. Of course, pay is a difficult issue because we have spent as a nation £407 billion on protecting the economy, so it is about trying to ensure that the recognition is there within the resources that we have as a country and the amount that taxpayers have.

The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) mentioned the Government’s efforts on the environment. The Environment Bill is still in the House of Lords. The Bill was passed in the Commons and carried over into this Session in the Lords, where every line and detail are now being debated—their lordships were debating it last night, I think, while others were watching the football; carrying on diligently, doing their bit for the nation. The Bill, which will come back to us, is a really important piece of legislation that will have a fundamental effect in helping us to meet our commitment to net zero.

The Government can be very proud of what we have done so far. The hon. Lady quoted me as saying a few years ago that I wanted cheap energy rather than windmills, but now we are getting both, which is much better. That is a huge success for the British people. Since 1990, we have driven down emissions by 44%—the fastest reduction of any G7 country—and grown our economy by 78%. What we want is economic growth and cleaner growth. What we do not want is to trash the economy and live in a cave. We want prosperity for the British people, and that is what we are getting. The hon. Lady says she wants environmentally friendly jobs, and so do I, and we are getting them, from Nissan and Vauxhall, because we are doing it successfully and in an economically intelligent way.

The Prime Minister has set out a 10-point plan on how we achieve net zero, how we ensure that the economy grows and how we become more environmentally friendly. Point 2 of the plan is on the opportunities of hydrogen, to allow clean energy with water the only emission. That is fantastic, because then we can all get back into our motorcars, as what comes out the end will be clean. It will be good for the motorist and good for the environment, and I think that is very exciting.

As regards the inquiry into covid, that has been promised by the end of the Session, as the Prime Minister has made clear. We are actually having a debate on a report produced by one of our most distinguished Select Committees, announced in Backbench Business time, before the summer recess.

As regards fairness and the Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts), I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the motion that she has tabled. The first two thirds of it, of course, are the motion that I asked to be shared with her for discussion at the House of Commons Commission, and of course for discussion with the employees of the House and Sir Stephen Irwin. It is very important that this is done on a consensual basis, and I think that the motion is a helpful contribution to the debate.

Of course, it is open to the Opposition to bring forward their motion on an Opposition day. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady says that they have not had one, but they have actually had three or four Opposition days since this issue arose. They decide to bring forward the motion

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

at the point at which they are waiting for one, but they will get more, as there is a commitment to Opposition days in the Standing Orders. I think it is a helpful contribution to the debate. It is very important to maintain the independence of the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme, but the motion put forward originated with the Clerks of this House and is a useful contribution to the debate.

As regards the PM and statistics, some of us will recall a former Prime Minister who used to reel off statistics from this great Dispatch Box—it was not then covered with Perspex—so let me model myself on that great lady and remind the hon. Lady of some of the statistics on what has happened over the past year: £407 billion of taxpayers' money supporting the economy, families and businesses; 14.5 million jobs and people helped through the furlough and self-employment schemes, at a cost of £91.1 billion to the taxpayer; protecting the most vulnerable with £8 billion for the welfare system; protecting thousands of businesses with over £100 billion of support; extending the furlough and self-employment schemes until the end of September; restart grants of up to £18,000 for retain, hospitality, leisure and personal care businesses. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady just sits there chuntering, because she does not want to hear the facts, and the facts are that the figures stack up and the Government have done an amazing amount to keep the economy going.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Is it not wonderful that the entire country is today talking about football, and not about covid or Brexit? My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is a great and distinguished democrat, and a stalwart supporter of the rights of this House and of Parliament, so can he explain why, having announced the business today, he is sending the House off for the summer recess without a vote on the 0.7% commitment? For how much longer will he continue to disrespect this House and run away from a vote on the matter, and to disobey your specific injunction, Mr Speaker, at 3.30 pm on Monday 14 June?

Mr Speaker: I would just say that nobody has said we are not having a vote yet.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Mr Speaker, it is even better than that. We had an opportunity for a vote, which my right hon. Friend passed up. He is a very experienced parliamentarian. He has been here much longer than I have. He is well aware that estimates are in fact the foundation of the power of the House of Commons to approve the expenditure of the Government. Estimates are votable. The failure to pass an estimate would have been a major problem for the Government, who would have had to bring back a new estimate. The fact that my right hon. Friend has not studied Erskine May carefully enough, and has therefore missed his opportunity, is not my problem but his.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It would be churlish not to recognise the great sporting success of the last 24 hours. I am sure the whole House would like to congratulate Surrey on finishing seven not out to deny Hampshire victory—I am sure that is much more up the Leader of the House's street.

Football may or may not be coming home in the next few days, but I will certainly be going home when business questions concludes. There is one place where there has been a massive defeat, and that is on the Government's English votes for English laws procedure. We will finally bury that appalling, time-wasting mess next week. I do not know whether it was dividing the membership of this House into two different and distinct classes of Member or the ridiculous attempts to have some sort of quasi-English Parliament squat here in the national Parliament of Great Britain and Northern Ireland that convinced the Government to back down, but it is a massive victory for the Scottish National party; our campaign of ridicule and disparagement of the whole nonsense has won. We do not often get victories in this place, but we will be celebrating next Tuesday.

I support the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). The House simply must have the opportunity to vote on this Government's overseas aid cuts before the recess. All that rubbish about estimates is not good enough. It has to be a dedicated vote. It is not often that Members of Opposition parties say that the Government must uphold their manifesto commitments, but that is what they must do, and we must have that vote before the recess.

We rise in a couple of weeks, and all the provisions for virtual participation and proxy voting will fall. Infections and hospitalisations are rising exponentially with the Johnson variant, and we do not know where we will be in September. What provision will the Leader of the House put in place for if this House needs to review its arrangements and requires some of the facilities that we have come to rely on over the past year?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is always a pleasure to hear from the hon. Gentleman when he is not feeling churlish. I hate to think what he would sound like when he is feeling churlish.

As regards plans for this House, such plans can always be made swiftly if necessary. On EVEL, I am delighted to suggest it is a victory for the SNP, but is also a victory for people of my way of thinking about our constitution. This is important—within this House, we are the Parliament of the whole of the United Kingdom. That is why on occasions, though not as a general practice of course, laws will be passed without legislative consent motions, as with powers that came back from the European Union—in the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, for example—where the Scottish Parliament was not willing to agree legislative consent motions. That is part of an overall package of the restoration of powers to the United Kingdom Parliament from the European Union, and we are the nation's Parliament. I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman recognises that.

As regards the 0.7%, I point out that we remain one of the world's largest donors at 0.5%. That is an impost on British taxpayers, and it is Her Majesty's Government being charitable on behalf of British taxpayers. I will go back to my constitutional lecture, because I think people are simply failing to understand the importance of estimates, which are fundamental to the powers of this House. The ability to approve expenditure is what historically gave this House its power over the Executive, and the ability to vote down an estimate is one that is

rarely used because of its very profound consequence. What I ask the House and those who support the hon. Gentleman is, if they feel as strongly about the issue as they say, why did they not use the tool available to them?

Let me go into this in a little more detail. Had the estimate been voted down, the Foreign Office and overseas aid would have run out of money after the initial estimate, which was done earlier in the year, had expired. A proportionate amount of money is agreed before the beginning of the financial year and would then run out if the final estimate were not to be approved. In that event, the Government have to come forward with a new estimate and it would have to be an estimate that they thought they could get through the House. As a matter of simple constitutional fact, had the House chosen to vote on the estimates, it would have left the Government in a position where they would have had to bring forward a new motion for overseas aid expenditure in the Foreign Office. Otherwise, all our embassies would have run out of money. They would not have been able to pay their water bills. It is a failure of those who stand up and chunter about this not to use the tools to hand. It is really not my fault if they have not studied “Erskine May” carefully enough.

Mr Speaker: I think we might just get a passage from “Erskine May” now—I call David Davis.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): My right hon. Friend recommended reading “Erskine May”. I happen to have the 25th edition of “Erskine May” with me. Of course, what it makes clear is quite how difficult it is to amend an estimate, so much so that the last time that one was successfully amended was one century ago; he may remember—it was 1921. It makes it very clear that the Crown’s prerogative on the monopoly of financial initiative means that the only thing we can do in this House, unless the Crown acts differently, is to cut the bill, not increase it.

My right hon. Friend’s argument to the House is that we should do away with all the aid in order to get more aid. I am not quite sure that the public—or, indeed, the ambassadors, with their redundancy notices—would have quite understood that. It is rather sad that the Government are playing such games with this very, very important issue.

My right hon. Friend is a kindly man and he will know that, unlike most of the debates he is asked for, every day that goes by without this debate means that more people go without aid, particularly in places such as Yemen, where there is a famine right now. In the words of the United Nations Secretary-General, the ex-Prime Minister of Portugal, António Guterres, under famine conditions

“cutting aid is a death sentence.”

Can we please have this debate as soon as possible, so that we can change the Government’s policy for the better?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The problem with pre-prepared questions is that they miss out what has been said before, so I will reiterate it: had the estimate been voted down, not amended—I did not mention amending—the Government would have had to come forward with a new estimate by early August, otherwise the money would run out. It is a very straightforward mechanism that my right hon. Friend failed to use. That is rather surprising, when he is

such an experienced parliamentarian. He has been in the House much longer than I have, as has my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell).

Our overseas aid budget must be what we as a nation can afford. We had our largest peacetime deficit in the last financial year because of the covid crisis. We cannot afford to be as generous as we once were, but we must ensure that the money we spend is spent as wisely as possible and on the alleviation of disasters, which is a fundamentally important part of our overseas aid budget.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: As always, I am grateful to be called, Mr Speaker. I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business up to the recess and for protecting the time for the Backbench Business Committee debate this afternoon. I hope that he can ensure that we have some time for Backbench Business debates in the first week back following the summer recess; we would be very grateful if he could facilitate that.

Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Transport prior to the summer recess about what his Department will be doing to address the huge shortage in heavy goods vehicle drivers in the road haulage industry? I have been contacted by representatives of the road haulage industry in my constituency of Gateshead who have really pressing concerns about the current situation and the implications for the industry and, more importantly, for the reopening of the economy over the next few months.

Mr Speaker, you might know that I chair the all-party parliamentary group for football supporters. Being a Newcastle United fan, I have come to expect nothing, so anything we get is a bonus, but congratulations to England; getting to the final is a great achievement. They are in the final—go on and win it.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I seem to remember that the late Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Hume, was a supporter of Newcastle as well, so I imagine there is some heavenly support for the hon. Gentleman’s team currently.

I hear the hon. Gentleman’s appeal for Backbench Business time. We always do our best, on behalf of the Government, to facilitate that. As regards the HGV driver shortage, the Government are aware of it and steps have been taken to implement several long-term solutions across Government, including the development of a large goods vehicle driver apprenticeship programme by the Department for Transport and the Department for Education aimed at addressing long-term driver skills shortages and improved labour supply. There is consideration of extending delivery hours, but the food industry is very well versed in dealing with delivery requirements and necessities. There is a statement from the Secretary of State for Transport coming up, but I think, Mr Speaker, you may get a bit worried if it goes from overseas travel on to—

Mr Speaker *indicated assent.*

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thought you would, yes.

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con) [V]: Returning to the issue of overseas aid and the target, is it not the case that the Government are doing one of

[Jeremy Wright]

two things? Either they are seeking to change that statutory target without parliamentary approval, in which case, although I would be the last person to ask the Government to disclose their own legal advice, they will have to explain why legal opinions that say that is unlawful are wrong, as I for one, do not believe they are; or alternatively, they are making use of provisions in the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015, which set that target in statute, that allow it to be missed in exceptional circumstances.

Those are two different things and I am not clear, from the pronouncements of various Ministers, which of the two is Government policy. Surely my right hon. Friend accepts that the House is entitled to absolute clarity on which of the two it is. If the Government are really proposing to change primary legislation, is it not incumbent on them to seek parliamentary support for that, rather than expect Parliament to use a device such as estimates in order to discuss it? If, on the other hand, the Government are missing the target but not changing it, then we need a statement to explore how compliance with the target will be restored.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. and learned Friend will be aware of the law that relates to the 0.7% target, which requires that at the end of the financial year where the target is missed a statement should be laid before Parliament. The law will be followed.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Leader of the House referred to distinguished Select Committees, but when the Future Relationship with the European Union Committee wrote to him about its untimely and premature demise, our plea fell on deaf ears. The same applies to international aid: not only no vote but no Committee. At a time when we have a diminishing percentage of a shrinking pot, surely scrutiny now is needed more than ever. Gaza is in ruins and we have a global pandemic. As a Back Bencher, the right hon. Gentleman was an assiduous Committee member. Can he prove that accountability still matters and that with his new lofty position the power has not just gone to his head?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The overseas aid Committee has been retained, so I am slightly puzzled that the hon. Lady thinks it has been abolished. It was kept, under its very distinguished Chairman. As regards the Brexit Select Committee, Brexit happened and therefore its purpose had come to an end. I am glad to say, however, that there is an excellent Committee that does its role—much better, actually, than the Brexit Committee ever did it—which is the European Scrutiny Committee, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash).

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): While I am absolutely delighted that football and the summer Adjournment debate are coming home, will my right hon. Friend please find time for a debate on what appears to be the inappropriate application of “do not resuscitate” orders by certain hospitals without the express consent of the patient and their loved ones. I do understand that during the height of the pandemic

those orders were made on an individual needs basis, but on such a sensitive subject everyone involved should be consulted.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. It is quite wrong for “do not attempt CPR” decisions to be applied in a blanket fashion to any group of people. Those decisions should be made only when the person involved and their carers and families have been consulted. We do not want to see efforts to introduce euthanasia by the backdoor by not reviving people who ought to be revived. I will of course pass on my hon. Friend’s concerns to my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Our high streets have been struggling for many years now, and covid has accelerated the challenges they face. There was another example of that last week when, sadly, Neston post office closed its doors for the last time. I understand that there is interest from some potential new operators, but experience has shown us that it can take many, many months for those interests to come to fruition. For a town of Neston’s size to have no post office for any period of time is simply unacceptable, so can we have a debate please on what we can do to have more statutory obligations on the Post Office to ensure that vital public services are not left from towns for any length of time?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government certainly recognise the difficulties that town centres are facing, hence the towns fund, which is £2 billion of funding offering town deals to 86 places across England, which includes accelerated funding provided to places last year. The towns fund will mainly spend taxpayers’ money of £25 million in each town, although in exceptional circumstances more is available. The ability to go to the post office or to banks and other essential services is of course of great importance. The Post Office has to ensure that it provides as much service as possible within the budget that it has got.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con) [V]: In the east midlands, we have a huge amount of potential but have been consistently at the bottom of the tables for public and private sector investment. I sense your concern about that, Mr Speaker, and I know you wish to see us playing a key part in the Government’s levelling up agenda, so you will be pleased to hear that we have all sorts of plans in place from our freeport development corporation, to plans around HS2, fusion energy and bids to the towns fund and the levelling up fund. Will my right hon. Friend find time to debate these key priorities in the House ahead of the levelling up White Paper and spending review in the autumn?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his determined representation of his county and his constituency. He has raised this issue with a much higher level; he recently met the Prime Minister to discuss the east midlands freeport and HS2 and how it might benefit his area, so his campaigning is proving very effective and his voice is being heard throughout the land, and particularly in Downing Street. The Prime Minister will publish the landmark levelling up White Paper later this year, which will include our plans for strengthening local accountable leadership. In total, we have committed nearly £3.5 billion of taxpayers’ money

for councils and businesses in the east midlands, so may I suggest to my hon. Friend that he might want to raise this matter further, either in a Westminster Hall debate or at the end-of-term Adjournment debate?

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) [V]: The Leader of the House may recall that I am my wife's carer. A year ago, at the height of the pandemic, I found myself in an extremely difficult situation in terms of carrying out my parliamentary duties, voting, making speeches and contributions and so on. I want to go on the record in thanking the Leader of the House and everyone else who managed to sort this out. It has been of great benefit, and me and my family are truly grateful.

May I ask the Leader of the House to cast his eye to September and what may or may not happen in terms of how the House conducts its business? Could I ask him to give earnest consideration to consulting people like me in my situation, disabled people and people who might have a health condition as to how we might enable all of us to participate as much as possible, if the capricious covid virus does something we do not expect in the months ahead?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am touched by the hon. Gentleman's thanks. I am not sure I deserve them as fully as he has given them, but I am none the less very grateful. I am always open to listening to hon. and right hon. Members who have suggestions about how the House is operating and what we may or may not need to do in future in relation to covid, as I know are the Chairman of the Procedure Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) and indeed you, Mr Speaker. We are obviously hoping that everything will be back to normal and that is the basis on which plans are being made, but man proposes and God disposes.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time to discuss the proposed May '22 train timetable changes, which cut the number of Darlington to London trains by a third? Delaying this timetable change would allow a proper assessment of the impact not only of coronavirus on the trains, but of the massive Government investment going into Teesside with our new freeport and Treasury North. Crucially, a delay would provide more time to develop the business case to introduce a direct Redcar to London service, which I am sure the Leader of the House agrees would be a great addition to the network.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am sure that having a Redcar service coming straight to London—a fast service—would benefit the nation and lift spirits. As I believe the Prime Minister said, Redcar has become “Bluecar”. That is probably Thomas the Tank Engine, who I seem to remember is the blue train.

I completely understand the difficulties that train timetable alterations create. Obviously, there has been great pressure on the train timetables during the course of the pandemic, and the losses that the railways are making have required some changes, but I will take up my hon. Friend's point with the Secretary of State for Transport.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I think everyone can see the rank hypocrisy in the UK Government, who seek to deny a future referendum on Scottish independence, simultaneously and unlawfully misdirecting money towards carrying out opinion polling on Scottish attitudes to the Union that was intended to go to the public health efforts against covid. Why, if now is not the time, was that polling activity undertaken? Will the Leader of the House use his good offices to prevail upon his colleagues to place the outcomes and findings of that research in the Library, so that the public might better understand exactly what it was that they got for their money?

Mr Rees-Mogg: When important communications have to be sent to the country at large around something such as covid, it is important to understand how people feel and how they will respond to the messages. The hon. Gentleman raises the question of Governments listening. I recall that the Shetland Islands last September asked whether it could look at ways of having more independence, possibly including becoming a Crown dependency. As Lord President of the Council, I am particularly interested in that question of its becoming a Crown dependency, because that activity would then come through the Privy Council. Of course, the Shetland Islands would be one of the richest sets of islands almost anywhere in the world if it were able to have the oil revenues that would accrue to it. I wonder what the Scottish Government are doing in response to the Shetland Islands. They are so keen always to have votes and so on; perhaps they will have a vote on independence for Shetland.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) [V]: First, what assessment has my right hon. Friend made of whether football is finally coming home? Secondly, does he agree that levelling up and the cities for growth agenda must not be limited to cities alone, and will he visit Melton Mowbray to see where I am campaigning for a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs office to open in the rural capital of food? If DEFRA cannot open an office in a rural town and prove that we care for our rural areas, then what Department will?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think, as England could win against New Zealand in the 50-over world championship, there is hope for all our sporting heroes, and therefore let us be cautiously optimistic about what will happen on Sunday. But it is possibly unwise of a non-expert in this area to make a forecast—not that we think much of experts as a general rule, but we will leave that to one side.

As regards the levelling up agenda, of course it must not be limited to cities alone. I represent a rural constituency, and I feel it is really important that the whole of our country is levelled up. That is the point of levelling up. As regards DEFRA moving to my hon. Friend's constituency and improving, therefore, the consumption of pork pies, which I believe are a great delicacy from Melton Mowbray—I am grateful for the opportunity to visit—I think she is right to campaign for that. I encourage her to do so, but I cannot promise what the answer will be from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Another business questions and still no movement on the Government's plans to eradicate the practice of fire and rehire. Continuing the football theme, it is like Ministers

[*Christian Matheson*]

taking the ball into the corner to run down the clock until we get to recess, without actually having to do anything. It is months now since the Government received the ACAS report, so can we have a statement before recess outlining the Government's position and what they plan to do to stop this scourge and this inhuman practice?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We did have a statement in response to the ACAS report on fire and rehire, the complexities of that report and the way in which it would best be implemented, and the Government's clear recognition that fire and rehire as a tactic is a bad practice. But there may be circumstances where the best protection of jobs involves an element of it, and therefore the straightforward banning of it altogether would not necessarily improve employment opportunities.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): In recent weeks, I have met several of my local parish and town councils, and they have all led on a rise in antisocial behaviours that is affecting their communities and residents. Some residents are living in fear, and more often than not it is a small group of people, sometimes even one family, causing chaos for those around them. I know that I have the full support of the new police and crime commissioner in Derbyshire, but may we have a debate in Government time on the powers that our police, district councils, county councils and, indeed, parish councils have in respect of residents who cause so much trouble for other residents, and their powers to make sure that communities do not suffer the blight of antisocial behaviour?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, and I sympathise with my hon. Friend, because every one of us has, as a constituency MP, come across instances of antisocial behaviour caused by a very small number of people. My experience is that the powers are there and that our role as Members of Parliament is to co-ordinate the local agencies and get them to use the powers that they have. When those powers are used, very often these problems are solved. I remind my hon. Friend that the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 provides the police, local authorities and other local agencies with a range of tools and powers. Although they can respond quickly and effectively to antisocial behaviour, sometimes it does not register with the relevant authorities early enough, which is why we as MPs play a useful role in bringing the focus of attention to it and encouraging them to use the powers that they have. My hon. Friend may want to raise this issue at Home Office questions on Monday.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab) [V]: The dream of transforming the Northumberland economy and leading the way in the green industrial revolution with 8,000 new local, well-paid, skilled, secure jobs in my constituency of Wansbeck came a step closer this week with the approval of the plans for the Britishvolt gigafactory in Cambois. The plans are to manufacture 300,000 lithium-ion electric car batteries annually. Is it not ironic that my constituency, which was hugely dependent on coal mining, now has this unmissable opportunity to greatly assist the UK in its zero-carbon objectives? As with Ellesmere Port and Nissan, Government assistance will be essential,

so can we have a debate in Government time to discuss how and what assistance can be given to ensure that local people are at the front of the queue and will be adequately trained and skilled up and in employment for day one of the planned construction?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is a great parliamentarian. I fear it must have pained him to praise a Conservative Government so much, so I am all the more grateful for the fact that he has done it and for the sincerity with which he did. I am tempted to exceed my remit and simply grant the debate he asked for, because he asked for it so charmingly, but I think I will leave it at a suggestion that it should be a matter for an Adjournment debate. I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support and co-operation, which shows that we can work on a cross-party basis to get zero carbon, to improve technology and to improve people's standard of living. If the two of us can be cross-party, almost anybody can.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I am sure that my right hon. Friend watched the England game yesterday evening and will join me in congratulating the team on their fantastic victory and in wishing them success and luck for the final on Sunday. The team have united the nation and I am sure that our success will spur on a new generation of budding Harry Kanes.

The fan-led review of football governance will consider all parts of our national game. It is important that it also examines how we can continue to nurture young talent. Will my right hon. Friend look to hold a debate in Government time on the review, when it reports its findings?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right about the uniting force of success. Football is the most popular game in this country—amazingly, it is more popular than cricket, which always surprises me, but nonetheless it is—and I did indeed watch the game last night, with any number of my children, some of whom were staying up rather later than is perhaps advisable for children of their young years, but never mind.

The fan-led review, an independent review led by our hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), was announced by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on 19 April 2021 and will explore ways of improving the governance, ownership and financial sustainability of clubs in English football, building on the strengths of the football pyramid. May I suggest that, rather than immediately having a debate, my hon. Friend seeks to speak to our hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford, because that will be a good way to start the conversation and be involved in the process?

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: We all want to move safely out of lockdown, but we may now see the emergence of a new vaccine-resistant variant in people who have had one jab who are infected and, indeed, the level of infection from the delta variant may rise to 100,000 cases a day. Will the Government ensure that in the event that Parliament is recalled in the summer, hybrid online facilities for MP participation will continue so that all voters can be safely represented?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Labour spokesmen and Members seem to come on and say that they want the lockdown to end and then they try to stop it ending. There seems to be a great desire not to end the lockdown. I think we want to get on on 19 July and get back to as normal as possible, including in this House. This is really important, but the House has shown in the past that it can act swiftly if necessary.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): There is an unprecedented national shortage of building materials, including timber and cement. Across the country, builders are struggling to get the materials they need and the prices are spiralling out of control. Will my right hon. Friend grant a debate on how we ensure that Britain's builders get the bricks and mortar they need to build back better?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am aware that there are inflationary pressures in some areas of the economy and I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. The Government are aware of the current shortage of building materials owing to global demand outstripping supply, and material prices are increasing significantly. This is having a particular impact on small and medium-sized enterprises. The Government are working with the Construction Leadership Council's product availability group to identify and resolve these challenges, but my hon. Friend could raise this at the end-of-term Adjournment debate if he seeks further discussion of it.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I do not think the Leader of the House has really addressed this adequately. If a Member of the House—if the Leader of the House—tests positive for covid-19 on 5 September and is required by the Government to self-isolate for 10 days, how are their voices, the voices of their constituents and the votes of their constituents to be represented in this House?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government speak with one voice, so if I were not able to be here, the Deputy Chief Whip—the Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew)—would appear for me, as he did once before, and, I am sorry to say, he did it extraordinarily well, which rather made me nervous, thinking that he might take this role on a more permanent basis. There are always opportunities for Government Ministers to be replaced by other Ministers, speaking with one voice for the Government.

As for the more general concern, the question is: are we getting to a stage where we live with covid and it is like other diseases, so Members of the House will be affected in the same way as if they had another illness? That is something that we have coped with over hundreds of years. There is a pairing system that works very well. There are means of getting questions raised on one's behalf, but this has been an exceptional period with exceptional practices because of the widespread, all-encompassing nature of the pandemic. Assuming that that is not going to continue to be the case permanently, we ought to return to normal as soon as possible.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con) [V]: While we all welcome the progress towards getting back to normal, is the Leader of the House aware that the covid emergency did result in some innovations being put in place that

were widely welcomed and popular? One in particular was the option given to local councils to hold virtual meetings, which has now lapsed. I know that my right hon. Friend prefers to embrace tradition before innovation, but will he and other Ministers note that there is a widespread desire for this option to be made permanently available? Will the Government therefore respond positively to this suggestion and bring forward legislation on the matter sooner rather than later?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that it would require primary legislation. I am not convinced of the strength of argument for it in ordinary times. I think that meetings are best when held together and there is better democratic accountability when people are together and able to have the informal, as well as the formal, conversations that take place in council meetings. Much the same is true for this House.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On behalf of all the people in Northern Ireland—the vast majority of them anyway—and my constituents in Strangford, I would like to offer my congratulations to the English team. We are very pleased as Northern Ireland supporters, and I am one of those, to let them use our song “Sweet Caroline”, and we rejoice in the singing of it at Wembley or wherever it may be. We will join in singing this anthem on Sunday and look forward to many glorious times if all goes well.

According to Open Doors, Christians in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, despite making up more than 95% of the population, are facing soaring violence in that country. In fact, the Democratic Republic of the Congo rose 17 places this year on the Open Doors world watch list of countries where Christians are the most persecuted. The DRC Christian population and churches are said to be at huge risk of violence in the east of the country, where Islamic terrorists groups the Allied Democratic Forces and the National Army for the Liberation of Uganda operate. One million people are displaced internally, and Christians have been targeted with killings, kidnappings, forced labour and torture, while Christian women are particularly vulnerable to rape and sexual slavery. It is an absolute tragedy happening as we sit in this Chamber. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate or an urgent statement on this matter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank both the hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter to the attention of the House and Open Doors for the incredible work it does as an organisation. They are both important voices for the rights of persecuted Christians. The UK and Her Majesty's Government are concerned about violence against all communities, whatever their religion or belief, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The violence is symptomatic of a broader picture of instability in eastern DRC. Her Majesty's Government continue to urge the DRC Government and the United Nations to work together to protect civilians from continuing violence and to address the root causes of conflict. We are committed to ensuring that the UN peacekeeping mission remains focused on delivering its mandate to protect civilians and that vulnerable communities remain central to the United Nations work in the DRC. The hon. Gentleman is probably more adept at using the House's procedures than any other

[*Mr Rees-Mogg*]

Member, so I hardly need remind him that Foreign Office questions are on 20 July, but I will in the meantime pass on his concerns to the Foreign Office.

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): In September, I will be running the Montane dragon's back race and attempting to run 230 miles, over twice the ascent of Everest. I am very happy for my right hon. Friend to join me on the world's toughest mountain race from Conwy castle to Cardiff castle along the spine of Wales. On a serious note, I am doing it for two amazing organisations: for the Wolves Foundation, which does so much work across Wolverhampton, particularly for the most vulnerable; and also for Elysium Memorial, which is raising awareness of veterans suicide—I have personally lost friends I served with. Will my right hon. Friend commit more time in this House to discuss such an important topic?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is considerably more energetic than I am. I think I would find it hard to do 2.3 miles, let alone 230 miles, and I might need the resuscitation that our hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) raised earlier.

To come to my hon. Friend's very serious point, I wish him well in his fundraising efforts for both foundations. On the issue of veterans suicide, this is a matter of the greatest responsibility for Government and parliamentarians. We ask people to put their lives on the line for the safety, security and peace of our nation, and we have a duty to them for the rest of their lives for what they have given or have been prepared to sacrifice on behalf of the nation. I am grateful to him for the work he is doing, and I can assure him that it is an issue the Government take with the utmost seriousness.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: The proof of the levelling-up pudding is in the eating for a community like Denton and Reddish, my own, which I proudly represent. I have submitted bids to the Government for both the Restoring Your Railway fund to provide important rail links for Reddish South and Denton stations, which are currently served by just one train a week, and the levelling-up fund to restore the old library, fire station and swimming baths complex in Reddish and turn it into a mixed community, leisure and employment growth hub for start-up businesses. As another conduit from Parliament to the Executive, can the Leader of the House please use his good offices to ensure that both these bids get fair consideration from Ministers?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the effort that he is making and for ensuring that all sources available for his community are explored. Again, it shows an element of desire for cross-party working, which I think is beneficial to our public life. I can assure him that all bids will be fairly considered, but I will pass on his comments to the relevant Secretary of State.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend make time for a debate on Places for Everyone and its relationship to individual councils' local plans in the Greater Manchester area? Bury Metropolitan Borough Council has not had an updated local plan since 1997 and is ignoring recent Government guidance on the protection of the green belt, which

would safeguard precious areas of countryside at Elton reservoir, Tottington and Walshaw in my constituency. Councils such as Bury should be required to have updated local plans before entering into joint development strategies such as Places for Everyone, to ensure a localised planning system that responds to the concerns of local residents.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend makes a really important point about the need to involve residents in the creation of local development plans. I assure him that that principle is at the heart of what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government is achieving. The national policy is clear:

"The planning system should be genuinely plan-led. Succinct and up-to-date plans should provide a positive vision for the future of each area".

The planning Bill will create a simpler, faster and more modern planning system, ensuring that homes and infrastructure can be delivered more quickly across England.

I would say that not updating a plan since 1997 seems to me an example of bureaucratic treacle—and the treacle should be baked away.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the huge increase in scammers and fraudsters targeting our constituents. Our constituents are advised by the police to contact Action Fraud; Action Fraud cannot investigate, so it goes back to the police anyway. The end result is too often that constituents do not hear any more. I appreciate that there is a volume problem, but can we have a debate about how we can better protect our constituents from these fraudsters?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is an issue that every Member of this House will be concerned about and that will have been raised in all our constituency surgeries. Reports submitted to Action Fraud are considered by the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau and evaluated to assess the information available that could assist an investigation. Data matching allows reports from different parts of the country to be linked through analysis. The hope is that that can lead to trends being identified and to action being taken to address these threats. However, I agree that more needs to be done; one often finds that constituents' cases are not investigated in the way that they would like.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I am sure that, like me, the Leader of the House will have been contacted during the covid pandemic by many constituents who have asthma. Last year, the all-party parliamentary group for respiratory health produced a report and recommendations on asthma outcomes, but does he know that the House has not had a debate on asthma since 2006—and that that was an Adjournment debate? Can we have a debate in Government time on asthma outcomes in the UK, to discuss the recommendations of the report and how we can support our constituents who suffer from asthma?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady raises an important subject that many in this House will be concerned about. I must confess I am surprised that there has not been a debate on it since 2006, although I think it is more an issue for the Backbench Business Committee

or for a Westminster Hall debate than for—as she will have heard when I read out the business—a very full Government programme between now and the recess.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Many residents in Kensington work in financial services and other professional services. Does my right hon. Friend agree that financial services are a vital industry, contributing 11% of our total tax take, and that we need to prioritise services when we negotiate future trade agreements? Would he consider a debate on the importance of financial services not only to London but to Scotland, Leeds, Bristol and many other places?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am extremely well aware of the importance of financial services, as I spent a number of decades working in the investment management field, and I am well aware of the particular importance of Edinburgh as a financial capital. My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue. Financial services are very strong, vibrant and flexible, which is what has led to their success. In reality, their ability to attract business from around the world has had more to do with their efficiency, their competitiveness and the collection of skills that they bring together than with particular agreements with other countries. Although of course we must discuss financial services with foreign nations, actually the City will do best if it is fleet of foot, capable and competitive.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): A group of my constituents have reported their employer, Horizon Care Homes Ltd, to the Pensions Regulator for allegedly failing to pay its pension contributions into the Government's NEST—National Employment Savings Trust—pension scheme. I have contacted the regulator and they have informed me that

they are legally unable to give me any information about their investigation, even with my constituent's consent. This makes it extremely hard for me to assist them. Will the Leader of the House support me in allowing a debate in this Chamber to ensure that MPs can gain appropriate access to the information needed to assist our constituents facing problems with their pensions?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am going to answer this question slightly tentatively, because I am calling on memory of what I think the law says about giving information to Members. My understanding and memory are that businesses are not obliged to give information to Members, but there is an exemption in the data protection rules that allows them to give information if they choose to do so. So my understanding is that this is a refusal of the organisation to give information under its own procedures, not one by law. Therefore, I would encourage and support the hon. Lady in continuing to put pressure on the organisation not to be obstructive of Members of Parliament doing their job.

I did come across this once on behalf of a constituent of mine, where a particular bank refused to give information, even with the support of the constituent, erroneously quoting data protection rules. If that is the case, I think the hon. Lady is in a strong position with the Pensions Regulator. I think it is their rules, rather than our laws, but I will check this and if I am not correct I will write and put the letter in the Library.

Mr Speaker: I now suspend the House for two minutes to enable the necessary arrangements to be made for the next business.

11.31 am

Sitting suspended.

International Travel

11.33 am

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):

I do not underestimate for a second just how difficult the last 16 months have been for those who have not been able to travel to see their families, for travel and tourism and for the aviation sector itself of course, and no Minister, let alone the Transport Secretary, would ever want to curtail our freedom and ask people not to travel, but protecting public health has rightly been, and will continue to be, the overriding priority of this Government, which is why we introduced some of the toughest border measures in the world.

However, thanks to our brilliant vaccination programme, we are now in a position where we can start to think about how we live with coronavirus, while returning life to a sense of normality. Last week, I said at this Dispatch Box that the Government intended to ease restrictions on fully vaccinated travellers returning from amber list countries. I am now pleased to be able to provide more detail.

As one of the world's most vaccinated countries, we must use these advantages to restore many of the freedoms that have been necessarily lost over recent months. So I can confirm today that from 19 July UK residents who are fully vaccinated through the UK vaccine roll-out will no longer have to self-isolate when they return to England. They will still be required to take a test three days before returning—the pre-departure test—demonstrating that they are negative before they travel and a PCR test on or before day two, but they will no longer be required to take a day eight test. In essence, this means that, for fully vaccinated travellers, the requirements for green and amber list countries are the same. To be clear, a full vaccination means 14 days have passed since someone's final dose of the vaccine. It is also important to note that health matters are devolved, so decision making and implementation may differ across UK Administrations. We will continue to work with the devolved Administrations to ensure we achieve our shared objectives of a safe, sustainable and robust return to international travel.

The change I am announcing today will prioritise those vaccinated in the UK. However, as I made clear last week, we want to welcome international visitors back to the UK and are working to extend our approach to vaccinated passengers from important markets and holiday destinations later this summer, such as the United States and the European Union. I will update the House in due course on how we approach vaccinated individuals from other countries.

When I highlighted the potential policy to the House last week, I explained that we needed to take some additional time to look at the evidence on children, who will not, of course, have been able to benefit from vaccines, and how they will be treated. I can tell the House today that children under 18 returning from amber list countries will not have to isolate on their return, nor take a day eight test. Children between the ages of five and 10 will only need to take a day two test. As before, children aged four and under will be exempt from all testing and isolation requirements. I know this was a big concern of families. After working with scientists and public health experts, I am delighted to be able to offer that reassurance today.

The success of our vaccine programme has been aided by those selflessly creating the great benefits for society and for the rest of the world by being part of the clinical trials, without which we would not have this vaccine programme. We committed to ensuring they are not disadvantaged as a result of being part of those trials, and I am delighted to announce that those on approved clinical trials in the UK will also not need to self-isolate, or take the day eight test after arrival from an amber list country. Passengers will need to prove their vaccination status, either through the covid pass, which is available on the main NHS app, not the covid app, or via the accessible letter, which can be obtained by calling 119, for those without access to smartphones. Passengers returning to England will be asked to include their vaccination status on their passenger locator form if they wish to benefit from the exemption to self-isolate. Transport operators and carriers will be required to check a passenger's proof of being fully vaccinated before they are able to get on the form of transport.

The Government have been working closely with international partners on restarting international travel safely through certification. I am pleased to announce to the House today that more than 30 countries and territories are now recognising vaccine certification as part of entry requirements, and either accepting the proof of vaccination letter or the NHS app. We will continue to increase that number, so that the NHS app becomes the natural default. Passengers should of course check Foreign Office travel advice to understand the latest entry requirements and covid-19 rules at their destination.

We know that travel is important and that many people have not been able to travel for the last year and a half. This is not, of course, just about holidays, eager as we are for time in the sun; it is also about reuniting families who have been apart throughout the pandemic. It is about helping businesses to trade and grow and supporting the aviation sector, which hundreds of thousands of jobs rely on. The Government have backed that industry through £7 billion of support through this pandemic. As they tell me, the support is of course very welcome, but the only way to actually recover is to allow them to fly and for travel to resume again.

That is why I am also pleased to announce that, from 19 July, we will remove the guidance that people should not travel to countries on the amber list. That means that people will be able to travel to amber list countries for leisure and business and to see family. I am sure the whole House will welcome that development and our approach to international travel.

However, I want to be clear that, as we begin to ease restrictions, travel will not be the same as it was in, say, 2019. People should continue to check Foreign Office travel advice and, where possible, travel outside busy weekend times. Importantly, they should expect that their experience at the border will be different, because longer waiting times will be necessitated by the risks, even as we introduce and expand the range of e-gates available to read the passenger locator forms. Public health remains our key priority, which is why we will not make any changes to requirements applying to those arriving from countries on the red list, even where they are fully vaccinated.

The measures I have announced today have been designed in close co-operation with my right hon. Friend the Health and Social Care Secretary, along with medical

and scientific experts, to ensure we can continue to minimise the risk of new variants. As many of us know from personal travel experience, the Government will not hesitate to act if required and the data suggests that needs to happen. In other words—to put this on the record—an amber list country could still turn red, necessitating a change in behaviour when people return to the UK. Indeed, if a country goes into red, there will be mandatory hotel quarantine.

The UK has achieved many hard-won gains through our successful vaccination programme and the continued spirit and determination of the British people. We continue to encourage people to take up the vaccine when offered, not only to protect themselves but to restore previous freedoms more safely.

19 July will mark the next step of this cautious reopening of international travel. Thanks to the Government's incredible success with the vaccine programme, people in England will be able to travel more easily to visit family and friends who they have not seen for a long time, and also get business moving again, kickstarting our economy while keeping the UK safe and supporting a wide range of jobs and industries in the process. I commend this statement to the House.

11.42 am

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement.

When I questioned the Secretary of State on publishing the data, he said:

“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.”—[*Official Report*, 29 June 2021; Vol. 698, c. 141.]

However, the assessment of 15 June has only published limited data on 22 countries and even that very limited data shows absolutely no data on incoming passenger testing and no data for new variant testing for some of the countries that were moved to the green list, including the Balearics.

The debate last time focused on India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, yet none of those countries has had the data published; nor have the countries that are critical to our economy, including the US, Canada and the vast majority of the EU. When the full data is published, will the Secretary of State ensure that it shows a very clear direction of travel for each and every country to instil travel confidence once more? Will he finally allow a full review of the delay in adding India to the red list, alongside Pakistan and Bangladesh, which led to the rapid spread of the Johnson variant, which he knows has delayed the easing of restrictions in the UK?

I also note that, in just a week, the Government have effectively taken our suggestion to scrap the confused amber list, but it is not clear whether some of the countries that are currently on the amber list should be moved to the red list. Can the Secretary of State confirm that a country-by-country assessment was carried out ahead of today's statement?

As the Secretary of State will know, Labour has been calling for the introduction of an international vaccine passport. He states that an agreement has been reached with 30 countries to accept UK vaccination status. So far, that list has not been published and it is not clear what pre-testing and arrival testing will be needed.

I welcome a common-sense approach that will allow children to travel with their vaccinated parents and carers. Will he confirm that every single one of the 30 countries that he says will now accept NHS vaccination status will allow children to travel without additional restrictions?

The Secretary of State will know that, in addition to the uncertainty around the travel list, the cost of testing is turning away would-be travellers. PCR tests often cost more than £100 a person. The Government could stop the rip-off we are seeing from private testing companies by instead using spare capacity in the NHS testing sites, supported by an updated NHS app, which would confirm testing status alongside vaccination status. We know that testing is a critical element of limiting the spread of covid. Will the Secretary of State take forward these suggestions and finally make meaningful progress?

When I asked the Secretary of State what action was being taken to open up transatlantic routes, he said that a US-UK working group had met the week before “for the first time”, yet no update has been provided on that today. How many more times has the group met since then? What progress has been made?

The international travel community and the tourism sector needed the Government to really step up, but I am afraid that Ministers have found themselves wanting. Labour is clear that the Government must follow the example of other countries by intervening and bringing forward a sectoral deal to protect jobs. Why have the Government still not brought forward such a deal, when the Chancellor promised it nearly a year ago?

When I visited Heathrow last month, it pointed out that more than a quarter of its cost base goes in fees and levies to Government. If Ministers do not want a holistic support package, can they at least look at the fees that are paid directly to the Government? On Eurostar, why has it not had the same business rates support as aviation, as an international travel operator? There should be a level playing field.

The announcement did not cover mask wearing. It is pretty clear that the Government have been all over the place on mask wearing, despite masks reducing the risk of passing on the virus to other people, especially and critically on public transport. Why does the Secretary of State believe that they should now be the subject of personal choice? Like me, will he commit to continuing to wear his mask on public transport?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman mentions the JBC data. The methodology is on the website, as I have mentioned before. I am sure it will continue to publish a full range of analysis as more countries are moved about and we have the next review of the green, red and amber lists on 15 July.

The hon. Gentleman brings up India every time we speak. It does not matter how many times that we explain the fact that we put India on the red list two weeks before it became a variant of concern, and a week ahead of it being a variant of interest, he continues to come to the House and make that point time and again.

He mentions the list of 30 locations that are accepting either the NHS app or an NHS letter. That is already published and available on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office website, which gives me the opportunity to stress that when somebody travels to any

[Grant Shapps]

location, they will want to use the FCDO website as the bible on the requirements on entry and departure from that country.

I want to update the hon. Gentleman and the House on one late change. Not just children travelling with adults, but all children will be exempt in the same way as somebody who is double-vaccinated.

He mentions the cost of tests. I have come to the Dispatch Box before and agreed that the cost of tests was too high. I am very pleased that, since May, costs have continued to be driven down as more than 400 providers have stepped up to the plate to produce tests. I was looking at the detail this morning. There are tests as inexpensive as a tenner, albeit that those tests are in person, but there are quite a number of tests now for much lower prices than previously.

He asks for an update on the US-UK working group that Biden and the Prime Minister announced. That work is ongoing. Those meetings are taking place each and every week. As I have explained to the House before, there are quite a lot of technicalities to overcome, not least an executive order from the previous US Administration—212(f)—which actually bans travel for anyone who has been in the UK or Europe for the 14 days previous. We are working through those issues with them. They are currently being held at official level.

On support for the industry, it is a pity that the hon. Gentleman did not reflect what the industry itself is saying. I noticed that the Airport Operators Association is saying that this is a significant step forward that it widely welcomes, and that people will be able to get away on a “well-deserved break”. Airlines UK, which represents the airlines, says:

“This is a positive move towards the genuine reopening” of the sector. Once again, it warmly welcomes this move.

The hon. Gentleman says, “Labour have been clear”, but I have to say that it is anything but clear. What is clear is that there is a division between him and the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds). First, the Opposition wanted quarantine lessened; then they wanted everyone in a hotel; then they wanted it to be done on a case-by-case basis; then they wanted to shut down travel, open up travel, put everyone on the red list and put more countries on the green list. This is not a policy. It is just plain politics.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. This is the first step in opening up Britain for business. However, I note that in his statement he said that people should expect that their experience at the border may be different, with longer waiting times than before. When queues at the border have been a problem in the past, extra staff have been brought in, including from other Government Departments, to support Border Force. Will my right hon. Friend, on behalf of the Government, guarantee that every effort will be made to bring in extra resources and deploy staff in different ways, including changing staff rotas at Border Force, to ensure that there can be a smooth movement of people through our borders and that we do not see inordinately long queues?

Grant Shapps: I welcome my right hon. Friend’s question. She is absolutely right. I have been working with the Home Secretary and Border Force on exactly that issue. I should perhaps be a little more specific about where travellers might expect queues. Quite a lot of the checking will be done upstream—in other words, before people board the aircraft, train or boat, at the location from which they are returning. Queues at check-in abroad may, in fact, be the place where those problems most exist. Many airlines are developing systems to further automate that process, but they will be doing quite a complicated job, checking the passenger locator form against the booked test still required on day two and, of course, vaccine status. I think it is fair to warn people who are travelling this summer that it is a process that we have not had to do before. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that it is important that the borders at this end are as smooth as possible. Indeed, a lot of investment is going into automating all that.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

I share the concerns of the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), about the lack of transparency in the data, and the Secretary of State’s answers on that were simply not good enough. We need to see more data and more quickly than we are at the moment. Although I welcome the thrust of the statement, I think the Secretary of State is being just a little disingenuous when he said the industry tells him that support is welcome and they need to get flying again. In and of itself, that is of course correct, but what he did not say is that that industry is still crying out for further support, because most of the industry has not had grant support, despite being the hardest hit sector in the economy.

I have said a number of times in the last few weeks that Glasgow Airport in my constituency has lost a third of the workforce that is based on site. That is 2,000 jobs gone locally at the airport and well over another 1,000 jobs beyond the airport that are connected to aviation. The Scottish summer season is already well over two weeks old and by the time this policy kicks in for England, teachers in my area will be back in schools three weeks thereafter, so only a very short window remains. The Government must therefore extend furlough for the sector—no ifs, no buts. Although this announcement will help, the number of passengers will still be significantly down, so the need for a sector-specific support package is still very clear.

From the outset, the Scottish Government have said that caution is required regarding international travel and people should think carefully about travelling abroad, as situations can suddenly change. The Scottish Government will continue to work closely with the other home nations and are cautiously supportive of exploring options for the easing of restrictions for fully vaccinated travellers arriving from countries on the amber list, but only if the clinical advice supports it and the systems are in place to ensure the wider safety of the Scottish population.

Rumours have circulated for months about robust Cabinet discussions on international travel, with, among others, the previous Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster often on one

side, and the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Transport on the other. One cannot help but note the change of pace in the changes to international travel now that the new Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), is in place. How can plans for an ambitious return of travel be made if the UK Government's rush to unlock domestically, with 100,000 cases a day and so on, means that other countries close their borders to UK travellers?

Lastly, as has been said, mask wearing on aircraft and, indeed, all public transport is to most of us a no-brainer. As the Secretary of State did not address the shadow Secretary of State's question, I will ask it again: will mask wearing on aircraft be compulsory? Will the Secretary of State confirm whether he will continue to wear a mask on all public transport?

Grant Shapps: I should point out that the change of pace is because we now have a situation in which the majority of adults in the UK are fully vaccinated. That was not the case a month ago, when we postponed step 4; it is the case now. I can confirm to the hon. Gentleman that I was in fact already discussing the changes with the previous Health Secretary.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that I omitted to mention masks; I should bring the House up to speed. We will still provide, in guidance, information about mask wearing. We know that it is sensible in more enclosed spaces, and personally I will wear a mask where it is appropriate to do so. The airlines have already said that mask wearing is a condition of carriage in, I think, all the cases that I have seen, and where it is a condition of carriage, I will of course always wear one. On the other hand, if we are talking about being in an empty carriage on a long-distance train for many hours, people will use their common sense, which is something that we on the Government Benches absolutely applaud and agree with. We are pleased to be able to get back to a guidance situation.

The hon. Gentleman is a doughty campaigner for Glasgow airport and often challenges me on these matters; I have to say to him that he might want to look a little bit closer to home. It is only very recently—in June—that the Scottish Government banned Scots from travelling to Manchester. As a direct result, easyJet cancelled new routes that would have connected a whole bunch of Scottish airports. No wonder the Scottish Passenger Agents' Association has said that the Scottish Government's approach to aviation is sacrificing the industry. I am afraid a lot of the answers the hon. Gentleman is looking for are closer to home. Meanwhile, the UK Government have provided £7 billion of support to the sector. I notice that the opening up announced today has so far yet to be reflected by Scottish Government announcements as well. If the hon. Gentleman really wants to help, he can help to move along the policy in Scotland.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Rejoice, rejoice! This is a much-needed shot in the arm for those who have had two shots of the vaccine in their arm, and for an industry and workforce who have been laid low during the pandemic—perhaps more than others—but have always been confident and steadfast in their belief that we can all travel safely again.

In welcoming this announcement, may I ask the Secretary of State also to keep an eye on the testing regime? We know that only 0.4% of those who have come back from amber destinations over the past couple of months have tested positive for covid. Can we perhaps look at the testing costs, which are still a barrier for those travelling? It would be great if, rather than people having to take an expensive PCR test, lateral flow tests could be used instead, and those who do test positive could then take a PCR test. I will look to the Secretary of State to keep on championing those kinds of ideas. Will he also make sure that the Foreign Office advice and website is as up-to-date as he is on this matter?

Grant Shapps: I thank my hon. Friend, who does a superb job as the Chair of the Select Committee and has been very consistent in his support for the aviation sector. He will be interested to know, as will the whole House, that we will have a further review date on 31 July. That is a checkpoint for the rules themselves. Currently, the scientific evidence is that PCR tests, in addition to being a bit more accurate, are also the ones in respect of which the genomes can be quickly sequenced to look for variants. My hon. Friend's point about the FCDO and ensuring that all the advice ties together is well understood; we will make sure we work closely on that.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This week, the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary warned of a considerable spike in infections, with perhaps 100,000 positive cases detected every day. That will clearly put pressure on our testing services, but it will also have a chilling effect on inbound travel, as people choose to travel to nations with lower infection rates. What kind of compensation is the Secretary of State looking to bring forward for the travel industry, because many travel companies in my constituency have really struggled over the past year as a result of the lack of Government support? Will he ensure that the support is long term, so that these companies have a bridge into their future?

Grant Shapps: It is of course true that there is a third wave, given the delta variant. We in the United Kingdom are in the fortunate position of having our exceptional vaccination programme, which will allow us to open up on 19 July—provided that is confirmed on Monday. I have described from the Dispatch Box today how we will allow people who have been vaccinated through the UK vaccination programme to travel to amber list countries and to return, treating those countries as if they were on the green list. On the other side of that, we will work on a second phase to enable people to travel here. I am working closely with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to ensure that that can restart as soon as possible. We need to be able to trust other vaccination programmes and verify that those travelling here have had a particular type of test, of course. That is the best way to help travel firms in the hon. Lady's constituency. I must point out that £7 billion is not a drop in the ocean. A lot of money has been spent supporting the travel sector, and we are proud to have done that, but the best thing will be to get the sector open again.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con) [V]: This announcement is a big step in the right direction and will provide a much-needed boost for the travel sector, so I welcome

[Julian Sturdy]

what the Secretary of State has said. It also provides a meaningful choice of holiday destinations for families looking to go abroad this summer. However, the Secretary of State will be aware—the Chair of the Transport Committee touched on this—that testing requirements remain costly and burdensome, especially for families. He mentioned 31 July, but will he also commit to keeping the testing under regular review, and can he look not only at the cost but at the bureaucracy that goes with it, because that also has an impact on families going on holiday?

Grant Shapps: I certainly welcome my hon. Friend's welcome of the policy. On the cost of testing, the narrative tends to run a little behind what is happening in the real world, so I jumped on the gov.uk website this morning to take a look, and there are some very inexpensive tests available. The cheapest I saw was £4.95, although that was quite specific because it referred to an individual test centre, which might be nowhere near. Let us assume that the costs are higher than that, but recognise that they are no longer the hundreds of pounds quoted in the spring. I want to see the costs continue to be driven down. I give him an assurance that we will carry on working with the scientists and looking at the data. We will not be testing people for a moment longer than is required, but our primary responsibility is to protect people in the UK. We do not want a variant to come in that we simply fail to pick up.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab) [V]: I warmly welcome this statement, which finally restores to us some of the freedoms that our European neighbours and Americans have been enjoying for some considerable time. If I understood the Secretary of State correctly, the green list testing requirements will still leave travel more restricted this summer than it was last summer, when we did not have the vaccines. As he will understand, reciprocity is absolutely vital for travel, and the lack of immediate reciprocity for other countries means that they are less likely to open up to us anytime soon. So why, when many European countries already accept our vaccine passport, are we incapable of accepting theirs now?

Grant Shapps: Of course reciprocity is very important. I have already explained the situation with the United States, and reciprocity would involve it not having Executive Order 212(f) in place, which would immediately relieve some of the issues. They still have 50 different ways to verify tests, because there is no central system—each state has its own version. The European example is better, as the right hon. Gentleman says. I am working very closely with my European counterparts and in regular contact with them. We wanted to have a first phase in place as quickly as possible—easy to verify through the UK vaccine programme—but we will move as quickly as possible to the next phase, to satisfy his concerns, working with other countries, including on the EU digital passport.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con) [V]: I very much welcome this statement from the Secretary of State and also his restatement of the significant financial support being given to the sector. Is it his judgment that these changes will allow the sector to stand on its own feet from a business viability perspective, or are we still

going to have to put significant sums of public money into it? We need to have this debate, because every bit of caution that people advocate comes with a price tag that must be met by the taxpayer, and that debate is essential as we go forward.

Grant Shapps: It is worth reflecting that this country is leading the way. I was having a look at which other major economies in Europe are going for an unlock as we expect and hope to do on 19 July, subject to confirmation next Monday, and I do not see any other countries that are opening up domestically quite as much. I know my right hon. Friend agrees that it is time to learn to live with the coronavirus. We have many advantages this year that we did not have last year, including easily available testing that is much reduced in price, and vaccination and immunisation that is accessible to all adults. That means that we can move to what will, I think, become the new world of aviation. To answer my right hon. Friend's question, from my conversations with the aviation sector in particular I know that many of them have downsized but are now ready to start upsizing gradually as we come out of what has been the most horrendous couple of years on record for that sector.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Not only has the Government's hotel quarantining policy been an utter mess, but the handling of complaints and of the legitimate calls for exemption has been painfully slow by official channels. I have had toddlers left without milk and kids so poorly nourished in these hotels that ambulances have been called out. Some people have been left without access to drinking water, and families in Luton are being charged nearly two and a half grand for it. Can the Secretary of State tell me who is making a profit from these astronomical charges, and why there is no discount for people on low incomes?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight these cases and fight for her constituents. I just want to point out that the figure that is charged at the moment does not make a profit for the Government. In fact, it is still being somewhat subsidised in the process. I also want to point out that people should not be travelling to red-list countries. The only people who should be coming back to Government quarantine are British or Irish citizens or people with permanent rights of residence, and there should be a limit to the number of people who are still abroad and wishing to return. I sometimes come across cases where people are still using the red list as if it is a case of "It's okay, I can come back and hotel quarantine." That should not be the case. However, if the hon. Lady has individual cases, I am concerned to hear about them. The system is handled by the Department of Health and I would be very happy to pass them on.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Secretary of State has quite rightly sounded a note of caution in saying that anyone who chooses to travel to an amber list country needs to be prepared for the possibility that it could become a red list country before they return. What happens if someone has booked to travel to an amber list country and it becomes red before they travel? Has he had discussions with the travel industry and the travel insurance industry to determine whether

passengers will be entitled to a refund in those circumstances, or will they simply have to sacrifice their holiday and lose all their money?

Grant Shapps: The travel industry has stepped up to the plate, by and large. For nearly everywhere that people can book—I encourage consumers to take a look—people are able to get a guarantee of a refund or a change of date if there is a change in status, and holiday insurance has become quite adept as well. The Government have also tried to assist. For example, under the Air Travel Organisers Licensing scheme—ATOL—people used to be able to get only a cash refund, but we have made those vouchers effectively Government guaranteed, so that people can take them with assurance. That is also helping the travel sector to weigh up its difficulties with cash flow.

To answer the hon. Gentleman's question, I am working very closely with the travel industry. He is absolutely right to raise the case. The most important thing that people can do is check before they book—particularly now, particularly this year—to make sure that refunds and rebooking are allowed in their contract.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con) [V]: The Secretary of State's statement will be a lifeline to the aviation industry which he has done so much to try to support throughout the pandemic. Inbound tourism is clearly very important to the economy of the United Kingdom; I therefore hope that he will be successful in swiftly ensuring that overseas visitors, not just returning British passengers, will be able to enter the United Kingdom relatively easily and safely. I hope my right hon. Friend will also be able to work with the FCDO to ensure that all World Health Organisation-approved vaccines are accepted in overseas countries, particularly including European Union countries such as France.

Finally, with reference to the issue raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), will the Secretary of State ensure that there are facilities not only at airports, but at the channel ports particularly, to ensure the swift flow of passengers?

Grant Shapps: I absolutely hear the call for inbound tourism, which I have heard from both sides of the House. We are working on that as phase 2; there are some further complications with how to accept different proofs of vaccine, but I absolutely agree with the idea that, as a very good basis, we should accept vaccines that have been approved by the World Health Organisation.

My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point about not just airports but other types of port. Those around the channel tunnel are, of course, some of the busiest in the country. I think that it is right to tell people that the additional checks are likely to cause delays on both sides of the channel this summer. They will want to prepare and plan their journeys with supplies and ensure that they pick the best time of day to travel to avoid such delays. I am already working closely with my French counterpart to minimise any delays as much as possible.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind) [V]: I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, but the latest stats from the Office for National Statistics on the coronavirus job retention scheme show that 57%

of employees in the passenger air transport sector remain on furlough. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Chancellor to extend the furlough to avoid a job crisis in the aviation sector before it ends?

Grant Shapps: As the hon. Lady knows, the furlough scheme is part of a national scheme. UK-wide, it has supported those in aviation and across the economy. Of course, it is starting to wind down through September, which is why today's announcement is particularly timely: because it gives aviation and travel companies the ability to get going again. I hope that, closer to home, the hon. Lady will put pressure on the Scottish Government to follow. At the moment, it seems that Scottish Members are calling for more support, but the most important thing of all—allowing the airlines to fly—does not seem to be forthcoming from the Scottish Government.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement that not only football, but air travel, is coming home. I will not repeat colleagues' points about clarity, testing, self-isolation, wearing a face mask and all the rest of it, but will my right hon. Friend please reassure me that as a result of his announcement there is absolutely no need for London Southend airport to stage more night flights? They really do cause a nuisance to local residents.

Grant Shapps: I congratulate my hon. Friend on shoe-horning two things into his question: first, 45 minutes since anyone has mentioned coming home, he got it into aviation, and secondly, he mentioned night flights, which were not entirely part of my announcement today. I know that Southend airport is very important to his local economy. I will not comment on the night flights position specifically, but I was relieved to see that flights will be able to continue there after the operator experienced difficulties recently.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab) [V]: I, too, welcome the statement from the Secretary of State. However, I would like to understand what he is doing to fix the issue with the quarantine hotels. My 34-weeks pregnant constituent who returned to the UK was quarantined in Greenwich at the O2 InterContinental hotel. On days one and two she ended up in hospital, on day six she was denied travel to hospital for a scan, and by day eight she had lost her baby and spent four days in ICU because she nearly lost her life. Will he meet me to discuss getting quarantining right for families, and especially the tragic case of my constituent?

Grant Shapps: I welcome the hon. Lady's welcome for the package. I am very, very sorry to hear about the situation that she outlines. Of course everybody in a quarantine hotel should have access to medical assistance. I am not aware of the details but I am happy to help to arrange for the correct Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care to meet her to discuss her constituent's case.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I very much welcome the announcement from my right hon. Friend, which will make such a huge difference to families wanting to see their relatives, to businesses in my constituency, and of course to people who want to go on holiday.

[Dr Ben Spencer]

Can I come back to the point on reciprocity? While we can ease the measures domestically, what happens when people land on the other side also impacts their ability to work, see relatives and so on. Ideally, we want international safety standards and an international approach that is synchronous across all nations. Will he update the House on his discussions on taking that forward?

Grant Shapps: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his campaigning on this subject. He has done a great deal in talking about safety standards and campaigning to get to a situation where we can help to reopen things. He is right to talk about reciprocity. He will be interested to hear that I chaired a meeting of the G7 Transport Secretaries with my equivalents earlier in the year and will do so again later in the year. Our drive is to introduce those international standards, because clearly coronavirus is not going away any time soon and we want to make sure that an internationally recognised system is in place. We are doing our part, since we have been chairing the G7, to make sure that those standards are recognised globally.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: We find ourselves in a position where previous failures of the UK Government have left us as a centre for a new variant. How does the Secretary of State's plan for ending quarantine take account of keeping future new variants out and the consequent impact that this may have on the ability of UK citizens to travel?

Grant Shapps: First, I do not accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman's point. We have had one of the most rigorous border check systems in place. When I was in the House only last week, I think that every single speaker in all parts of the House urged an opening up, so I am interested to hear his views. Secondly, the steps in place still require a pre-departure test and a PCR test on or before day two in order that it can be sequenced, and there is all the other guidance that exists as well.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con) [V]: I warmly welcome the Secretary of State's announcement. These are absolutely the right measures to be taking. However, can I encourage him as soon as possible to go further and look to expand the number of green list countries to which international travel is possible, particularly working in the US-UK travel taskforce? It is estimated that every day we do not have meaningful transatlantic flights is costing the UK economy some £23 million?

Grant Shapps: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all his work and campaigning on this subject; his constituency is greatly impacted by the success or otherwise of aviation. Yes, we will certainly look at which countries fall into the red, amber and green categories. For the purpose of clarity for the House it is probably helpful to say that the next review will take place on 15 July—so there is not long to wait—and there are then two checkpoints, one on 31 July to look at the system and its operation in total and then on 1 October, which are already in the programme going forward.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his update, as always. What steps have been taken with the Republic of Ireland Government to ensure that the correct tests are taken as assessments? This was an issue for a constituent of mine and his pregnant wife only on Monday past: a Ryanair-supplied test was deemed insufficient and around 300 people were placed in a quarantine hotel with no idea at all of just what had happened and what had gone wrong. Can the Secretary of State assure my constituents that the right information will be conveyed to the travel sector so as to make international travel as smooth and understandable as possible?

Grant Shapps: I was not familiar with that Republic of Ireland situation, but I undertake to speak to my opposite number—we do speak regularly—and receive an update, and perhaps write a letter to the hon. Gentleman with information to take the case further.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. I realise that this is not his decision, but what additional evidence does his statement provide to help the House of Commons authorities in their deliberations on whether my delegation can return to Europe?

Grant Shapps: Far be it for me to get between my hon. Friend and the House authorities, but I do have to say it is time for those delegations to be able to return.

We have today set out a form of travel where amber can be treated as green and where double vaccination—or I should say full vaccination, because some people will have a single vaccination in the future—plus 14 days provides reason to travel, and I very much hope that that then brings to a conclusion this long-running situation where my hon. Friend and others have not been able to travel to important Council of Europe and other business.

Anum Qaisar-Javed (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) [V]: The newly appointed Health Secretary has said that the UK Government's policy of returning to normal may lead to as many as 100,000 covid cases per day. It is entirely possible that these case rates, uncontrolled by the UK Government, could lead to further curbs on UK travellers abroad. How will the Secretary of State's plans announced today accommodate these projected domestic case rates?

Grant Shapps: It is important to know that we are in a different phase of this coronavirus now, as never before have we had the majority of our population double vaccinated, and everyone is welcome to come forward—and, indeed, should come forward—if they have not been for their vaccinations yet. The rest of the world is not quite in that situation as yet but will want to get itself to that position.

For us, therefore, increasingly the focus is not so much on the specific case rates—after all, we are not vaccinating children yet, and we wait for the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation to let us know whether it is scientifically proven and advisable to do so—but on hospitalisations and deaths. Other countries will experience the same thing, and there is no reason, as we have seen throughout the coronavirus, to think that one country's epidemiological situation is different

from another's. We know that while we may have been suffering from the delta variant, other countries, sadly, will be in the future; I hope that they can get themselves vaccinated in time.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con) [V]: The whole travel industry will welcome today's decision, which will help build confidence in the industry and among passengers. Clear and concise guidance will be needed quickly for airports, airlines and travel agents to navigate the additional paperwork required to check passengers' vaccination status, but given that some people cannot have the vaccine for medical reasons, what can be done to provide confidence that we are not moving towards a two-tier society?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—the airline industry, for example, says that it is looking forward to working with the Government to continue this momentum and further open up markets—and I welcome his welcome for today's announcement. He is also right to point out that there are some people who, for various reasons—I mentioned in my statement people who have been on a trial, for example—would not qualify under the normal circumstances. The other set of people, of course, are those who are clinically unable to have vaccinations for various reasons. We will bring forward guidance on all these issues.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: My constituent Tracy Crabb has been double-jabbed, but she is one of those who has had the Indian-manufactured Covishield version of the AstraZeneca vaccine, which the EU currently does not recognise in its digital certificate travel scheme. That is absolutely crazy given that that drug is no different from the AstraZeneca vaccine manufactured here. Some European economic area countries have said they will still accept Covishield, but most have not yet, and France apparently considers people with that jab as being unvaccinated. What is the Secretary of State going to do to try to get some common sense on this issue, so that Tracy and thousands like her can enjoy some of the international travel freedoms he has just announced?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, of course. If the vaccine is recognised by the World Health Organisation, there is no excuse not to recognise it. We are working with our friends and colleagues in the EU and elsewhere, and I am pretty certain that this situation will be resolved.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for coming to the House and making this statement, and for all the work he does behind the scenes to support the travel industry, but I have a concern. If I understand him right, amber countries can now be travelled to; the restriction has gone. However, the FCDO advice for those countries—Germany and Italy, for instance—is still that people should not undertake non-essential travel. Will that guidance be updated now for 19 July, so that people can plan in advance?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I should explain two things. First, FCDO travel advice is about the danger for somebody in a country. Of course, that could be about covid, but it could also be about political unrest or some other natural or other crisis

going on in that country, so it is by necessity different from the traffic light system. The traffic light system is interested in the risks posed by that person, having visited that country, on their return to the UK. However, my hon. Friend raises a very important point about the travel advice to people going to amber countries, which at the moment says “don't” for the purposes of holidays, for example. We will be changing that advice for the 19th to make it clear that people can travel for holidays and other reasons.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I confess that I was quite surprised by the response that the Secretary of State gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) on the issue of travel insurance, given that consumer body Which? has found that many travellers are “being left with a false impression”

about the travel insurance protection they would enjoy in the event of covid-related disruption to their plans, with less than 1% of UK travel insurance policies providing people with full, comprehensive cover for covid-related disruption. In view of those concerns, will the Secretary of State undertake to have discussions with the travel insurance industry to ensure that consumers can have confidence that they are appropriately covered in the event of disruption to their travel plans?

Grant Shapps: I want to be clear with the House: it has involved some cajoling—that is what I would describe it as—to ensure that the travel industry is in the right place more times than not. I am aware of the Which? report that the hon. Lady refers to. I am also aware that the competition authorities have been looking at this and, in the case of one or two of the larger airlines, have taken action. It is very important—I hope that she will accept this—that the Government are very much on the side of consumers, and we want to see flexibility in the system. That is why we backed the ATOL system for vouchers to be accepted, to make it easier both for travellers and for the industry, and we will do everything we possibly can to assist. I am very happy to accept the hon. Lady's offer and arrange for the Aviation Minister, and perhaps the appropriate Ministers across Government, to meet her and discuss this issue with her.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I warmly welcome this announcement. It will bring much relief to companies such as Travel the Globe, a very successful travel business based in my constituency that has struggled over the last 18 months of uncertainty, and to families and individuals hoping to travel and reunite with family. However, given that double-vaccination is key to unlocking international travel, what message does my right hon. Friend have for those who are still yet to book their second jab?

Grant Shapps: One of the things that is important is that people are fully vaccinated. That means with the vaccines we are using at the moment—two jabs—and then waiting for 14 days, they will be able to use the new dispensation we have announced today on amber list travel and not have to quarantine. The message is simple: if you have not booked your second vaccination and have had your first, please book. If you have not booked your first, book that. We have reduced the waiting time to eight weeks for those under 40. Please use this as the reason to get on the website and get yourself booked in for that second jab.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Government made some major mistakes on our borders last year, but it is right that we move forward in a pragmatic and sensible way now in light of the success of the vaccine roll-out. I have heard from many constituents working in the travel industry in Cardiff South and Penarth in many small travel companies who have been hit hard by this crisis and want to see international travel resume in a safe way. Can the Secretary of State just be absolutely clear about the situation for residents in Wales? He says that UK residents who are fully vaccinated through the UK vaccine roll-out will not have to quarantine if they come back to England. Obviously, we will expect announcements in due course from the devolved Administrations about their own ports and airports, but is it correct that Welsh residents coming back into a UK airport—Heathrow or somewhere like that—will not have to quarantine?

Grant Shapps: Yes, I do want to stress that this is an announcement that I am making for England, but we are working closely with the devolved Administrations. There is, of course, only one international airport in Wales, which is Cardiff. I very much look forward to the Administration there coming to their own conclusions. They will also need to describe what happens, as was the case when we had country changes on and off the corridor list, to travellers who come to an English airport and then wish to travel across the border. I am sure that between the hon. Gentleman and I we can convince them to do the right thing, get on board with this, and enable both the English and the Welsh to travel with ease.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP) [V]: I apologise to the Secretary of State if I missed it, but I did not hear one word in his statement about the international cruise ship industry, an industry which has now fulfilled the Government's request for a crisis workshop with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and has taken the extraordinary step of agreeing to a memorandum of understanding on repatriation. Can he reassure the international cruise ship industry that, as he talks about increasing traffic between international airports and opening the international economy, he will not neglect that industry and the 88,000-plus UK jobs that are reliant on it?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to stress the importance of the cruise industry and he will be pleased when I tell him that that these moves do include cruises from 19 July. Indeed, we have enabled cruise ships to sail already with up to 50% capacity, where people have been double vaccinated. So yes, they are included, but I do have to say to the hon. Gentleman that it is a frustration that we have been allowing cruise ships in English waters, but that they have been banned from docking at Scottish ports for the past month or two. If he really wants to help those 80,000 people employed by the cruise sector, maybe he can start by talking to the Scottish Government about that.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con) [V]: I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement today and I am listening very carefully to his answers. May I ask

him just to clarify two of those answers? First, in regard to the amber list review, if one country is on the amber list on 31 July, by implication it will still be on the amber list until 1 October—is that correct? Secondly, given that VeriFLY and the EU digital travel passport are already in place, how quickly does he expect the UK to be able to join schemes to allow all foreign fully vaccinated travellers to come to the UK?

Grant Shapps: I must caution the House and everybody listening that of course it is the case that, while opening up today and making these announcements, an amber list country could in theory switch to being a red list country. I can provide my hon. Friend no such guarantee that from July to October there may not be changes. There could be. None the less, I think most realise by this stage that the path of the coronavirus is unpredictable and I hope that this double vaccination measure provides some reassurance. It can change quickly and I want to reassure him that we will always act to the best benefit of people securing their health going forward.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Will he consider issuing separate guidance for business travellers who have multiple short visits abroad? It is self-evident that they cannot take a test three days before returning if they have only a one or two-day visit, so given that many business travellers will undertake such visits, will he issue that guidance? Can he also give a commitment to publish the criteria on which the decision to place a country on the green, amber or red list is taken? If the travel industry knew what the criteria were and the methodology, it would have an idea of the direction of travel rather than having sudden events and deadlines imposed upon it.

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention the case of, for example, a business traveller who might go from A to B to C. One of the things that is little noticed is that a test is up to day 2—it is not a day 2 test per se. It might be helpful, though, if I were to write to him in more detail about the application and how that would work under this new system with regard to, for example, somebody travelling for business to many different places.

Finally, I am pleased to tell him that on the gov.uk website, the methodology for the Joint Biosecurity Centre is already set out. It does include subsections of a number of different criteria that apply. I often hear people say, "X country has fewer cases than we do, so why aren't they on the green list?" The answer is probably that they are not sequencing their genome, they are not uploading it to the GISAID internationally recognised format, and perhaps they are not vaccinating people at quite the rate that we have. There are many different factors, but they are all set out by the JBC.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, and I suspend the House for a few minutes to make arrangements for the next business.

12.36 pm

Sitting suspended.

Afghanistan

12.38 pm

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): With permission, I will make a statement on the UK's policy towards Afghanistan. Twenty years ago, Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda leadership had turned Afghanistan into the epicentre of global terrorism, where, in the words of the author Ahmed Rashid:

"everything was available—training, funding, communications and inspiration."

It was in the mountain ranges of this sanctuary that al-Qaeda operated a formidable network of terrorist training camps, drilling and indoctrinating thousands of recruits. The terrorists who acquired their murderous skills in Afghanistan or who were organised from its soil dispersed across the world, inflicting bloodshed and tragedy on three continents. They detonated truck bombs in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998, killing 224 people. They attacked the USS Cole in Aden in 2000, killing 17 people, and then they perpetrated their most heinous atrocity, claiming almost 3,000 lives in New York, Pennsylvania and Washington on 11 September 2001.

Today, thankfully, the situation is very different. The training camps have been destroyed. What remains of al-Qaeda's leadership no longer resides in Afghanistan and no terrorist attacks against western targets have been mounted from Afghan soil since 2001. We should never lose sight of those essential facts.

On the morning after 11 September, few would have predicted that no more terrorist attacks on that scale would be launched from Afghanistan in the next 20 years. Those gains were achieved by an American-led military intervention mounted with overwhelming international support, including troops from dozens of countries, and the first and only invoking of NATO's article 5 security guarantee. We can take pride that Britain was part of that effort from the beginning.

Over the past two decades, 150,000 members of our armed forces have served in Afghanistan, mainly in Helmand province, which was, from 2006 onwards, a focus of our operation. In the unforgiving desert of some of the world's harshest terrain, and shoulder to shoulder with the Afghan security forces, our servicemen and women sought to bring development and stability. The House will join me in commending their achievements and paying heartfelt tribute to the 457 British service personnel who laid down their lives in Afghanistan to keep us safe.

We always acted in the closest partnership with the Government and the people of Afghanistan, and we owe an immense debt to the translators and other locally employed staff who risked their lives alongside British forces. We have already helped more than 1,500 former Afghan staff and their families to begin new lives here in the UK. This year, we adopted a new policy offering priority relocation to the UK to any current or former locally employed staff assessed to be under serious threat to their lives, together with their close families.

British diplomats and development experts worked alongside our allies to rebuild the country, opening schools and clinics where there had been none and bringing safe water and electricity to millions of people for the first time. No one who lives in comfort, as we do, should underestimate the importance of their advances.

In Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, virtually no girls attended school. They were, as a matter of declared policy, driven from the classroom and forbidden from returning. Today, 3.6 million girls are going to school in Afghanistan, seizing their chance to escape from illiteracy and poverty. The Girls' Education Challenge fund, established by the British Government, has helped more than a quarter of a million Afghan girls into the classroom.

Our priority now must be to work alongside our Afghan and other partners to preserve those vital gains and the legacy of what has been achieved. Under the Taliban, women were excluded from governance. Today, women hold more than a quarter of the seats in Afghanistan's Parliament. Since 2002, more than 5 million refugees have returned to Afghanistan under the UN's voluntary repatriation programme, aided by the fact that Britain, the UN and our Afghan and international partners have together cleared more than 8.4 million landmines or other unexploded munitions, restoring 340,000 acres of land for productive use. In 2018, Herat province was declared clear of mines after 10 years of painstaking work by the HALO Trust, based in Dumfriesshire, in a UK-funded programme.

No one should doubt the gains of the past 20 years, but nor can we shrink from the hard reality of the situation today. The international military presence in Afghanistan was never intended to be permanent. We and our NATO allies were always going to withdraw our forces. The only question was when, and there could never be a perfect moment. As long ago as 2014, the UK ceased all combat operations and brought the great majority of our troops home, reorienting our role and our involvement. About 750 service personnel stayed in Afghanistan under NATO's mission to train and assist the country's security forces. Last year, the US decided to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, while the Taliban undertook to prevent

"any group or individual, including al-Qaeda, from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies".

President Biden announced in April that all American forces would leave by September at the latest, and the NATO summit declared last month that the alliance's military operations in Afghanistan were "coming to an end". As a result, all British troops assigned to NATO's mission in Afghanistan are now returning home. For obvious reasons, I will not disclose the timetable of our departure, but I can tell the House that most of our personnel have already left.

I hope that no one will leap to the false conclusion that the withdrawal of our forces somehow means the end of Britain's commitment to Afghanistan. We are not about to turn away, nor are we under any illusions about the perils of today's situation and what may lie ahead. We always knew that supporting Afghanistan would be a generational undertaking, and we were equally clear that the instruments in our hands would change over time. Now we shall use every diplomatic and humanitarian lever to support Afghanistan's development and stability. We will back the Afghan state with more than £100 million of development assistance this year and £58 million for the Afghan national security and defence forces.

We will of course continue to work alongside our Afghan partners against the terrorist threat. Our diplomats are doing everything they can to support a lasting peace settlement within Afghanistan, and they are working

[*The Prime Minister*]

for regional stability, particularly by promoting better relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Here I commend General Carter, the Chief of the Defence Staff, for his steadfast efforts.

I spoke to President Ghani on 17 June to assure him of the UK's commitment, and I was moved once again to hear his tribute to the British soldiers who strove so hard to give the Afghan people better lives. We must be realistic about our ability alone to influence the course of events. It will take combined efforts of many nations, including Afghanistan's neighbours, to help the Afghan people to build their future, but the threat that brought us to Afghanistan in the first place has been greatly diminished by the valour and by the sacrifice of the armed forces of Britain and many other countries. We are safer because of everything they did. Now, we must persevere alongside our friends for the same goal of a stable Afghanistan, but with different tools in our hands. I commend this statement to the House.

12.47 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement. First, may I give my apologies on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition, who is on a long-planned visit to meet political leaders in Northern Ireland? May I also associate myself with the Prime Minister's comments regarding British service personnel and the collective efforts of our partners in NATO?

This is a profound moment for the more than 150,000 UK personnel who have served in Afghanistan during the past 20 years, including my hon. Friends the Members for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) and for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) and many more Members across this House. My own brother served in the British armed forces during that period, too, so I know how it feels to say goodbye to a loved one before a tour of duty. Thankfully, I do not know how it feels not to see your loved one come home again, and the pain that those families have gone through is unimaginable. Hundreds of British men and women lost their lives in the service of our country. Many more were wounded or injured and still suffer the physical and emotional scars. They have shown extraordinary bravery, skill and courage so today, to everyone who served in Afghanistan and to all who loved them and supported them, we say a huge thank you.

There have been moments of huge difficulty in the past two decades, and the situation on the ground in Afghanistan today is more concerning than it has been at any point in many years. That must not take away from the many positives our engagement has brought to Afghanistan and the real difference our services and development sector have made in a country that has suffered so much. We have supported improvements in security, governance, economic development and, as the Prime Minister said, advancing the rights of women and education for girls. Yet these gains have not been secured; the Taliban are making gains on the ground, and serious questions remain about the future stability of Afghanistan.

A security threat remains to the wider world, including to the UK. Nobody wants to see British troops permanently stationed in Afghanistan, but we simply cannot wash our hands or walk away. It is hard to see a future

without bloodier conflict and wider Taliban control. Already, they are on the brink of gaining control of provincial capitals, and Afghan security forces are at risk of being overwhelmed. This spells jeopardy for the Afghan people, particularly for Afghan women and girls—and for all the things the Prime Minister talked about earlier—who in a just world would have had the same rights as women everywhere deserve.

In the words of the Prime Minister, this is a situation fraught with risk, and I understand that. So can he tell us whether he argued for or against the withdrawal by the US Government and NATO, and what other steps he proposed? Our British troops made enormous sacrifices and we believe, as a nation, that we have a responsibility to our veterans. Can the Prime Minister really tell them that our work as a nation in Afghanistan is done and that their efforts will not be in vain? On their behalf, I ask the Prime Minister: what plans are now in place to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a failed state and a breeding ground for those who wish to oppress their own citizens and threaten ours? What additional threat does our country now face? What diplomatic plans will be in place in the region to support the peace process? Are the UK Government engaging with the Government of Pakistan about their role? Will the UK embassy in Kabul remain? How will we keep our UK staff there safe?

Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world, yet our aid funding to that country is being cut by more than £100 million—the Prime Minister referred to this today. The UK funded a project involving 6,000 women that has already been cancelled. When he visited Kabul as the Foreign Secretary he said that girls' education was our "crowning achievement", so can he tell the House what impact his cuts to the aid budget will have on programmes there? Will he not rethink those cuts?

I reiterate that we all want to see an end to UK military operations in Afghanistan, but if we leave without putting a plan in place to ensure that Afghanistan does not go back to the conflict and violence of the past, we will have failed those who have given so much over the past 20 years. Building and maintaining the peace and prosperity of Afghanistan, protecting women and girls, and in turn protecting our own nation, should always be our priority. To honour the legacy of those who have served and the lives that were lost, let us make sure, Prime Minister, that we get this right.

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady for what she said and particularly the spirit in which she said it, so let me try to address some of her points. It is clear that what is happening now is a follow-up to what was very largely the withdrawal—the end of military operations—in 2014. The presence since then has been much smaller, but a great deal of good work has continued to be done by British aid workers, the British armed forces and British diplomats.

The right hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the work of educating girls and young women. The whole country can be proud of what has been achieved. I reassure her by saying that this country will not only continue to fund education in Afghanistan and continue to support Afghanistan to the tune of £100 million, but we will also increase our funding for the Global Partnership

for Education. We will be making further announcements about that later this month, when the Global Partnership for Education summit takes place here in London.

The right hon. Lady asks the most important question that I think veterans of the Afghan conflict will want to have answered, which is whether we think that the threat from Afghanistan has now been reduced. The answer is yes, we do think the threat from al-Qaeda is very substantially lower than it was in 2001. There remain threats from Islamic State Khorasan and the Haqqani network—of course there remain terrorist threats from Afghanistan—but the answer is to have a peaceful and a negotiated solution and that is what our diplomats will continue to work for.

I would just say to the Taliban that they have made the commitment that I read out to the House, in their negotiations with General Khalilzad. They must abide by that commitment. I am sure they will be aware that there is no military path to victory for the Taliban. There must be a peaceful and a negotiated settlement for the political crisis in Afghanistan, and the UK will continue to work to ensure that that takes place. I believe that can happen—I do not believe that the Taliban are guaranteed the kind of victory that we sometimes read about.

The UK will continue to exert all its diplomatic and political efforts to ensure that there is a better future for the people of Afghanistan, for the women of Afghanistan and for the young people growing up in Afghanistan, and to ensure that the legacy of the 150,000 British serving men and women who went through Afghanistan and, above all, the 457 who laid down their lives, is properly honoured.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): May I first say thank you to the Prime Minister for coming and giving this statement himself? This is an enormously personal issue for me. I did not meet the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) here or in any of the clubs or think-tanks around Westminster—I met him about 20 miles to the west of Garmsir in the desert, as we were fighting side by side against the enemies the Prime Minister has just listed. The achievements he listed were won with the blood of my friends. I can point him to the graves where they now lay.

That legacy is now in real doubt—we know that and we know that it is not just the Prime Minister's decision and that the US decision to withdraw forces was fundamental here. But can he explain to me how Britain's foreign policy works in a country like Afghanistan? If persistence is not persistent, if endurance does not endure, how can people trust us as an ally? How can people look at us as a friend?

The situation reminds me not of Vietnam, but of Germany in 1950, at a time when we could have walked away. We could have said, "It is too expensive; it is too difficult to rebuild. Let's let Stalin have it and see what happens." But we did not. We stayed and, in doing so, we liberated the whole of Europe peacefully.

Now I understand that it is hard to do that and I understand it demands a lot. The integrated review set out a really impressive strategy and it was not just summarised with the three words, "God bless America".

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the whole House will want to thank my hon. Friend for his service in Afghanistan and for all the good that he did with his

fellow serving men and women in Afghanistan, but as I think he conceded in his question, what the UK has been able to do in Afghanistan has not been possible through our efforts alone. We have to work with others, and of course the United States plays a massive role in these considerations.

I wish to reassure my hon. Friend and the House that we are not walking away; I made that point absolutely clear to President Ghani on 17 June. I say to the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner)—I should have answered this point—that we are keeping our embassy in Kabul. We will continue to work with our friends and allies, and particularly with the Government of Pakistan, to try to bring a settlement and to try to ensure that the Taliban understand that there can be no military path to victory. There must be a negotiated solution. That is what the British Government will continue to do, and that is very largely what we have been doing since 2014.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). We should listen very carefully to what he had to say on behalf of himself, other Members of this House who have served in Afghanistan, and indeed those all through these islands who went to that country—those who sadly lost their lives, those who were injured in the conflict and the many who were maimed for the rest of their life.

Let me thank the Prime Minister for coming to the House and for advance sight of his statement. It is an important statement and, of course, it is largely about national security. Let me state that I think that there is an obligation on all of us on the Opposition Benches to work constructively and to be a critical support to what we are seeking to achieve. In that spirit, I commend the Prime Minister and his office for agreeing to Privy Council meetings for the Leader of the Opposition and for us, because it is important that we are as informed as we should be in order that we can play our role in scrutinising the Government but supporting them where appropriate.

While there would have been no question of the UK realistically maintaining a presence unilaterally in Afghanistan, there is no point in pretending that the vacuum created by the accelerated withdrawal of US and allied forces has done anything but create instability. We know that the departure of the remaining western forces from Afghanistan has emboldened Taliban insurgents. In recent days, the Taliban have seized several districts, and they have made it clear that they expect any western forces left behind—even those guarding Kabul airport or embassies—to be a violation of the Doha deal.

It is the stability of the country and the humanitarian interests of Afghans that should be foremost in the mind of the leaders who have had operations in that country. A situation in which violent extremism and fundamentalism return to the heart of political life in Afghanistan would be dire for Afghans, as well as for our allies in the region and beyond.

In the past hours, we have seen the fightback intensify, both from Afghani Government troops and from civilians. In a stark reminder of what is at stake, thousands of women have protested in the streets for the freedoms that they know the Taliban will deny them. All they want is what we want: a more open Afghanistan that is

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a better place for women for its future, instead of going back to the senseless cruelty of the past. For those reasons, it is utterly inexplicable that we have cut aid spending in this country. That hinders any progress in rooting out extremism and abuses against women or in protecting human rights.

May I ask the Prime Minister what general assessment has been made as to any potential security implications of the developments in Afghanistan? What are the implications of any threats from al-Qaeda and Islamic State? What measures will be taken by the UK Government to protect the UK's diplomatic presence in Kabul?

Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to pay respects on behalf of my party to the families of the 457 British troops whose lives were lost in Afghanistan. I am sure that many of them will be following the proceedings in this House and the actions taken by the Government. They will be asking questions to make sure that there is a lasting legacy to the sacrifices that were made by so many.

The Prime Minister: Again, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the spirit and the content of his remarks. On the substance of his questions to me, our assessment is that the threat from Afghanistan to this country has very substantially diminished as a result of the actions by the UK and our friends over the last 20 years, although clearly a threat remains, and the extent of that threat will now depend on exactly what happens. To come to his points about the Taliban, their intentions and the progress that they are making, I think it is true that the Taliban are making rapid progress in rural areas, but that does not mean that they are guaranteed a victory in the whole of Afghanistan or across the urban areas of Afghanistan, where, as he points out, there is lively resistance to what they have to offer and their view of the way things should be. That is why this Government, through all our agencies—diplomatic, political, development and otherwise—will continue to work for a negotiated settlement, particularly with regional actors such as Pakistan. I believe that is the best way forward for Afghanistan. There must be a settlement and it will have to—I think we must be realistic about this—include the Taliban.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con) [V]: Decisions do not come any bigger for a Prime Minister than to send our armed forces to war, but when an overseas operation lasts two decades, costs hundreds of British lives, billions of pounds to the taxpayer and ends in retreat, it would be a dereliction of duty not to ask what went so wrong. We now abandon the country to the fate of the very insurgent organisation we went in to defeat in the first place. I say to the Prime Minister that, if we do not learn the lessons of failing to appreciate Afghan history, the folly of imposing western solutions, the delays in training Afghan security forces and denying the Taliban a place at the table back in December 2001, we are likely to repeat similar mistakes. I ask the Prime Minister: please conduct a formal inquiry.

The Prime Minister: I must caution my right hon. Friend that I do not think that is the right way forward at this stage. He calls this a retreat. This was never intended, at any stage, to be an open-ended commitment or engagement by UK armed services in Afghanistan.

There was no intention for us to remain there forever. As the House knows, Operation Herrick concluded in 2014. At that stage, the Army conducted a thorough internal review of the lessons that needed to be learned. Those were incorporated into the integrated review of our security and defence strategy that was published earlier this year. Given the length of such inquiries—I think the Chilcot inquiry went on for seven years and cost many millions of pounds—I do not think that this is necessary at this stage. I think that the Government should rather focus our efforts on ensuring that we do everything we can to secure the prosperity, the peace and the stability of the people of Afghanistan and that is what we will do.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD) [V]: Can I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to the role our armed forces have played in Afghanistan, and especially remember the 450 men and women who laid down their lives and the many more who sustained lifelong injuries? We are grateful to them, and remember them and their families.

The Prime Minister rightly says that our country retains a responsibility to the people of Afghanistan, so with Afghan soldiers trained by allied forces surrendering all too frequently, with some analysts predicting that the Taliban are probably only months away from taking Kabul, with a new era of injustice, inequality and brutality facing the women and girls of Afghanistan, and with the potential for a new vector of international terrorism forming across Afghanistan, can the Prime Minister explain with far more substance how the British Government plan to work with our international partners to fulfil the responsibility he accepts we still have to the Afghan people?

The Prime Minister: Yes. We are going to continue to support the Afghan national security and defence forces, as I pledged to President Ghani, with at least another £58 million. We are working with the regional actors, particularly Pakistan. The right hon. Gentleman knows that the Pakistan security services have a very considerable influence in Afghanistan. We are working with the Pakistani Government and with the Taliban to ensure that there is progress towards a negotiated solution. As I am sure he knows, in Kabul, there are many actors and there is a very fractured political scene. The UK Government know all those actors well. It is essential that they work together for a negotiated settlement and for the long-term future of Afghanistan, and that is what we will do.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for coming to the House to make this statement. I agree that we clearly owe a debt of honour to the members of our armed forces, many of whom have lost their lives or been badly maimed, who have done their country proud in what they have delivered: education for women; clinics and healthcare; and freedoms that were not there before under the Taliban. He said in his statement, however:

“I hope that no one will leap to the false conclusion that the withdrawal of our forces somehow means the end of Britain's commitment to Afghanistan”.

So I have a very simple question for him: how far does that commitment extend? If the Taliban take over and take away the women's rights to education, do we

intervene? If they take away the rights and freedoms that we gave them, do we intervene? If they end up killing and maiming more people in Afghanistan and allowing terrorist organisations in, do we intervene? As one veteran said to me literally 48 hours ago, this begins to look a little bit like the last days of Vietnam, an unprecedented and hurried exit with no commitment. Are we committed?

The Prime Minister: Yes, as I said in my answers to the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne and other Members who have effectively asked the same question, the circumstances in 2001 when this country went into Afghanistan were quite exceptional. NATO's article 5 of mutual appeal for defence was invoked by our American friends. That is why we went in and it was a quite exceptional moment.

Since then, in the last 20 years, we have achieved a very great deal—an increase in life expectancy in Afghanistan, from 56 to 64 years, and the education of women, as has been mentioned—and we will continue through development assistance and by other means to do whatever we can for the long-term future of Afghanistan. But, as my right hon. Friend knows, the fundamental military decision to cease Operation Herrick was the turning point. What we are going to do now is use our best endeavours, our best efforts, all our political engagement, to produce a negotiated settlement and to produce a stable future for Afghanistan.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind) [V]: This has to be a day of reflection. We have spent billions of pounds in the war in Afghanistan, 450 British troops have lost their lives, thousands of Americans and other troops have lost their lives, many, many thousands of Afghan people have lost their lives and many more have been forced to be refugees in exile all around the region as well as in western Europe. Surely we need to think about this very carefully. It is disappointing that the Prime Minister appeared to reject calls for an inquiry at the Liaison Committee yesterday and appeared to reject the request for an inquiry made by the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) today. May I ask him to think again about that? Surely we need an inquiry into how such a decision came around to go into Afghanistan in the first place, and now the withdrawal from Afghanistan and of course the chaos that is being left behind.

The Prime Minister will have noted that some talks are going on, which have been cautiously welcomed by the United States, in Tehran between the Afghan Government and the Taliban. He will also have noted that there are large numbers of Afghan refugees now in Tajikistan as well as in Pakistan.

What efforts will the Prime Minister be making to try to ensure that there is not a descent into civil war but some kind of diplomatic initiative at least to bring about security for the people of Afghanistan, and obviously that includes the entire population, particularly those children who have suffered so much and those women who have been so grievously discriminated against in that country?

While Britain is withdrawing, surely we need to recognise that when we make hasty foreign policy decisions to go to war, the consequences go on for a very long time. In this case, it is now the 20th anniversary of such a decision.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. I am of course aware of what is happening in Tehran and the contacts that are taking place, and the role of the UK Government is to promote dialogue. I have said what I have said about the Taliban and the reality of the situation that Afghanistan finds itself in. I do not think that the Taliban are capable of victory by military means, a point I have made several times. The UK will work, principally through our friends in Pakistan but also with other actors on the ground in Kabul, to try to bring about a settlement that works for Afghanistan.

On the right hon. Gentleman's question about an inquiry, I repeat what I have said to several colleagues. I do not think that another Chilcot-style inquiry is called for at this stage, particularly given that the fundamental decision to end Op Herrick was taken in 2014, which is now a long time ago. What I think the House can always consider is whether the Defence Committee, for instance, wishes to investigate it themselves.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Having been in Afghanistan many times, I add my very sincere tribute to our armed forces, the civilian support, the non-governmental organisations and all those who risked, and sometimes sacrificed, life and limb to give the people of Afghanistan a better future. What discussions has he had with our international partners, particularly the United States, on how we will monitor and react if the hard-won gains that we made, including on the rights of women, roll backwards under the brutal, medieval influence of the Taliban, and perhaps even—God forbid—the re-emergence of a terrorist threat?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend, who knows a great deal about Afghanistan and the problems it faces. Of course, we have raised repeatedly with our American friends and other NATO colleagues the legacy that we wish to preserve in Afghanistan, particularly the gains made for women, and they understand that. In all candour, I must be honest and say that I do not think that the military options open to us are very great, and I think that people need to recognise that, to return to the point I made to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). But we will do whatever we can diplomatically and politically to get a realistic lasting solution for Afghanistan.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Yesterday the Prime Minister told the Liaison Committee that he was apprehensive about the future of Afghanistan and that the situation was fraught with risks—a sentiment shared by many Afghans, who fear that the gains of which he has spoken so eloquently today, such as girls' education and democracy, may be lost. After two decades and the sacrifice of so many British lives, whose loss we mourn today and always, why is he so confident that the Taliban will never again allow any part of Afghanistan—because they control some parts already—to be used by terrorist forces, including ISIS, as a base from which to attack this country and others of our allies?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Obviously, the Taliban have for several years now controlled a considerable part of Afghanistan, as he knows, and it is during that period that we have not seen terrorist operations launched

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against the wider world. What may weigh on the Taliban's minds as they think about whether to allow the Khorasan province group, the Haqqani network or al-Qaeda to return and re-form in the way that they were there in the past, and to act outside Afghanistan, is that they should remember what happened last time.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It sounds from that as if the Prime Minister is saying that if those groups go down that route again, there could be another military intervention. Does he accept that a fanatical brand of Islamist terrorism, sheltered and supported by the Taliban extremists, has not only attacked the west before but is highly likely to do so again? He mentioned that the military operations route is not great, but rather than veering from occupation to evacuation and back again in a few years' time, will he now commission a study of an alternative containment strategy involving selective strikes with allies from strategic bases, to prevent a total terrorist takeover of Afghanistan?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. Afghanistan was never occupied, and nor is this an evacuation. What we will certainly look at—I think this is the point he was getting at—in addition to working with our friends and partners in the region is to what extent counter-terrorist activity can be conducted from outside Afghanistan on an outside-in basis.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister very much for coming and making this difficult and important statement to the House today. I thank him also for what he said about the contribution that has been made by the Girls' Education Challenge fund, which we set up in 2010 and which has been responsible for the education of millions of girls in Afghanistan. It seems to me that his statement eloquently makes clear the limits of hard power and the importance of soft power. I take it that that was one of the things he was referring to at the end of his statement when he spoke about the different tools for the future. It is soft power that will now help the Afghan state to survive and hopefully deliver for its people, so I hope he will not think it unreasonable of me to ask him to look again at the recent extraordinary decision to cut our development spending in Afghanistan by £200 million.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend. I know that this is a subject that he has returned to many times in this House, and I understand how deeply he feels about it and how much he understands it. It is still the case that we were the third biggest bilateral donor to Afghanistan last year. We are committing a further £100 million per year to the people of Afghanistan, plus the military and logistical support for the Afghan national security and defence forces. I think most people in this country understand that, after giving £3.2 billion in development assistance to Afghanistan over the past 10 years, we are in tough financial times here in the UK, and that it remains a remarkable thing and a matter of pride that the UK is able to continue to support the people of Afghanistan in the way that we are.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab) [V]: I would like to thank the Prime Minister for recognising the amazing work that aid workers have done to date in Afghanistan.

I would like to quote from the Government's own development tracker website, which today states:

"Almost 40 years of conflict has left Afghanistan one of the poorest and most fragile countries in the world. Creating a more stable environment will help reduce poverty and make progress towards the Global Goals. It will also reduce threats to the UK from violence and extremism, and discourage illegal migration."

Our funding for aid to Afghanistan has fallen dramatically. In 2019-20, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office spent £244 million and the conflict, stability and security fund spent an additional £48 million. Last year, we spent over £170 million, and this year £100 million has been committed. At the very moment that we are withdrawing troops, therefore, we are also cutting the aid that helps maintain stability in the country. How does this keep us safe or, indeed, build on the investment we have already made through our development work?

The Prime Minister: This country remains, as I have just told the House, one of the biggest bilateral donors of aid to Afghanistan in the world. The people of this country should take great pride in that. A statistic I did not mention earlier, to get back to the hon. Lady's earlier point, is that, partly thanks to the work of UK aid and the whole NATO mission, mortality for women and children in Afghanistan has fallen faster than in any other low-income country.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con) [V]: First, I pay tribute to and thank all those who served in Afghanistan so professionally and courageously. May I press my right hon. Friend on the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) by asking him how we, the UK and our allies, can now physically stop Afghanistan from once again becoming a haven for international terrorism? Let us not be naïve: the Taliban are back and all the horrors associated with them.

The Prime Minister: A couple of quick points. It is important for my hon. Friends not to exaggerate our ability, by military might alone, to stop parts of Afghanistan already being used for terrorist purposes if that were what the Taliban desired to do, given that they already possess substantial portions of that country. It is also the case that there are many other parts of the world that can be used as a base for international terrorism. What we propose to do is continue to work with our friends to look at an outside-in approach to counterterrorism, and to work with regional actors to ensure we have a solution in Kabul that prevents that country lurching back into becoming a haven for terrorism in the way that he describes. As I have told the House, I do not think that that will necessarily be easy, but it is by no means impossible and the hope is certainly there.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for coming to the Chamber to make a statement. He noted the importance of the Afghanistan nation, with which we have worked so hard together to create real change. In 2012, I had the opportunity to visit Afghanistan on behalf of my party. At that time, I was able to meet some of the Irish Guards and the Royal Irish Regiment. Some who served were my constituents. Some gave their lives and some were injured as a result—the sacrifice of many of our brave service personnel in lives lost and injuries. I have a photograph in my office taken at that time of Afghan national army recruits at their

training college. I was very impressed by their courage and bravery. There is a real fear that Afghanistan will feel our loss too deeply. What discussions have taken place with the USA and other interested allies to ensure that there are enough munitions, physical support, help, advice and guidance required for the future of our friends, all citizens and allies in Afghanistan?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman and join him in paying tribute to the sacrifice of all serving men and women of the Irish Guards, the Royal Irish Regiment, as well as all those who sacrificed their lives in Afghanistan, and everything they did to protect the people of that country. As he knows, the UK helped to train about 5,500 officers in the Afghan security and defence forces. We will continue to invest in them, with £58 million a year in the way that I described. We will, of course, be doing that in concert with our American friends and allies.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con) [V]: Three years ago I had the privilege of visiting Afghanistan and seeing the Welsh Guards in action. It is fair to say that the threats they faced and the risks they overcame were simply humbling. Their efforts helped many who otherwise would not have done so to receive an education, and the makings of a civic society were brought together. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to them? Does he agree that the best way to do that is to continue our diplomatic and political focus, as well as continuing to use our generous overseas aid budget in seeking to pay a significant legacy in that part of the world?

The Prime Minister: I share completely the feelings of my right hon. Friend and join him in thanking the men and women of the Welsh Guards and all other armed forces who did so much in so many ways in terms of sanitation, electricity and generally improving the life chances of the people of Afghanistan. We will do whatever we can from now on—diplomatically, politically and with our development budgets—to make sure that we protect the legacy of their achievement.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC) [V]: Now, with over a quarter of a million civilian lives lost, 457 British soldiers dead on Afghanistan's plains, and thousands more at home maimed in body and mind, will the Prime Minister, unlike some of his predecessors, please give me his frank assessment: is the terrorist threat really eliminated, will the Taliban not just reverse the progressive gains of the past 20 years, and were those lives lost and ruined in vain?

The Prime Minister: No, I absolutely do not believe that the sacrifice of British troops over the past 20 years has been in vain. I believe that they are leaving a lasting legacy in Afghanistan. In 20 years, they have helped substantially to reduce the threat of terrorism. As I have told the House candidly, of course that threat has not gone away. We must do everything that we can to ensure that the Taliban stick to their promises—stick to what they have said—but we must also work to ensure that there is a settlement in Afghanistan that is propitious to a new approach and a new settlement for its people, so that there is not the temptation to use that country as a harbour for terrorist operations.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con) [V]: Given the high likelihood that China will now exploit the opportunity presented by the US departure by extending the belt and road initiative, buying off the Taliban and muting their opposition to abuses in Xinjiang, what approach will my right hon. Friend take, with our allies, to the resulting greatly strengthened Beijing-Tehran axis, with all its grisly potential impact on security, prosperity and human rights?

The Prime Minister: The Chinese are not as yet a very major player in Afghanistan, but my right hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is vital that the people of Afghanistan should determine their own future.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) [V]: The armed forces covenant states:

“Those injured in Service, whether physically or mentally, should be cared for in a way which reflects the Nation's moral obligation to them”.

In the north-east we are proud of and grateful to our servicemen and women, but local charities such as Anxious Minds and Forward Assist tell me that mental health support is wholly inadequate. How does the Prime Minister propose to support the mental wellbeing of those returning from service in Afghanistan? Why do his Government not even collect data on how many veterans have committed suicide or experienced post-traumatic stress disorder or other mental problems?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to draw attention to the problems that veterans of conflicts have experienced, particularly the health and mental health problems. Last year we put another £16 million into veterans' health—mental health, in particular—and this year the number has gone up to £17 million. We also want to make sure that we are clear with people signing up for our armed forces that we will respect their service throughout their lives. That is why we instituted the railcard for veterans and the national insurance holiday for employers who take on veterans, we prioritise veterans for social housing, we have set up lotteries for veterans, and we have a Minister for veterans in the form of my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty).

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to the armed forces who have served in Afghanistan. On behalf of my constituents in Wealden, I also pay respect to the 457 lives lost.

I know that the Prime Minister is very dedicated to supporting women and girls. I was in Afghanistan post 9/11, and women and girls are telling me now that under the Taliban, regardless of any peace settlement, they are lambs to the slaughter—schools and clinics will be closed. I believe that President Biden is due to make an announcement and provide safe passage to 2,000 vulnerable women, but with those women leaving I would argue that that will leave a further vacuum of women who are able to carry out education and any medical treatment, which will mean more female lives lost in Afghanistan. What support are we going to give the embassy when the Taliban arrive in Kabul? With the growth of the Taliban and, in their wings, Daesh, there will also be an export of violent extremism, so what strategies are in place to protect our children here who may be brainwashed by violent extremism?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her service in Afghanistan for the BBC World Service. I know that she knows and cares deeply about that country. We will of course work with the Americans and all our NATO allies to achieve the objectives that she sets out, particularly protecting this country against terrorist threats, but also making sure that any settlement that we are able to encourage protects the rights and freedoms of women that have been won partly through the efforts and sacrifice of the British armed services.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement, and join him in thanking all those who have served in Afghanistan and those who have lost their lives.

The Prime Minister was very clear that the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan does not mean that we are not committed to the future of Afghanistan, but, like the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), I just want to be clear about what that commitment is. The Prime Minister says that he wants to negotiate a settlement. I agree with him; everyone does—but over the next few days and months, Afghan security forces are going to come under attack, so will they get access to the logistic, intelligence and air support that they are going to need? I accept that that will not just be delivered by the United Kingdom—it will be a coalition agreement—but we need to have some clarity on that, if we are not going to see the collapse of some of those forces very quickly.

The Prime Minister: I know that the right hon. Gentleman understands the situation very well. It is not open, I do not think, to the Taliban to enforce a military solution, but neither is it open to us—to NATO—to have a military solution. I am sure that he will accept that. What we want is a negotiated settlement; I think that is in the best interests of all parties.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Prime Minister has been given a hard time today and I have a lot of sympathy for him because, given that we have to follow in the wake of the Americans, we have very few cards to play. I give him credit for coming here and taking it on the chin, but this is a catastrophic defeat for the west. It is a very sad day for tens of thousands of British personnel whose life's work may now lie in ruins, and an abandonment of all our friends in Afghanistan. Let us be honest, the Taliban will probably take over large tracts of the country and the rest may be taken over by a warlord, so it is a desperate situation.

Given that we have spent all this money on overseas aid—more than £825 million, I think, in the last four years—and given that we know from our Syrian experience that there is no point in dispensing aid in a completely war-torn country, as it just leads to corruption and disaster, is the Prime Minister prepared to work with our NATO allies to ensure not only that our embassy is protected, but that aid workers are protected and that there is some minimum military force? Otherwise, there is no point in disbursing this aid to Afghanistan; it will just go up in flames.

The Prime Minister: We will do whatever we can to ensure that we protect our diplomatic and development assistance, obviously, but I just do not accept the characterisation that my right hon. Friend has given of what is happening today. After all, the main strategic

decision to end Op Herrick took place in 2014. I believe, actually, that the legacy of UK involvement in Afghanistan is a proud one and will be a lasting one: millions of children educated who would not otherwise have been educated; millions of girls in school who would not otherwise have been in school; the reduction in the terrorist threat for that country for decades; and still the chance, I think, of a political, negotiated settlement involving the Taliban, which is really the only realistic prospect for that country.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is right today that we remember the sacrifices of our troops in Afghanistan. In his statement, the Prime Minister said that 3.6 million girls are now going to school in Afghanistan and that the Girls' Education Challenge fund has helped more than a quarter of a million Afghan girls into the classroom. He said that our priority must be to work alongside our Afghan and other partners to preserve what has already been achieved. In response to the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), he said that there would be an increase in funding for the Global Partnership for Education this year. Will he therefore tell us whether that increase will cover the more than 25% reduction for education for girls in Afghanistan that has already taken place on his watch?

The Prime Minister: I cannot give the hon. Lady the answer to exactly how the increment in the Global Partnership for Education funding will be dispensed around the world, but clearly Afghanistan is a very important recipient country. It is where we can achieve a huge amount and have already achieved a huge amount. We are committing a further £100 million, and we remain the third biggest bilateral donor. Those are facts of which people in this country should be very proud.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): When Tony Blair shamefully led my party into the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, dutifully following Washington, he was fully backed by the Tories, but dissenting voices in this place and millions on the street foresaw the disasters that the wars would unleash. Twenty years on, it is clear that the dissenting voices were right and the British establishment was wrong. The wars took the lives of 50,000 Afghan civilians, more than 1 million Iraqis and 636 British soldiers. They destabilised a whole region, undermined democracy at home and made us all unsafe, and now the Taliban are set to regain power in Afghanistan. Does the Prime Minister agree that those catastrophic wars in Afghanistan and Iraq show the need for a new foreign policy—one that is based on restraint and diplomacy, not military aggression?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, the circumstances in Afghanistan in 2001 demanded action. It was clear that the US had been under attack and article 5 of the NATO treaty was invoked. I believe it was right to take action against that brutal and ruthless terrorist cell that was incubated in Afghanistan. The hon. Lady advocates democracy, but the Taliban had no democracy then and nor did they educate girls in school. If she refuses to see what the soldiers, the men and women of this country, the diplomats and the development officers have done in helping young girls and women in Afghan—if she refuses to see their achievement—I really think she is blind to the facts.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): Didcot in my constituency is the proud home of the 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal and Search Regiment, which played a vital role in our operations in Afghanistan, and sadly lost members along the way. I have other constituents who also lost loved ones during the conflict, so this is doubtless a difficult time for all of them. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the bravery and sacrifice of my constituents and others in our operations in Afghanistan?

The Prime Minister: I do; I pay tribute to their bravery and sacrifice. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), I have been to that cemetery in Kabul, as I am sure many colleagues in this House have, and I have seen the memorials to British soldiers going back decades—the more than 100 years that this country has been involved in trying to bring stability to Afghanistan. I thank the regiment based in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) for what they have done, and I simply want to repeat the burden of my point to the House today: I do not believe that their efforts and sacrifice have been in vain.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab) [V]: The Hazara community in Afghanistan is an extremely vulnerable religious minority, millions of whom already live in constant fear and jeopardy as victims of targeted attacks. Only last month, the Hazara girls school in Kabul was bombed. What are the Government doing to ensure that the Hazaras are provided with adequate protection now that international troops are leaving Afghanistan?

The Prime Minister: I understand the concerns that the hon. Gentleman has. He will understand the limits of what we can do by way of practical direct military action, but that has been the case, as he knows, for several years now. What we can try to do is ensure that there is a settlement in Kabul that protects the rights of all minorities, including the religious minorities that he describes.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: I join the Prime Minister and others in paying tribute to our armed forces who have served in Afghanistan.

My right hon. Friend will be well aware that the primary source of income for the Afghan farmers is the poppy crop. Our allies in the United States took the view of torching the poppy crop because it supplies the illegal drugs trade. Will my right hon. Friend consider that we should instead purchase the poppy crop and use it for beneficial pharmaceutical purposes, rather than allowing it to continue to supply the illegal drugs trade?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his imaginative suggestion; it is one that I actually considered many years ago and researched quite deeply. Unfortunately, the reality is that we would not achieve the result that he suggests. All that would happen is that the farmers in Afghanistan—the Taliban-controlled farmers in particular—would grow not only legal opium for medicinal use but illegal crops, so we would simply have a double market.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) [V]: Good afternoon, Madam Deputy Speaker; greetings from the far north of Scotland.

The Prime Minister has referred to diplomatic and political efforts and to different tools, and, to my delight, he has just referred to the BBC World Service. Does he agree that the BBC World Service is a national treasure and one of the strongest arms of soft power that this country can wield, and that it should be enhanced and used to maximum effect to give succour to our friends in Afghanistan and all over the world?

The Prime Minister: I associate myself completely with the hon. Gentleman's views. I can tell him that that is why we are providing, through the FCDO, almost £95 million more to the BBC World Service this year.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): I place on the record the same thanks as others have for the service and sacrifice of our armed forces who have served in Afghanistan.

As my right hon. Friend said in his statement, we owe the translators and locally employed staff in Afghanistan an enormous debt of gratitude for all the work that they have done in supporting UK armed forces personnel. Does he agree that it is right that we repay those people and help them to begin new lives here, in recognition of everything that they have done in support of our country?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is completely right, and I know that his views are echoed in every corner of this House. We owe those people a huge debt for their bravery, their sacrifice and the risks they have run not just to their own lives, but to the lives of their families. That is why the Afghan relocations and assistance policy addresses those risks and I am proud that, already, 1,500 have been allowed to come safely to this country. I thank everybody involved for the speed and efficiency with which they have been handling those cases.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement.

Point of Order

1.49 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The rules of this House are very clear that any hon. Member visiting another Member's constituency in any official capacity should inform that Member. Indeed, the ministerial code is very clear that Ministers making any official visits to someone's constituency should inform them in time and in advance. This morning, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has visited the New Covent Garden flower market in my Battersea constituency and, disappointingly, his office has not informed me, so I seek your guidance as to how we can ensure that Ministers follow the rules like the rest of us.

Furthermore, I wrote to the Chancellor in May about the problems and the support for traders at the flower market, and I am yet to receive a response despite several attempts to chase his office. I seek your advice on how we can ensure the Chancellor responds to me.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of this point of order. I assume that she has told the Chancellor that she is raising this in the House. She is quite correct; the document called "Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House of Commons" deals with the issue that she has raised. When a Member visits another Member's constituency, expect on a purely private visit, they should take reasonable steps in advance to tell the Member in whose constituency the visit is taking place. That guidance also states that

"failing to do so is regarded by colleagues as very discourteous."

She also refers to the ministerial code and, again, she is correct that paragraph 10.10 states:

"Ministers intending to make an official visit within the United Kingdom must inform in advance, and in good time, the MPs whose constituencies are to be included within the itinerary."

The hon. Lady has made clear her concern. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard that and will feed back the points that she has raised.

I suspend the House for three minutes to make arrangements for the next business.

1.51 pm

Sitting suspended.

Licences and Licensing

1.55 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I apologise for the hoarseness of my voice, but this is what happens when you shout at a television for however long it was. It seemed like an eternity, but it was well worth a shout. I shall be doing exactly the same on Sunday.

I call Victoria Atkins to move the motion.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I beg to move,

That the draft Licensing Act 2003 (2020 UEFA European Championship Licensing Hours) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 7 July, be approved.

It is somehow fitting that you are in the Chair for this particular statutory instrument, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I suspect it may be the most popular statutory instrument of my entire career. It will enable pubs, restaurants and hostels around the country to roll out the barrel and welcome in fans, friends and families to cheer on our great team. These regulations enable them to stay open until 11.15 pm on Sunday. We have tried to give enough time for extra time, to ensure that fans can celebrate wholeheartedly.

The technical description in the Licensing Act 2003 is that we can extend hours for occasions that have "exceptional international, national, or local significance".

I believe all three of those boxes are ticked. Just to give an indication of how much that might mean for our publicans across the country, the British Beer and Pub Association has estimated that 50,000 pints were sold each minute last night, which on my very quick reckoning means an extra two and a quarter million pints in the 45 minutes that we are going to be introducing. *[Interruption.]* Mr Deputy Speaker has just said that most of that was him—I wanted to make sure I got that in *Hansard*.

In conclusion, will you allow me, Mr Deputy Speaker, to mangle the words of our greatest wordsmith, William Shakespeare, in "Henry V"? The game's afoot: Follow your spirit; and upon this charge, Cry, "God for Harry, England and Saint Gareth!"—I mean Saint George.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I don't think we are going to expect a Division on this, are we? I think this will be the most popular motion the Minister has ever moved.

1.57 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab) [V]: It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Lady. I apologise to you and her for not being in the Chamber in person, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I came to St Helens last night to watch the game with my kids. As rare as English football success is, sadly the failure of the west coast main line is all too frequent for us in the north-west, as you will know, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I was unable to be there.

It strikes me as something approaching cruel and unusual punishment to ask an Irishman to support opening pubs for longer hours, but only on the basis that England are in the final and could win the Euros. Of course I and the Labour party are delighted to give

our wholehearted support not just to the order, but to Gareth Southgate, Harry Kane and the entire squad. If I might be allowed to abuse my position on the Front Bench, I particularly want to say how proud I am that Conor Coady from Haydock in my constituency is in the squad. I know that his family and the whole local community are right behind him.

I do not intend to detain the House or strike any discordant note, but I would just like to ask the Minister a few questions. Will she ensure that local licensing teams, alongside the police and businesses themselves, have all the information and support they require to prepare for Sunday? Will she also ensure consistency in the Government's messaging in relation to coronavirus regulations and the need for us all to continue to meet our obligations to each other and be responsible, while of course also enjoying the fun we have missed so much over the past 16 or 17 months?

Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to pubs, clubs, bars and the wider hospitality sector for their heroic efforts of late? Is it not great to see them back at the heart of our communities, being the place where we share, together with friends and neighbours, the ups and downs of life, love and the world? Will she also do us a favour and ask her colleagues who have been boycotting the England games to stick steadfastly to their principles and ensure that they do not jinx the team on Sunday by switching from the reruns of "Murder, She Wrote" on ITV4 to the biggest game that the country has seen in 55 years?

I want to say something serious about England and this team, because what has happened over the past few weeks goes way beyond football. Since I came here almost 20 years ago, this country has been very, very good to me; I have made my life here and I have been given incredible opportunities. I think that these young men and their manager are the best of England and everything I have experienced. In fact, they are the best of life itself. They are inspiring all generations, through not only their skill and success, but their values and example. We salute them and we wish them well. In conclusion, it is a pleasure to support this legislation, which means that for millions of people watching the

game in pubs across the country on Sunday, when football comes home, they will have a little more time to celebrate before they have to.

2 pm

Victoria Atkins: It gives me great pleasure to respond to the hon. Gentleman. I am sorry that he is not here in person, but he has been causing those on the Government Benches to chuckle away at his many comments. First, I am happy to confirm that the police, the National Police Chiefs' Council, the Local Government Association and the British Beer and Pub Association have been working, alongside UKHospitality, to develop guidance for licensees screening the tournament, very much to help venues make sure that we all end up having a great time on Sunday and celebrating, we hope, together in a safe way. On his other comments, I am going to leave it to his imagination as to whether or not I agree with him on certain points, but I would say that as a mum of a very excited nine-year-old last night I know that mums and dads across the country will be trying to contain young children, as well as perhaps those of an older age, on Sunday night to ensure that we all have a great time. The team were a superb example of sportsmanship and talent last night. They are an absolute credit to our country and we will all be willing them on, whether we are in the pub or not, on Sunday night.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Rather similar to Conor McGinn, this proud Welshman was wearing an England T-shirt last night, cheering on Harry and the team, and consuming some of the beer. As honorary president of the all-party group on beer, I declare an interest there. This proud Welshman will also be at Wembley on Sunday, with my England T-shirt, cheering them on to victory.

Question put and agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We will suspend very briefly, just for the sanitisation of the Government Dispatch Box.

2.2 pm

Sitting suspended.

Fuel Poverty

2.3 pm

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I beg to move,

That this House has considered fuel poverty.

I am pleased to be able to open this debate, which is an annual opportunity for Members to raise their constituents' views on the important question of fuel poverty. The past year has been a challenge for everyone, yet the impacts of the pandemic have not been felt equally. In particular, it has had a devastating impact on those already on a low income. The issues being faced by those in fuel poverty are not unique to the pandemic. The health implications of living in a cold home remain as serious as ever. Work is ongoing to address the issue and support those who are most vulnerable.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I appreciate the Minister giving way so early. She is illustrating the impact of covid and people in fuel poverty. Does that not underline the need to retain the £20-a-week universal credit uplift?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I will continue, if I may, and I hope I will answer the hon. Gentleman's points.

Government-led energy-efficiency upgrades over the last decade have reduced the cost of heating homes, building resilience for all households, especially those on low incomes. I will come on to the energy-efficiency schemes that have kept households warm over the past year and the further action we are planning to take to accelerate progress towards tackling fuel poverty.

I would just like to acknowledge the importance of the strong relationships built with energy suppliers, which have been crucial during the pandemic. I thank them and their staff for their total commitment to looking after customers, despite risks to themselves. These relationships enabled us to quickly secure a voluntary agreement to support customers impacted by covid-19, which has been hugely successful in protecting those most vulnerable or at risk of debt, and came top of the Citizens Advice ranking of protection measures by industry. There is no doubt that more immediate support for those struggling to pay their energy bills and ensuring fairness within the energy market is important and I will come back to that later.

It is important to note that fuel poverty is devolved and that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has a responsibility for England. Each nation remains committed to tackling the issue and I welcome contributions from all hon. Members today as they raise their own nation's issues.

In February this year, we published an updated fuel poverty strategy, "Sustainable Warmth: Protecting Vulnerable Households in England." The strategy details our focus on energy efficiency, which enables warmer homes at lower cost, while also reducing carbon emissions in line with net zero. Our strategy reiterates the 2030 fuel poverty target in England, which is to ensure that as many fuel-poor homes—indeed, all homes—as is reasonably practical achieve a minimum energy-efficiency rating of band C by 2030.

A great deal has been achieved in the last decade, but there remain a significant number of households in need of support on our journey to the 2030 target. As of

2019, there are 3.18 million households in fuel poverty in England. That is a reduction of 1.6 million households since 2010. The main reason for the reduction in fuel-poor households over the last 10 years has been energy-efficiency improvements—improvements that are of benefit for many years to come.

Cold homes will often have issues with mould and damp. By installing energy-efficient measures, we are improving the comfort of our constituents' daily lives. They are crucial in protecting and improving people's health and helping to reduce the burden on the NHS, as well as reducing energy use and thereby reducing bills. We are focusing on improving the least energy-efficient homes first, to ensure some of those in the homes that are the most difficult and expensive to heat are prioritised. There has been significant progress.

Compared with 2010, there are now 1.3 million fewer low-income households living in the least energy-efficient homes—that is bands E, F or G. Our sustainable warmth strategy details the energy-efficiency schemes currently in place.

The green home grant local authority delivery scheme will deliver £500 million of energy-efficiency and low-carbon heating measures across the owner-occupied, private and social rented sectors. The home upgrade grant will support low-income households, with upgrades to the worst performing off-gas grid homes in England, providing energy-efficiency improvements and low-carbon heating alternatives.

In the 2019 Conservative manifesto, we committed to a £3.8 billion social housing decarbonisation fund over a 10-year period to improve the energy performance of socially rented homes. We have committed to a four-year, £4 billion successor scheme to the energy company obligation—the ECO, as it is known—across Great Britain. That will accelerate our efforts to improve homes to meet fuel poverty targets.

While these energy-efficiency schemes are crucial in reducing fuel poverty in the long term, we also recognise the need for short-term help, so our support for households in the winter months continues with the warm home discount, providing 2.2 million households with £140 off their energy bill this year. We are continuing to improve the scheme by expanding it and consulting on new ways to improve targeting to reach those most in need. Since 2011, it has provided more than £3 billion of rebates to households, helping keep homes warmer over the colder months.

Winter fuel payments provide pension age households with financial support worth up to £300 each year and cold weather payments support vulnerable households through particularly cold spells. They provided more than 3.6 million households in Great Britain with support last winter.

Alongside all the direct support, the voluntary agreement with energy suppliers has been crucial over the past year in protecting vulnerable customers. Our work with energy suppliers to ensure the best protection for low-income and vulnerable consumers and promote best customer service in a thriving energy market is vital, so we are working to reduce the impact of debt on fuel-poor households and identify those at risk of self-disconnection or self-rationing. Ofgem rules require suppliers to offer emergency and "friendly hours" credit to all prepayment customers at risk of self-disconnection. We are also

working to improve the communications and advice available to everyone, to ensure that better engagement and information are readily accessible to consumers.

I assure hon. Members that we remain fully committed to addressing and reducing fuel poverty for our most vulnerable constituents so that all households can be assured of a warm and affordable home. We will continue to drive forward on delivering energy efficiency measures to reduce energy bills and create warmer, safer living environments, while providing direct support with energy bills and working alongside the energy market to ensure a better consumer experience and protect customers. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss this important issue and look forward to hearing from colleagues.

2.10 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I, too, welcome the opportunity to talk about the whole question of fuel poverty. It is very helpful that an annual debate is required in Government time so that we can get to the bottom of the issues. We certainly need to, because as the Minister mentions, 3.2 million households in England, or 13.4%, are still in fuel poverty. I might add that that is under the new metric that the Government have introduced over the past year, along with their document “Sustainable warmth: protecting vulnerable households in England” and the updated fuel poverty strategy. Unlike in a number of other areas, the Government do appear to have a strategy on fuel poverty now, which is a good step forward. It is based on some changes in methodology and hence in the slant of a number of commitments on fuel poverty that the Government have made for the future.

Of course, as the Minister has mentioned, we should not in any way underplay the significance of what has happened over the past year. The pandemic has probably driven a substantial number of additional households into fuel poverty because people have been staying at home, using more energy and paying a lot more in energy bills. That effect is likely to continue for quite a long while, so there are several factors to consider in thinking about where we are now with fuel poverty and where we want to go.

One of the key changes that has been set out this year is a change in the definition of fuel poverty—what it consists of and how it is measured. I was a little surprised when I first heard that Lord Lilley, the former right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden, had come up with a definition of fuel poverty, but that is not actually the low-income, low energy efficiency definition set out in the strategy. What is important about the new definition is that it explicitly includes a metric involving property banding in England. Property bands have not been specified in a definition before, although they have been in the Government’s ambitions for 2030; the Minister mentioned the target to get the properties of as many people in fuel poverty up to band C as possible.

Although that may not seem like an enormous difference, I think it is a really fundamental change inasmuch as it explicitly recognises for the first time that a very substantial element of fuel poverty is not just income, although that is very important, and is not just energy prices, although they too are very important, but is actually the energy efficiency of the properties people are living in and how bad that may be. Indeed, we know that there is a very considerable correlation between income, for

example, and the kind of properties that people who have a low income—well below the median rate—are living in.

That correlation is very clear for the bands of properties people are living in. Indeed, we can see from the calculations of what a household bill is likely to consist of that that is a tremendous problem for people who have a low income. For example, an average band C property will have an estimated energy bill of about £600 a year. Go to band D and that figure is £900, but band E is £1,400, which is double or more the band C level. Worse than that, go down to band F and band G, and it gets to treble or more the band C bill. Those people who are in fuel poverty, with a lower income and less able to pay bills, are by and large facing much larger bills in the first place because of the nature of the property they are living in. The strategy essentially puts a much greater emphasis than hitherto on getting those properties into a fit state for people to live in so that their bills are such that fuel poverty is essentially written out by the energy efficiency of the properties the people are living in.

The recognition of that particular metric does, however, lead to very substantial and grave policy implications and commitments for the future, because what the Government are essentially saying is that they are going to get to average band C by 2030 to drive fuel poverty out in the way I have described. The judgment we have to make now is: are the Government in a position right now to actually fulfil that particular ambition in order to carry out the fuel poverty strategy they have set their mind on over the next period? My suggestion right now is that they are clearly not.

The Minister has, in a slightly Panglossian way, set out a number of commitments that will lead to the strategy being achieved by 2030, but they are mostly short-term strategies and mostly strategies that are poorly funded. In one instance, a strategy was mentioned in the poverty strategy itself:

“Invest in energy efficiency of households through the £2 billion Green Homes Grant, including up to £10,000 per low income household to install energy efficient and low-carbon heating measures in their homes”,

but it actually disappeared just a month after it was set down in the fuel poverty strategy as one of the key drivers as far as the energy efficiency of homes are concerned. This is the green homes grant system that, as the Minister has acknowledged, got into terrible difficulties. It was, frankly, a pathetic attempt at investing £2 billion in energy efficiency in homes and needs to be recovered and revised very rapidly.

In that context, it is a shame that this debate comes just before the Government’s heat and buildings strategy is to be published. I understand that it is to be published shortly, but we are still on the wrong side of it. What I am looking for in that strategy is a coherent plan—not just a few bits and pieces here and there—for building an efficiency strategy right through the next decade, so that when we get to 2030, band C is the median for all properties. That will require a large amount of investment, and thinking of new ways to undertake changes in energy efficiency through bodily uprating the energy efficiency of properties throughout the whole country. It will also mean concentrating on those sectors—particularly the private rented sector—where we know that band D, E and F properties are concentrated, and having a coherent strategy to tackle the very low energy efficiency of such properties across the country.

[*Dr Alan Whitehead*]

I hope that in the heat and buildings strategy the Government have not given way to the pressure I know there has been in respect of ensuring that landlords in the private rented sector have a greater responsibility for bringing their properties up to a decent level of energy efficiency. Many of those who are in fuel poverty live in the private rented sector, sometimes in appalling conditions yet faced with enormous bills that they simply cannot afford, as part of their income, normally to discharge.

There is now a great onus on the Government to come forward with an energy efficiency strategy that meets the commitments made in the fuel poverty strategy from February onwards and to give a convincing account of how that strategy is to be met. Of course, I think all Members would agree that that is not the whole issue as far as fuel poverty is concerned; the question of income and what one does about that as far as benefits and assistance are concerned remains very important. That is also important in terms of the effect of the new strategy on people who are objectively in fuel poverty but happen to live in properties that are band C or above.

Several hundred thousand people have been knocked off, as it were, the fuel poverty concern radar by the LILEE—low income low energy efficiency—definition that came in this year. Those people's circumstances have not objectively changed—they are in exactly the same position as they were—but the new definition has moved them out of a particular category. I hope that that particular section of the population will not be forgotten as a result of the new strategy. They would clearly need to be approached in different ways in terms of vulnerability measures, some of which the Minister outlined. We should not think that because we have changed the definition, we have somehow solved fuel poverty for that group of people.

We need to continue with a three-pronged approach to our fuel poverty targets: yes, we need energy efficiency; yes, we need to consider incomes and to make sure that people have the income to pay the bills in the first place; and, of course, we need to consider energy prices themselves. We have not yet had through the results of the energy price cap considerations for this year—I think that they, too, will come out shortly—but I hope that when they come out they will be relatively good news for those people who face increasing bills, year on year, as they struggle to try to meet their warmth and home energy commitments on low incomes and in the badly insulated homes that we all hope will be, by 2030, very much a thing of the past.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): This is a time-limited debate, but we will try not to put a time limit on individual contributions, so I ask for restraint, please.

2.24 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con) [V]: I support the Government's aim of making a major reduction in fuel poverty, and I admire the Minister's enthusiasm for the task and her wish to share with Parliament and to listen to good ideas from across the House.

There are three ways to tackle fuel poverty. The first is to help people have more efficient appliances and warmer homes so that they need to burn less fuel. The

second is to cut the price of fuel itself. The third is to help people find better-paid jobs and give them encouragement in ways to boost their income.

We first need to work through the Minister on these plans and projects so that more homes can be upgraded and people do not have to live in damp and cold surroundings. How right she is about that. I ask her to make common cause with me in approaching the Treasury, because now that we are free to choose what to put VAT on and what to take it off, can we please have a Brexit bonus for those in fuel poverty by taking VAT off all those things they need to buy in order to improve their homes? Why are we still charging VAT on insulation materials, boiler controls and a whole range of green products that are necessary to lower a home's fuel bill and improve its warmth and fitness for purpose? That would not be too big a charge on the Treasury, in terms of lost revenue, but it would be a great win for both the Government's green strategy and their fuel poverty strategy. A bit dearer would be tackling the price of fuel directly by taking VAT off domestic fuel in its entirety, and that too I would welcome, because I think that fuel is expensive in this country and electricity is becoming very expensive.

I also urge the Minister to look at electricity policy generally. Time was when we had a great three-legged strategy for electrical power. The first leg was that the Government were responsible for ensuring that we could always generate all the electrical power we needed in Britain for ourselves, with a decent margin of spare capacity in case a large power station went down or there was a sudden surge in demand during a very cold winter. We do not seem to have that any more. I urge her to take action as soon as possible to commission the electrical power that we are going to need, because we do not wish to be dependent on unreliable and potentially very expensive foreign sources for import, should we get into difficulties with the amount of power we have available.

The second leg of the strategy was to go for cheap energy, because that is the way to get industrial recovery and revival, and to get more people out of fuel poverty because they can afford domestic fuel. Again, we seem to have dropped that leg. We seem to be opting for rather dearer fuel. We used to believe that the fuel supplied should always be the cheapest, whereas now, for various reasons, we often opt for a dearer way of producing electricity, or we opt for an apparently cheaper way but we need a lot of back-up capacity because renewables can be interrupted. We need to look at the charging mechanism and try to ensure that, with our overall new mix of energy, we can get cheaper power.

Then of course we also always had green imperatives, which are very necessary, and it is particularly important that clean air is central to the whole ambition, and that wherever we are burning fuels, we do everything we can to avoid dust, soot and particles emerging into the atmosphere, because they are not pleasant for any of us.

Boosting personal incomes is probably too wide a subject for the limited time of this debate, but let me just say that levelling up must be about encouraging people to go on their own personal journeys. It must be about making available the educational opportunities, training opportunities and promotion opportunities,

within public bodies and throughout the private sector. It must be about working with people so that they see that if they are low paid today, they have a reasonable prospect of being better paid tomorrow.

Cheap energy can underpin all of that, because if we went for more cheaper energy, supplied domestically, we would have a bigger industrial base, because energy is often a much bigger cost than labour in a modern, fully-automated factory. That would create more better paid jobs to go alongside the factory; I am thinking of all the things that need to be done to design, market and sell on the products that the largely automated factory can produce. So please, Minister, let us make common cause with the Treasury, do more at home and create more better paid jobs at home. Let us understand the role, in all our ambitions, of having enough electrical capacity producing cheap power here.

2.30 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Like you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I was shouting at the television last night.

The subject of today's debate is very important. Everybody agrees that fuel poverty is a bad thing. It is debilitating. It causes mental and physical health problems. It is estimated that it can cost the NHS in England up to £2 billion a year in related health conditions. It causes people to die earlier, and it further shortens the remaining lifespan of those who have been diagnosed with a terminal illness. It can force the terminally ill out of their homes as they face a death that they would rather manage in their own homes with their families. So I ask the Minister to consider the recommendations of the report by the all-party parliamentary group for terminal illness, entitled "No place like home". I pay tribute to the work it has done in conjunction with Marie Curie.

National Energy Action estimates that, shamefully, there are approximately 10,000 premature deaths a year related to fuel poverty, so we really need to do what we can to eliminate this scourge. In Scotland, we have greater pressures because we have a colder and wetter climate and a high proportion of homes are off the gas grid. Within the off-gas-grid cohort in the highlands, many customers pay up to £400 more per annum to heat their homes because they have restricted meters and pay up to 4p more per unit of electricity. I ask the Minister why she thinks it is fair that that surcharge is added in an area that is actually now a net exporter of electricity to the rest of the UK. When will that injustice be resolved?

As the Minister said, fuel poverty is a devolved matter, but energy policy overall is reserved to Westminster, and 85% of welfare spending in Scotland is reserved to the UK Government. Although the Scottish Government are trying to address the devolved aspects, they are constrained by UK Government policy. One simple example of that is that the UK Government have confirmed that the universal credit uplift of £20 per week will be removed. If that uplift was required for people to live through covid, it is obvious that it will be required going forward. Otherwise, more people will end up in fuel poverty.

In contrast, last year, the Scottish Government introduced child winter heating assistance, which will support the families of about 14,000 of the most seriously disabled

children and young people with automatic payments of £200 a year. As always, the Scottish Government are having to work wonders within a fixed budget.

Energy efficiency is devolved, but the UK Government refuse to cut VAT on insulation measures, despite a request from the Scottish Government. I support the call from the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) for that to be removed.

The UK Government designed the warm home discount and, although it provides welcome relief, it is actually paid for by other energy users, which puts others under pressure in terms of energy bills. It is the UK Government who are responsible for the energy company obligation scheme. The Committee on Fuel Poverty stated in 2018 that it has not been targeted at the correct audience. In March, the Environmental Audit Committee concluded that ECO will not achieve the fuel poverty targets required, and that the reality is that

"the poorest pay proportionally the most...this makes it a regressive policy."

Energy UK, whose members are responsible for delivering the ECO scheme, has expressed concerns about the impact on the bills of the poorest. When will the UK Government and the Minister listen to those concerns and make relevant changes?

As we know, it is the UK Government who were responsible for the failed green deal scheme, which came about because they were determined not to have direct Government investment or on-book borrowing. I again ask the Minister: when will the HELMS victims be compensated for the mis-selling of green deals to them?

How renewable energy is paid for is under the remit of the UK Government. As a consequence, nearly a quarter of our electricity bills are now accounted for by energy policy decisions. That again puts more pressure on bill payers and could tip the scales for some, pushing them into fuel poverty, especially those in off-grid homes. The current imbalance in policy costs between electricity and gas bills really needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

Overall, we need more direct UK Government investment and the UK Government need to follow the lead of the Scottish Government. It is not just the likes of myself as an Opposition Member saying that. Energy companies say it; many third sector organisations say it; the Committee on Climate Change, in its 2019 progress report, said it; and so did the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee in its 2019 report, "Energy efficiency: building towards net zero".

There are some key points in that BEIS Committee report, which stated:

"We note that Scotland's investment of four times more than England cannot be explained by a less efficient dwelling stock...For example, in 2017, 49 per cent of homes in England had insulated walls, compared to 60 per cent of homes in Scotland...Scotland has made much faster progress in improving the energy efficiency of its fuel poor homes than England, where in some bands, progress has stalled."

The statistics actually show that: 44% of Scottish homes were rated EPC band C or better in 2018, compared with just 34% in England and 28% in Wales.

The UK Government have given us a failed green homes grant scheme, whereby last year the Treasury clawed back £1.5 billion of the original allocation.

[Alan Brown]

What is actually needed from the UK Government is a long-term energy efficiency investment programme that will create jobs and deliver at best value, avoiding spikes in cost. It could be part of a green industrial revolution. It is no wonder that the BEIS Committee concluded its report by stating:

“The Government appears indifferent towards how public per capita spend in household energy efficiency in England compares to other parts of the UK...the governments of the devolved nations treat energy efficiency as a much higher priority than the UK Government.”

That comment on indifference is particularly damning. I would like to hear how the Minister responds to that.

By contrast, let us look to Scotland. The Scottish Government have an award-winning fuel poverty scheme, Warmer Homes Scotland, which is designed to help those who are living in or are at risk of fuel poverty through installing energy insulation and heating measures into individual properties. More than £124 million has been invested through the scheme since its launch in 2015, helping over 20,000 households. By the end of 2021, the Scottish Government will have allocated more than £1 billion since 2009 to tackling fuel poverty and improving energy efficiency, including nearly £200 million this year alone.

Another important measure in Scotland is Home Energy Scotland, which is also award-winning. It provides impartial free advice for anybody concerned about paying their energy bills. Yet again, UK and English-based consumer groups think it is a model that the UK Government need to adopt. As we look to decarbonise our heating systems, having an impartial advice service, as we do in Scotland, will be critical when people have to consider key choices such as whether to purchase a new boiler, or when they are considering low carbon energy such as heat pumps.

That brings me to the target of 600,000 heat pump installations per year by 2028. When will the Government bring forward a policy road map for the funding, and why are they not starting with a rolling programme aimed at off-gas-grid properties? That, combined with energy efficiency measures, would be an ideal way to tackle one category of fuel poverty. It is no wonder that the Committee on Climate Change, in its latest progress report, is scathing about the lack of UK Government policies. We really need to see the heat and buildings strategy, although it was disappointing that no energy Bill was listed in the Queen's Speech.

The Scottish Government remain committed to implementing the Fuel Poverty (Targets, Definition and Strategy) (Scotland) Act 2019 in full. It is the most ambitious and comprehensive fuel poverty legislation in the UK, setting challenging but achievable targets, including that by 2040 no more than 5% of households are fuel poor and no more than 1% in extreme fuel poverty. That is compared with the UK Government's targets, which are based solely on energy certification, which in itself is not sufficient to eliminate fuel poverty.

In conclusion, it is quite clear that fuel poverty is another matter where the UK Government hold Scotland back. Plenty of other bodies can see that change is needed in UK-wide policy, which the UK Government are responsible for. We really need to see policy in action—sooner rather than later.

2.39 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): This is an incredibly important debate—it is of huge importance for residents across Hastings and Rye—and I welcome the Minister's introductory comments on fuel poverty. It is hard to comprehend that, in our country today, some households still have to choose between heating and eating. The House of Commons report published at the end of June estimates that some 3.2 million households across England are in fuel poverty, with around 600,000 individuals having fallen into fuel poverty during the coronavirus pandemic.

I have seen for myself the pain and anguish that fuel poverty can cause for a household. Representing Hastings and Rye is a fantastic honour, as I genuinely believe it to be one of the greatest places in the UK to live and work. However, we have to face up to some of the harsh realities and the difficulties that we have. The tortuous decision of a parent who has to choose between putting the heating on in the winter and providing a hot meal for their child at the end of the day is a reality for far too many residents in my constituency. Over 10% of households in Hastings are in fuel poverty, a figure that shocks and saddens me.

However, the Government are helping to address that with their fuel poverty strategy. I am pleased to see from the energy White Paper that the warm home discount will be expanded to nearly 3 million homes, which will help households save £150 a year on electricity bills. I am particularly pleased to see that the social housing decarbonisation fund demonstrator has awarded £62 million to social landlords across England and Scotland to test innovative approaches to retrofitting at scale, with more than 2,300 social homes improved to EPC band C already.

I have seen the positive impact that retrofitting renewable energy, helped by grant funding at the time, can have in social housing. As a district councillor for Eastern Rother ward, I highlighted the issue of fuel poverty in Camber and Rye Harbour. Night storage heaters are expensive and do not provide heat when it is needed. Black mould and condensation are health concerns. I was delighted a couple of years ago to be asked to look at some retrofitted social housing in Camber, where solar panels with batteries and air source heat pumps had been put in. The tenants were delighted. There was no black mould and no condensation, and their homes were warm at lower cost.

However, we now need a new scheme to replace the old green homes grant, to help households make their properties more energy efficient, insulating them in the winter months and reducing their bills. Better-insulated homes will not only provide a financial benefit to those living in them, but help the Government and the country to meet our ambitious environmental targets.

We must do that in a way that does not burden households with huge costs to replace old boilers, install insulation and get their properties to an EPC rating of C or above. That is why I believe that a grant system to help households—especially those who are really struggling, such as the 10% of households in my constituency in fuel poverty—to improve the energy efficiency of their homes is one of the best ways forward. I would welcome any update that the Minister can provide on support for households already in fuel poverty

who will need to improve their properties to meet the Government's ambitious target that every home should have an EPC rating of C or above by 2030.

Let me end on a positive note. Although the recent pandemic has pushed up the number of households in fuel poverty, I am hopeful that the creativity of this Government and their determination to support and help those most in need will prove to be effective in finding a way to build on the support that is already in place and offer a way out of fuel poverty for thousands of households in my constituency and millions across our country.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Thank you very much for a very concise speech of five minutes. If everybody follows suit, we will get everybody in.

2.44 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) [V]: Good afternoon, Mr Deputy Speaker. I shall try to be brief. A subject like this is one where I always prick up my ears, because the village of Altnaharra, in the centre of the Kyle of Sutherland in the north of my constituency, is always the coldest place each winter in the whole of the UK. I want to do two things: I want to share some statistics that have been provided to me; and I want to namecheck the Highland Council, which takes fuel poverty extremely seriously and has done good work.

The Highland Council's own report identifies huge areas of the highlands in fuel poverty. Nearly all the county of Sutherland has a fuel poverty level of 70% of households. The Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust carried out research recently which showed that one in four children in Sutherland live below the poverty line. All this, as we know, has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Fuel poverty, boy oh boy, has been an issue for very many years. It is made worse by the electricity distribution charges that are levied by area. As a result, the highlands is disproportionately affected with the highest distribution charges levied anywhere in the UK. That is, ironically, in spite of the fact that we produce huge amounts of energy from green power—wind and hydro—which we actually export to the central belt of Scotland, sending it down south. The result is that the cost of each unit of electricity in the highlands is significantly higher than in London or in the central belt of Scotland.

In September last year, the Highland Council wrote to the UK Government asking them to bring in a national distribution charge for electricity to prevent that unfair practice. The reply said that they would not, but that a £60 million fund would be made available to mitigate the impact of higher distribution costs. My good friend Councillor Richard Gale, the councillor for East Sutherland, does not think there has been a reply or any further comment from the Government. May I therefore very politely ask my friend the Minister if she could possibly look at that and see what happened to the £60 million fund? If it could be forthcoming it would be fantastically helpful.

I completely support the argument put forward for the reduction in VAT on installation materials. That would be a tremendous step in the right direction. Let us hope that consideration will be given to it. Finally, the population of my constituency, and certainly the

county of Sutherland, is an ageing population, so we can imagine how that is made still worse when we pile that on top of the fuel poverty issue. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker for your time and patience. That is my short speech concluded.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Very concise. Thank you very much.

2.47 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Some 20 years ago, I introduced my private Member's Bill to eliminate fuel poverty. It received Royal Assent in 2000 and was called the Warm Homes and Energy Conservation Act. It was inspired by a Polish gentleman living in a high rise block of flats who died of fuel poverty. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) said, no one should die of fuel poverty. I am delighted that fuel poverty in England fell by 3.9 million households between 1996 and 2004, and decreased by 34% between 2010 and 2019, but I say to my right hon. Friend the Minister that the fact we are having this debate today means we still have not eliminated fuel poverty.

My 2000 Act placed on the Government a duty to produce a strategy to ensure an end to fuel poverty "as far as is reasonably practicable"

in 15 years. However, in a subsequent court case the judgment was that the words of the Act meant there could only be an "effort" to achieve the targets, instead of guaranteeing that they would be reached. In addition, the courts ruled that the words "as far as is reasonably practicable" meant that the Government could deprioritise fuel poverty if, for instance, resources were tight. In short, therefore, the courts ruled that there was no duty to end fuel poverty, only to try to do so. As a result, fuel poverty was not ended by 2016.

Fuel poverty needs to be eliminated, as the whole House agrees, as quickly as possible to maintain our population's health and to prevent any avoidable deaths that can happen as a result of a cold home. I am pleased, however, that my Act has been updated and that the current duty to bring fuel-poor homes up to at least energy performance certificate band C by 2030 is set in regulations. However, the words

"as far as is reasonably practicable"

are used time and again, so I hope my right hon. Friend the Minister can confirm today that the only exceptions to ending fuel poverty will be made due to the physical characteristics of the property or the occupiers' refusal to have works carried out.

I introduced—listen to me, as if I am a separate Government—a Back-Bench Bill called the Domestic Properties (Minimum Energy Performance) Bill in the last Session

"to ensure that domestic properties have a minimum energy performance rating of C"

and

"to give the Secretary of State powers to require persons to take action in pursuance of that duty".

I ask my right hon. Friend the Minister to agree to a meeting with her officials to discuss energy performance of buildings. I am working with the industry and experts on a revised version of the Bill. I know that no Government enjoys private Members' Bills in reality; they always like to promote them themselves—I am not bothered about

[*Sir David Amess*]

who takes the glory. I believe that it would certainly be beneficial in reducing fuel poverty if she and officials worked with me on the new Bill. Among other things, it would reduce the impact on the environment and make fuel more accessible to all in privately rented properties, social housing, new homes and owner-occupier properties.

There are brilliant charities throughout the country, especially in Southend, that help people who are struggling financially. Age Concern in Southend offers a range of support for older people. One of the concerning trends that it is starting to see is the number of older people requiring services that indicate they are housebound. This means that they use more fuel for heating and cooking while they are on a fixed income. There may be a fuel poverty crisis coming our way. This has, of course, been intensified by the coronavirus pandemic. The types of inquiries that Age Concern is receiving are for its befriending services, social activities and help at home. The Government need to invest in preventive measures that would get older people out of the house and active again. This will keep people healthier and help to alleviate the need for fuel use. This is where the Haven community hub in Westcliff comes in, which encourages people to leave their homes, where it is safe to do so with the current restrictions, and socialise.

In conclusion, it is promising that colleagues are debating this topic today and there have been improvements in reducing the rate of fuel poverty in the last 21 years, but really, I say to my right hon. Friend, we need to do more. The coronavirus pandemic has further pushed developments back and I hope that the Government perform their statutory duties by bringing fuel-poor households up to EPC band C by 2030. The wording of these regulations should not limit the extent to which fuel poverty can be reduced, as my Act suggested 21 years ago. People still need heating and electricity during the coronavirus pandemic and these problems will never go away unless concrete legislative action is actually taken.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you for another concise contribution.

2.53 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), especially given his track record on this very important issue. Today is the first opportunity we have had to debate this subject since my fuel poverty and energy price caps debate in November last year. We all know that despite fuel poverty being a devolved issue, two of its three key drivers—energy prices and income—are reserved. We also know that just as living in a fuel-poor household impacts on many aspects of everyday life, there are numerous factors that impact on the drivers. That is one reason that I often raise fuel poverty in the House, most recently presenting an Energy Pricing Bill to urge us to have legislation to close the loophole that allows energy suppliers to exclude existing customers from their cheapest available tariffs.

The Library briefing highlights that the “poorest households pay disproportionately” towards the energy company obligation scheme and that this UK Government policy is considered “regressive” by the Environmental Audit Committee. I would argue that the loophole

allowing existing energy customers to subsidise new energy customers is also regressive. While I am under little illusion about the chances of my Bill progressing, I hope that the Government will consider and take on these points.

I will not repeat many of the serious aspects of fuel poverty that I covered less than eight months ago, except to reiterate that we cannot underestimate the implications of living in a fuel-poor household and we must do everything to end the dilemma of whether a person heats their home or feeds their family, because that causes physical and mental distress and ill health. It is these health implications that I want to highlight today. However, it appears that it is not a priority for this Government given the announcement on the phase-out of the £20 universal credit uplift, potentially pushing half a million people below the poverty line just in time for the winter.

Through being forced to make heat or eat choices, people in fuel poverty have a poor diet if they want a warm home, and that causes and exacerbates physical and mental health issues as well as slowing recovery from existing conditions. Yet if those in fuel poverty choose to eat well they run other risks: living in a cold house increases their chance of suffering from heart attack, stroke or respiratory illness. The Committee on Fuel Poverty has already documented the correlation between cold homes and excess winter deaths and the World Health Organisation estimates that 30% of excess winter deaths are directly attributable to living in cold housing. It can be argued that there is a strong case for giving GPs the ability to prescribe heat.

I urge those who have not yet done so to read “No place like home”, the all-party group on terminal illness inquiry into housing and fuel poverty at the end of life. It is stark reading, but crucially it highlights the vicious cycle of fuel poverty and terminal illness. Additionally, the Scottish fuel poverty advisory panel, an adviser to the Scottish Government on tackling fuel poverty, highlights asthma, chest, breathing and mental health problems and slowed physical growth and cognitive development all as conditions that affect children living in a cold home. Elderly and vulnerable people living in cold houses also experience an increased risk of circulatory and respiratory disease, exacerbation of arthritis, an increased risk of falls and injury, social isolation, and poor mental health including anxiety and depression. In reality, fuel poverty disproportionately affects the most vulnerable in our society.

The effects of fuel poverty also further strain our overstretched NHS, which has borne the brunt of the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic has also shone a light on the pockets of poverty that exist within our communities. Its economic impact is taking its toll and combined with increased fuel bills as people spend even more time at home can lead to even more people struggling.

Eliminating fuel poverty is an important part of tackling poverty in general and therefore reducing inequalities in our society. The Scottish fuel poverty advisory panel is working with Members and organisations to provide information that can help us better understand the connections between fuel poverty and health, and it has welcomed the support the Scottish Government have given to those in fuel poverty and poverty generally throughout the covid-19 pandemic.

I could say much more about what is happening in Scotland and what is wrong with the support we get from Westminster, but I am mindful of the time and that other Members want to speak. I am sure we will return to this debate over the months ahead. I look forward to the Minister's summing up and hope that the Government will consider some of the points raised in my speech and Bill.

2.57 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): I am grateful to speak in such a vital debate.

As many Members have stated, the scale of fuel poverty in the United Kingdom is staggeringly and unacceptably high. In England, more than one in 10 households is forced to spend more than they can afford on energy, and in my own city of Coventry that figure almost doubles. Those numbers should be a source of shame for the Government and we have heard time and again about the devastating impact of fuel poverty on family finances, health and mental health. The pandemic has certainly exacerbated the impact of fuel poverty.

The covid-19 issue has slashed incomes for many and increased home energy usage. Unsurprisingly, this has led to increased debt owed to big utility companies. With many people still not working full time or at all and the furlough scheme on the verge of disappearing entirely, more than 2.5 million people will be forced to begin paying back the fuel debt incurred throughout the pandemic, which many simply cannot afford.

Last March the Government launched a policy encouraging energy companies to reassess the energy debt owed by those who were fuel-poor and suffering because of the pandemic. This policy has since lapsed and I urge the Government to take immediate action to revive and strengthen it, because without support many families in Coventry will find themselves struggling to repay debt and bills that they cannot afford.

There are other concrete steps that the Government can and must take to alleviate fuel poverty. Sustained investment in making homes more energy-efficient must be a priority in the upcoming spending review: investment is vital to reducing fuel poverty. In fact, the Conservative party's manifesto at the last election promised £2.5 billion for a home upgrade grant scheme for homes that are not fuel-efficient, significantly lowering the cost of heating them. The Prime Minister repeated that pledge in his 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution, but warm words will not warm homes. We need investment right now.

If the Government do not upgrade homes immediately, we will see those in fuel poverty suffer increased health complications and further financial strife. From speaking to energy experts this week, I learned that single parents and their children are most negatively impacted by fuel poverty. It is single parents and their children who will continue to suffer the effects of fuel poverty in the highest numbers if the Government do not follow through on their lofty promises.

As we work to make Britain's homes more efficient, we must also ensure that all new policies are fair. That is why the Government must revise the new green gas levy, which presently means that energy users, whether they are a single mother or a big company, will pay the same amount towards subsidising biogas. Surely that is a very

regressive tax: it means that the poorest will pay a much higher proportion of their income than very wealthy and big companies. The Government must fix the green tax levy so that it does not punish the poor unfairly. They must not leave the most vulnerable literally out in the cold. I really hope that the Minister will consider some of the points made today.

3.1 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: It is an honour to speak after my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi).

Fuel poverty is like food poverty: it is not complicated. It is poverty, and I do not know anyone who has chosen to be poor. To address it, we need better-paid jobs, affordable housing and reinvestment in the welfare state, and we need people to be treated equally, with fairness and respect. When someone, or a family, has no gas or electricity in their home and cannot afford to pay their bills, that is fuel poverty. When they are unable to have a shower, warm their home and make a hot meal, they are in crisis—they are in fuel poverty.

Fuel poverty is not as visible as food poverty—we cannot see families queuing up for fuel parcels—but for families around the UK rationing their hot water and for pensioners shivering, it is very real. The latest estimate from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy was that there were more than 3 million households in fuel poverty—and that was prior to the pandemic.

I recently spoke to a headteacher of a school in my constituency. Many of the low-income families there will be drained of money because of costly fuel meters, and in spite of their child contracting the virus, they cannot afford to isolate because they must leave their home to top up their gas and electricity meters. Their dilemma is understandable when we consider how punitive the penalties are for entering into arrears on a prepayment meter: as much as 70% of a top-up amount can be deducted if the payee is in debt. These companies make it harder for poorer people and families—they take more from those who do not have much. The Government really must do something about it. They cannot stand back and pretend that it is not happening. Will they make a difference for all communities, to prevent all people and families from experiencing fuel poverty? They must review this measure and do something about it.

As we know, debt can quickly snowball, with vulnerable people turning to payday lenders or worse. Universal credit, with its delays and sanctions, just makes their circumstances more desperate. Yesterday, in the Justice Committee, I became aware that as a result of certain debts due to poverty, such as an unpaid TV licence, a person can end up in prison. It is acutely expensive to keep someone in prison—much more expensive than a TV licence. Ultimately, that means that people are being punished for being poor. How does that make sense?

Let us look at health. Health services in England spend £1.3 billion to treat the impacts of cold homes, such as bronchitis. With poverty comes worry and stress, which can lead to emotional and mental health difficulties. All those things can have an impact on primary and secondary healthcare, and they all come at a cost. With water bills, lower-income households can pay lower rates, but there is no such provision for energy bills. Will the Minister commit today to introducing a measure, such as a social tariff, that will bring consistency

[Janet Daby]

to the Government's policies? As we have already heard, the Government have also made a manifesto commitment to making our energy system more efficient. Do they have any intention of following through on that?

I would like to end by drawing attention to one of the victims of this cruel crisis. Christians Against Poverty told me of the miserable experience of John, who said:

"It's an awful time when you can't get electric, you can't have the lights on. Never mind the TV and the radio. It feels black, it is black and it feels dark. It's not nice. You think what's the point of trying to struggle on?"

I hope the Government are listening, as this problem can be solved. We need a new fuel strategy—a new fuel strategy that focuses on green energy and a new fuel strategy that equally focuses on the customer's welfare.

3.5 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) [V]: No one should have to make the choice between feeding their family or heating their home, yet this is the choice that the 3.2 million households living in fuel poverty face. In Bath and North East Somerset, generally considered an affluent area, over 10% of households are struggling with their fuel bills. We are fortunate enough to have an excellent Citizens Advice, but Citizens Advice cannot replace urgent Government action.

The effects of fuel poverty are heartbreaking, such as needing to wrap up in a duvet in damp conditions with restricted mobility. Existing health conditions, including mental health, deteriorate fast and family life is often under severe pressure. The pandemic has made things even worse. It has created additional financial hardship while increasing household bills, as people were forced to stay at home and wholesale energy prices rose. Research suggests that people working from home added an extra £16 a month on energy costs, adding up to £195 a year for those on poor value tariffs.

We must address fuel poverty not only to end this unjustifiable inequality, but because it could be a major step forward in tackling the climate emergency. All too often fuel poverty goes hand in hand with poor housing, especially poor insulation. Energy inefficient homes are not just bad for the environment, but a huge drain on the household bills of low-income families. Behind the reduction in fuel-poor homes in 2018-19 was the increase to an energy efficiency rating to band C or higher, but the Government are relying only on the energy company obligation and the warm home discount. That is simply not enough.

The Government need to make much more serious efforts to drive the retrofitting of Britain's old housing stock. We need a coherent plan, and we need action, not words. Where are the training programmes to dramatically build up the skills base we need? Where are the tough energy efficiency and heating regulations? Why do the Government not give more powers to lead on the delivery of the schemes to local authorities, which are in a much better position to support house owners and landlords, and better identify the households living in fuel poverty?

The clearest example of the Government's failure is the scrapping of the green homes grant only five months after it was introduced. Only 6% of the budget was spent, and only a fraction of the vouchers were given out. Rather than ending the whole scheme as quickly as it was introduced, the Government should have extended

the scheme over 10 years, with the clear aim to end fuel poverty and cut greenhouse gas emissions by the middle of the decade. With a long-term commitment, the industry would have been able to scale up to deliver this massive task. Knee-jerk actions and short-termism are not just bad for the environment; they are letting down the 3.2 million households that will continue to live in fuel poverty. I urge the Government to reinstate a new net-zero homes grant, but this time with a long-term commitment to end fuel poverty once and for all.

3.9 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As always, it is a pleasure to speak on this issue. As others have said, fuel poverty is a devolved matter, but energy prices and incomes are the responsibility of this place, so this debate is as pertinent to my constituents as it is to anyone elsewhere. I was involved in this issue in my former role in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and also on the council, where we had many initiatives to address fuel poverty. It was good to be involved in those initiatives, because those sorts of issues were coming into my office on a regular basis.

The pandemic has exacerbated the issue of fuel poverty. For me, when I was at home and unable to do visits, I was still able to do some of the work around the farm. I am sure everyone has heard people being described as a Jack of all trades and a master of none. I would not say that I was a master of none. I can probably make sure the carpentry stays together and the electricians do not break down, but does it look pretty? Probably not. Maybe that is the difference between a skilled person and me.

For many others, however, lockdown was almost a time of captivity, and those on the poverty threshold who lived above the benefit cap and whose wages were then reduced to 80% had to make every penny count when they were restricted to their homes. When people are in their homes for a long period of time, their heating bills go up. For those who worked in offices, HMRC allowed an allowance to be claimed against tax when they were working from home. That was not available for those on furlough, however. Fuel poverty in our nation is very real and it has been felt more than ever during the covid lockdown. People could not head to their mum's or their sister's for the day to use their heating; they had to heat their own home or sit there in blankets and extra clothes, as others have said. That is not a picture I normally associate with the UK, yet data has shown that that was the case.

In August, Citizens Advice estimated that 2.8 million UK adults had fallen behind on their energy bills. The Policy Institute at King's College in London estimated that three in 10 people had experienced a reduction in their income as a result of coronavirus, that three in 10 people had cut back on non-essential spending, and that only two in 10 had more money left at the end of the month. The combination of reduced incomes and increased debt has had a profound impact on householders. A National Energy Action survey of organisations working to support fuel-poor households found that three quarters said that there was a high risk of an increased build-up of fuel debt as a direct result of the pandemic.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group for healthy homes and buildings, and one of the things we are interested in is the insulation of homes and making

homes more suitable for people. We have done an inquiry on that, and for me this issue is incredibly important. The APPG on fuel poverty and energy efficiency has produced a marvellous briefing with a number of key points that I absolutely agree with. One of the most pertinent is that, within the upcoming heat and building strategy, the UK Government must set out a clear energy efficiency standard for both the private and social rented sectors. The briefing further highlighted that in the Government's plans to reach net zero, regulating retail energy markets and increasing incomes must work alongside energy efficiency improvements to support all UK nations to end fuel poverty and to achieve a fair and affordable energy transition.

It is said that meeting the net zero targets could result in as much as a 20% increase in energy costs. If the experts are right and that is the case, we could have a problem. It is great to set targets for ourselves, but they must be achievable. I could set myself a target to learn Mandarin Chinese during recess, if I had the time and I was not so busy, but the reality is that learning that beautiful, complex language in that short space of time is highly unlikely. The point I am making is that targets must be achievable, which means that resources must be in place and schemes must be available to all earners and non-earners to update wall insulation, which cuts energy bills and as a bonus is better for the environment. We must commit to resourcing those schemes.

We must also commit not simply to uplifting income for some families but to changing the way they spend their money. A household is said to be in fuel poverty if it needs to spend more than 10% of its income on energy costs. In Northern Ireland, the rate of fuel poverty is 22%. Three factors can and must be addressed by the Government: income, the cost of energy and the domestic energy efficiency of homes. The need is clear and the path is clear. We must begin the journey remembering to bring the working poor and those who are on benefits with us. If we do that—and I believe the Government have that commitment—we can achieve something.

3.14 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Members who have secured this important debate.

An estimated 3.2 million households, or one in 10, are currently living in fuel poverty in England, meaning that they are below the poverty line and face much higher bills due to poor levels of energy efficiency in their homes. The covid-19 crisis has worsened existing inequalities that our communities face and has pushed many into unimaginable levels of hardship. In August, Citizens Advice estimated that 2.8 million UK adults had fallen behind on their energy bills. That will no doubt include people who receive legacy benefits and will be denied the £20-a-week uplift. I urge the Minister to press her colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to end this injustice, which has resulted in 4,889 of my constituents missing out on vital support during the pandemic.

This week in Liverpool West Derby I spoke about this issue to Jo from St Andrews Community Network, which does a fantastic job in combating poverty in my community. Jo told me that it recently sent out an email asking the networks of food banks throughout my constituency to prepare kitchen packs for people

suffering from fuel poverty who can only use a kettle to prepare foods. These packs consists of noodles, tinned fruit and meats that can be eaten cold. Let that sink in: it is 2021 and many families in my constituency are using a kettle to prepare food for their children's meals on a daily basis. How is that levelling up, Minister? I put on record my gratitude to the team at Liverpool City Council for the citizen support scheme, which offers support for people in crisis, but without a fair funding settlement for councils, it is now under threat.

As a Commons Library briefing explains, cold homes can have negative impacts on both mental and physical health, potentially adding demand on the NHS and social care providers and directly contributing towards more people dying in the upcoming winter. Health impacts of cold homes include increased risk of heart attack or stroke, respiratory illnesses, poor diet due to "heat or eat" choices, and worsening of or slow recovery from existing conditions. Those most at risk of ill health from fuel poverty include children, the elderly, people with disabilities and people with long-term illnesses.

With this in mind, it is unthinkable that in the middle of a pandemic the Government are pushing ahead with plans that will cut support and push people even further into fuel poverty. The plan to scrap the £20-a-week universal credit uplift is shameful and must be reversed. How can the Government cut universal credit when it is clear that more support is needed, not less? This comes alongside the Government ending the eviction ban and tapering down furlough, both of which will leave people vulnerable to food poverty and debt in communities throughout this land. I genuinely fear for the situation facing our community this winter when the pandemic is far from over and when, as is clear from the Library briefing, fuel poverty already leads to illnesses that place people at serious risk from covid-19.

I ask the Minister to put herself in the shoes of a mother in the winter, freezing cold because they cannot afford to put the gas heating on and heating the kettle for the noodles they have received in a kitchen pack from the food bank for their family, and ask herself if that is something that one of the wealthiest countries in the world should be allowing to happen while, worse still, making policies that enable it further. I urge her to remember that image when she devises the policies that are creating this environment and, for the good of this nation, to change course and show some humanity, not cold indifference.

3.18 pm

Dr Whitehead: We have had an excellent debate that is absolutely up to the mark as regards the requirements of the fuel poverty legislation. The debate has underlined the human cost of fuel poverty. Contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) and for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) emphasised that to tremendous effect, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne). We always need to remember that at the heart of the fuel poverty debate is the human misery and suffering brought about by it. We need to strive with all our might to remove it as a stain on our country in the 21st century; we could do so much better.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who was at the heart of it when fuel poverty issues were first debated many years

[Dr Whitehead]

ago. Indeed, I have been alongside him debating those issues for quite a while myself. He must be grievously disappointed by the glacial progress being made on the elimination of fuel poverty in our country.

The Minister has heard a universal contribution from all Members here this afternoon that the Government must do better. I look forward to the new policies that are coming forward, which I hope will give a clear indication of just how the Government are going to do better, because they are a long way away from closing the gap between ambition and action and putting that into operation. I am sure we will debate the matter on frequent occasions in the future, but I look forward to those strategies. I hope they will be up to the mark in doing what we now know we need to do on fuel poverty in all its aspects. Perhaps from this afternoon's debate we can bring out a renewed vigour to get on with it.

3.21 pm

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank all those who have spoken this afternoon. It has been a really powerful and important debate. I particularly thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood). It might be rare to see him and the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) standing up together to lobby the Treasury on reducing or removing VAT on insulation and other green products, but who am I to stop such a bonding of those least likely to want to campaign together? It is a fascinating issue, and we should all watch closely and hope that this will be a new match to take on some of the green challenges that we all want to see fixed.

I thank the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun for raising the issues that the all-party parliamentary group for terminal illness raised. I will make sure that I read that report and look at it in more detail. As I said, Scotland obviously has its own devolved controls over fuel poverty issues, but I recognise, as someone who lives in Northumberland, that the challenges of weather do cause differences, and we have to be conscious of that as we work towards finding those solutions.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) for being such a great and persuasive advocate for her constituency. She understands clearly and in depth that there are areas in her constituency that need more support. I hope that she will work

closely with her local authority on the schemes it can deliver to help insulate homes and make sure that she drives it to greater success.

It is always a pleasure to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), although we did not hear any calls for city status. His total commitment on this issue is heartening at every level. He has campaigned on it and has driven a change in many Government policies over the years. I hope that he supports the renewed drive and, indeed, supports bringing in the band C requirement as part of our fuel poverty strategy. That will not only drive the short-term ways we can help support families in fuel poverty, but will make sure we will change forever the landscape of our property mapping across the country. Properties in bands D, E and F will be brought up to scratch to ensure that we do that.

We must continue to take action to address the fuel poverty that still exists. As we move towards our 2025 milestone and our ambitious 2030 fuel poverty target, we are very aware of the challenges that remain. By focusing on energy efficiency and delivering 1.6 million households out of fuel poverty, and as we move to those low-carbon heating solutions and net zero by 2050, we have the opportunity to ensure that those on low incomes are not left behind. A fair and affordable transition will be key to protecting those who are in fuel poverty.

The social housing decarbonisation fund will deliver energy-efficient homes. Support such as the home upgrade grant, which is due to begin delivery early next year, with a commitment to a £4 billion successor energy company obligation scheme, will continue to help push forward a reduction in the homes that need to be improved.

For anyone whose questions I have not answered, I will make sure that we do so in writing. I thank everyone for their important and thoughtful contributions today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered fuel poverty.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We will suspend briefly for the sanitisation of both Dispatch Boxes, then we will resume with the next debate.

3.25 pm

Sitting suspended.

Backbench Business

Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review

3.29 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes the publication of the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review, First Do No Harm; further notes the Government's failure to respond to the recommendations of that review in full; notes the significant discrepancy between the incidence of complication following mesh surgery in the Hospital Episode Statistics and the British Society of Urogynaecology databases, as highlighted in the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists' Project Report, entitled Hospital Episode Statistics as a Source of Information on Safety and Quality in Gynaecology to Support Revalidation; notes that the Government's plan to publish a retrospective audit to investigate the links between patient-level data to explore outcomes has not been fulfilled; notes that the moratorium on mesh implant procedures should not be lifted until that audit has been undertaken and the true scale of suffering established; notes Ministers' failure to acknowledge recommendations relating to victims of Primodos; and calls on the Government to fully implement the recommendations for victims of mesh, sodium valproate and Primodos without further delay.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate. Today is the one-year anniversary of the publication of the report of the independent medicines and medical devices safety review, entitled "First Do No Harm". It is that report, and the Government's response to its nine recommendations, that this debate is intended to address. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Baroness Cumberlege, who chaired the review, and her dedicated team. I am delighted that she is able to be here to listen to the debate.

The publication of the report gave hope to so many women who had felt ignored and belittled for years. Since it was published, Baroness Cumberlege has continued to campaign in the other place for the thousands and thousands of women impacted, and I am proud to be supporting her. I pay tribute to the women personally affected by the medical interventions under investigation and their bravery in sharing their stories. In the words of the report,

"They told their stories with dignity and eloquence, but also with sadness and anger, to highlight common and compelling themes."

The review examined the hormone pregnancy test Primodos, which was thought to be associated with birth defects and miscarriages; sodium valproate, an effective anti-epileptic drug, which caused physical malformations, autism and developmental delay; and pelvic mesh implants, which have been linked to crippling, life-changing complications. The report had a damning conclusion:

"the system is not safe enough for those taking medications in pregnancy or being treated using new devices and techniques".

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate. I do not intend to speak, but I am here today because a constituent has written to me. She has suffered horribly from appalling damage as a result of these procedures. I want to thank the hon. Lady sincerely for bringing this to the Floor of the House and allowing us all to be educated—well, those who need educating, like me.

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for his comments, and I am very pleased that he is able to join the debate.

The report showed that patients were exposed to the risk of harm when they did not need to be. They were affected adversely by poor or indifferent care. They suffered at the hands of clinicians who did not listen or chose not to do so. They were abandoned by a system that failed to recognise its mistakes and correct them at the earliest opportunity.

The systematic silencing of women's voices, the indifference to their stories and the outright denial of their pain and suffering was a central theme in the findings of the report. That theme has been repeated time and time again when it comes to women's health. Enough is enough. Today's motion calls on the Government to implement all nine of the recommendations in the report, and I hope Members across the House will support it.

I am joint chair of the all-party parliamentary group on surgical mesh implants, and my comments will obviously focus predominantly on that, but I want to very quickly mention the Epilepsy Society's campaign "Safe Mum, Safe Baby", which calls on the Government to fund research into safer epilepsy medication so that babies are not born with preventable diseases.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady is right to bring this issue to the fore, and I commend her for that. The Minister will recall that I had a debate on how the mesh is affecting men. I had 400 people in Northern Ireland contact me saying that their problems were the same: it is hard to remove and causes extreme pain, depression, relationship problems, marriage breakdowns and, for some people, unfortunately suicide. Does the hon. Lady agree that, whether the mesh is for women or men, it is detrimental and has harmed many people?

Emma Hardy: Absolutely. One of the points that I will come to later is that people who have had rectopexy and hernia mesh implants have also been badly affected.

The recommendation that I want to focus on is the one that requires immediate action from the Secretary of State to set up an implementation taskforce to oversee the progress of the other eight recommendations, and to offer a timeline for the actions. Unfortunately, the Government declined the recommendation and instead offered the creation of a patient reference group to "ensure that patients voices are heard".

With respect, patients' voices have been heard in the Cumberlege report. We already know that women are not listened to in the healthcare system. We need action to change that, rather than another review kicking the can down the road. I would be interested in hearing from the Minister how the Government intend to ensure that women's voices are placed at the centre of their treatment when the patient reference group publishes its report.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Like others, I thank the hon. Lady for securing this vital debate. Does she agree with me that we need to encourage women to speak up and to support them to deal with their own health issues, but that comments made by some in Government recently that it is down to women individually to speak up can be unhelpful? We have to see this

[Hannah Bardell]

through the lens of the institutional challenges that women have faced for decades. Although we need to celebrate our clinicians, we really need to do more to educate them and give them resources and support to ensure women are not treated in the way the hon. Lady is describing.

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and I agree with her absolutely, which brings me on to the point about the redress agency, which is one of the recommendations in the report that has been rejected. Instead, the Government have said:

“The government and industry have previously established redress schemes without the need for an additional agency.”

That goes to the point that she made, because this puts the burden of redress in entirely the wrong place: on the victims, not on those responsible. Seeking redress requires enormous effort on the part of those who are already suffering, not just financially but emotionally, as was set out in Baroness Cumberlege’s report. It recommends that without waiting for the establishment of a redress agency:

“Separate schemes should be set up for each intervention...to meet the cost of providing additional care and support to those who have experienced avoidable harm”.

Sadly, no such moves have been made, so I would be interested if the Minister gave an indication of the progress on such schemes.

The report also recommends transparency on payments to clinicians, with a UK-style Physician Payments Sunshine Act 2010 to require the mandatory reporting of all payments made to doctors, teaching hospitals, research institutions and charities. The Government’s interim response said that they would “consider” this recommendation, in discussion with other parties, including the General Medical Council. I understand that there are suggestions that this could be done by expanding the voluntary system of reporting, but, as we have seen, voluntary systems simply do not work.

By way of a quick example, a high-profile academic recently admitted that he had failed to declare £100,000 from the manufacturer of one of the types of vaginal mesh implants that he was assessing. He has now published a correction, but this is almost seven years after he first did his report and it came only after a complaint was made about him. A section 60 order in the Health and Care Bill would allow for legislation to cover this, because transparency is vital to patient safety. There should be no opportunities for payments made by industry to introduce bias into prescribing or the scientific literature that is used to inform our National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines. This report recommended creating a database to record which device was used when, in which person, and what the outcomes were in terms of safety and patient feedback.

The roll-out of the medical device information system has begun, but questions are arising as to what data is being collected. This is really important. To give an indication of that, let me raise the case of Kath, an extremely fit and healthy woman who used to be interested in skydiving. She had mesh implants and afterwards was in such pain that she was unable to move or get out of bed. This completely changed her life forever. However, her procedure was recorded as a success because she no

longer had incontinence and that was the measure being looked at. We need to be looking at all patient outcomes when we are recording that data in those data sets.

That brings me on to my next point, which relates to the current moratorium on using mesh, as recommended in the report. Kath has said that there is no way she would ever have had this procedure had she had any indication of the risk of harm. I understand that there is pressure from some of the surgeons to reintroduce mesh, but I do not believe we can do that without fully informed consent, and we can have that only if patients are fully aware of all the risks. They can be fully aware of all the risks only if all the data is collected and recorded accurately. Until that is done, we cannot have informed consent and we should not consider lifting the moratorium on the use of mesh implants.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for joining me to help to secure this debate. I will be speaking later, but I wanted to touch on this specific point about the pressure we are coming under. Does she agree that nothing has changed from a clinical point of view in the past 18 months, yet the clinician pressure is to stop the suspension? Does that not represent the pressure we are under coming from the clinician side of this argument?

Emma Hardy: I completely agree and thank the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate forward and championing it from the other side of the House. He correctly says that we need to have all that evidence so that people can give that informed consent.

Finally, the report recommends establishing specialist treatment centres

“to provide comprehensive treatment, care and advice”.

Some of these care centres are being established, which is good news, but again there are concerns about the data collection on patient outcomes after mesh removal and not all women are having all their mesh removed—some of this is only a partial removal. Again, what questions are being asked and what data is being collected? I have submitted numerous written parliamentary questions to the Department but have yet to receive a clear answer on exactly what data will be collected.

There are also important questions to be answered on the competence of surgeons to undertake removals. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) has a very difficult story on this issue. The Department says that it is for individual trusts to decide which surgeons to use for removals, but I do not share that view. How can it be fair to ask a woman to return to the same surgeon who put the mesh in, causing her all that harm, in order to have it removed? I really think we need to look at this issue again.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The situation is even worse than the hon. Lady suggests, because in some cases these surgeons, who have now been appointed as lead figures in the mesh centres, are the people who not only put the mesh in but then persisted in denying that the mesh was the cause of any of the terrible problems their victims had suffered.

Emma Hardy: I thank the right hon. Gentleman and completely agree with his point.

We are now one year on from publication of the Cumberlege review. Of course I accept that there has been a pandemic, but there is nothing to stop the Government accepting the recommendations. We would all be quite realistic and understand that the Government can accept the recommendations but that there would have to be a delay in implementing them, because of the pandemic. That would be fine, but they have not. They have implemented only two recommendations, on an apology and on the appointment of a patient safety commissioner.

Given the lack of progress and the concerns that I have outlined, to which I know colleagues here will add further, I urge the Government to reconsider the implementation taskforce. The problems identified by the review are systemic and of long standing and, if unaddressed, will condemn more to a lifetime of suffering. It is essential that they are brought to an end, and to do so the review's recommendations must all be implemented in full.

3.41 pm

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I join the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) in thanking the Backbench Business Committee for enabling this important debate.

I decided that the independent medicines and medical devices safety review should be set up because I was deeply concerned about the impact, which had been raised over many years, of the use of certain medicines and medical devices on women, and in particular the use of pelvic mesh, sodium valproate and hormone pregnancy tests, predominantly Primodos.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend all Members of the House who have campaigned on these issues over the years. I would also like to add my thanks to the noble Baroness Cumberlege for the work she did in chairing the review, and in producing such a no-holds-barred and absolutely-to-the-point review, which made very clear for the Government the problems that had occurred and what needed to be done.

I will also take this opportunity to say to the Minister that I would like to thank the Government for their decision to establish a strategy for women's health, which I think is important. But that is for the future; what we are talking about now, of course, are problems that occurred in the past but also problems that are still occurring, as we have just heard in relation to mesh, and indeed as with sodium valproate, which I will refer to later.

What was clear to me when these issues were raised with me is that over decades women had suffered, children had suffered and families had suffered, and the impacts are still being felt today. What was also clear was that the voices of patients, of women and of others had been raised and had consistently been ignored. There had been a sort of attitude that said, "There, there. You're a woman; you just have to put up with it." The unwillingness to listen and act had occurred under successive Governments, through the Department of Health and various aspects of the national health service.

I have to say to the Minister that sadly such an approach is perhaps not unexpected by Members of the House. I am sure that other Members will, like me, have had constituency cases in which there has been a problem with the treatment an individual received from the

NHS, and they want an apology and to know that someone will ensure that it does not happen again to somebody else, but they come up against a brick wall, because the natural inclination is to defend the institution, rather than address the issue that has been raised.

Jim Shannon: Some of the ladies in Northern Ireland who have contacted me want more than apologies. Some of them have not been able to work—they cannot work and will never be able to work—not because of anxiety and depression but because of the physical difficulties they have. Does the right hon. Lady agree that this is also about making sure that people have the benefits that the Government can make available? We also need to address the breakdown in their marriages and the help we can give. Those are some of the things that my constituents want to see, as well the things that the right hon. Lady has referred to.

Mrs May: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and I shall come to the issue of redress in relation to these particular aspects of pelvic mesh, sodium valproate and Primodos and other HPTs. I was making the general point that I see constituency cases of individuals where a mistake has been made by the NHS. They want an apology and to know that change is going to take place, but they come up against a brick wall and sometimes find themselves battling and ending up in court to try to get some redress—with all the problems that that creates—because the institution has defended itself, rather than taking the patient's voice seriously.

Our NHS does amazing work day by day and it has done amazing work during the pandemic, but, sadly, when mistakes are made, it does not always respond in the right way. The report of the independent review made this very clear:

"There is an institutional and professional resistance to changing practice even in the face of mounting safety concerns. There can be a culture of dismissive and arrogant attitudes that only serve to intimidate and confuse. For women there is an added dimension—the widespread and wholly unacceptable labelling of so many symptoms as 'normal' and attributable to 'women's problems'."

It went on:

"Mistakes are perpetuated through a culture of denial, a resistance to no-blame learning, and an absence of overall effective accountability."

It was apt that the report was called "First Do No Harm"; as the noble Baroness Cumberlege said:

"It is a phrase that should serve as a guiding principle, and the starting point, not only for doctors but for all the other component parts of our healthcare system. Too often, we believe it has not."

Like the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle, I am concerned that the Government have not responded to and accepted the recommendations of the review in full. The recommendations were not made lightly; they were made after listening to considerable evidence and hearing the voice of people who had suffered for years as a result of the use of these medicines or medical devices. The report identified where changes needed to be made. Of course responses take time and of course the Department has been dealing with the pandemic, but I hope that the Government are going to respond properly on all the issues raised.

The Government have agreed to set up an independent patient safety commissioner—partly, I have to say, because of the action in the House of Lords in relation to amendments to a Bill—and they are now consulting on

[Mrs May]

the position, but we do not know when the commissioner is going to be in post. The commissioner is important, because it is the commissioner who will enable the user's experience—the patient's voice—to be heard. By hearing that voice, it will be possible to detect and stop the use of medicines and medical devices that lead to avoidable harms.

Hannah Bardell: The right hon. Lady has made the point about institutional cultures, defensiveness and the culture of litigation that it feels like we have now got into, particularly in respect of some aspects of the health service. Does she agree that the patient safety commissioner must have teeth and must be able to help us—I think there would be agreement across this House and in the other place on this—to try to move away from that culture so that we can learn from mistakes?

Mrs May: I absolutely agree about the importance of the patient safety commissioner; they have to be able to do the job that is intended and set out for them to do. I know that there will be those who will be concerned that their sponsoring Department is the Department of Health and Social Care. It is natural because this is a health issue, but I hope that the Department will make every effort to ensure that it cannot be accused of trying to water down the role of the independent safety commissioner, because, as we are saying, it is important for the user's experience to be heard. This is not about trying to get at the Department of Health or the NHS or anything. It is about people who are suffering real-life experiences and impacts as a result of the use of medicines and medical devices; it is about identifying those situations and ensuring that action is taken to stop them happening so that others can be protected.

The issue of redress was mentioned by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle and the hon. Member for—I apologise, because the hon. Gentleman is in the House so frequently, but I have forgotten his constituency—[*Interruption.*] Strangford, thank you. The issue was also mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The Government have said that an agency is not needed, yet time and again the only redress for patients is through recourse to the courts. That is expensive and stressful. It is also expensive for the national health service; in 2018-19, the NHS paid £2.4 billion in clinical negligence claims. But redress is about far more than compensation. It is about relating to the real impact that the use of these medicines and medical devices has had on people, such as the need for special education for children who have been affected because their mothers have taken sodium valproate when pregnant. There are many other examples. I urge the Government to look again at that issue.

I also want to raise the issue of the patient's voice, because this has all been about an unwillingness in the past to listen to the patient's voice. Setting up the patient reference group was fine, but I understand that it is due to publish findings shortly, and nobody knows whether the patient's voice is going to be taken into account or how it can be in the future. I urge the Government to ensure that patients are part of the implementation; it is their experience that we are talking about, so it is so important that they are included.

My final point relates to sodium valproate and it partly comes from constituency experience. This medicine has a one in two risk of causing harm to a baby if a woman is taking it while she is, or becomes, pregnant. What lies behind this issue is information and education, but it took a year for the Government to write to women to raise awareness of the risk. I hope that the Government do not think that that is job done, because this is an ongoing issue that has to be addressed. It is not just about providing information to women; it is also about ensuring that their clinicians are well informed when they are prescribing and dealing with their cases.

Women suffered considerably from the use of pelvic mesh, from hormone-based pregnancy tests, predominantly Primodos, and from sodium valproate, but they and their children are still suffering today. At the heart of this situation lay a health system that, in the words of the report, is

“not good enough at spotting trends in practice and outcomes that give rise to safety concerns. Listening to patients is pivotal to that.”

The system did not listen. It saw real pain and debilitation as women's problems. The service which at its heart has our safety and protection ignored concerns over safety for too many years. The independent report recommends steps for the system to change. I urge the Government to embrace the recommendations in full. That way, we will be on the way to ensuring that we have a system that genuinely first does no harm.

3.53 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) for securing this very important debate. As we have heard, today marks one year since the independent medicines and medical devices safety review was published. I was speaking virtually that day and I have to say that I am thrilled to be able to speak in the Chamber today; thankfully, it is starting to feel a bit more normal. I wholeheartedly thank Baroness Cumberlege and her team for their excellent work; it is great to see her with us today. I also thank the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) for commissioning the review in the first place. It was a brave and bold thing to do—and the right thing to do, as she has so often done in this place.

The problems with the medicines and medical devices that the review reports on—Primodos, valproate and vaginal mesh—have been ongoing for much, much longer than just the past year, as we all know. I have had the privilege of working with campaigners over many years on these issues; I pay tribute to Janet Williams, Emma Murphy, Marie Lyon and Kath Sansom, to name just four, for their dedication and expertise. They are normally with us for these debates, and it is sad that they are not able to be here.

I first spoke in this House about surgical mesh implants in October 2017, as shadow Minister for public health—there were always lots of debates in that brief, as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) will know. My mam always likes to see my speeches, so one Saturday, while I was making lunch, I showed her that speech and said “Oh, thank goodness you've never had any of this awful mesh put in.”

That was when our world was turned upside down. She said, “No, no, I only had a bit of tape put in a few years ago, before all my troubles started”—the “troubles” she refers to being numerous health problems that appeared one after the other. She had had scans and cameras everywhere, with no diagnosis. Obviously there was no solution that could be found. Does that sound familiar to those who have had constituents with mesh problems get in touch?

Fast-forward three and a half years—coming up to four now—from that first debate, and my mam still has all sorts of complications. She is now in constant pain all the time. She is 76 this year. She has all sorts of autoimmune reactions and she just wants her mesh removed, no matter her age. She was very healthy and had a great life before, and her life now is a shadow of its former self. She wishes constantly, every day, that she had never had it put inside her.

She is not alone. I know that there are tens of thousands of women in exactly the same position, so I support all the recommendations of the excellent Cumberlege review. Recommendation 5 calls for specialist centres to be established, which is excellent; it has happened, they are open and I think some have actually started to do some of their work. But therein lies the issue that I want to specifically mention today—I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle and the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) have already raised it, so I am not alone in being concerned.

The issue is that the very surgeons who implanted this awful, life-devastating mesh are in most cases the very same ones now offering to remove it. As the right hon. Gentleman said, after gaslighting women and telling them that their pain was in their head or that they just had to learn to live with it—or to lie back and think of England when they tried to have sex, as was once mentioned in Westminster Hall—they are the very same surgeons these patients, including my mam, are expected to trust again to remove this mesh. That trust is, unsurprisingly, all gone.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady; I really appreciate all the work that she has done on the issue alongside us. To take what she says one step further—she may be coming on to this point—does she agree that the other problem is that the evidence we have had in APPG meetings is that the very same surgeons still think that this is the best cure for women? They are not actually accepting some of the problems that are blatantly obvious.

Mrs Hodgson: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point; I was not moving on to it, so I am glad he has made it. They are very keen to start reimplanting and reusing the mesh; they still say that it is great and that it transforms 90% of women’s lives. For the 90% whose body can tolerate it, that is great, but for the 10% who cannot, it devastates their lives. It transforms their lives in a devastating way; in many cases it can leave them crippled and unable to work.

Not all these women are of pensionable age like my mam, who is 76 this year. Some are still of working age and have all the problems associated with trying to get recognition in the benefits system when so little is still known, not just by GPs but by the Department for

Work and Pensions people who are dealing with them. The last thing we want to do is create more victims of this terrible medical device. Mesh-injured women are between a rock and a hard place: either they have their mesh removed by the very same surgeon who implemented the mesh, often—in the case of my mam as well—after it was widely known that it was devastating some women’s health, or they do not have it removed at all. This should never be a choice, so I call on the Minister to work with NHS England to reconsider that and put patients first by giving them a genuine choice about where they go for their mesh removal and who removes it. There are only eight of these centres, so this is not often as easy as saying, “Oh well, you can go to Manchester or London,” as was said to my mam; obviously, I will bend over backwards to enable that to happen, but some women just will not have the wherewithal. There must be a way for surgeons from other parts of the country to travel to where those women are, so that they do not have to face and deal with the surgeon who put the mesh in them.

I want to briefly mention valproate and Primodos. Since the review was published a year ago, very sadly 10 members of the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests have died, still suffering with the enormous guilt of feeling, even though it was not their fault, inadvertently responsible for the damage to their babies. This has been an ongoing battle for them since 1978 and we have heard and will hear further this afternoon how devastating this drug has been for those who took it in all innocence, with full trust in their doctors to do them no harm.

On valproate, I have huge respect for the noble Lord O’Shaughnessy. When he was the Health Minister responsible he put in train excellent guidance and safeguards and tried to help more than anyone before him, yet shockingly still around 400 babies are born per year who have been exposed to valproate—even now, after all we know and all that the noble Lord put in train. That is truly shocking. Some 15,000 women in England alone are prescribed valproate in their child-bearing years with the majority still not receiving the pregnancy prevention programme or given a change of medication should they seek or want to become pregnant. This is without even beginning to estimate the additional tragedies of stillbirths, miscarriages or terminations that are due and necessary because of valproate.

This Minister’s lasting legacy could be to right these historical wrongs once and for all. We must ensure that everyone in the healthcare system is protected and treated with care, and when there are failings, as will happen—they cannot all be prevented, much as we would like it to be so—the Government must take action to ensure that those harmed are treated with respect and given proper healthcare and restorative surgery where possible and are, if they can be, properly compensated. But mostly we need to ensure that this sort of harm from medicines and medical devices never happens again.

4.3 pm

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): What an honour it is to follow the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson); I remember from my time as Health Secretary what an incredibly powerful and passionate campaigner she was on all health issues,

[Jeremy Hunt]

and she has done an enormous amount for families up and down the country through her campaigning in this place. I also thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) for her powerful comments and for securing this debate alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke); both are formidable campaigners. I also particularly thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) for encouraging me to commission this review as Health Secretary. It was the right thing to do, and it reminded me of another great decision she made: to commission an independent investigation into the contaminated blood scandal, which was long overdue and which Prime Ministers prior to her had ducked. That was again an example of someone being prepared to do the right thing.

We would not be here if it were not for the hard work and dedication of my noble Friend Baroness Cumberlege. When I asked her to carry out this review in February 2018, neither of us had any idea quite what a huge job it would be. She set about the task with enormous energy and determination, and with the integrity to know that the job could not and would not be done properly until she had heard the stories of families up and down the country who had been damaged by what went wrong. I thank her, Sir Cyril Chantler and the entire team for their work and the clarity that they have brought to these difficult issues.

There has been the most terrible oversight of women's medicine and medical devices. Until we implement the recommendations in the report, there will not be just a lack of justice, but also a risk of repeat.

I commend the Minister, who I know is personally deeply committed to patient safety. I know that, as a Minister, it is not always easy to get your way and to do all the things that you would like to do, because other people in the system overrule you. I know her heart is in the right place. I thank her for the fact that we have legislated for a patient safety commissioner.

I understand the Government's argument that it is not necessary to have an independent redress agency to implement a redress scheme, but we still do not have a redress scheme in this case. The risk of not having an agency is that every time we want to set up a scheme, there must be negotiations with the Treasury and the whole machinery of government combines to try to slow the process down. If we are to have justice in the future, we do not want that to happen.

On sodium valproate, I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West. I remind the House that 400 babies are born every year to women on valproate. Half of those babies are harmed. As the hon. Lady rightly said, that is an underestimate because it does not include any stillbirths, miscarriages and terminations that may be associated with valproate.

The NHS took nearly a year to write to all the women of childbearing age on valproate, to warn them of the risks. I can understand why it took so long in the year that we have just had with the pandemic, but I am more concerned that the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency was approached as early as 2013 with the same issues. That identifies that we have a systemic problem that needs to be addressed.

I am also concerned that the letter that went out from the NHS simply had a warning about the dangers of valproate. Why did it not announce a ban on the routine prescription of valproate, saying that in future, it could only be prescribed through specialist channels, where we can absolutely make sure that the checks are in place to make sure that babies will not be harmed?

I am very concerned that the letter contains an ambition to halve the number of pregnant women on valproate by 2023. I cannot understand why we would just want to halve the number of pregnant women on valproate, when that would mean that 100 babies will continue to be born harmed every year. There can be no other proper ambition than to eliminate the number of babies born harmed by valproate and we need a plan to do that. It feels too much like that saying by Aristotle that the problem is not aiming too high and missing, but aiming too low and hitting. In this case, we must be aiming to prevent all harm to babies and to mothers.

My final point echoes many comments made by other hon. Members this afternoon. This is of course about justice, but it is also about learning. This time, it was valproate, Primodos and mesh. Next time, it will be different medicines and medical devices. I say to the Minister, only because I have been in exactly the same position as she is now on many, many occasions, that the only thing to do in this situation is to put your hand on your heart and ask yourself honestly and searchingly, "Am I absolutely sure that, having done what I am going to do, this can never happen again?" Until these nine recommendations are implemented, we will not be able to have the certainty that these mistakes will not be repeated. I think we need more pace and more ambition from the Government and I hope that is what we will hear when she makes her comments later.

4.10 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in such an important debate. I congratulate, again, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and it is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt). It is rare in these political times that this House is united on an issue, but it is united today, more than I have seen it for some time. I hope to speak directly for a moment to those out there who are watching who have been affected by hormone pregnancy drugs such as Primodos, like my constituents Kirsteen and Wilma Ord, or sodium valproate or vaginal mesh, or mesh that is used in men: this House is united and there are Members in this place who will not give up the fight to make sure that you get justice and redress.

I want to talk specifically about families affected by Primodos. I pay tribute to Baroness Cumberlege and I am very pleased that she is here today. She and her team did an incredible job on her review, "First Do No Harm". I pay testament to the bravery, dedication and passion of the Primodos campaigners, led by Marie Lyon. She is the personification of persistence and I know that she will be watching, because it is unimaginable that families and victims of Primodos had been subjected not only to the harm of the drug, but years and years—decades—of waiting and campaigning. We have to recognise, as Members including the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) did, that it is so damaging that these things can take so long. They are corrosive and debilitating—I have seen that in my constituents.

Time and again, we see families treated this way, whether they are the victims of thalidomide, contaminated blood, the families of Hillsborough or now the victims of Primodos, sodium valproate and medical mesh. There have been years of inquiries and public money is being spent for those who have suffered and are still suffering, and very often, they do not get justice or have to wait for decades, or they and their family have died before they have the truth. It is a culture of kicking the can down the road and it is toxic.

One key thing, particularly in relation to Primodos, is the guilt that those women live with—that they somehow were responsible, and have been told by doctors that they were responsible, for the harm of their own child, which we all know is absolutely incorrect and not true. I hope that any family, any victim and any woman affected, particularly by Primodos or, indeed, sodium valproate or mesh, know that it is not your fault. You did not do anything wrong.

The Cumberlege review was a huge step forward in recognising the unnecessary and colossal harm inflicted on victims of the Primodos drug. The review was supposed to mean that victims had finally been heard and believed and I think that many, many felt that they had been. After it was published, the Conservative Government made a very welcome and long overdue formal apology to victims, and I pay tribute to the former Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey, and the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead, for their part in the work that they have done in that area.

However, we need to be reminded, and those now in power need to be reminded, that an apology means nothing if the action to rectify those issues and make sure they cannot happen again does not happen. Only two of Baroness Cumberlege's nine recommendations have been implemented. Given that these families—the Primodos victims—have waited almost 60 years, including my constituent Wilma Ord and her daughter Kirsteen, they cannot be forced to wait any longer, surely. An apology and a patient safety commissioner is a big step forward. In Scotland, we have also brought forward a review and intend to bring forward those plans, and I am sure that we will continue to work with this Government and the Health Secretary to make sure that we do all we can in Scotland.

The injustice continues, however, because the families have not received the compensation or lifetime care that was rightly awarded to thalidomide victims earlier this year. Like thalidomide victims, Primodos survivors face constant uncertainty about the cost of their care as they get older. Many surviving victims are now in their forties and fifties, and they are facing physical challenges with their bodies. Many have relied on care from their parents who are now getting older and facing their own challenges. That is truly heartbreaking.

My constituent Wilma Ord has spoken very candidly to me about the burden she feels, and the fears she has for her daughter as she gets later into her life and may not be able to cope. She worries about what will happen when she has gone. She just wants to know that her daughter will have the support she needs. I do not think that that is very much to ask. Financial support for these families is the least they should be offered. That should just be the starting point in addressing the harm that was done to them. Thalidomide campaigners did

not have to obtain proof of a causal link in their fight for justice and rightly so, so why is there a higher bar set for Primodos victims before the Government will provide equal treatment? I hope the Health Secretary can answer that question.

The UK Government repeatedly cites—we have not spoken about this yet, I do not think—the 2017 expert working group report. Its failings have been widely acknowledged. Having worked closely with the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who has done a huge amount on this issue, and campaigner Marie Lyon who sat on that group, we know the expert working group was not only a whitewash but a disgraceful waste of public money. There are serious questions around the process and independence of that report, but we want to move forward.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): The hon. Lady mentions the expert working group's report, which was, as she rightly says, universally panned in this Chamber. The interesting thing is that the Cumberlege review took place after the expert working group. It had a look at the report and also came to the conclusion that it was not worth the paper it was written on.

Hannah Bardell: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She makes an excellent point. We know there were serious questions around the process and the independence of the report. I remember going with her across the road to the conference centre where it was being launched, and being denied entry. Two democratically elected Members of Parliament working for our constituents were refused entry to the launch of a report funded by public money. It was an absolute scandal.

The evidence uncovered by Sky News reporter Jason Farrell suggested that significant sections of the original draft were changed before publication, including the omission of a graph showing that the majority of historical studies found an association between the drug and malformations. In short, evidence was deliberately omitted and censored, and Government money was spent on that. You know the worst of it? Families and victims were strung along for months and months and months only to be let down. That can never happen again.

If the Government seek to rebuild trust after such devastating scandals as Primodos, they must give the public and most of all the victims a fair and open process. That cannot be achieved, however, if it relies on a report and findings that are not fit for purpose. Everybody in the House knows that and the public know that. How many times are we going to see public money spent on placating people, while report after review gathers dust on a shelf rather than action being taken? Processes have to be open and robust. When they are and when reports such as Baroness Cumberlege's report are produced, they have to be put into action. It is vital that that now happens and that we find a way forward for Primodos victims, and for the victims of sodium valproate and mesh.

All the failings in the system that led to this awful situation are in the past and cannot be undone, but we have to be sure that the public have confidence not just in their medical practitioners, who have done a phenomenal job through covid, but in the processes and in our ability as parliamentarians to do our job. Now, in 2021, why are the Government continuing to perpetuate that wrong?

[Hannah Bardell]

They are compounding the pain and suffering that the families have endured at the hands of the state's failure to regulate private pharmaceutical companies properly. It feels very much like profit over people. We do not want to hear, and I know that my constituents do not want to hear, "We're in litigation; we're engaged in a legal process." That is all very well, but the Government have a duty to implement the recommendations of the report that they commissioned.

All I would say to the Minister and the Health Secretary is that they have the opportunity to right a wrong. Let us not continue down the road of defensiveness and turning our back on those victims who have waited decades—literally lifetimes—to get answers and justice. Ministers should do the right thing and give them the justice and the recompense that they deserve.

4.20 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): May I, too, commend the Backbench Business Committee for securing this important debate?

My constituent Mrs Jennifer Meakin was pregnant with her third child, Daniel, when she was prescribed Primodos as a pregnancy test. Daniel was born on 14 September 1974, with severe birth defects. He had an occipital swelling containing brain cells and fluid, which had leaked out when the neural tube was developing, and he was categorised as spina bifida. Daniel has undergone five major brain operations. By any standard, he is severely disabled. Equally, by any standard, the challenges experienced by the Meakin family since his birth over 47 years ago have been enormous.

Hormone pregnancy tests first came on to the market in the early 1960s, and approximately 1 million prescriptions were dispensed. As early as 1967, warnings were made available to the Committee on Safety of Drugs that such tests were unreliable, might cause neural tube defects of the sort that afflicted Daniel, and could precipitate an early abortion. However, a 1967 CSD press release reported:

"The consensus of expert opinion is that there is no scientific evidence to support the view that the hormones used in pregnancy tests can cause congenital malformations."

The IMMDS report comments on that very forthrightly, stating:

"Given the concerns raised, the non-essential nature of HPTs and the provision of risk-free alternative tests...the CSD...should have recommended the withdrawal of the indication for use as a pregnancy test in 1967."

However, it was not until June 1975 that a general warning was issued by the Committee on Safety of Medicines, the statutory successor to the CSD, about the possible association between hormone pregnancy tests and an increased incidence of congenital abnormalities, with an explicit recommendation that doctors should not prescribe hormonal preparations for pregnancy tests. That was some eight years after concerns about the tests were first raised and eight years after the date when, according to the report, the CSD should have recommended that Primodos should not be used as a pregnancy test—and sadly, of course, it was after Mrs Meakin was prescribed the drug for that purpose.

The report makes two specific recommendations in relation to Primodos, which I strongly endorse: first, the establishment of specialist centres for all families adversely affected by medicines taken in pregnancy, to provide integrated medical and social care in one place; and secondly, an ex gratia scheme, to provide discretionary payments. Families who have been afflicted by this scandal for half a century need all the support that they can get. It is a tribute to their persistence and indefatigability that they have pursued their campaign for so long. The report rightly observes that, although causal association has not yet been established, families such as the Meakins have suffered stress, anxiety, psychological harm and the general toll of fighting for recognition. They have, in short, put up with almost unbearable adversity.

The Government did the right thing recently when they confirmed a commitment to lifetime support for the thalidomide victims. I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that the Government would, similarly, be doing the right thing now if they were to establish a support scheme for the families affected by Primodos. I strongly urge them to do so.

4.24 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) for securing this important debate and the Backbench Business Committee for making it possible.

I want to talk about sodium valproate and the impact it has had on so many people, including so many children of women who were taking that drug, and I want to talk about my constituent Bethany Dodgson, a young woman affected by foetal valproate syndrome. She speaks up on this issue, and she tells me about her difficulties and the more serious difficulties experienced by her brother every day, as well as about her role as a carer in her family and how they have to live with the consequences of foetal valproate syndrome. I also want to pay tribute to Janet Williams and Emma Murphy from INFACt—the Independent Fetal Anti-Convulsant Trust—who have done so much to campaign on this issue, and to all those other women and other people who have campaigned on this issue.

It is really scandalous that we still have children being affected by foetal valproate syndrome today because their mothers were not aware of the risk of taking sodium valproate. People have campaigned, as Emma and Janet have campaigned, and they have been through records and talked to an endless number of people to try to ensure that women are made aware of the risks of taking sodium valproate, but still we see people being harmed. One year on from the Cumberlege report, "First Do No Harm", what we have seen on this issue is one letter sent in the last few weeks to warn women of the risk. There have been attempts in previous years, with greater or lesser success, to ensure that doctors were aware and warned their patients, but much more needs to be done actively to ensure that no more children are harmed from their mothers taking sodium valproate.

I would like to talk a bit, as others have, about the recommendations of Baroness Cumberlege's report "First Do No Harm". The first thing is the patient safety commissioner, which has been accepted. I am aware

that there is movement, but still we have further delays. We have a consultation on the role, and we have extended delays. This is a really significant and important role for the future, and I would urge the Minister and the Government to act swiftly to ensure that the patient safety commissioner is in place.

Secondly, I want to talk about having a redress agency. Going to the law is no answer for the people who have suffered from any of these syndromes. In itself, that would be further torture and a trial on top of what they already have experienced. I endorse exactly what Baroness Cumberlege said in her report: there must be an independent redress agency to stop the pain of people having to keep on fighting—fighting in law—for their rights. I hope the Government and the Minister will be able to accept that, and then individual schemes for each condition can be set up for redress. These people have already had to live for years with their views not being heard, living with the physical consequences for either themselves or their family of the drugs or treatments they have had. Please can we get on and set up this agency now? It is really vital for those people. They do not deserve to have to fight in a different place to achieve that redress, so I hope the Government will look at that.

Then there is the patient reference group. Although it has been set up, there are concerns that there is not sufficient continuing patient involvement in the work that has to go forward. I urge the Minister again to look at that, and to agree with patient groups how they can be involved in future and how we can learn the lessons about what happened to them as we go forward so that this cannot happen again.

Let us be clear: we are talking about a medical issue in medical terms, but this is a women's issue. It is an issue of women not being listened to and their concerns not being heard, and of action not being taken. Frankly, it is just not good enough. We certainly need to learn the lessons going forward. The Government must act now and we must find a way to prevent further harm to women. As we develop and consult on the women's health strategy, we need to make sure that we are learning these lessons and the lessons of so many other cases where the voices of women have not been heard and listened to effectively. The title of the Cumberlege report is "First Do No Harm". It is vital that this principle is looked at when we consider the women's health strategy.

4.30 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate in my name and that of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy).

When the hon. Lady and I met to discuss the progress that may or may not have been made, we felt it was important to hold this debate today because it is one year since the publication of the report. Everybody in this House, and I am sure a lot of people around the country, understands that the past year has created a set of circumstances that was always going to put some aspects on the back burner and not move them forward. So today's debate is not designed to criticise and have a go at the Government—I have a great deal of respect for the Minister and the Department—but merely to say, "Please don't forget about this report." It is one of the most important reports on health matters that has come before this House in many years.

What is important today is that none of us loses sight of the people we are talking about. Hon. and right hon. Members from across the House have already raised issues relating to the people themselves—real stories about real people. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) has done enormous amounts of work on this and speaks with passion and from the heart of the effect it had personally on her family and her mother. I can only wish her and her family the best and hope that those matters can be resolved.

This first came to my attention when a constituent came to see me. I know that some hon. and right hon. Members will have heard this story before—in fact, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West touched on it—but it is worth telling again. The constituent was a very, very brave lady. She was in her 40s. She had had a child. She was a physiotherapist for the NHS. She was fit and healthy. She stood in front of me and could not sit down. She was having to bend her body into a position to feel as comfortable as she could. She sweated throughout the entire surgery because she was in crippling agony.

I knew nothing about this subject when my constituent came to see me and explained what had happened. What was even more terrifying was that it was an operation she never needed. She had had her child. She continued to have a full, loving and sexual relationship with her husband. But every now and again she had some urinary leakage, and she was told, "Don't worry, we've got a cure for that. It's a great cure. We can put some mesh inside you. We've done it for years. You'll be fixed and there'll be no problem." She went ahead and had the operation done.

About eight years later, things started to go wrong. The fundamental problem is the time between having the operation and problems becoming apparent. That is why the recommendation of a proper database is so very important. As the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle said, inserting the mesh is being recorded as a successful operation, but what happens afterwards is not recorded. To be blunt, thalidomide was successful in what it was supposed to do because it stopped morning sickness. Nine months later, the consequences were horrific. We do not class that as a successful drug that was administered. Indeed, we could talk about other drugs today, such as sodium valproate and Primodos, which raise a very important point in relation to this report. However, I am going to focus on the vaginal mesh issues.

One reason why I will focus on vaginal mesh is that my jaw hit the floor at some of the stories that my constituent told me. First, let me get rather graphic, because I think it is important. She described to me how during sexual intercourse, her husband's penis was sliced. That is not a successful operation in anybody's book. She then went through several operations, where, to be blunt, she was butchered to the point where she has no sexual stimulation whatever. She was told, "On the bright side, you now have a designer vagina."

In what circumstances does anybody feel it is appropriate to comment on the perceived attractiveness of somebody's genitalia, especially when they are suffering the pain and agony that my constituent is going through? I am afraid that that comment alone shows the arrogance of clinicians that we are up against with this issue. It is appalling, and it is one of the reasons why, as I said to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and

[Alec Shelbrooke]

Hessle, and indeed to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West, we have to push back against clinicians saying, “We want to stop the suspension of the use of mesh because it works in so many circumstances.” I am sorry, but there is too much information out there about patients simply not being listened to.

It took two and a half years for Baroness Cumberlege to put the report together. The review went around the country. Indeed, the constituent I am speaking about sat and spoke at a table with my noble Friend. She said to me afterwards, “It is fantastic. I was really listened to.” Normally when a Government set up an inquiry, you think, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, they will take some hearings and everything else”, and you get, “You’re my Member of Parliament, can you feed in?”, and so on. She said to me afterwards, “I was really listened to.”

When that report came out, women felt that they had finally been listened to and things were moving forward. I have to say that the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries), performed brilliantly that day when she stood at the Dispatch Box and first of all issued the apology. My constituent said to me she had nothing but praise for the Minister. I hope the Minister knows that the comments I am making today are in no way directed towards her; they are more directed towards what is going on in the NHS and the clinicians. Obviously the driver of this debate today is making sure, as we come out of this global pandemic and all the strains that have been put on the health service, that we reinvigorate these reports and say that they must, must, must be at the forefront of what happens.

I am afraid there is a pattern forming. One of the things that struck me when we had the debate about vaginal mesh in Westminster Hall, which I believe was around 2017, was when I described what I have just described to the House about my constituent’s sex life. In that debate—it is in *Hansard*—I used the word “clitoris”. It is incredible how much notice was taken of what I had said because a man used that word. I am afraid there is a blunt truth to this debate: it appears to be that only when men talk about women’s issues do people perk up and listen. It seems to me that there appears to be a huge gender blindness in the NHS to how it approaches the health issues of women.

It simply cannot be right that a woman goes time and time again to a doctor and is just dismissed out of hand. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) clearly outlined in her speech, we hear, “There, there. You will get over it.” I have heard that so many times.

Today’s debate does not include endometriosis—that is a different debate, but many in the House will know that I feel very passionate about it, and the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle works very hard on it alongside me. To deviate for one minute, if you will allow me, Madam Deputy Speaker, endometriosis is a crippling disease that affects 10% of women in this country, yet there is still an eight to 10-year diagnosis period before anything is done. That again shows the problem. Why are women not being listened to? Why does it take a male Member of Parliament to say these things and get noticed? It is not good enough. The reality is that the recommendations in Baroness Cumberlege’s review need to be implemented.

As I bring my comments to a close, I want to focus on the issue of redress. Redress is not about compensation culture. It is about the fact that my constituent—a healthy and active woman in her 40s who was a physiotherapist and worked for the NHS—as a result of an operation she never asked for, has seen her marriage break down, her career disappear and her life destroyed. The destroying of her life has meant that she can no longer operate as a physiotherapist. She physically cannot do the job. To a certain extent, she has had sick pay and has been looked after, but that is not the point. The point is that the NHS did the operation, said it was all fine and ignored her. She had to take out a loan and go privately to have the mesh removed because of the waiting list. It got to the point where, after she had the operation and was still not getting better, she had further scans that revealed that the mesh had intruded into her bones. Someone commented, “It’s like trying to remove hair from a piece of chewing gum.”

My constituent cannot work. She will never, ever return to the life that she had. Not to mention the breakdown of her marriage, she will never return to the profession that she trained for. She has a caring attitude. She always points out to me, “Alec, you’re too fat. Your knees are going to collapse. I see it all the time.” In fact, I bumped into her in Wetherby market square about two weeks ago, and she said, “Well, at least you’ve listened and lost a bit of weight, but there is still some way to go.”

My constituent was part of the caring profession. That is who she is, but she cannot work again. That is why redress is important. It is important that we are able to look after the people the NHS damaged. She did not need the operation and was damaged. This is not about compensation culture; it is about looking after such people. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead made clear, the NHS is an all-encompassing caring body and society. We cannot just pick out parts of it and say, “That was the care, but now we are going to ignore you.” We either believe in what it was set up for and what it is meant to do or we do not; it is as simple and black and white as that.

I believe that everybody in this House believes that; I certainly know that my hon. Friend the Minister does. I read her comments in the *Daily Mail* this week about women’s pain being ignored and about the idea that women can just accept a bit of pain—I think it was about the implanting of the contraceptive coil. It is high time that we start to recognise the institutional picture that that paints. The first step, and the reason why I wanted to speak in this debate—I know my hon. Friend the Minister is absolutely dedicated to these causes—is to bring this as high as we can in the public spotlight. We must move as quickly as we can to implement the nine recommendations, because we are destroying people’s lives. We have destroyed people’s lives, and although we will never rectify the situation, we have a responsibility as a society to do everything we can to support the people who have suffered.

4.44 pm

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): I wish to speak about the devastating effect that the drug Primodos had on countless families, including my constituent, Nan McGradie, and her daughter, Michelle.

The hormone pregnancy test drug Primodos was taken by women in the 1960s and 1970s to test for pregnancy. There was considerable evidence that women who took the drug prescribed by their general practitioner and were pregnant at that time gave birth to babies with serious birth defects including deformities, disabilities, missing limbs, cleft palates, brain damage and damage to internal organs, and in some cases miscarried or had stillbirths. The surviving victims of Primodos are now in their 40s and 50s and many face a host of new problems as their bodies continue to suffer. Many have died prematurely.

Despite the serious concerns raised by paediatrician Dr Isabel Gal in 1967 indicating the possible dangers of Primodos, no official warnings were issued about these drugs until eight years later. The Committee on Safety of Medicines and the Committee on Safety of Drugs were the Government drug vigilance authorities at that time. Those committees were set up specifically to ensure that nothing like the previous thalidomide tragedy could ever happen again. There is strong and compelling evidence of systematic regulatory failures demonstrating that the committees tasked with safeguarding the health of pregnant women failed in their duty of care.

I want to briefly highlight the case of my constituent Nan McGradie and her daughter Michelle. In 1975, Mrs McGradie was a recently married, healthy young woman. Feeling sick and suspecting she may be pregnant she went to her doctor for a pregnancy test expecting, as was normal at the time, to have a urine test. Instead her doctor prescribed her two Primodos tablets. It was subsequently confirmed that Mrs McGradie was about seven or eight weeks pregnant at that time—incidentally, around the time that a foetus in a womb develops a diaphragm. At the time, in 1975, Primodos had already been banned for use as a pregnancy test for five years in Norway and Sweden.

Mrs McGradie had a totally uneventful pregnancy during which she neither smoked nor drank, and on 20 August 1975 her daughter Michelle was born. It was discovered immediately that Michelle had been born with a hole in her diaphragm, which had allowed her bowel and spleen and part of her liver and kidneys to be forced into her chest cavity, crushing her lung. Michelle was not expected to live, but through the skills of our national health service she survived and is now aged 45.

Throughout her life Michelle has endured numerous operations and surgeries and long, long periods of hospitalisation and has suffered severe health issues including breathing difficulties, a weakened immune system, numerous bowel obstructions and inflammatory bowel infections, and has been unable to conceive children. The effects of these debilitating physical, psychological and medical extremely challenging health conditions suffered by Michelle and her parents for the last 45 years just cannot be adequately described in words.

Michelle was born in 1975, and at that time Mrs McGradie was unaware that Primodos, the drug she had been given to test for pregnancy, had been associated with birth defects for at least eight years, but some two and a half years later, in 1978, she read an article in the press which reported on a number of cases linking birth defects to the drug, including internal organ damage similar to that suffered by her daughter. Since that time, Mrs McGradie has, along with many

other women, been fighting the injustice that no one has been held responsible for the damage caused to so many lives through the prescribing of Primodos.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) for her leadership and thank her for initiating the independent medicines and medical devices safety review overseen by Baroness Cumberlege, and I thank Baroness Cumberlege and her team for their hard work. The review was instructed to consider the regulation of the hormone pregnancy test, Primodos, and the other medical products debated today. One of the report's conclusions is that Primodos should have been withdrawn from the market in 1967 after the first substantial, and very significant, report by Dr Gal. However, the Government refuse to accept responsibility for the effects of Primodos without appropriate causal association, yet they admitted later in a Sky TV interview and to the independent medicines and medical devices safety review team that they did find a possible association.

There was a moral duty on the Government representatives on the Committee on Safety of Medicines to protect patients at that time, but they failed in their duty of care by suppressing evidence of harm caused by the drug. The Government continue to deny and suppress the evidence even today, while supporting the flawed conclusions of the 2017 expert working group report. The damage to individual lives and families caused by Primodos, fuelled by successive Governments' lack of action and failure to prevent this, is immeasurable. This could be a far greater tragedy even than thalidomide.

I welcome the £40 million provided by the Chancellor in the last Budget for the ongoing care of families affected by thalidomide, but there can be no justifiable reason to deny the victims of Primodos the closure, support and justice they so clearly deserve. The Government now have an opportunity to right a tragic historical wrong, and I urge them to implement the independent medicines and medical devices safety review's recommendations in full and without further delay.

Finally, on behalf of the Primodos children and their families, I pay tribute to Mrs Marie Lyon, the chair of the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests, for her tireless campaigning for over 40 years, and to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on oral hormone pregnancy tests, for her exceptional support for the campaign.

4.50 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I must say it is quite hard to speak unemotionally after hearing the tragic story that the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans) has relayed to the House. How much more difficult must it have been for Baroness Cumberlege to hear dozens, if not hundreds, of such stories of individual human suffering? She came up with a truly magnificent report and the House of Commons had what I thought was one of its best days for a long time when we discussed it, in no small measure due to the Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) and her response to the report. We would all have felt quite justified in thinking that, at last, there was real light at the end of this horrible, terrible, awful tunnel, but it does not seem that we have got to the end of it yet.

[Dr Julian Lewis]

I took from Baroness Cumberlege's report one particular area of hope, and that was the establishment of the specialised mesh centres, and I wish to focus in my contribution on three questions. First, are the mesh centres truly dedicated and comprehensive one-stop shops offering all the types of treatment likely to be needed and all the types of investigation likely to be required, if not under one roof, then at least within a single footprint, or are they merely specialists hubs in name only?

Secondly, there is another problem related to the centres. Are we seeing a situation in which surgeons who could have been described as mesh problem deniers are now reinventing themselves as mesh problem remediators? I do not think they are qualified to hold that role. I fear that there is an attitude of mind that says, "Well, it's not that easy to find people who specialise in this area, and therefore, even though these are the people who put the mesh in, maybe they are the people who are best qualified to take the mesh out." I absolutely refute that. Not only did those people put the mesh in, but when the patients came along time and again to say what terrible problems they were suffering, those were the people who refused to listen to them. They were the people who, in some cases, insisted on putting more mesh in, and they were the people who, in other cases, refused to let the patients have a referral to figures such as Miss Sohler Elneil in London or Professor Hashim Hashim in Bristol, who are—or were at that time—the true, and possibly the only, specialists in mesh removal.

When I was thinking about what to say in the light of what had gone before, I was debating whether I should use the word "butchered", but my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) did use it in his most powerful speech and I will use it as well. The idea that someone who has butchered your body is an appropriate person for you to go back to, after all that, and that they could then say they are going to take the mesh out, when that person may well have stood in the way of your perhaps going to see Miss Elneil or Professor Hashim, who could have done something for you, is unconscionable.

My third question is: what research is being undertaken on new methods of safe removal? If indeed it is the case that an argument is going to be made that there might be some future use for mesh in safer ways, what research is being done to see whether or not something could be developed that would not run the risks of this disaster?

I shall say something very fanciful now, and it is probably nonsense, but the thought occurs to me, hearing about the way in which the flesh grows around the mesh, the mesh fractures and it becomes so very difficult to remove: has anybody ever thought that it might be possible to develop a future type of mesh, if this is not possible with the mesh that has already been put inside people, that might conceivably be harmlessly dissolved within the body if something went wrong, by the addition some sort of chemical? That may be absolute nonsense, but the point is that unless specialist research is carried out, this sort of botching and butchery is going to continue.

As a result of the three constituency cases that I originally cited in a debate on—it is hard to believe that it is more than three years ago—19 April 2018, I have received certain amounts of information and concerns

from Kath Sansom, who does such wonderful work with the Sling the Mesh group. I conveyed a message to her and basically said, "If you were standing up in this place today, what points would you like to put over?" She said:

"The debate is calling for all Cumberlege recommendations to be implemented without further delay, including financial redress for women and sweeping reform of the healthcare and regulation framework. Women are losing hope that they have been properly listened to. They need urgent financial redress for the many losses they have suffered. They want to know also when they go to a specialist centre that it is not a postcode lottery of care. To date the specialist centres are special in name only."

In other words, is there really a new centre, or are people being sent from pillar to post for all the different parts of the investigations and having to wait months between each particular appointment for each particular type of investigation?

Kath also said:

"There has been no national training programme and no agreed way to measure success—they haven't even agreed on outcome logging measures to standardise the data capture."

She also made the point, which I think I have made strongly enough, about some of the centres

"being run by pro mesh surgeons who have denied mesh is a problem".

Alec Shelbrooke: I said this in my speech, but it is worth emphasising again. We are talking about what needs to be done and what is happening, but we must also come back to people; as my right hon. Friend says, people are very important. Women are killing themselves. They are killing themselves. Look at the suicide rates for women with mesh problems and endometriosis. Women go through crippling pain, and dozens a year are taking their own lives. Does that not make the point that my right hon. Friend is making—that we have to move more quickly on this?

Dr Lewis: It totally does. I shall share a little something with the House. Although it does not compare with the agony of what these women are going through, I lost a year and a half of my life when I was given some inappropriate treatment that resulted in my being unable to read for a year and a half during my early 20s. What really made it worse was the knowledge that, if I had not asked for a particular treatment to try to improve my tired eyes because I was studying, none of it need have happened. How much worse must it be for these women, many of whom are not only undergoing all this suffering, but are undergoing it because they were told it was a minor procedure and they thought, "Oh, well—maybe I will have it, then." If only they had known, they would never have gone within a mile of it. They must be saying that, over and over again. To expect them to go back to the same surgeons who did not tell them what the consequences could be is inhumane and totally unrealistic.

The issue of some people having a financial interest in promoting certain products has been touched on. We are obliged to declare our interests in this House and perhaps something like the Physician Payments Sunshine Act would be the equivalent for people in this context.

Finally, Kath draws attention to what she calls a black hole in official statistics. She says, for example, that according to hospital statistics, in the year 2008-09, 1,038 women were readmitted to hospital with problems

within 30 days of a mesh sling having been implanted. In comparison, data derived from surgeons says that only 104 women were admitted to hospital—that is something like 10% of the total. Some 934 women have somehow gone missing from the surgeons' data.

These are strange and disturbing features. This House has shown itself at its best in condemning what happened. The Government need to build on that and put in place the measures recommended by the report to make it far less likely that it could happen again.

5.2 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab) [V]: As I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on valproate and other anti-epileptic drugs in pregnancy, my comments are on that issue. However, I just want to note the harm done, the hurt caused and the justice needed for victims of surgical mesh and Primodos, who are in a similar position to those who have been harmed by sodium valproate.

One of the common threads that runs through all three campaigns is the way in which, more often than not, it is women who are the victims and it is women's concerns that have been dismissed. Justice, frustratingly, always seems just out of reach.

One year on from the report's publication, we really are not much further forward when it comes to sodium valproate. NHS England wrote recently to all women and girls aged 12 to 55 who are currently prescribed sodium valproate, reminding them of the risks of taking it while pregnant. That is a step in the right direction, but it has taken a year. One letter is not going to resolve the issue. The Government really must explain what further action will be taken and over what timescale.

Baroness Cumberlege's report included nine general recommendations, in addition to a number of specific recommendations on sodium valproate. In January, the Minister provided the Government's initial response to the recommendations. However, she only responded to the general recommendations and not the specific recommendations on sodium valproate. The Government have since stated on a number of occasions that they will respond in full later this year. Do the Government still plan to make a full response this year and will they address the report's specific recommendations on sodium valproate?

I have a few brief comments about recommendations 3, 4, 5 and 9 of the report, before turning to the specific recommendations on sodium valproate. I would appreciate an update from the Minister.

Recommendation 3, which is for a new independent redress agency for those harmed by medicines and medical devices, has not been implemented, and it appears that the Government are unwilling to do so. May I express how hugely disappointing that is, given the avoidable harm that so many families have experienced? The case for an independent redress agency remains strong. Other countries have successfully set up an agency without such a mechanism, and people who have suffered avoidable harm following healthcare treatment have no option but to go to court, which is such a lengthy, expensive, confrontational and stressful process.

On recommendation 4, although the Government have stated that they are carefully considering a redress scheme for those harmed by sodium valproate, no further

progress has been made. Again, I feel so disappointed, and I know that the families affected share that feeling. Patients who have suffered avoidable harm need help and support now, and actually we owe it to them. That may take the form of additional financial support, above and beyond that to which they are already entitled via welfare benefits and respite care. The frustrating thing is that many have already waited decades for help. What progress is being made to establish a redress scheme for those affected by sodium valproate?

On recommendation 5, again there has been no progress on establishing any specialist centres for those adversely affected by medicines taken during pregnancy. The Department of Health and Social Care appears to take the view that such centres are not needed. I therefore call on the Government to commit to introducing a network of such specialist centres, in recognition of the additional support and care that those affected require.

Recommendation 9 is that the Government should immediately set up a taskforce to implement the review's recommendations. The Government have been quite clear that they have no plans to establish such a taskforce. The 14-person patient reference group that has been established had a series of meetings this year and will publish its findings shortly. I look forward to reading them, but the group is only able to provide feedback on proposals, whereas a taskforce would have been able to implement the recommendations. The Government really need to explain how they intend to keep patients fully involved as they move forward with full implementation of the report.

On the sodium valproate recommendations, the Government have not responded directly to any of these recommendations, and quite frankly they need to. More importantly, they need to implement them. On the recommendation that a clear process should be agreed to ensure that women can receive counselling related to their epilepsy treatment and contraception choices, at the moment it is a postcode lottery, so what progress is being made to ensure that women and girls with epilepsy have access to pre-conception counselling on epilepsy medicines and contraception?

On the recommendation that information should be collected to identify those already affected by exposure to valproate to ensure that they have access to diagnosis and support and plan their service provision, it is still not sufficient, especially without the redress scheme in place. May we have a response to that recommendation, please?

On the recommendation that a prospective registry should be established for all women on anti-epileptic drugs who become pregnant, and to include them in mandatory reporting of data relating to them and their children, such a registry could be expanded to collect data on paternal effects as well, but at the moment we are just looking at valproate. The valproate registry has been established, and it has been confirmed that other epilepsy medicines will be included, but that has not happened yet. It needs to be expanded to include those other epilepsy medicines as a matter of urgency, because we already know that anti-seizure medication is causing problems during pregnancy.

On the recommendation about stakeholders continuing to work with the patient groups to monitor and improve the pregnancy prevention plans and look at the next steps, all women and girls of childbearing potential

[Cat Smith]

have been written to, as I said at the start of my contribution, but we really need to do so much more to improve the PPP. It is important that a balance be found that allows women to make a choice about their treatment and care, while limiting the number of pregnancies exposed to sodium valproate and other harmful epilepsy medicines. May I ask the Minister what progress has been made in making improvements to the PPP?

The final recommendation on sodium valproate is:

“Clinicians should continue to follow guidance regarding prescribing of valproate and alternatives”.

Although further measures have been introduced to communicate the need for that, it is unclear—perhaps the Minister can shed some light—whether or not it is happening in practice, particularly given past concerns about the lack of communication with women and girls. That is a huge concern for me, as I know it is for many of the campaigners involved.

This is not the first time that I have raised the issue in the House. I put on record my thanks to my constituent Janet Williams and her fellow campaigner Emma Murphy for bringing the scandal to my attention in my first few weeks as an MP. Since then, I have learned so much about sodium valproate and epilepsy. I also put on record my thanks to Daniel Jennings from Epilepsy Action for his support in keeping me abreast of this and other issues that people with epilepsy face.

The challenges that women seeking pregnancy face while managing their epilepsy are not just about sodium valproate. Evidence shows that there are a number of other anti-epilepsy drugs that can cause preventable disabilities in babies when taken by their mothers. We must not forget the women impacted by other anti-epilepsy drugs. We cannot go on seeing history repeat itself. Anyone watching this debate who is in that situation might want to seek out the Epilepsy Society’s “Safe Mum, Safe Baby” campaign.

The Government need to consider funding research into safer epilepsy medicines so that babies will not be born with preventable disabilities caused by their mothers’ life-saving drugs. Some important progress has been made, but there are far too many areas in which we are still waiting for action and further response from the Government. It is deeply concerning that the Government have so far chosen not to respond to the specific recommendations on sodium valproate, because it took six months before they produced their initial response to the Cumberlege report, and after a further six months we are still waiting for their full reply.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before we go any further, may I make an appeal to hon. Members who are speaking from home to remember that those who are here in the Chamber still have to get back to their constituencies this evening—and that usually that which can be said in 10 minutes can be said more effectively in five or six?

5.12 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; you will be pleased to know that I will probably speak only for approximately three minutes, having got used to that time limit.

I am glad to have the opportunity to speak in today’s important debate, one year on from the publication of Baroness Cumberlege’s independent medicines and medical devices safety review. I thank Baroness Cumberlege and her team for their work, and of course the women who bravely shared their horrific experiences, which shone a light on the horrors of the mesh scandal. Without their bravery, the review would not have been possible.

It is vital that the Government continue to listen to the victims who were ignored for far too long. I was glad to hear reassurances from the Minister, following the publication of the report, that the Department is committed to doing so. I was proud to support the Medicines and Medical Devices Act 2021, part 1 of which established the role of an independent commissioner for patient safety and states:

“The Commissioner’s core duties are to...promote the safety of patients”.

If that prevents the repetition of any one of the mistakes from the past, it will have reduced pain and suffering for our constituents, and it will have done its job.

In my time as a high street solicitor, I acted on behalf of a number of clients who experienced horrific difficulties as a result of mesh implants, like those so clearly outlined by my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke). The trauma that mesh patients underwent was truly horrendous, and it is shameful that it took so long for action to be taken and for women’s voices to be heard.

I welcomed the announcement in February by NHS England and NHS Improvement’s women and children’s programme of care that it is commissioning specialist services for women with complications with mesh inserts. The regional centres will ensure that women receive specialist treatment to mitigate this awful suffering. I encourage County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust to ensure that its patients access the appropriate treatment applicable for the mesh implants they have and to get access to the justice they deserve.

Baroness Cumberlege’s review was a powerful reminder of the need to listen to patient voices in safety matters. I am glad that the Department of Health and Social Care has offered an unreserved apology for its mistakes in the past, and welcome the steps that it has taken so far to build on the report’s recommendations. I look forward to the Minister outlining any further response to Baroness Cumberlege’s report.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman most profusely for his brevity.

5.15 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): There are quite a few people I want to pay tribute to. First, I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who is unfortunately not in her place, for bringing forward this very important debate. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith); I am fortunate and proud also to be a member of the APPG for valproate and other anti-epileptic drugs in pregnancy. Between the work that she does with her constituents, and my constituents, they really are a force to behold.

I turn—very awkwardly—to my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), who made the important but depressing point that it

does appear that women's health only seems to be paid any real attention when men talk about it. That is a depressing thought for every man and woman in this Chamber, and for every woman out there in the country. It should not take a man to come forward and say, "There's a problem that we need to listen to". There are women going to their GPs who are not being listened to. There are women who have been medically gaslighted and told, "You don't have this; you might have something else" or "It's just a bad period. Why don't you try some more painkillers?". That is wrong. As my right hon. Friend said, endometriosis can take nearly nine years to be diagnosed and a number of women unfortunately end up taking their own life because they cannot cope with the daily pain. That is something of which we should all be shamed. We must do everything we can in this Chamber to put it right.

I want to talk about sodium valproate in particular. I will try to keep my comments brief, because the speech of the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood covered the main ethos of the debate. It all comes down to what Baroness Cumberlege said in her report. For decades, the healthcare system has neglected to inform patients about the effects of valproate on unborn babies when it is taken by mothers during pregnancy. Those effects include physical malformations, autism and developmental delay in many children.

For many, valproate provides an incredibly valuable relief from epilepsy and mental illness, so it continues to be prescribed because for some there is no alternative. But for all these years there has been no advice to the contrary, saying, "If you take this while you are pregnant, this could be the impact on your unborn child and the development of that child.". Unfortunately, that advice has been lacking, so many expectant mothers have been taking this drug in ignorance. It is right that we have started to address that, but we need to go much further.

Thanks to decades of campaigning by scientists, doctors, charities and affected families, proper mechanisms have been put in place and patients are now warned about the effects of valproate on their unborn child. The Government have also launched the valproate pregnancy prevention programme to ensure that no unborn baby is affected again, but we need to ensure that every GP is aware so that patients are not only advised about the potential impact, but that they are actively informed of it when they are being prescribed this medication. Having said that, the time that it took the healthcare system to listen and respond has left acute suffering and serious concern for the families affected. As Baroness Cumberlege said in the review:

"The system is not good enough at spotting trends in practice and outcomes that give rise to safety concerns."

Ultimately, the one message that we all need to realise is that listening to patients is pivotal. When many, many people come forward with symptoms, doctors need to listen. We need to listen to doctors and we need to send a strong message that we are there to listen and act on concerns.

Like the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, I have a constituent who suffers from epilepsy and needs valproate to treat her epilepsy disorder. It is the only drug that has been able to provide relief for her condition. She has five children, all of whom have, unfortunately, have been affected by foetal valproate spectrum disorder, and this is because she was not given any information,

let alone the right information, about what effect this medication might have on her children. As much as I support the initiatives put in place to prevent further avoidable damage to families and children, we need to support those victims with a redress scheme, similar to how we gave thalidomide victims the compensation they deserved. So may I urge the Government and the Minister to establish a redress agency, as set out in the "First Do No Harm" report recommendations, which I wholeheartedly support, to ensure that the victims of valproate used during pregnancy get the compensation they rightly deserve and that I can go back to my constituent and tell her that we have listened?

5.20 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on obtaining this debate. I am chair of the all-party group on hormone pregnancy tests, which contains 135 MPs. This is just one of the countless times I have stood on the Floor of this House on behalf of thousands of victims affected by the hormone pregnancy test drug Primodos to plead with this Government's Ministers to do the right thing. I have used most of my Prime Minister's questions and Health orals on this issue. Some 1.5 million expectant women in the UK were prescribed Primodos, a hormone-based pregnancy test used in the 1960s and 1970s that caused them to have babies with malformations and disabilities, to have miscarriages and to have stillbirths. For decades, these families have been dismissed and have been told repeatedly that despite all the evidence of a cover-up, it is all in their heads and there is no link. So imagine my relief, and theirs, when one year ago today the Cumberlege review was published. It was the most comprehensive assessment of all the evidence on the hormone pregnancy tests and it said very clearly that Primodos caused avoidable harm. The report exposed widespread systemic failings, where warnings were ignored. For hundreds of Primodos families across the country who had campaigned for the truth and closure, the conclusion of this report was a significant moment of recognition. The review also said that had Primodos been removed from the market in 1967, when concern was first raised, many of these families would not have endured the decades of suffering. It was also very clear that compensation should be made available for these people.

Today, we are in this House to ensure that this report does not gather dust, which the cynic in me would say is the Government's intention. I pay tribute to Baroness Cumberlege, who is sitting in the Gallery today, for conducting this review and to her colleagues. The review was thorough and sensitive over the course of two and a half years. Baroness Cumberlege has been so affected by this report that she has set up an all-party group on first do no harm. In her review, she found that the root cause was a failure of the healthcare system by some in the medical profession who have ignored the concerns of women and their families. From these findings comes clear guidance and recommendations on how to support these people and ensure that these things do not occur again. The Minister will be aware that in Scotland some of these measures have been implemented so I would like to ask: why the delay in this Department? The Government refuse to acknowledge the Primodos families and instead keep telling us, "We refuse to comment due

[Yasmin Qureshi]

to an ongoing legal action.” That is a smokescreen, an excuse, a deliberate refusal to accept that Primodos families deserve justice. Baroness Cumberlege remarked in the other place that

“rumours are...rife of a ritual burial”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 2 September 2020; Vol. 805, c. 385.]

of the report. Frankly, from the answers to the parliamentary questions that I have asked, it is easy to see why that conclusion is reached. Today is the Minister’s opportunity to give an assurance to the families that the report will be implemented in full.

In one of the letters that the Minister wrote to me, she said that there is no causal link between Primodos and deformities. She hides behind the expert working group report to justify her refusal to give the families of Primodos the dignity and justice they deserve. However, is she aware that the expert working group, which was done by the MHRA, a Department of Health and Social Care agency made up of civil servants, who decided who would be on the group, was so discredited by academics, campaigners and Members of this House? We had an urgent question in the House on its report, and I ask the Minister to look at that debate, because every aspect of the expert working group was discredited. It is surprising that the Government are using that group as a reason not to compensate these people.

I ask the Minister to remember that the Cumberlege review was set up after the expert working group. Baroness Cumberlege’s group looked at the expert working group’s report with a fine-toothed comb. Despite that, with all the other evidence it heard, it came to the conclusion that the harm was avoidable and that there was a link. In a Sky interview, the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), said of the expert working group report:

“At one point it says that they could not find a causal association between Primodos and congenital anomalies, but neither could they categorically say that there was no causal link.”

It was also found at the time that the report’s initial recommendations had been changed to its final recommendations. Even in that report, there were discrepancies.

Why does the Minister continue to rely on the findings of that discredited expert working group report, and why does she continue to remind us that there is no causal link when she knows well that there was no causal link for the thalidomide victims and they have rightly been compensated? She also knows that it will be impossible to test these drugs on pregnant women, so there could only ever be a possible link.

The Minister will know the inspirational campaigner for Primodos families, Marie Lyon, with whom I have had the pleasure of working for the last 10 years. Marie Lyon will refuse to let this scandal be swept under the carpet, just as I and my parliamentary colleagues will. We are often reminded of the bravery and dignity of the people who have suffered and the families who look after them, including children and older people. They deserve respect and admiration—and they deserve justice. It is outrageous for the Government to suggest that justice for Primodos families could be delayed or denied. If they were given compensation, then we would not have to consider any legal recourse.

I ask the Minister again: please do not listen to the civil servants. Do not listen to the MHRA expert working group recommendations, which have been roundly condemned. Instead, please look at the report of the Cumberlege review, which was carried out by a Conservative former Health Minister and the experts who sat with her. They went through everything, and they have made it very clear what needs to be done.

I ask the Minister please to compensate the victims of Primodos and, of course, all the victims of mesh and sodium valproate, and I urge her please to stop listening to the bureaucrats—the civil servants—in the NHS and give justice to the victims of Primodos, mesh and sodium valproate.

5.29 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) [V]: I am pleased to speak in this debate on such an important inquiry. I pay tribute to Members across the House for some outstanding speeches today, and to those who have campaigned for so long to draw attention to the issues that have been addressed in this excellent report, which I think reflects very clearly the distress shared by hundreds of affected patients and their families.

I want to focus on problems with mesh implants, which have been raised with me by many constituents, and most recently by Nicole MacNiven. Nicole has been in constant pain since her mesh was fitted four years ago, and she of course wants to see action on the back of this report. The timelines of events contained in the report make for salutary reading. In each case, warning signs were dismissed, patient and practitioner concerns disregarded, and those at the heart of the healthcare system allowed professional or commercial concerns to outweigh the interests of patients. As a result, decisions on harm avoidance were delayed, allowing many more women’s lives to be diminished or destroyed, and sometimes also those of their babies.

In the case of mesh implants, concern was expressed for many years, but it took until 2014 before the Scottish Government took the lead and called for a suspension of their use, something the MHRA should have done long before. Baroness Cumberlege’s words are very direct and very telling when she reviews the many treatments and devices the inquiry was asked to investigate, but which fell outwith its remit. She concluded:

“Concerns about these...point to a healthcare system that cannot be relied upon to identify and respond promptly to safety concerns.”

That certainly describes the case of mesh implants, and these words should be a wake-up call for the new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, as he takes over responsibility for a regulatory system for the whole UK that is in serious need of reform. As the inquiry makes clear, the healthcare system takes far too long to pull back to a place of safety when warning signs emerge or, as Professor Ted Baker puts it, there is an “insidious” culture of defensiveness and blame.

Key to the failure of the MHRA has been its lack of engagement with patients, which is what makes the recommendation of a patient safety commissioner so important. I am pleased that, as the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) has just set out, the Scottish Government have consulted on the appointment of a truly independent commissioner, as recommended by Baroness Cumberlege and endorsed by Scottish mesh survivors. However, that is not what is proposed by the

UK Government, who seem determined to let the Health Secretary appoint the commissioner. The recent scandal over how Ministers in the Department of Health make important appointments should lead to a rethink of that proposal. This is too important an issue to let the usual Tory chumocracy operate.

It has taken a long time, but now the report is here, it is the responsibility of Governments to ensure that women such as Nicole MacNiven get the support they need and deserve. The Scottish mesh survivors charter sets out some key demands, and this has now been endorsed by the Scottish Government. A mesh fund has been established, and steps are to be taken to provide reimbursement for past mesh removal surgery. A comprehensive service for mesh complications and removal is being established, and that will be developed in consultation with the affected women. The national service will be delivered by a multidisciplinary team, supported by more than £1.3 million of Scottish Government funding for 2020-21. For those patients who are reluctant to return to the NHS for mesh removal, NHS Scotland is tendering internationally for additional capacity.

We have heard so clearly today how the healthcare system has badly let down women damaged by mesh implants. The Scottish Government have appreciated this, and accepted their obligation to support these women and to do what needs to be done, so now the UK Government must follow suit and implement Baroness Cumberlege's recommendations. Given what we have heard in the Chamber today, that is the very least these women should expect.

5.33 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: Along with other Members here, I took part in the debates on sodium valproate in 2017 and on vaginal mesh in 2018. I welcome the fact that Baroness Cumberlege's inquiry covered both of these issues, along with Primodos, a hormonal pregnancy test that, like valproate, contributed to congenital abnormalities. At the time of our debates, it was clear that the same underlying issues had driven all three disasters and that there were four main features: a failure of licensing and regulation in the first place, particularly regarding implantable devices such as vaginal mesh; a lack of accurate information so doctors could discuss the risks of these drugs and devices and allow patients to give genuine, informed consent; a weak and poorly publicised system for doctors or patients to report adverse events that would result in action; and finally, the failure of doctors to listen to the affected women who were raising concerns.

The report makes nine recommendations, with two main aims: the need to provide remedial support and redress for the women and children affected; and how to prevent something similar happening ever again in future. The report also captures the experiences of women who have been campaigning on these issues for years, which are well summarised on the report's contents page:

"'No-one is listening'—The patient voice dismissed... 'I was never told'—the failure of informed consent".

Considering the evolution of these disasters, I would perhaps reverse those two aims, as the problems started with the failure of regulators to ensure that these drugs and devices were safe and to provide accurate information on which women and their doctors could base treatment decisions.

I will focus my remarks on vaginal mesh, as there were additional issues associated with its licensing and use. In particular, the original trials comparing mesh with traditional abdominal operations did not have a long enough follow-up. This meant that while immediate surgical complications such as bladder injury were seen to reduce from one in 10 to one in 100, the later mesh complications were not identified. This led to the original vaginal mesh tapes being defined as low-risk devices and gynaecologists switching to this approach as it actually appeared safer for patients.

The whole issue was compounded by the fact that, after that initial research, the federal drug administration in America licensed all similar tapes without further trials, despite the fact that their design and how they were inserted at surgery changed significantly. The products that it passed then largely got accepted by the European Medicines Agency and the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency. Because late problems such as muscle or nerve damage were not recognised, gynaecologists did not even have the accurate information to discuss benefits and risks with patients.

The Scottish Government were the first to advise against routine use of vaginal mesh in 2014 and established a registry in 2017, but there have been no vaginal meshes inserted since 2018. They have accepted all the recommendations that are under devolved control and are in the process of appointing an independent patient safety commissioner. The UK Government have brought in the Medicines and Medical Devices Act 2021 but did not take the opportunity to establish a registry of all implanted devices to allow long-term audit and patient recall in future, if necessary.

There are risks and complications with any operation and they should be presented clearly and openly to allow patients to make an informed choice of what is important for them. Dr Wael Agur, a well-known gynaecologist involved in the mesh campaigns, works in Ayrshire and Arran, my local health board, and working closely with patient groups, he developed a Scottish patient decision aid for patients with incontinence, which was praised in the report. However, there is a need to get consensus on such decision aids and to ensure they are actually used routinely.

A lack of patient information was also central to the issue of sodium valproate. While it is an excellent drug to control epilepsy, a dangerous condition that kills over 1,000 people a year, sodium valproate has caused developmental delay in thousands of babies, and birth defects ranging from cleft lip to spina bifida. While the first case reports were published many decades ago, the connection was missed due to a lack of reporting. Even now, as we have heard today, women and their children are still in danger due to not being given the right information about their medication.

All three disasters highlight the failure of the yellow card system. The MHRA plans to introduce artificial intelligence in the future to recognise common patterns and themes, but adverse events need to be reported in the first place. It is about reporting any adverse event with a possible link to a new drug or any congenital defect in a baby whose mother has received medication during pregnancy. Publicity is also needed to inform patients that they, too, can complete a yellow card and report concerns directly themselves.

[Dr Philippa Whitford]

A year on from the publication of the report, we need to hear from the Government how they plan to take forward Baroness Cumberlege's recommendations, particularly on the reform of the licensing and regulation of new drugs and devices, and the system to detect and act on adverse reports. However, the Government also need to lay out how they plan to support the women affected through the provision of removal or remedial surgery and financial redress for the women who have suffered so much. Without their forceful campaigning, even more women would now be suffering. Financial compensation is also crucial for families affected by the use of Primodos or sodium valproate, so they can provide long-term support for their children.

As highlighted by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), at the core of all three disasters has been the failure of doctors to listen to women, or to patronise them and dismiss them when they raise concerns. Above all, these three medical disasters should be discussed in medical schools to teach student doctors, the doctors who will look after women in the future, the importance of actually listening to all their patients.

5.41 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak for the Opposition in this important debate and I commend the Backbench Business Committee for choosing it. It has been an excellent debate and that started with those who secured the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on securing the debate and on their leadership of the all-party parliamentary group on surgical mesh. There were common themes: the hope we all felt when we read the Cumberlege review a year ago and how keen we all are to make further progress. The right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell said he wanted to reinvigorate the debate. I think that that has happened today—very much so.

I also recognise the contributions of the right hon. Members for Maidenhead (Mrs May) and for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) because we probably would not be here without their personal leadership. I do not think it is a secret that we on the Labour Benches sometimes disagree with them on matters of health policy, but not in this regard and particularly not with their iron clad commitment to patient safety.

I want to pay a special tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), my predecessor as shadow public health Minister. It tells us everything we need to know about her that she might have gone on to other roles on the Opposition Front Bench, but she is still at it on these issues. It is never just a job for her, but a campaign and a drive to do it. We are very lucky to have her. She helmed an all-star cast of Labour Members who have been working very hard on this issue: my hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) on sodium valproate; and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) with her leadership and passion around Primodos. I thought their contributions were very good indeed.

Today is the first anniversary of the publication of the Cumberlege review. It was a seismic report, one that vindicated campaigners who in many cases had fought for decades. It showed how they had been denied, derided and ignored. Crucially, it gave us nine concrete ways forward—nine ways to start to meet the obligation we have to these women and the families affected. I wish we had heard in the oral statement the following day last year an acceptance from the Government of all the recommendations and I wish we were speaking about the progress we had made in implementing all nine. I am sad that we are not. However, I will start by recognising the progress that has been made.

The apology was very widely welcomed. The patient safety commissioner will have a really big impact in this area—we just need to get on with appointing them. I am very proud of the work the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and I did with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) on the identifiable database for medical devices. That will prove really valuable in time. Similarly, the network of specialist centres will be of great value to those who use them when they are fully operational.

However, it is still impossible to avoid the feeling that the Government are stopping short, particularly on the areas of redress and independent oversight. On recommendation 3, rejecting a redress agency—something that is used in other countries—is short sighted. A redress agency would have consolidated the various schemes and methods available to families in one place and given them a model that suits them, rather than one that seems to suit the Government and companies more. I hope the Minister, having heard what she has heard today, will look again at that.

Similarly, recommendation 4, on redress schemes for each of the interventions, is of course a good idea and would make the process simple and transparent. Families are struggling and need help now. Six months ago, the Government said they were thinking about that. Well, a year is more than enough time, and I hope to hear news from the Minister on that.

Similarly, on recommendation 8, a year is more than enough time to have scoped out a workable model on a doctors' register of interests. Colleagues made points about that very well. On recommendation 9, the Government were wrong to reject an independent taskforce, which would have given impetus and drive. Perhaps that is why we have not made the progress that we want. Again, the Minister could still revisit that.

I want to highlight some of the points that campaigners raised with me in my preparation for this debate. As we have heard, it is striking that across the UK, approximately 25,000 women are still using sodium valproate. There is good reason for that in very many cases, but taking the report on board, that means 400 exposed babies every year, 200 of whom will suffer harm. That is an awful lot. The volumes of research on the topic of valproate date back to the '70s and the causal link is well proven, so it is surprising that better information has not been made available to patients. It was right that, last month, NHS England wrote to all women of childbearing age it believes to be on valproate. It is clear that that should have happened sooner. Goodness knows that campaigners such as INFANT have been saying that for long enough. I would like to hear from the Minister today a commitment

that that was not a one-off and that it will be a regular, perhaps annual, communication, because it is crucial that we communicate with those mothers and potential mothers.

Communication across Government and the health service is crucial too. I am aware that there are eight groups dealing with this issue across Government and the Department. It is right that that important work is going on, but how is it being pulled together? Who is leading on it? How do we measure the impact? How do we know it works?

The Government continue to refuse to accept responsibility for HPT/Primodos families without a proven causal association, and continue to rely on the 2017 working group review, which said that there was no conclusive association, despite later admissions to the review team that they did find a possible association. Baroness Cumberlege stated that Primodos should have been withdrawn from use in 1967 after the first substantial report from Dr Gal was published. The response from the Government was that the IMMDS review did not revisit the existing science. However, although the team did not review the existing science, it reviewed all the existing documents, including the scientific evidence available at the time, which formed a solid base for its conclusions.

That is what I mean when I say that it feels like the Government are stopping just short of what needs to be done. Where is the proper justice for these families? Ten members of the campaign group have died since the report was published, still without their justice. That is why a proper redress scheme is crucial. I hope the Minister addresses that point.

On surgical mesh, the point has been made a couple of times, but it bears repeating, that the use of such an intervention for stress urinary incontinence was paused for good reason. The conditions for resuming use have clearly not been met at this time, but I know there is pressure to do so. I hope the Minister will confirm that that will not happen unless and until those conditions are fully met.

When we discussed this issue a year ago, there was righteous anger and a sense of purpose to put these injustices right. A year later, colleagues' frustration that we have not made greater progress is tangible. We are in danger of letting down those affected all over again. Hearing the campaigners talk about resuming campaigning is saddening. They should not have to; they did everything they needed to do. For Marie, Janet, Emma, Kath, all those who campaigned across the country over the years, including those we have now lost, and all those affected, we know what needs to be done; we now need to get on with doing it in full.

5.49 pm

The Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health (Ms Nadine Dorries): I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) for securing this debate on the implementation of the recommendations of the independent medicines and medical devices safety review.

Hon. Members have spoken passionately across a range of issues mentioned in the review, but before going into the detail of the recommendations I want to

make a number of main points. First, the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) raised that issue of Primodos with huge passion again today, but I am afraid I have to rebut her criticism. I am not allowed as a member of the Government to discuss an issue that is sub judice and that is a live litigation in the courts at the moment; I am simply not allowed to do that. I have made this point a number of times and cannot make it much clearer: as a Government Minister, I am not allowed to discuss something that is in the process of live litigation.

Yasmin Qureshi: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Dorries: I will not, as I am about to move on to the other matters raised. I would also say that as a Government we make our decisions on the basis of scientific recommendations, and the scientific evidence provided to us at this moment in time does not support there being a causal link between Primodos and adverse outcomes in pregnancy. I am afraid that is all I am allowed to say. So on Primodos I say to those who have raised the matter that I hear everything they say and I hear the issues, but because it is sub judice I am not allowed to comment.

Yasmin Qureshi: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Dorries: I will give way, but I am afraid I will not be allowed to comment.

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I heard both the points she made, but would the victims be compensated if the legal proceedings were withdrawn, or is this issue about the expert working group still going to be an obstacle?

Ms Dorries: I apologise, but I cannot answer the question.

Moving on, I want to address sodium valproate, in general terms now and later in more detail. I have heard the speeches today and some pertinent points were raised, and I would like to make an overall point on valproate again before going into the recommendations: valproate is a drug that saves the lives of women who can receive no other treatment for their epilepsy. Some women suffer life-threatening epileptic fits of such severity that only sodium valproate can save them; their lives would be lost if they did not take sodium valproate. Therefore it is not possible to ban the use of sodium valproate, because those women's lives would be compromised.

A number of changes have taken place, too. A letter was sent out to women taking sodium valproate to make sure they were aware, and other measures have been put in place, which I will discuss in a moment, including ensuring that prescriptions for sodium valproate go into one box rather than being partial prescriptions, and the boxes have very clear and significant warnings on them. I could go into further detail, but the inquiry covers—

Emma Hardy: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Dorries: No, because the hon. Lady will be able to respond at the end of the debate and, without going into a huge amount of detail, I want to address a number of overall points that I feel can be made clear.

[Ms Dorries]

First, I thank Baroness Cumberlege for her report, of course. She is sitting in the Public Gallery—watching over me, as she does every day. I am delighted and not surprised that she is here, and we are all grateful to her. The report was commissioned by the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), in response to public concern. It examined how the healthcare system in England responded to reports about harmful side-effects from the three specific subjects discussed today. Baroness Cumberlege was asked to chair the review. It is just not possible to do the review justice. It took two years, it was incredibly thorough, and it listened to so many voices on so many complex issues. It is not possible to do this overnight. No review undertaken by any Government on issues as serious as these has been implemented rapidly. They take a lot of discussion, time, evaluation and implementation by the NHS.

The review was published on 8 July 2020 and contains nine strategic recommendations that have wide-ranging implications for the healthcare system. That is why it is not possible to implement them rapidly. I pay tribute to the women and families who bravely shared their experiences and brought these issues to light.

Recommendation 1 was an apology. A year ago, I made that apology, and I will make it again. Having met the patient reference group members, spoken to those who have been harmed and read the report, which makes very harrowing reading, I want to make that apology again. I am desperately sorry. I have heard the stories of harm, which are harrowing. I am desperately sorry for those women who have been harmed. Of course, we all want to ensure that this ends and never happens again. The Government absolutely recognise the need for effective patient engagement to begin to rebuild trust and to ensure that we get the implementation right. That is why we established the patient reference group to work with the Department to develop this response. My officials and I have met the group regularly to gather their insights and to ensure that patient voices are heard as we progress towards a full response, which will be given in this place at the Dispatch Box before the end of this year.

Some Members said that none of the recommendations have been implemented or that we have not paid attention to them. That is simply not true. Recommendation 2 was on the establishment of a patient safety commissioner. I happen to know from discussions with Baroness Cumberlege that it was a prime concern for her that we established that role. As part of the written ministerial statement that I published in January, I announced that the Government had tabled an amendment to the Medicines and Medical Devices Bill before the Christmas recess to establish the role of an independent patient safety commissioner in line with recommendation 2. That is now in law under the Act. The commissioner will promote the safety of patients who use medicines and medical devices by ensuring that the views of the wider public about them are heard. There would be absolutely no point in having a patient safety commissioner if the role was not fully independent. That is what we are working on putting in place now. A public consultation is currently open and running until 5 August. I urge all Members

who have spoken today and have constituents who have been affected to respond to that consultation to make sure that their views are known.

Recommendation 5 was on specialist centres, which are in place. There are eight specialist centres, and another will be opening in the south-west of England very shortly. Recommendation 6 was on reform of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. I have announced that the MHRA has begun a substantial programme of work to improve how it involves patients in all aspects of its work to reform the system. Recommendation 7 was on establishing a medical device information system, again through the Medicines and Medical Devices Act 2021. In line with Baroness Cumberlege's recommendation, this will mean that the NHS can track patients' outcomes and spot issues. Work is under way to build, test and cost options on how a medical device information system could be embedded into the UK healthcare system.

Turning to the recommendations that we do not accept, I was honest when I stood here and said how desperately sorry I was and how harrowing those stories were, and I am not going to stand at this Dispatch Box and say that we are reviewing all the recommendations, which is what has happened in the past. I will be honest: we are not going to accept the redress agency in recommendation 3, or the taskforce. No Government have ever asked someone to chair or undertake a review and then asked those who conducted the review to implement the recommendations on behalf of the Government. That has never happened before. It is the responsibility of the Opposition to hold me to account and it is our responsibility as Ministers to implement the recommendations that the Government see fit to implement.

The Cumberlege report is a document that vividly shows the importance of patient safety and of listening to women. It is incredibly important that we listen to women. I am delighted that many people today have highlighted the adverse situations that many women experience, suffer and have to endure because they are women. It is absolutely right to say that many women are not listened to, and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) also made that point. This was the substance of the report by Baroness Cumberlege. Women are not listened to, and they have not been listened to. The women's health strategy was not a recommendation but it was seriously influenced by Baroness Cumberlege's review. That is why I established the women's health strategy, and 112,000 women responded. It was not one of the recommendations, but we implemented it because women's voices have to be heard.

6.1 pm

Emma Hardy: I thank everybody who has taken part in this debate, and particular thanks again go to Baroness Cumberlege. May she continue to look over and down upon the Department of Health in ensuring that these recommendations are, hopefully, at some point enacted.

I would like to make a point about valproate. The Cumberlege review looked at the expert working group report and said it was flawed. On that point again, Epilepsy Action is looking into a campaign called "Safe Mum, Safe Baby" for alternative medications for women to use, and one of the campaigns is to ask the Government

for money to help to fund some of that research. I hope that, in the light of the comments the Minister has made regarding valproate, that is something that the Government will look kindly upon.

A comment made by the former Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), has stayed with me. He said that this was not just about the lack of justice but about the risk of a repeat. That is why these recommendations matter, not only for justice for the women harmed but because of the risk of repeating this. I look forward to not having to hold this debate again on next year's anniversary, but I am sure, if necessary, we will all be here—same time, same place—next year. Hopefully we will see a few more of the recommendations enacted. Thank you, everyone.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the publication of the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review, First Do No Harm; further notes the Government's failure to respond to the recommendations of that review in full; notes the significant discrepancy between the incidence of complication following mesh surgery in the Hospital Episode Statistics and the British Society of Urogynaecology databases, as highlighted in the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists' Project Report, entitled Hospital Episode Statistics as a Source of Information on Safety and Quality in Gynaecology to Support Revalidation; notes that the Government's plan to publish a retrospective audit to investigate the links between patient-level data to explore outcomes has not been fulfilled; notes that the moratorium on mesh implant procedures should not be lifted until that audit has been undertaken and the true scale of suffering established; notes Ministers' failure to acknowledge recommendations relating to victims of Primodos; and calls on the Government to fully implement the recommendations for victims of mesh, sodium valproate and Primodos without further delay.

Electricity Network Grid Charges

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

6.2 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a privilege to introduce my first Chamber Adjournment debate. Ideally, it would not have been at this time on a Thursday, but beggars can't be choosers.

This is a long overdue debate on the need to reform the grid charging regime. It is an issue that has been simmering for a long time, and it is now reaching a critical period where, if change does not happen, renewable energy investment and job creation in Scotland will be put at risk, needless sums will be added to consumers' electricity bills, and the UK Government's pathway to net zero will also be put at risk. I will go into further detail on that, but a key issue is that the UK Government do not seem to understand the problems or have the desire and willingness to change. As a result, the remit of the regulator Ofgem is not fit for purpose either. It is not just me saying that change is required; the wider industry is saying it too. Scottish Power, SSE, Vattenfall, RWE and Red Rock Power, among others, have all called for changes to the grid charging regime, so I hope the Minister will take these matters seriously and engage with the industry to find a solution.

The national grid system was founded in 1935. There were massive and significant upgrades in the 1960s, effectively giving us the footprint that we still have, although of course there have been ongoing upgrades. With the privatisation following the Electricity Act 1989, systems had to be developed to create a framework for the private market to operate in, so in 1992 a charging system was developed that is still with us to this day. This means we have a system and a charging regime that are still aligned with the concept that electricity is generated from coal, gas, oil and large nuclear stations. That means that the charging system is still geared to incentivise power generation sites close to centres of population or, to be more accurate, the closer to London, the better.

It beggars belief that three decades on from when the system was devised based on the factors pertaining then, we are still having to highlight the absurdity of the system to the UK Government. What it means in reality is that instead of having a long-term plan for where the best locations are for the generation of renewable energy and the system required to facilitate that, we have one that does the polar opposite.

The Minister will be aware that Scotland has 25% of Europe's offshore wind potential, but at the moment offshore developers connecting to the north of Scotland will pay the highest connection charges in the whole of Europe. Meanwhile, connections to the south of England result in generators actually getting paid to connect to the grid. That in itself shows how wrong the system is. I understand that it can be argued that there are transmission losses when moving electricity long distances, but that aspect is dealt with separately via the transmission loss multiplier, which is applied to Scottish generators.

I know it can be argued that the further away a generation site is, the more extensive the national grid network needs to be, and there are associated maintenance costs with that, but I would argue that geographical

[Alan Brown]

charges are not the best way to deal with that. Why penalise developers for constructing in the areas best placed to give maximum power output? Also, the charges cannot be reflective of the true cost, either, because clearly it is impossible to have a negative cost of operation, which is effectively what the payments to southern connections indicate.

What that means in numbers is that a 1 GW offshore wind farm off the north Scottish coast will pay £38 million a year to connect to the grid, yet a similarly sized offshore wind farm connecting to southern England will get paid £7 million a year. That is a £45 million a year differential between the same size Scottish and English offshore wind farms. Over 20 years, that would equate to nearly a billion pounds of difference between the two.

The reality is that Scottish offshore wind farms are now 20% more expensive than those in English waters. When lowest price is the winner takes all in the contracts for difference auctions, that is clearly a major issue. It means that investment in offshore renewable energy in Scotland is at risk, which means fewer direct jobs and less supply chain work in Scotland, but it also potentially hampers the just transition for the oil and gas industry.

The effects of the charging burden on Scottish projects can already be seen. In the 2015 auction round, Scottish projects accounted for about 40% of offshore wind contract awards made. In the 2019 round, it was less than 10%. Surely that is not an intended consequence of the charging regime. Worse, if nothing else is done, in the next few years, grid charges will be charged at a rate equivalent to 50% of the current offshore wind strike rate, and that would make it utterly impossible for Scottish projects to compete with those bidding in English waters.

The charging burden also means that the most appropriate efficient locations for renewable energy will not be utilised and maximised, which risks the net zero targets for the entire UK. Achieving net zero is now legally binding, and it is accepted that net zero is required by 2050—or 2045 in Scotland—to mitigate the effects of climate change and abide by the Paris agreement, yet there is no net zero plan in place, and we have a regulatory regime that is not fit for purpose. It makes no sense that the Government have set a legally binding net zero target, but as yet have not made net zero a statutory consideration for the regulator, and that clearly affects long-term planning for the grid transmission network. It could lead to short-term investment that needs further future upgrades, costing bill payers even more money. Both the National Infrastructure Commission and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee recommend that Ofgem is mandated for net zero, so could the Minister advise when she thinks Ofgem will be legally bound to consider net zero?

The UK Government initially set an ambitious target of 30 GW of offshore wind deployment by 2030, then last year they increased the target by 33%, so the new target is now 40 GW of offshore wind by the end of the decade. So far, so good—it is a welcome target, except that then we realise that the policies do not match the target. To achieve the 40 GW target, the UK Government need to mandate changes to the grid charging regime as soon as possible. They also need to rapidly increase the current auction caps or, quite simply, not enough offshore wind contracts will be awarded to meet their own targets.

How difficult is it to look ahead and work out how much future capacity needs to be allocated in the next few years? It is not difficult. Here is a hint: it requires 4 GW a year from 2025 onwards. It means doubling the existing 20 GW of offshore wind that has been consented, in a five-year period. If there are no changes to the current policies and systems, that will not happen.

We come to the next contradiction or policy failure in the mix, and that is energy interconnectors. They do not pay connection charges—the Minister confirmed to me in a parliamentary question that that was part of the EU trade deal. That is clearly a disadvantage for companies looking to construct in the UK. It means that a multinational company is now effectively incentivised to build in another country with zero connection charges, and then surplus energy can be exported to the UK, undercutting renewable projects here.

I appreciate the advantages of a wider interconnected grid and, given that Scotland is a net exporter of electricity, Scotland might benefit, but it still does not seem right to have an uneven playing field that could impact on projects here. What is worse, for me, is that there is no control over the source of any imported energy from interconnectors. The Minister knows that. It means that, while the UK is supposed to be going green, we might end up having imported electricity generated from gas on the continent undermining the cost of renewable energy here. That is another paradox that the Minister needs to consider.

These examples illustrate how dysfunctional the current system is. The UK Government need to do something about it. The one focus they have is nuclear energy, but that is another policy that actually adds to our electricity bills. They have committed to Hinkley Point C and this week reinforced their commitment to signing a deal for another £20 billion nuclear plant at Sizewell. It is so obvious that the £20 billion would be better invested in grid upgrades, long duration storage such as pumped hydro, or even battery storage and hydrogen. Why the nuclear obsession?

The Government cannot stick to the baseload argument, given that 75% of the existing nuclear fleet will be offline before Hinkley even starts generating. To me, that proves beyond doubt that large-scale nuclear is not required. A report recently published by Good Energy in conjunction with Energy Systems Catapult demonstrates that the UK could be operating a net zero electricity network in 2050, based on 98% renewables, with the other 2% being provided by Hinkley, not because it is required but because it is assumed it will be there.

I hope the Minister can consider that report, as well as one published by Imperial College that demonstrates that the use of new pumped storage hydro could save nearly £700 million a year in system costs by 2050.

There is one more point on nuclear, in terms of grid charging. It is frustrating that EDF is going to be paid money to connect Hinkley Point C to the grid. Will the Minister acknowledge that that is effectively another hidden subsidy over and above the 35-year deal to pay £92.50 per megawatt-hour, when the strike rate for offshore wind now sits at £40 per megawatt-hour? Where does the risk for changes in the grid charging system sit? Is it with EDF or the Government? Has the grid charging system been discussed with EDF as part of the current negotiations for Sizewell?

Returning to renewable energy, Scotland leads the world in the development of wave and tidal energy generation, but the UK Government have refused to consider a proper route to market, meaning that the technology development and investment could be lost to countries such as Canada. Will the Minister therefore confirm tonight that the Government will ring-fence a proportion of capacity—the request is 100 MW—in round 4 of the auction process? Will she properly discuss with the Treasury the development of an innovation power purchase agreement to allow companies to enter into agreements to purchase electricity from emerging wave and tidal companies? Does she understand that, if this technology does scale up in the way we want and its generation costs come down, those companies will also be at the mercy of the grid-charging system, unless changes are made? Will she please open discussions with the European Marine Energy Centre on the funding needed to replace EU funding streams?

I wish to make a final point about the current charging system and price volatility. Although the actual cost of maintaining and operating the grid remains stable year on year, the charging prices vary every year. This is another example of how the system is not fit for purpose. Prices can vary by an astonishing 500% in one year. As companies cannot predict such fluctuations, they are a risk that they need to factor into the capital cost of projects. It is estimated that, by the end of this decade, the cost of that risk will be £400 million a year. That is £400 million a year going to companies so that they can hedge against the risk of price fluctuation. That is money added to our energy bills for no reason at all—money that would be better off either in our pockets or, at worst, if the £400 million is realised, at least used for investment purposes. Will the Minister address that as well, please?

One small positive in the mix is that Ofgem has now recognised that there is an issue and proposed changes with the targeted charging review and the ongoing access and forward-looking charging review consultation. The downside is that the changes Ofgem currently proposes do not resolve the problem. Indeed, Ofgem's new proposals could prejudice existing embedded renewable energy sites in Scotland. What assessment have the Government made of Ofgem's "minded to implement" proposals? Will the Minister finally admit that it is for the UK Government to take charge of the process and make the necessary changes for Ofgem to follow, rather than continuing to say that it is "for the regulator", which is actually just passing the buck?

To sum up, I have a list of questions for the Minister to consider and I am sure she would love to answer them. Will she consider the impact of the current locational grid charges that make Scottish offshore wind farms 20% more expensive than southern English ones? Does she recognise that the charges applied to Scotland are the highest in Europe? Does she accept that the projections are that the charging burden could go as high as half the current strike rate that is received and paid to companies? Does she understand that the impact of price volatility could cost £400 million a year by 2030? What will be done to assess and mitigate that? Does she understand that the current Ofgem proposals could adversely affect 6 GW of embedded energy projects? Will she consider the cost savings and system benefits that would arise from adding more pumped hydro storage to the grid?

The Minister must realise that it is for the Government to set the policy and regime for Ofgem to implement and that a new policy statement is long overdue. I really hope that she can address those points, and that she will work with the industry and the regulator to shape an electricity system that is designed for the 21st century—one that will lead us on the pathway to net zero.

6.17 pm

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) on securing an important debate.

Network charging arrangements are central to the delivery of a secure and affordable net zero energy system, and the Government absolutely understand that. By law, network charging is a matter for Ofgem, as the independent regulator. Network charges are governed by the principle that the user pays. For the transmission network, that means higher charges for generators in Scotland, as much electricity is sent over long distances to centres of demand in the rest of Great Britain. By contrast, homes and businesses in Scotland pay lower transmission charges than consumers elsewhere in Great Britain. This cost-reflective approach ensures the efficient use of the network and keeps costs down for all bill payers.

Ofgem recognises the critical importance of charging arrangements in progressing to net zero. Last week, it published its consultation on a number of reform proposals as part of its access and forward-looking charges review, including a proposed reduction in the up-front charge paid by generators and demand users connecting to the distribution network. Ofgem's consultation also noted potential issues with transmission charging arrangements and signalled that it is considering a wider and more holistic review of them.

As the pace of the energy transformation accelerates, it will be important for Ofgem to have clear sight of the Government's policy priorities for energy decarbonisation. We have therefore committed in our energy White Paper to consulting on Ofgem's strategy and policy statement in 2021. It will set out the strategic priorities of the Government's energy policy, the policy outcomes sought and the role of the Government, Ofgem and other parties collectively responsible for delivering these goals.

For the Government's part, we remain firmly committed to the roll-out of renewable generation projects and are taking a number of measures to support it. We will continue to support low-carbon projects across Great Britain through our contracts for difference scheme. Scotland has benefited significantly from the scheme since its inception in 2015; 34% of all projects are located there. The next round will open at the end of this year.

We have launched the offshore transmission network review to improve the delivery of transmission connections for offshore wind generation. We are working very closely with the devolved Administrations on that.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): The offshore transmission review, as the Minister knows, means a lot to my constituents because they strongly support net zero. Offshore wind has been an amazing achievement in East Anglia, but it is bringing new infrastructure and

[James Cartlidge]

we have the threat of new pylons across open countryside. On pricing, is it not true that one should look not only at the charging, but at expenditure on capital items that are relieving infrastructure pressure? For example, the eastern link, a huge undersea cable off the coast of Scotland that will relieve pressure on the countryside, will be more than £3 billion. People in East Anglia will hope to see similar expenditure so that they have a defrayment of the infrastructure that would otherwise be going over the countryside.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner on the matter and continues to drive the Department to make sure that we are moving the offshore

transmission network review at pace to find the right solutions that work for the whole country. We will be working on the review to improve delivery.

If I may, I will reply in detail in writing to the very long series of questions asked by the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun, to ensure that he gets as full an answer as possible. In closing, I emphasise the importance of the network charging arrangements, which support the delivery of net zero in a fair and efficient way. The reforms that Ofgem is progressing will help us to achieve that.

Question put and agreed to.

6.21 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 8 July 2021

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Covid-19: Household Debt

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

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

1.30 pm

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to normal practice in order to support the new hybrid arrangements. Timings of debates have been amended to allow technical arrangements to be made for the next debate. There will also be suspensions between each debate.

I remind Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive for the start of debates in Westminster Hall. Members are expected to remain for the entire debate. I must also remind Members, particularly those participating virtually, that they must leave their camera on for the duration of the debate and that they will be visible at all times, both to each other and to us in the Boothroyd Room—in other words, do not do anything you do not want to be seen on camera.

If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks at westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and as they leave the room. I also remind Members that Mr Speaker has asked that masks be worn in Westminster Hall.

1.31 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab) [V]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on household debt.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. The effects of covid-19 have been uniquely lopsided. We hear a lot about people making savings during lockdown; the Bank of England apparently estimates that at £150 billion overall and says that many people are able to pay off debt using income they have saved. That is all very well, but it glosses over the at least 11 million people—perhaps the most vulnerable in society—whose debt has increased because of covid-19. That is 11 million people who, by March 2021 according to StepChange, had built up £25 billion in arrears and debt to pay.

About 4.3 million people are now behind on bills such as council tax, rent or fuel, and the average debt is higher too. According to independent polling, 14 million people have suffered an income shock over the course of the pandemic, with almost half of those people turning to crisis borrowing to cover essential expenditure. The Money and Pension Service found that 9 million people have had to borrow money in the last year to buy food and to pay essential bills—whether via credit cards, overdrafts or, if they are very lucky, family and friends.

According to Standard Life, one in 10 of all households were facing serious financial difficulty, with the majority in arrears on at least one bill.

Loss of income is, of course, at the heart of the increase in debt. StepChange says that more than 19 million adults experienced some loss of income during the pandemic. The package of help from the Government has been a lifeline for so many in crisis, because of lost incomes and loss of jobs. However, welcome as they are, in many ways they are going to simply delay the inevitable because they are expiring or due to expire in September. When the various schemes come to an end, we can only expect the situation to get worse. Some advice agencies are talking about a tsunami of debt. It is a highly dramatic image, but maybe not far from the truth.

We like to think that covid-19 has been a great leveller—that we are all in it together—but the fact is that the increased debt burden has had a disproportionate impact on the least well off and most vulnerable in society. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has found that the poorest 20% of the population saw a decline of £170 per month in their savings during the pandemic, while research from Citizens Advice showed that young people, people with dependent children, black, Asian and minority ethnic people, disabled people and renters were far more at risk of falling behind on essential bills such as council tax repayments. People living in places with average earnings lower than £28,000 a year—such as my own constituency in the Wigan borough, where average earnings are just over £18,000—are, according to the Centre for Cities, significantly more likely to be indebted than the more affluent areas in the south. How are the Government proposing to deal with this disparity?

Families with children have been perhaps the hardest hit of all. Again according to StepChange, one in five parents who has suffered a hit to their income from covid says that they or their children have had to skip meals, ration utilities, or go without some appropriate clothing for the weather. That debt also comes from increased expenditure: families with children, especially those whose children have been at home rather than school, found themselves spending more money, not less, on food and other essentials.

Poorer households who spend the majority of their money on essentials did not experience the drop in non-essential expenditures that others reported during the pandemic, and these people quite often pay more for their goods and services than the better-off. As Fair By Design has demonstrated, a clear poverty premium is in operation. It has calculated that this costs the average low-income household £490 a year and, for more than one in 10 low-income households, at least £780 a year.

Low-income households have also been more impacted by another covid-19 trend, namely the move away from cash. Some commentators speak as if its demise is a wholly good thing, but the fact is that many millions of people rely on cash for daily transactions, especially those on low incomes who see it as an excellent budgeting tool. I am pleased that the Treasury is now consulting on giving the public the legal right to access cash a reasonable distance from their home. I will be interested to see how that will work, and I am sure that the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) will have much more to say about the issue. I also welcomed the announcement in the Budget that £3.8 million will be available to fund a no-interest loan scheme. Again,

[Yvonne Fovargue]

the devil will be in the detail, but the fact is that such a scheme needs to be rolled out quickly if it is to help with the fallout from covid-19.

I have been a vocal critic of the harm done by both payday lenders and rent to own. More recently, we have seen the rise of a new product—buy now, pay later—whose products, I note, have been rebranded as a naughty little treat for women. Research from Which? has disproved the myth that the biggest users of this type of credit are young single women: it found that the biggest group are women with children who have other forms of credit debt and who are using it to buy essential items. The Financial Conduct Authority has said that it will regulate this industry, too: the sooner it does so, the better. I urge the Minister to look at the remit of the FCA to allow it to be proactive when new products emerge that may cause consumer harm, rather than having to wait until harm has been demonstrated. We also need to encourage a savings culture—there could be a whole other debate on how we encourage people with low and fluctuating incomes to save.

I have spoken on a number of occasions about the need to regulate the bailiff industry. With debt to both national and local government increasing during the pandemic, now is the time to tackle this issue. The Government should lead by example by reforming the way in which they recover debt such as council tax arrears, so that local authorities put a clear focus on affordability and fair treatment. We need nothing less than a new debt management Bill to write off historic tax credit debts, embed fairness principles in statute, and establish a bailiff regulator with statutory powers to protect financially vulnerable individuals. I hope the Minister agrees with that.

There are some measures that could be taken to reduce the amount and impact of debt. Enforcement action should be halted for debts built up as a result of coronavirus; non-priority benefit deductions from universal credit should cease; and plans should be brought forward to extend repayments over a longer period, as well as making the £20 uplift to universal credit permanent in order to give people the certainty and security of having enough to live on. Does the Minister agree that removing any money from those on the lowest incomes would inevitably create more debt and hardship?

I also believe that now is the time for a full holistic review of all debt solutions to be undertaken. We need a simple, straight-forward system that, crucially, ensures that people in debt are able to access the solution that best suits their needs. The system has grown in a piecemeal way; we need to fully reform it.

Breathing Space is really welcome, but the 60 days should be flexible to allow people more time to recover if they have reduced income or debts because of covid-19. Other measures that could help include targeted debt write-down of priority arrears—rent, council tax and so on—and longer-term protections so that households can safely address covid-related debts over a more sustainable timeframe.

Some have suggested establishing a special Government fund to provide grants to pay off and cancel all unavoidable debt accrued by households during the lockdown period. Reset The Debt argues that such a fund would make the money already spent on economic recovery worth it for

many families, and would release them to be more economically productive in the future. StepChange suggests a covid rent debt fund specifically for private renters, to ensure that the Government honour their pandemic promise that no renter will lose their home. I would be interested to hear the Minister's views on both schemes.

We also need to better fund our advice agencies, which expect to see an enormous increase in demand for their services once furlough ends. They are now struggling with a serious income shortfall because people have not been visiting them while measures have been in place to mitigate the problems with finance, but those people are building up problems for the future. Such advice agencies offer free debt advice services based on a comprehensive assessment of a person's situation and then provide practical help and support for however long it is needed. The increase in funding from the Money and Pensions Service is welcome, but applying contract rules rather than grant funding will impose VAT and remove most of that benefit. Could that be looked at again, as it appears to be giving with one hand and taking back with the other?

It would be a scandal if the Government's package of support merely delayed the onset of unmanageable debt. If we truly want to help struggling people to get back to normal life when the crisis is over, we cannot simply abandon them when support ends.

1.42 pm

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con) [V]: Just last month, the financial service provider Auden Financial published its "Pandemic Penalty" report, which contained a number of troubling statistics. Some 50% of its clients now have savings of less than £100. The report found that single-parent families are the most likely to resort to short-term loans, and a third of them rely on food banks. The 18-to-35 age group is the most likely to apply for short-term credit, but also the most likely to be rejected. Only half those in financial difficulty have actually made contact with money advice providers. Surely those who turn down those borrowers need to do a better job of signposting them to the help that they clearly need.

All those statistics show just what an endemic problem debt is in this country as we reach, I hope, the end of the covid pandemic. It is no wonder that people find themselves in financial crisis when the unexpected strikes—from a fridge no longer working to a family bereavement. I congratulate the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) on securing the debate and setting out such a broad spectrum of views and considerations.

Debt advisers do a fantastic job, as the hon. Lady said. I welcome the increased funding from the Money and Pensions Service, but I am also aware that debt advisers may not have the specialist knowledge needed to interrogate tax debt and to ascertain whether or not debt that an individual is informed about is actually owed in the first place. TaxAid and Tax Help for Older People, two charities that help with tax cases, looked at the data from 66 cases on their system from August 2019 to just before the covid pandemic started. The total debt for those 66 cases when they first approached TaxAid was more than £230,000. After Tax Aid had done its work, only £46,000 of that debt remained: only 25% of what was originally cited.

To me, that illustrates powerfully the point that checking that a debt is owing in the first place should be the first step. However, that requires specialist tax knowledge rather than general debt knowledge, which is relevant to the latter stage once the actual amount of the debt is established. It is all very well for us to have the finest system in the world for arranging debt repayments and dealing with debt, but why do we not aspire to similar excellence in checking whether debt is due in the first place?

Like the hon. Member for Makerfield, I welcome the introduction of the Breathing Space initiative, but, as the We Are Debt Advisers network has observed, 60 days may not be long enough to exhaust all other potential sources of income, particularly when we can see that Department for Work and Pensions decisions around extra benefits, such as the personal independence payment, are taking far longer than 60 days. Can the Government look again at whether they can be more flexible about that 60-day period, to recognise when people are in the process of securing extra income?

May we look again at debt relief orders? As a former Minister for legal matters, I know that such legal instruments can be made available and charged for only on a cost recovery basis. Some £90 to obtain a debt relief order is a burden on those already in debt. I would welcome a proper Government review of whether that truly represents nothing more than cost recovery.

On the issue of the no-interest loans, which I very much welcome—not least because of my interest in reforming local welfare assistance schemes—may I ask what progress has been made? In my view, this should not be rocket science. The original idea came from Australia, where Good Shepherd Australia has been operating microfinance for many years. To introduce it here must be a matter of cut and paste, rather than starting from the beginning to build a programme from scratch. This type of project is important, because the cost of replacing white goods is terrible for many families, who fall into debt as a consequence. We need only listen to the Liverpool-based End Furniture Poverty campaign and look at the pilot schemes that Fair4All Finance are launching to tackle what they term “appliance poverty”.

With so many people living in unfurnished, private rented properties and on low incomes, over 1 million people are lacking either a cooker, fridge freezer or washing machine. No cooker may mean a focus on costly takeaway meals for those who are time poor and no washing machine might mean a £7 trip to the launderette for a single load of washing. Getting into debt to pay for these essentials is simply not the answer.

If we are to tackle the issue of problem debt more fundamentally, we must also address the tools that people choose to manage that debt through the various forms of credit open to them, often at the highest cost to those with the greatest debts. That means the Government have to react promptly to the Woolard review, which looked at the wide picture of financial resilience, rather than just the promise of regulation for buy now, pay later that much of the media fixed on.

That wider objective should be helping those in debt out of it, and preventing those just about managing from going into debt in the first place. As Theodora Hadjimichael, chief executive of Responsible Finance, said recently,

“Withdrawals from the subprime market mean a vacuum in access to credit. Without responsible lenders stepping in to fill it,

the options available to individuals who need to plug a gap in income or pay for one off expenses may become increasingly dire”.

That is very much the situation I believe we are looking at. At the moment, the least well-off are disproportionately penalised within a poverty premium that sees them subjected to higher insurance premiums and a much smaller range of affordable credit products, if any at all exist for their particular financial circumstances.

I do not believe the answer is a whack-a-mole approach that knocks out every credit option one by one. People on whatever level of income should be able to choose to pay for goods using credit, including buy now, pay later. The challenge is to ensure that those products are transparent and affordable. We need to move the focus to the behaviour of the borrower over a lifetime—looking at all their borrowing, rather than just a single test of their credit risk or a single affordability assessment. People might be able to afford a loan at a particular point in time, but then be hit by a family bereavement, which ends up changing their entire financial situation. Doing that requires much speedier progress on open banking than we have seen so far and for our lenders to see a wider picture of spending habits.

We also need greater diversity in the market. Community, voluntarist solutions exist but cannot be scaled up quickly. The arguments get quite techy quite quickly—community development, financial institutions, FinTech and how the Financial Conduct Authority regulates the sector. It is much harder to get political purchase here because it gets so complex. MPs get stuck into a “something must be done” rut that expresses itself in attempts to stop things rather than starting better alternatives.

The Government have introduced initiatives to help people build up their savings, but the payroll-based Help to Save scheme is not as transformative as it could be and perhaps needs supercharging. There are a numerous savings schemes for those on lower incomes, but all are voluntary and do not have people nudged into them in the way that occurred with workplace pensions. Ministers have spoken of replicating the contracting-in model of the workplace pension scheme to create what are known as sidecar savings schemes for those in work. What is actually happening with that?

We need to offer a route to asset accumulation for everyone, and those in poverty three years in three should have access to the same nudge as everybody else to start building their own safety net, which would be their first recourse if misfortune struck. Government support for that nudge would reduce demands on other streams of Government welfare assistance and create a pathway out of indebtedness. So yes, we need to deal with today's covid-related debt, but we should use this opportunity to fashion new approaches that enable a better credit market and better systems to deal with those who will inevitably, sadly, fall into debt. We will never have a world without debt, but we can help to prevent people from falling into debt, help people out of that debt, and above all create a world without destitution. That should always be our first goal as a responsible Government.

1.51 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: It is a pleasure to take part in the debate, and I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) has done on these issues for many years.

[Stella Creasy]

I agree with every word from the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard); I fear that consensus will break out in the House on the need to act. Whether we have different ideas on how we should act may be another matter, but I think the concern that debt has been the quiet winner of the covid crisis is widely shared across the House. The two excellent previous speeches reflect that. The talk of people saving more may well be true, but we know that, in our communities, many people are drowning, not waving. Frankly, they were already in deep water before the pandemic hit.

The two previous speakers gave some excellent statistics on the debt in our country. I am mindful that StepChange tells us that more than 19 million adults have experienced a loss of income during the pandemic, while 11 million people have built up £25 billion of arrears and debt—not because they have been sat at home ordering consumer goods to entertain themselves, but to pay for essentials. As we know, those debts are not equally distributed within our communities. In particular, renters, those from minority ethnic communities, and women and mothers, as Women's Budget Group research shows, have borne the brunt of the debt crisis that is building up in our communities. In April, a quarter of mothers from black and ethnic minority community backgrounds reported that they were struggling to feed their children, and 32% of young women said that they were finding it hard to pay for essentials.

So, the question for us all is, what are people doing to make ends meet? Some 26% of those affected by coronavirus have borrowed money to make ends meet, most commonly through credit cards or an overdraft facility, and a million of those people have used some form of high-cost credit product. Crucially, Citizens Advice research also shows that people from shielded groups are four times as likely as others to be behind on utility bills such as council tax.

Understanding the nature of the credit tsunami that is coming towards us due to the debt that underpins our economy and underpins the response to credit is vital not only for people's individual lives, but for our public sector. The reality is that research increasingly paints a grim picture for many of our constituents. Some 48% of consumers told the FCA review of high-cost credit that they had to cut back on other spending to make their loan bills, while 37% said they missed payments on their rent or mortgage or on utilities, with council tax the top payment that many are forgoing. Some 16% of customers reported that their most recent borrowing was to repay debt that they had already taken on. People were being drawn into a spiral whereby they were borrowing from Peter to pay Paul, from Paul to pay Sarah, and from Sarah to pay Peter.

The truth is that this is not a new phenomenon in our country. We have always had an economy that was increasingly reliant on consumer debt, and we have always had millions of people for whom that reliance was toxic. As my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield set out so well, it is very expensive to be poor in this country. Credit cards and high-cost credit, whatever form it takes, are expensive for people on low incomes. Indeed, a sub-prime credit card costs around £200 more a year, and personal loans cost around £500 more a year. The issue is not just about the credit that people

can access, but about the way utilities are sold. Being on the best energy pre-payment tariff could still be £131 more expensive than the best online-only tariff.

We must not be complacent—I know the Minister is not—and we must not encourage a consumer spending bubble. I urge the Treasury to change tack and be like the Grinch, but for good cause, owing to the problems in our communities. The debt advice services tell us that they have not yet seen hundreds of thousands of people coming to them, but we know it takes time for people to get to the point when they admit that they need help. The true impact of the pandemic on debt advice is yet to be seen, although we are already seeing some incredibly worrying trends. The Financial Wellness Group tells us that around 24% of the customers it has advised on utility debts each owed about £1,000 in arrears, but that has risen to £2,000 over the last year. We can see that when people seek help, they are already in a position whereby it is much more difficult to help them. In particular, they flag up housing costs.

I recognise the point about incomes made by my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield, but I represent a community in London—supposedly an affluent area—that has the 10th-highest level of child poverty in the country due to the cost of housing and of keeping a roof over people's heads. We must focus on the poverty that we see in our communities and on the impact it has on people's spending. With the eviction ban ending, with no end in sight for high rents and with no action taken on them, it is clear that people will struggle to manage the cost of trying to stay in the community where their children go to school and where they can be as close as possible to whatever work they can get, especially if they have experienced unemployment during the epidemic. Indeed, the Financial Wellness Group tells us that more than one in three customers to whom it has provided free debt advice have had negative disposable incomes—their priority living costs exceed their income. For many of those people, it is about housing costs.

Like others, I welcome the Breathing Space process, but I believe we need to have a much more fundamental rethink of how we help people to manage their finances and how we put consumers front and centre in what is often an unfair fight. I recognise the point made by the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys about not taking a whack-a-mole approach, but I hope he will forgive me if I take a bite out of some legal loan sharks that I have been concerned about and spoken about to the Minister for some years now—the “buy now, pay later” industry, which has been one of the overall winners in the pandemic.

Since the pandemic started, there has been a massive increase in people using “buy now, pay later”, because they have been able to do online shopping. It has even been suggested that £1 in every £4 spent last Christmas was “buy now, pay later”. Several years ago, few of us had heard much about that industry. It is now huge.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield said, the impression being given is that the issue is all about fast fashion and young women buying too many pairs of shoes, but the brutal reality coming from the research is that it is not about that at all. People are using the options provided by websites to make ends meet because there is too much month at the end of their money. In particular, families are suffering and having to use that form of credit. As my hon. Friend said, the *Which?*

research is incredibly compelling. People are using “buy now, pay later” to access credit at a stressful and challenging time in their life—for example, when they face redundancy, or when they might not have been able to access help because they are one of the 3 million excluded in our country, in particular those who have children to keep clothed, fed and warm.

Missing a credit bill or payment can be a major life event. The odds of using “buy now, pay later” go up by about a third when someone is made redundant, has a baby or has to move because they can no longer afford to live in their home. We know that, as a result, those people’s credit records are affected. We know they have been referred to debt collection agencies and that they have experienced mental distress. We know that it does not have to be that way.

I welcome the fact that, over the past year, the debate has changed from the idea that this is somehow just a new wacky way to use the internet to shop more simply to a recognition of the damage and the danger that this form of credit, which is unregulated—and still is unregulated today—represents. The FCA report was clear about that.

We know from Citizens Advice that almost 40% of people who have used “buy now, pay later” did so without realising, as a lot of the retailers push people to use that as the first option on their sites because they are officially paying the fees for it. Almost the same number of people thought it was not proper borrowing and really did not understand what they were signing up for. If we consider the research from the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, which shows that 3 million people with mental health problems have found it much harder to control their online spending since lockdown, in part because of the design of online retail sites, the need for urgent action grows ever stronger. As I have repeatedly said to the Minister, we have to learn the lesson of the payday lending industry. We did not act quickly enough, so even now we are seeing millions of people who still have problems as a result of borrowing seven or eight years ago through payday lenders.

The public know that we need to act because they do not believe the adverts. They know this is a problem. Indeed, the Hastee Workplace Wellbeing Study showed that 59% of workers had applied for high-cost credit knowing that they would struggle with repayments, but feeling that they had little option. Yet over the past couple of months, rather than the industry recognising its responsibility to its consumers and recognising the support from across the House that the Government would have for regulation, we have seen it simply changing the wording. Such entities no longer call themselves “credit”. They call themselves “a money management tool”. They offer debt advice themselves. It really is turkeys talking to us about how going vegan at Christmas is a good idea. The industry is moving quicker than the Government. That is why I urge the Minister, when he knows he has cross-party support and when he has the evidence, that there should be no further delay in regulating those companies on the issue.

We need to tackle the way in which the companies see affordability. It is clear from the evidence that their definitions of affordability are not ones that we accept in other industries. We need to challenge the product design and how those companies are evolving so quickly to evade what is commonplace evidence about credit regulation—many of the things the Advertising Standards

Authority has tried to pick them up on. However, they are moving quicker than Government. We need to make sure that we have a proportionate regulatory process.

One of the things I am extremely concerned about is hearing Ministers suggest that somehow these companies would not have to follow the same rules around credit regulation as other companies, as if they were special and as if they were not as bad as some others. There are two things about that. I hope the Minister will set out for us why he thinks there might be exemptions. What particular elements of our consumer regulation would he not apply to “buy now, pay later” industries? Why does he think that would not create a race to the bottom across the consumer credit industry, as companies variously tried to argue that they were not the bad guys ripping off our constituents? Has he spoken to the Competition and Markets Authority about this? Setting out a situation whereby we allow companies to pick and choose which regulations they abide by is not going to help our constituents.

On that point, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield that we need to review the FCA. The failure to act quickly enough on Wonga, BrightHouse and Amigo Loans is an example of why we need the regulator to be better. Too often, the Financial Ombudsman Service has intervened on behalf of our constituents, rather than the regulator, which has been working with the companies. It is right to review now the FCA and whether it is working effectively, when people are without the compensation they are due from those companies, many of which have gone bust. Some people are not going to get the compensation they are entitled to, but they are also being chased by the creditors of those companies because they owe the companies money. Something is fundamentally wrong in that balance.

Finally, I again agree with the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys that we need to ensure that there are good credit options, which is why I urge the Minister to talk to his colleagues—not just in the Treasury, but in local government—about our credit union movement, which is on its knees as a result of the pandemic. As a proud Co-op MP, as well as Labour, I believe that social finance initiatives are critical to helping people out of this crisis. Minister, the people who are drowning, not waving, need us to offer more than a life raft such as Breathing Space. They need us to deal with all these legal loan sharks, which are circling them and pulling them down—once and for all, in truth. The Minister will have my support, and I know the support of Members across the House, if he takes that robust, proactive approach, but right now all we can see is more fins in the waters ahead.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): It might help Members to know that five Back Benchers want to get in before I have to call the Front Benchers at half-past the hour; if people keep their remarks to five minutes or less, we will get everyone in.

2.5 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con) [V]: I congratulate the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) on securing today’s debate.

Being British, we do not tend to talk much about debt, or money issues at all, but I showed an early interest in the subject by explaining to my first primary

[Selaine Saxby]

school teacher that my parents were worried about their overdraft—I think my parents were most surprised to have that discussion at school.

Debt in whatever form is a worry. I have direct personal experience of it, and of the invaluable support available from charities such as StepChange and from our churches through organisations such as Christians Against Poverty. I have a maths degree, yet when I lost my business, I still needed help to sort through creditors, understand which bills really were essential, properly to sort out my budgeting and to get my finances back on track.

As the pandemic has progressed, our understanding of exponential growth has also improved. One suspects that this is the same growth rate for both the number of our constituents in debt and the debt they carry. I already have constituents being evicted because of rent arrears and, as there is no temporary accommodation in North Devon due to the surge in the number of holiday lets, the nearest is up to 100 miles away in Bristol. That is clearly unacceptable, as local people will be uprooted from their communities.

Debts have built up where rent or council tax has not been paid, and through credit cards and overdrafts being used to buy everyday items to make ends meet. Far too many families do not have savings for a rainy day, and the pandemic has been positively torrential. As a former maths teacher, I find alarming the number of people who do not understand compound interest or who are unable to budget, which I think stems from not having enough financial education at any stage of the school curriculum.

Given the scale of the issues with which so many families living in our constituencies are dealing with, we need to put extra resource in debt management and give people and companies more time to get their businesses back up and running after the last year and a half of restrictions. Although we did an excellent job deploying extra staff to help to get those who needed it on to universal credit at the start of the pandemic, I worry that we have not seen a comparable increase in the number of debt counsellors in our excellent citizens advice bureaux, for example, so that new claimants could turn their finances around.

While the focus is rightly on getting people back to work, we need to recognise the level of debt that they might have built up during their time not working. Many vacancies are becoming available for jobs that might not pay enough to cover that additional debt on top of a family's cost of living. Many people have had to retrain and are starting again. We should encourage them back to work by doing everything we can to help them to spread out their repayments and balance their books. Many people who moved on to universal credit during the pandemic will have also found that they have historical tax credit debts, which they now have to repay, along with any advance they may have received ahead of their first universal credit payment.

Universal credit is a working benefit, so many claimants are working, and while additional hours might now become available for some families, for others the numbers do not add up. Although I have heard and understand all the arguments as to why the £20 temporary uplift to universal credit will end in September, I hope the Minister

will have some explanation as to how families who already cannot make ends meet are supposed to do so when it goes. For many families who are unable to work, the uplift may represent 20% of their weekly income. How many people have household budgets that will tolerate a 20% drop in income?

The pandemic has already produced a health crisis, and the debt crisis it is generating cannot simply be brushed away by us hoping that everyone can work their way out of it. Many can and will, but debt accumulates. The impact on mental health is devastating, but the relief of resolution is immense. I urge anyone worried about debt to seek advice as soon as they can. I did not become an MP to see families in my North Devon constituency and across the country become destitute. Levelling up, to my mind, is about ensuring that everyone, in every community, has a fair chance to get ahead and that our economy raises the standard of living for everyone. I fully recognise how much the Government have already spent and the work undertaken by the Treasury team to save businesses and jobs. We are now a nation in quite a lot of debt, but we know it will not be repaid immediately. With so many families in the same position, can they not be afforded the same luxury?

Debt and poverty are about families and people. It is not about the billions we have already spent or how much it will cost to give those people a leg-up; it is about doing the right thing to help those families to build back better. The Minister knows as well as I, albeit on a macro level, that debt cannot be repaid if outgoings continue to exceed income. We cannot allow bigger gaps to open up in our society. That is not levelling up, which the Government set out to do. I hope we can still deliver.

2.10 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) for the securing this important debate and for her brilliant contribution.

Although the Government trumpet the billions spent so far during the pandemic on support such as on furlough and business support grants, we all know that millions have been excluded from support, or worse, have lost their livelihoods. As each day goes by, many fall further and further into debt. As we have heard, StepChange estimates that between the start of the pandemic and March this year, 11 million people built up £25 billion of arrears and debt. Unsustainable household debt is not just devastating for those involved; it damages the economy. Economic activity declines as households in debt cut back their spending, and the banking system is affected when there are loan defaults. Without a clear covid recovery plan that tackles the household debt balloon, our ability to recover economically from the pandemic will be in peril.

I will outline briefly a few elements that I would like the Minister to consider. For immediate support to repay council tax and rent debt, the Jubilee Debt Campaign and other organisations advocate providing grants directly to households to help clear rent debt and council tax arrears. I agree with other speakers that the £20 uplift in universal credit must be maintained and should be extended to those on legacy benefits. There must be an emergency grant for the millions who have been excluded from any Government support and complete parity

with the extension of the coronavirus job retention scheme and the self-employment income support scheme. Payments for those excluded should also be backdated.

To manage long-term debt, the Government must first remove barriers to insolvency procedures such as debt relief orders. There should also be fair debt write-down. Many lenders sell on their problem debts for a fraction of their value, only for debt collectors to enforce them at their full value, which places debtors under increased and unnecessary pressure. The Government could tackle that by creating a consumer version of UK Asset Resolution, the public finance company that was set up to purchase problem debts from the banks during the financial crash. Such a public vehicle would allow the offloading of many problem debts, to be refinanced at affordable rates for borrowers. Only the Government can borrow at low interest rates to make that happen effectively.

Finally, is the option of a debt jubilee must be examined—writing off some debts for households and businesses that will simply never be able to repay them, even at more affordable rates. Even former Chancellor George Osborne has called for all coronavirus emergency debt taken out by small and micro-businesses to be forgiven. In practice, that would need to be carefully and strictly limited to specific types of problem debt. An example of how it could work is if a lender decided that an outstanding loan was simply not going to be repaid, they could discharge the debt and be offered a tax break in return.

The Government must heed the warning signs. Responding to the growing covid debt crisis is not just morally the right thing to do, but essential if we are to have any chance of rebuilding our economy as the pandemic ends.

2.14 pm

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) for securing this important and timely debate.

I am not alone in seeing the impact of covid-19 on household debt in my mailbag and through surgeries. I suspect I am also not alone in this place in seeing the divergence between those who have managed over the past year to cut their costs and increase their savings and those who are just about managing, who now find themselves in an even more perilous position. Data from the Office for National Statistics backs that up, with evidence that some households, particularly those with low incomes, have run down their savings over the past 12 to 18 months and increased their debt during the pandemic. We have to be keenly aware of that divergence as we emerge from covid.

As I walk around Barrow, Dalton or Ulverston in my constituency, I see the households that have spent some of the past year fixing up their gardens and houses—I have to say that I am a little jealous of them—and those who have allowed their houses to fall into disrepair. Of course, it is no official measure, but it is clear that in the same streets we are seeing families rubbing up against each other, some of whom are thriving and some of whom are struggling. Renters, parents, carers, disabled people and many of those who shielded over the past year are the people we must ensure are not left behind

as we move through covid. We must be ready to ensure that that schism is not permitted to widen further or their debt burden to increase even more.

I pay credit to the Government for their significant efforts to support families through the pandemic. Furlough, the universal credit uplift, the national living wage increase, the local housing allowance uplift and the hardship fund are all measures that have not just kept families afloat but kept them going in these uncertain times. Extending the UC uplift was the right thing to do. I am grateful to the Chancellor and his team for listening to Back Benchers such as myself when we made the case for it, but we are about to go into a period of uncertainty. I would be very interested to hear the Minister's views on what a further extension of that programme might look like and how it might support vulnerable people.

We are right to focus on jobs now—getting people into work, earning more and getting the skills they need to get back on the ladder. We should also look at the support schemes that are working and how we can support them. Christians Against Poverty is a great example, as is StepChange. Yet the fact remains that not everyone will be able to make the jump into a job, or to make it as quickly as others. A robust safety net has to be in place to support them, otherwise we are derelict and failing in our duty. The Kickstart and Restart schemes targeted at young people and those at risk of long-term unemployment will be key to that. I pay tribute to the Department for Work and Pensions team in Furness, which is working so hard and with great enthusiasm to deliver those schemes. Only a few days ago, my local DWP team announced that Lisa, our local youth work coach, will be working in a different office—in a place called Drop Zone in the centre of town—alongside local council officers, job providers and others. That visibility and change in circumstances is really innovative and great to see. I want more of that as we try to help those who really need it right now.

We cannot allow household debt to rack up. The Breathing Space scheme is welcome. Many of my constituents have sung its praises to me. It provides important short-term relief, and we must take this time to look at the principles behind it and how we can sympathetically help families who may be building up problem debt. I declare an interest as the former chair of the Barrow and District Credit Union, but I think there is a role that such organisations can and should play to help individuals and families as we emerge from this crisis. I hope that the Government will consider supporting them in order to support our communities more. They are well connected to debt advice charities, they work very closely with the local third sector and, perhaps most important in this regard, they help to steer people away from short-term lenders and loan sharks. In many ways, they are some of the very best parts of our civil society and some of the least known.

You will be relieved that I am coming to the end of my speech, Mr Bone. We have to be alive to the fact that gaps exist, and the road ahead for many of our constituents will be difficult, especially as we try to keep them out of debt. We have to rise to that challenge. Some of the issues related to this topic are crucial; they worry away at the fabric of our society. By focusing on debt, financial exclusion, dependency, loneliness and skills, we are providing people with a ladder. We have an opportunity

[Simon Fell]

to make a real and lasting change for those in our communities most in need. We have to grab that opportunity and take it.

2.19 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab) [V]: Let me try to zip through this so that we can accommodate everyone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) and the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) not just for securing this debate, but for the serious work they have put in throughout on this issue. They work effectively on a cross-party basis:

I apologise for straying slightly from that cross-party approach, but I listened to the Chancellor on the “Today” programme this morning and, to be frank, he exuded complacency about the scale of problems and hardships my constituents and many others face. The Chancellor quoted selectively from today’s IFS report and the recent Resolution Foundation report. What he did not say is that the IFS reports that 700,000 more children have fallen into poverty over the last eight years. In my constituency, 42% of children are now living in poverty. What he did not quote from the Resolution Foundation report is the potential for 4% inflation by the end of the year, which will have an impact on those families.

We have to put this in the political context. A series of regressive Government policies will drive this debt and poverty crisis deeper. The scrapping of universal credit has already been mentioned, but we will have the freezing of the income tax thresholds from next April and the 5% council tax rise this year. For people on the minimum wage or working in the public sector, their pay rise this year will be below inflation, leaving them worse off in real terms. It is no wonder that the lives of many of my constituents are plagued by insecurity and stress. This leads many of them to have mental health crises, so I fear that, alongside the covid pandemic, we will experience the equivalent of a mental health pandemic, but it will be quiet and it will often be secret, because the stigma attached to debt is so heavy in our society. That is why I believe that lifting the worry of debt off people’s shoulders has to be a priority, exactly as hon. Members have said.

I welcome the combined briefing we have received from StepChange, Generation Rent and other bodies, which sets out a financial package to support and help tenants to clear covid-related rent arrears. It is a sensible and practical approach, and I hope the Minister gives it serious consideration and also takes urgent action.

The time has come to look beyond the covid-related debt crisis and to address the systemic debt burden that always weighs down so many families in our society. Tackling personal debt, as others have said, has social, economic and health benefits. One solution is to cap interest rates, and other proposals include capping the total amount that can be paid in overdraft fees on interest payments.

I also want to refer to what my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) has said. The UK lending market and secondary debt market requires much stronger regulation from the Financial Conduct Authority if we are to protect consumers and businesses. As my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) said, one wider solution to debt—as

proposed by Johnna Montgomerie—could be the creation of a company like UK Asset Resolution, which purchased problem debt from the banks during the banking crisis, to do the same for consumers to clean up their financial situation once and for all.

This has been an important debate and I hope that the Government’s response will be positive. We will need to return to the wider question of systemic debt fairly promptly.

2.23 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) [V]: Unsustainable debt destroys lives, marriages and couple relationships, and causes misery to families up and down the country. As in so many areas of life, prevention is always better than cure. That is why we need to start by looking at the reasons why people end up with unsustainable debts.

Dealing with the causes of debt is at the heart of preventing the misery that unsustainable debt is responsible for. The United Kingdom stands as a real outlier internationally in that so many people who start their lives in entry-level jobs end their lives in entry-level jobs. Why is that such an issue for the United Kingdom? Why is it less so for other countries? What can we do about it?

When I served on the Work and Pensions Committee, I was taught about the ABC approach to eradicating poverty. In the Church circles that I move in, that acronym stands for our current wonderful Archbishop of Canterbury but in this context it stands for a job, a better job and a career. That is the mindset that we need to encourage and enable so that people have the opportunity perhaps to go to night school or study at weekends while they work in order to improve their skills and earn, say, £22.50 an hour rather than £9 an hour. That is exactly what the Government’s newly introduced lifetime skills guarantee sets out to facilitate, and what programmes such as the nursing associate scheme enable. Helping as many people as possible to get into work in the first place and recreating that British jobs miracle that the Government have done before is absolutely key.

Secondly, we have to do something about the ridiculous cost of housing for far too many people. That is more of a problem in some parts of the country than others, but I have long been convinced that the unavailability and unaffordability of housing is the root cause of debt and poverty in this country. Of course we need to build the houses we need in the right places and with the infrastructure going in at the same time—we have not always had the best record in achieving that—but quite simply, far too much of people’s income goes towards housing costs, which leaves far too little for food, utilities, clothing, transport and other items.

That brings me on to zero energy bill homes—precisely what we need to do now to expedite our journey to net zero but, equally important, to eradicate poverty now. Yes, we can have a home today where we do not have gas and electricity bills because the house sends more energy back to the grid in the summer than it draws down in the winter. British architect Bill Dunster OBE is already building houses that do exactly that, and no, they are not more expensive than conventional houses.

Financial literacy also matters, and we need to make sure that people have the skills to make sure they do not get ripped off with overpriced deals on all manner of

items. We are doing more in this area in our schools, but we need to keep going to make sure that those skills are ingrained among the whole population.

When money is owed to local authorities, it is especially important that a reasonable and compassionate approach is taken. Some people can afford to pay and I have no problem with the full panoply of the law being used against those who can pay their bills but choose not to. Other people simply cannot pay, and local authorities have a particular duty to behave well in those circumstances. I welcome the proposal for an enforcement conduct authority to make sure that bailiffs behave reasonably as well. It is overdue and I look forward to its establishment.

I am also a strong supporter and indeed a member of a credit union, the Chalkhill Blue, in my constituency. More people should use them. For those who are in debt, amazing help is available if only people know it is there and choose to take it up. Over the last year or so, I have watched at close quarters in awe and admiration the work of a debt coach for Christians Against Poverty. I have seen—anonymised, of course—examples of people with debts of £30,000 or so who have become debt-free and able to save a little every month and live within their budget.

The tragedy is that too many people do not know that help is available or do not use it. The citizens advice bureau and the Salvation Army have a similar brilliant service in my constituency, and I am aware of other amazing charities such as Crosslight working in this area as well. If someone is suffering with problem debt that they cannot manage, they should immediately seek help from organisations such as those. Help can be at hand and people can be free of their debts, as many people are able to testify.

2.29 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Like so many, I begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) for securing this important debate. We can all agree that with many households having suffered a prolonged fall in income as a result of the pandemic and with unemployment rising, the problem of household debt is increasingly worrying, with 14 million people having undergone an income shock over the course of the pandemic.

We have heard much today about the charity StepChange, which I am sure we all want to pay tribute to. That charity has found that 4.3 million people are now behind on basic bills such as rent, fuel or council tax, with 2.8 million people now borrowing simply to make ends meet, accessing high-cost credit that means they are more likely to be locked into a cycle of debt in the longer term. Indeed, 2.4 million people are facing long-term debt problems, which inevitably means that increasing numbers of people will face the threat of eviction and homelessness down the line.

One of the great injustices that people face in every constituency across the UK is having to pay more for their essentials, and we have heard much today about the poverty premium. The cost of accessing credit can be considerable for some people in our communities, trapping them in high-interest debts that so many of them will find difficult to manage and almost impossible to escape. As we work to emerge from this health pandemic, it is very important that inclusion is baked

into all essential services, so that the pricing of all products and services is fair to all users. When necessary and appropriate, the Government should regulate the market to make sure that that happens. The poverty premium is simply an unacceptable burden on those who are already struggling. The capping of interest rates is a very interesting idea, and I hope that the Minister will look carefully at it.

As we all look forward to a return to some kind of normality, those who have fallen into covid-related rent arrears face the very real prospect of losing their homes, and some are already facing eviction notices. With household debt linked to covid soaring to crisis levels, the chief executive of the debt charity StepChange has urged the Government to bring forward a long-term vision for those financially affected by the pandemic, to avoid the danger of lasting economic and social damage that will deepen inequality and act as a drag on any economic recovery. If there is to be the kind of covid recovery that we all want to see, it must be a recovery for all of us. We have a real opportunity to use the experience of this health pandemic to look again at how we do things; how we deal with the glaring inequalities that we all know exist; and how we can be more inclusive.

However, we cannot do that when so many people in my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran and across the United Kingdom have lost their jobs or suffered an income shock that has driven them into debt—sometimes unmanageable debt—to help pay for essentials, which now threatens to overwhelm them. Let us be clear: when people get into debt to pay for essential items, that debt is not born of profligacy, but of poverty. With many navigating the income shock that they have suffered and doing the best that they can—not least the 3 million who have been excluded from all financial support by the Government—this is not the time to pull back on the £20 per week universal credit uplift, nor is it the time to withdraw furlough payments before businesses have had the time to properly scale up their operations post-lockdown, which threatens potentially thousands more jobs.

Creativity and compassion are needed to ultimately address the debt and poverty crisis. In Scotland, the re-elected Scottish Government are using all the powers they have to alleviate poverty, which so often drives people into debt. For example, they have reached an agreement with local authorities to introduce universal free school meals for all primary 4 children, starting in August, as part of a £520 support commitment made to low-income families. A further £100 payment was made to coincide with the start of the summer holidays—which, in Scotland, is at the end of June—in addition to the £100 paid at Easter. A new school clothing grant has been announced to help low-income families with the cost of school uniforms: available each year, it has been increased from £100 to £120 for eligible parents with children in primary school, and to £150 for secondary school pupils.

A new £10 million grant fund has been established to support tenants who have fallen into arrears as a direct result of the pandemic. That is a unique scheme established to address this problem and a doubling of the game-changing Scottish child payment and the extension of free school meals in this Parliament, using every power at our disposal to tackle child poverty, which will disgracefully be undermined by the universal credit cut

[Patricia Gibson]

of £20. It is the kind of creative response that we need in order to help hard-pressed families. As the Scottish Government use all the limited powers that they have to address these issues, how much more could the UK Government do, with their control over a full gamut of powers, to create a more equal and socially just society? If that does not happen, the substantial inequalities that we currently see all around us will become even more marked, making our society less cohesive.

We are sitting, as a society, on a debt time bomb. In every constituency across the UK, people are living with constant worry about debt that they simply cannot see their way clear to paying off, not because they have been profligate or are living an enviable lifestyle, but because they have suffered an income shock through no fault of their own. They still need to feed their children, to consume energy and to pay for essentials. It is important that support is put in place for such people. Alongside this, the current plans to start withdrawing support, such as the universal credit uplift and furlough, are very worrying, as that can only exacerbate the current pressures and hardships that so many people are facing. I therefore urge the Minister to look carefully at all the concerns raised today and to bring forward the measures necessary to mitigate the misery that debt causes to families and, ultimately, wider society. Otherwise, the mantra of “building back better” will be empty and hollow words when so many are left behind.

2.36 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab) [V]: Thank you for your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) and the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) for tabling this debate. I also welcome the contributions from all the right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield said at the start, any consideration of the pandemic's impact on household finances and debt has to take into account not just the overall effects that we are hearing about, but the impact on particular income groups. In this case more than many others, averages and overall outcomes can conceal very different outcomes for different groups of people. For those on secure incomes who have continued to be paid their full salary—or most of it through furlough—long periods of lockdown and the inability to spend on travel, tourism and so on during the pandemic have resulted in rising levels of savings. We hear some big numbers from the Bank of England—up to £200 billion in the course of the pandemic. That of course has led to a big increase in bank deposits, not only in this country but in most developed countries.

However, behind the overall figures lies a tale of two cities—or perhaps this week, we should say “a game of two halves”. The biggest increases in savings have come for those who were better off in the first place and for retirees. Those on low incomes and the unemployed have seen savings decrease, and that is if they had any savings at all in the first place. For many people on low incomes who had nothing to spend on holidays or restaurants in the first place, the cost of essentials has gone up over the past year. Families have been spending

more time at home. That has seen heating bills rise. There have been increased food bills from children spending long periods off school. And there have been other extra costs.

This morning's report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies says that the proportion of low-income households in arrears with their bills rose from 15% to 22% in the early months of the pandemic. Among the self-employed, the rise was even more stark. The proportion of the self-employed falling behind on household bills rose from just 2%, at the start of the pandemic, to 13%. There was also a rise in this figure among some ethnic minority-led households, where often there is just one income earner.

The charity StepChange, which we have heard a lot about today, reports that 11 million people have built up debts of £25 billion during the pandemic and that 4.3 million are now behind on things such as council tax, rent and fuel. It reports a 40% increase in the number of people facing severe debt problems, and that half a million private renters are now in arrears—that is twice as many as before the first national lockdown—at a time when the ban on evictions has just come to an end. Combined, those effects have led to the campaigning organisation Generation Rent to fear that thousands of tenants could face eviction just as the country tries to emerge from the pandemic. The number of renters on universal credit has already doubled during the pandemic.

There has quite rightly been a focus on universal credit today. I acknowledge that the Government's support has helped household incomes during the pandemic. The furlough scheme, grants for small businesses and the £20 a week uplift have all made a big difference until now, but as even the Prime Minister confirmed earlier this week, although restrictions will be lifted in the coming weeks, we cannot say the pandemic is over.

That is why six former Conservative Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions have taken the step of writing to their own Chancellor to say that the £20 a week universal credit uplift should not be withdrawn in September. Their letter says:

“A failure to act would mean not grasping this opportunity to invest in a future with more work and less poverty and would damage living standards, health and opportunities for some of the families that need our support most as we emerge from the pandemic.”

That is what the Chancellor's own former colleagues are saying. Going ahead with this cut would mean a loss of £1,000 a year in income for 6 million of the lowest income households in the country.

On the radio this morning the Chancellor tried to justify the cut by referring to incentives to work. Leaving aside the callous implication that poverty has to be increased to persuade people to work, we have to remember that two in five universal credit claimants are already in work, and the proportion of in-work households dependent on universal credit is expected to rise over the course of this Parliament. It is a myth to portray universal credit as just an out-of-work benefit. It supports many people who are in work, too.

The regional impact of the proposed £20 a week cut is deeply uneven. In the region I represent in the west midlands, the cut is expected to hit one third of households. Similar proportions of households will be affected in Yorkshire and the north-east. How can the Government talk about levelling up when they are about to proceed with a cut in income that will hit the poorest hardest

and will hit the north and the midlands hardest? Equality is not just about a few new buildings or a few pots for capital spending; it is about incomes and opportunities, too. It is not just about bricks and mortar; it is about families who are struggling to pay the bills.

Although some of the Government's interventions have made a big difference overall, for some people the past year has meant debt increases and a big strain on household budgets. It would be grossly complacent of the Government or anyone else to look just at the overall figures and averages. The Government must get underneath these figures and consider the impact on those who have the lowest incomes. In particular, the Government should reconsider the cut of £20 a week that they plan to make for the 6 million poorest households in the country in just a few months' time.

This issue, perhaps more than any other, points to the need to come out of this pandemic in a better position than when we went into it. We need to tackle inequalities, which, although not created by the experience of the last 18 months, have certainly been exposed by it. We have to be more ambitious than just trying to recreate what went before. If build back better means anything, it means tackling some of those problems and building something that really is better for the future. That is what we have to do, starting with household debt.

2.44 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) and my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) on securing this debate. I know that both Members care a great deal about the question of how best to protect the personal finances of the most vulnerable. They have made many valuable contributions in Parliament on this matter, including through the hon. Lady's role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on debt and personal finance and my hon. Friend's Local Welfare Assistance Provision (Review) Bill, which has been mentioned today.

I thank all Members who have contributed this afternoon for their deeply thoughtful and considered speeches, especially my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous). Our thinking may diverge in some areas, but I believe that there is a great degree of commonality between us. We have a shared desire to tackle problem debt and a shared understanding that this complex issue cannot be wished away with quick fixes, much as we might like it to be. We also have a shared recognition that we must tackle this issue strategically. As a number of Members highlighted this afternoon, the covid-19 pandemic has meant that action in this area is required now more than ever before.

The Government have responded to the crisis with one of the most comprehensive economic plans in the world. I reject the assertion that that somehow means that there is a degree of complacency: that is not the case. With the furlough scheme, the self-employment income support schemes and substantial welfare support, including the £20 universal credit uplift, a suspension of the universal credit minimum floor and an increase to local housing allowance rates, the Government have sought to make a range of interventions across society. I believe that that plan is working.

We also recognise that even when the economy bounces back, and there are very encouraging signs in that direction, there will still be people living in fear of a knock from a debt collector or another payment demand. That is why we have introduced the numerous policies that have been mentioned this afternoon. I would like to respond to Members' points about the policies that we have introduced to help people escape debt. As has been highlighted today, we are maintaining record levels of funding for free debt advice in England through the Money and Pensions Service this year, with a budget of £96.4 million. I recognise that there is still some uncertainty about the nature of that demand as people's situations become clearer, but that includes funding for the Money Adviser Network pilots, which simplify access to debt advice. I am pleased to say that more than 40 different creditor organisations are now signed up, including HM Revenue and Customs.

I recognise hon. Members' concerns about the complexity of tax debts, but consumers referred via the network will first have a conversation with an HMRC adviser, which should minimise the risk of misunderstanding over what is owed. The Money and Pensions Service budget also includes funding for the administration of debt relief orders. A number of colleagues have raised that this afternoon. We know that DROs can be an important solution for some, which is why we worked closely with the Insolvency Service to raise the monetary eligibility limits for DROs from the end of last month, a step that will help more people take advantage of this valuable option.

I recognise that some Members would like the Government to review the £90 DRO fee, as the Woolard review recommended earlier this year. I acknowledge those concerns but the Government believe that further changes to DROs should not be considered in isolation. A number of Members have made the point that we need joined-up solutions, so we will undertake a wider consultation on the personal insolvency framework. We will in due course launch a call for evidence to help us gain a deeper understanding of the situation.

I want to talk about Breathing Space. The steps we have taken are significant, because we recognise that the barrage of letters, calls and bills can be overwhelming, leaving borrowers unable to tackle what they owe. We launched the Breathing Space scheme on 4 May, just two months ago, whereby lenders agree to hold off fees and payment requests for 60 days. That relieves the pressures on borrowers and gives them time to tackle their finances with the support of a qualified debt adviser.

I will address the point, made by several Members, about whether 60 days is long enough. We believe that that period finds the right balance between debt advice, clients' interests and their creditors' rights. It has only been there for two months. However, we should also recognise that greater flexibility is built into the system for those experiencing mental health crises, reflecting the nature of the treatment and the challenges that might arise in supporting those clients. We will use a similar model of respite from bills and demands for our statutory debt repayment plan, which is currently being developed to work alongside the Breathing Space scheme. Under the plan, people struggling with problem debt will enter into formal agreements with creditors to repay their debts over a more manageable timeframe. Our aim is to lay legislation at the end of next year and introduce the scheme thereafter in 2024.

[John Glen]

As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys so aptly put it, debt should not mean destitution. Income that could be spent on essential items, such as cookers or washing machines, or that could build savings, should not be swallowed up by sky-high interest rates. Fair and affordable credit should be available to all those who need it. I will turn to our work in this area. As has been highlighted, at the Budget we announced plans to provide up to £3.8 million to work on a pilot for no-interest loan schemes. I care passionately about this area, and I think it could make a real difference to many vulnerable people's lives.

I note my hon. Friend's comments about a cut and paste from Australia. He is right that we can learn a lot from the equivalent Australian scheme, especially in terms of partnership. Their scheme has been so successful because hundreds of socially minded organisations have played their part alongside the Government. We hope to follow that model and develop a scheme that is sustainable and properly supports vulnerable customers. I hear the urgency around that, and indeed I spoke to my officials just yesterday about securing an update on it in the coming days. Our next step is to appoint a delivery organisation with suitable expertise. Further details will be announced soon.

My hon. Friend is also correct to point out that greater market diversity is critical if we are to achieve our goals in this area. That is why we have used a significant part of the £96 million dormant assets scheme—money that would otherwise have remained idle—to boost financial inclusion. We have also committed to legislate to enable credit unions in Great Britain to offer a wider range of products and services; my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) mentioned his involvement in a credit union. There are, I think, 411 credit unions across the country, of wide and varying expertise. We have worked closely with the Association of British Credit Unions Ltd, one of the significant trade bodies for credit unions, to develop that approach. While legislation will play an important part in widening access to affordable credit, innovation is also key, as some Members picked up on. That is why, in this year's Budget, we announced a number of actions in response to the independent Ron Kalifa review into FinTech, including measures to make it easier for firms to attract staff and develop new concepts.

I will make a final point on two other issues that I know are of real interest to contributors this afternoon. First, it is true that buy-now, pay-later agreements can be a helpful way of managing finance, but we need to make sure that consumers are protected. As we indicated during the passage of the Financial Services Act 2021 earlier this year, we will bring buy-now, pay-later under regulation, as the Woolard review recommended. However,

any future regulation must be proportionate so as not to fundamentally damage those products that are innovative and low cost. There is a distinction between smoothing lumpy expenditures and multiple, unsustainable deferred payments. We must get that right, but I recognise the urgency around it.

I appreciate the positive words about our recent “access to cash” consultation. I assure Members that the Treasury is working closely with the private sector—indeed, I had meetings just this morning—to ensure that we get that right, and that cash services are provided for people in an environment where the use of cash is diminishing significantly.

I reiterate the acknowledgment that there is a real desire to provide urgent help to those who are dealing with significant debts. I share that strength of feeling, as I hope my track record in this role demonstrates. It is vital that these policies improve the lives of as many people as possible, so I welcome the range of speeches this afternoon and the constructive spirit that was relayed in many of them. I look forward to further collaboration to deepen and improve our interventions in this area.

2.55 pm

Yvonne Fovargue [V]: Thank you for your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Bone. I thank all the Members who contributed for their passionate, well-informed speeches on this issue, and I thank the Minister. Many good initiatives have been put forward, but there is a lot more that we can do. We do not want the debt crisis to turn into another symptom like long covid—a long debt crisis. We need to turn this into an opportunity. There are opportunities—to remove the shame from debt; to look at the causes of debt; and to look at creative solutions, many of which have been mentioned this afternoon. Not all of them should be loans. There will be a need for grants for people who are so mired in debt that they cannot see their way out. There is an opportunity to look both at how we can prevent debt and how we can help those who fall into debt.

I fear that if we do not seize those opportunities we shall be back here repeatedly, having this debate for many years ahead. While we debate this subject in Parliament, my constituents and people across the country will be suffering. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) said, they will be finding that debt has turned into destitution, and that is something that we all need to be aware of.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on household debt.

2.57 pm

Sitting suspended.

Election Campaign Finances: Regulation

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

3.15 pm

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that there have been some changes to procedures in Westminster Hall because of the hybrid arrangements. Debate times have been amended, as you will already know. I remind hon. Members participating physically and virtually that they must arrive at the start of the debate and remain until its completion, and keep their cameras on at all times—so we can keep an eye on you and make sure you are having as much fun as we are.

I also remind hon. Members to sanitise the desk they have been using before leaving the room. If those of you joining us virtually have any technical difficulties, email westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk and they should be able to sort out any immediate problems.

3.16 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the regulation of election campaign finances.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. Before I start, I would like to say what a pleasure it is to see the Minister in her place in Westminster Hall this afternoon. The debate has come at a timely moment. The Government published the Elections Bill this week and yesterday the Committee on Standards in Public Life published its report on the regulation of election finance—a lengthy review. I myself was interviewed by the Committee on my work chairing the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's inquiry on disinformation and fake news. I thank the Minister for giving me the chance to discuss the Elections Bill with her and her officials some months ago, before it was published.

It is very important to have these periodic reviews of election law, because technology changes the way we live our lives and the way in which elections are fought, and regulations have to keep pace with changes to society. At the heart of good election regulation are two simple and fundamental things that have stood us in good stead through the ages, and it is important that they are translated into the modern world: transparency of funding and transparency in campaigning. We all know that when we deliver leaflets in our constituencies during elections, there is an imprint on those leaflets saying who paid for them and who they promote. There is no provision for online campaigning, and given that online campaigning—particularly on Facebook—now plays a much bigger part in everyone's campaigns, it is increasingly important that there should be. That is why I welcome the fact that the Government are recommending the introduction of electronic imprints as a legal requirement in the Bill. It is a very necessary reform.

One of the big challenges that we face is not campaigning under our party banners. To an extent, we all have a bit of personal jeopardy if we put out leaflets with a party logo or our names on them: there is an assumption that they belong to us. Although, of course, as recent by-elections have shown, it is possible for people to put out leaflets

without necessarily saying who they are, so this is not a purely online phenomenon, but it is one that is increasingly important in the online world. When non-party campaign organisations—not official registered party groups—campaign with increasing resources and increasing funding, not just in election periods but throughout the year, it is important that there is some understanding of where their funding comes from when they seek to campaign on a political issue.

The problem does not just affect the UK; it is a problem around the world. In 2019, I attended the International Grand Committee on Disinformation in Ottawa, Canada. That was a meeting of parliamentarians who were mainly interested in digital campaigning, disinformation and the role of elections in the online world. It was the second such meeting. The first was the meeting I chaired here in the Boothroyd Room as part of the DCMS Committee's inquiry on disinformation and fake news. At that meeting in Ottawa, one of the witnesses we questioned was Ellen Weintraub, the commissioner for the Federal Election Commission in the United States. She set out the problem with online donations as she saw it in America, and I think people would agree that there are a lot of parallels elsewhere in the world, including here. In response to a question that I asked her about the difficulty of tracking money online, she said that

“our entire system of regulation is based on the assumption that large sums of money are what we need to worry about and that this is where we should focus our regulatory activity. On the Internet, however, sometimes very small amounts of money can be used to have vast impact, and that doesn't even get into the possibility of Bitcoin and other technologies being used to entirely mask where the money is coming from... The problem with dark money is that you never really know who is behind it. There has been about a billion dollars in dark money spent on our elections in the last 10 years, and I cannot tell you who is behind it. That's the nature of the darkness... We have a constant stream of complaints about dark money. The case I just described to you is one of the foremost examples we've seen recently. It can be money that comes in through LLCs... In this case, it came in through the domestic subsidiary of a foreign corporation.”

She sets out the nature of the problem. It is easy to transfer money in small amounts anywhere in the world, but it is very difficult to trace. If that money is being donated to political campaigns, of whatever nature, it is difficult to know the original source of the funding. We need to be very mindful of that in the digital age.

Just before the last general election, I chaired a DCMS Committee session with PayPal. Interestingly, PayPal gave an answer similar to that which we often get from technology companies about the things that happen on their systems. Its view was that it was not its responsibility to know the source of funding, or indeed whether funding was permissible, when someone made a political donation through its systems. If someone overseas makes a political donation to a political party in the UK, the platform facilitating the transaction says it has no obligation to know or check, even though it is being used to facilitate what would be an offence. The liability rests entirely with the party receiving the funding, but I do not think that payment platforms should have no role in supervising what goes on. They could at least change their settings so that the country of origin of a donation is clearer. Again, I know that this is something that the Government have looked at in their Elections Bill to try to ensure that there is greater transparency on foreign donations, which is very important.

[Damian Collins]

The Committee on Standards in Public Life has made some specific recommendations that merit consideration. One is that company donations should not exceed net profits after tax generated in the UK within the two preceding years, which is very helpful. Businesses make donations to political campaigns—I have had businesspeople in my constituency in Kent make donations to my political campaigns. It is a perfectly proper form of donation, but it is clear which companies are involved, as they have to declare it, just as an individual would have to declare it. We should guard against shell companies being used to make large donations when they are not turning any profit, because the question will rightly be asked whether the money was transferred to that company so that it could make a donation but not generated by it. In that case, where did it really come from? The Committee on Standards in Public Life was right to make that recommendation and it is worthy of consideration and debate.

Recommendation 10 in the Committee's report was that all donations over £500 be donated through the banking system, which would allow greater transparency on the source of funds. People would have the option of making smaller donations through electronic payments and systems such as PayPal. Paying money through the banking system is not a guarantee of transparency, but it is a more transparent method. Again, it is worth considering what the threshold should be in that circumstance.

As I have already said, I welcome the fact that the Minister proposes in the Bill to have electronic imprints on electronic campaign materials, but there should also be common standards on the role that technology companies perform in this regard. Some companies have ad libraries where they keep a store of all the ads that a campaign has placed. Facebook does that. It also requires that anyone placing an advert has a Facebook page, and they have to demonstrate to the company that they are a real person. However, I know the Information Commissioner has spoken about the difficulty sometimes in tracking down the real source of campaign ads, particularly when that source is not a political party but a new organisation that has just been set up. We need to make sure we have high standards there, so that people placing political ads are known and are known to be permissible advertisers.

Ad libraries for political campaigns should not be based on the platform policies of the companies. It would be good practice to ask anyone advertising through online platforms, and for those platforms to require a record of ads to be kept. Ads on social media can be placed as dark ads, where they target individuals and not everyone else can see them. It is useful to the democratic process for everyone to be able to see and check what a campaign organisation is saying to its voters, even if it is not targeting those adverts at anyone.

In the same way, it is important for people to know why they are being targeted. There are systems, particularly on social media, whereby people can look at why they are receiving an advert—why it has been targeted at them—but they are not necessarily standardised. It would be a good thing for people to be able to see why they were receiving a political message. Is it because they have declared an affiliation for that party and

therefore they are being targeted, or is it for other reasons? People should have the right to check and there should be standardised tools in that space.

There is also the question of ads that are fraudulent, wrong or misleading during elections. This is not just about policy debate; I think it is very difficult to regulate political opinions. As we all know, politicians can give two totally different arguments on the same subject, based on different interpretations of the same facts. We cannot seem to regulate that, nor do we try in this country. The fact that we have imprints on ads creates personal jeopardy for what we say—we have to put our name to it and it can be traced back to us. However, in the near future, technology will take us to a place where deepfake films could be made of a politician saying something inflammatory on the eve of an election. In fact, it would be a synthetic creation of them on film, saying something that they had never said. If that ad was being placed online on social media, and it could be demonstrated and proven that it was fake—that it was not based on real footage—what action would be required? Would it be a required action of take-down by the social media companies? Would the content be considered illegal for electoral purposes? Would it be stopped? In the very near future, new technology will make that sort of campaigning very cheap and easy, and we have to consider our response to that.

There is also the question of foreign placement of advertising, such as the much talked about case in America during the 2016 presidential election of the Russians buying ads on Facebook to target voters. It was an offence there, and indeed, foreign buying of ads to target voters in the UK would be an offence too. There are different countries around the world—not just the Russians, but the Iranian Government and other Governments—that engage in the process of electoral interference in other countries. We should regard that as an offence having been committed. If it is an offence that has been committed, and those ads have been identified as being run to target British voters, then it is legitimate to ask whether that activity is illegal. If it is illegal, there are two things we should consider: it is not just an offence committed by the person who has placed the ads, but an offence committed by the platform for running those ads in breach of the law.

The Government's draft Online Safety Bill will require social media and other technology companies to have policies in place to remove illegal content. We need to consider whether an illegal ad, placed on social media by a foreign agent, targeting UK voters, would require the social media company to remove it as a form of illegal content, as it will be required to do under the Bill. In that situation, should that be a requirement of the regulator? The Bill recommends that Ofcom be the regulator—we can question whether for political ads it should be Ofcom or the Electoral Commission, whichever is most appropriate. If we regard such ads as being illegal, should the regulator's task under the Bill be to say to the social media company that they must demonstrate to us that they would not only remove those ads when identified, but have systems in place to try and stop this happening—to check when someone places an ad whether it is illegal, to identify it and to stop it? Good practice should be that social media companies take an interest in where in the world people are buying ads from, and, when they do it, whether they are doing so in breach of electoral law.

I labour that point because I think it is important. I remember questioning Facebook about the case in 2016; about whether they had identified Russian ads that had run in America, and whether they had ever identified anything like that in previous elections in the UK. They said that if we had intelligence that that had happened, we could give it to them and they would check. However, there was no obligation for them to have those systems in place to pre-emptively stop it. If this was another form of fraud, such as banking fraud, banks are required to proactively look for, and identify, likely sources of fraud, and to notify the authorities of something suspicious. That does not exist in law around the placements of ads during elections. The combination of the Elections Bill and the draft Online Safety Bill that the Government are bringing in poses this natural question as to whether some forms of campaigning are illegal and, in that case, whether the regulator should take a view on not just acting against them, but ensuring that the companies have policies in place to make sure that this sort of campaigning does not happen in the first place.

These are all incredibly serious and important issues. I have spoken to the Electoral Commission about this, and it finds it quite frustrating, when dealing with technology companies to pursue lines of inquiry about suspicious activity, that unless it has launched a formal investigation, the company will not co-operate, because it is under no obligation to do so. Again, we need to consider the powers of the Electoral Commission in this regard both to make preliminary inquiries of a technology company about likely offences relating to digital adverts and to share information that it has discovered that could be relevant to the work of the police or the Information Commissioner. It is important that we consider those points.

These are important issues, and this debate is timely given the welcome introduction of the Government's Elections Bill, the soon-to-start parliamentary scrutiny of the draft Online Safety Bill, and the report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life. That report is the first of its kind for 20 years, which shows that these things come along only periodically, so it is important that we get this right.

3.31 pm

Anum Qaisar-Javed (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Paisley. I welcome the opportunity to speak in this incredibly important debate, which was secured by the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins)—I think I have pronounced his constituency correctly; apologies if I have not.

Free and fair elections are one of the cornerstones of our democracy. Elections place power in the hands of the people to choose the politicians they wish to stand in this House to represent their needs and interests. However, a true democracy is not defined by the holding of elections alone. It is essential that our elections are competitive, inclusive and free from corruption and undue influence.

In this digital age, our democracy faces new challenges as our elections are increasingly fought on the battlegrounds of social media. As we continue to adapt to this new media age, so must our electoral regulations. It is vital that these regulations are updated to ensure political parties do not use the digital landscape to abuse voter data and undercut electoral finance laws.

Social media is playing an increasingly important role in modern politics. It has become the stage on which free debate and the sharing of ideas flow, and while we have all experienced the negative side of social media, it has undoubtedly made politics more accessible. I have personal and recent experience of this. In the recent Airdrie and Shotts by-election, whereby I was elected to this House, I made use of social media. I regularly created TikTok videos explaining a day in the life of a candidate—if you have not attempted a TikTok dance, Mr Paisley, I highly recommend it. The comments from viewers were positive, and many noted that these videos actually helped them engage with politics and made politics more accessible to them as voters.

However, as with all advances in technology, with each positive development comes a challenge that we must adapt to and overcome. In recent elections, we have seen political parties and sides exploiting technology to abuse voter data and undercut electoral finance laws. Electoral regulations are essential to ensuring that elections remain free and fair. However, social media has created a loophole that certain political sides have been all too happy to take advantage of.

For example, during the Brexit campaign, Vote Leave utilised data acquired from football sweepstakes to build its voter harvesting base and target voters unsuspectingly with political campaigns. It utilised these illicit tactics to boost its campaign while subverting regulations. The Tories—we can begin to see a pattern here—illegally collected the ethnicity and nationality data of 10 million voters to target them in the 2019 general election. It appears that some in the Conservative party believe that there is one rule for them and another for everyone else. However, such illegality cannot be allowed to go unchecked, and if political parties cannot be trusted to follow the rules, it is essential that we strengthen our electoral regulations to prevent them from compromising our democracy.

The Tories are also launching an attack on our democracy by scrapping the electoral checks and balances of the Electoral Commission and the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, which are essential to upholding the standards of our democracy. As the Tories attempt to gut the Electoral Commission, I must ask where the Labour party stands on defending our electoral democracy. By abstaining in the vote to remove the Act, it is failing to be an Opposition—to stand up to the Conservatives' attacks on democracy and their blatant attempts to grab power while polls are in their favour.

The Tories' attempts to weaken the checks and balances of the Electoral Commission have very real consequences for our democracy. Electoral finance laws will continue to become entirely redundant, creating a system in which the party with the biggest cheques has the greatest advantage. That will undoubtedly impact the ability of smaller parties to compete in elections and will continue to uphold Westminster's two-party system, which is becoming increasingly less reflective of the range of political beliefs held by the electorate.

This attack on our electoral system is just the latest of the Tory Government's sustained attempts to chip away at our democracy. In recent years we have seen this Government attack the judiciary, disregard parliamentary convention and even attempt to suspend our democracy completely through the unlawful Prorogation of Parliament. Just this week we have seen the Third Reading of the

[Anum Qaisar-Javed]

Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which is nothing less than an attempt by this Government to clamp down on the democratic right to protest. It is no surprise that they are going after the institutions that hold them accountable: they do not want to strengthen our Electoral Commission, because the commission's weaknesses allows them to benefit. It is not democracy that matters to this Government: it is the ability to use their money and influence to gain power that is of most importance.

For centuries, the United Kingdom has regarded itself as a leader of democracy—an example for nations around the world to follow. I say, as someone whose ancestors were part of the British empire, that there has been this regard for the UK as a leader of democracy. However, under this Government there have been continuous attempts to chip away at that democratic system, moving power from the ballot to the wallet. It is vital that we stand up against this attack on our democracy and reject any attempts to weaken the power of the Electoral Commission. Instead, we should seek to extend its powers to ensure that the cornerstone of our democracy is protected from any attempt by the Government to utilise technology and finances to improve their outcomes in future elections.

3.38 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. My thanks go to the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) for having secured this important debate and for all the excellent work he has done on this issue over the years in various roles.

I welcome the report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life on the regulation of election finance, and this chance to debate it alongside the Elections Bill, which is making its way through Parliament. That Bill includes five core measures to improve and tighten up the important components of the political finance framework, namely fairness, transparency and controls against foreign spending. The five new measures it introduces are third-party campaigner registration; restriction of third-party campaigning; a ban on simultaneously registering as a political party and a third party; restrictions on co-ordinated spending between political parties and third parties; and the requirement for new political parties to declare assets and liabilities.

These are the right measures in terms of their focus, and they are broadly a step in the right direction, but they are simply not robust enough and do not go far enough. They do not reflect the seriousness of the challenges our democracy faces from dark and dirty money, which has the potential to fundamentally corrupt our democratic system. I will come back to what the recommendations should be and what changes need to be made to the Bill—although we in the all-party parliamentary group on electoral campaigning transparency broadly support the Bill, there are a number of areas where it really needs to be strengthened.

Let me give some extra context as to why we think the debate is so important. For far too long, we have taken our democracy for granted. We have been complacent, and our complacency has allowed malign forces to subvert our rules and undermine our institutions. It is

not just a British phenomenon, of course. Dark money and dirty data are a real and present threat right across the west.

The work that I have been doing over the past few years in my role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group, in partnership with FairVote, has been to focus on British democracy and on how we can ensure that we have our own house in order, with a system of election finance regulation that is resilient to hostile threats and fit for the 21st century. We launched our report “Democracy in the Digital Age” in January 2020. It was the first real attempt to step up and meet the challenges around finance and transparency, and we hope that the Elections Bill is a sign that Parliament is finally waking up and realising that our democracy is under threat and that we must do something about it.

Many of the revelations about just how flimsy our defences were brought to public attention following the EU referendum campaign and through the prosecutions in some of our general elections in the past five years. Our APPG has always been clear that we are about looking to the future rather than back at the past. We are about protecting the soul of our democracy for generations to come, learning the lessons of the past but recognising that we have to be resilient for the future.

Let us be absolutely clear: there is a real problem with election finance. The Electoral Commission was established at a time when political campaigning centred around door-knocking and leafleting. It is an analogue regulator in a digital age. Digital campaigning and online political engagement have revolutionised politics, so it is critical that the commission is given the tools and resources it needs to make it fit for purpose in the 21st century.

Crucially, the Electoral Commission actually recognises that. Its leadership has openly acknowledged that the commission lacks resources and bite. Paltry maximum fines of £20,000 are really just the cost of doing business for some of the very wealthy funders we are dealing with, while a lack of prosecuting power means there is little deterrence for those who are all too ready to break the law.

It gives us confidence to hear from the Committee on Standards in Public Life report that

“The majority of contributors expressed confidence in the Commission as an independent, non-partisan regulator, including those who see room for improvement in how the Commission carries out its role.”

The committee is right to say that. Although some have called for the abolition of the Electoral Commission, and draft legislation has called for taking away its independence and prosecutorial powers, the aim of the forthcoming electoral integrity Bill should be to give the Electoral Commission the resources and power it needs to tackle the threats to our democracy, as outlined in the CSPL's report.

It is deeply concerning that, for the first time, a majority of the members of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission are from the governing party. That is deeply unfortunate, as independence can be ensured only if cross-party consensus is maintained. We urge changes to be made to return confidence in the Speaker's Committee and its governance role in this context. As the CSPL's report makes clear,

“An electoral system needs to be demonstrably fair and to command the confidence of political parties and the public and must be overseen by a strong independent regulator.”

Our all-parliamentary group's report makes 20 recommendations across three specific areas, based on evidence from 70 different organisations and experts. There were three clusters of areas. The first cluster was around transparency: how we make sure that citizens have access to information about online and offline aspects of election and referendum campaigns. Secondly, there was deterrence: how we offer the Electoral Commission the tools it needs to deter and, if necessary, penalise. Thirdly, there was monitoring: how we ensure there is a process to review whether campaign laws are up to date and can be reformed when needed. We believe those are the three key ingredients needed to ensure that the public feel confident that the system works.

Focusing specifically on campaign finance regulation, we said that the Elections Bill needs to be amended according to the following recommendations. All donations should be regulated

"by reducing permissibility check requirements from £500 to 1p for all non-cash donations".

We should also

"Increase transparency and regulation of local candidate financial reports by shifting oversight to the Electoral Commission...Streamline national versus local spending limits with a per-seat cap on total spending...Modernise spending regulations by instituting per-annum spending limits...Standardise financial reporting"

and

"Require corporate donations to come from profits reported in the UK".

We also say:

"Third Party Political Organisations and political parties should complete an 'Exit' audit after an election period".

Finally, we should include valuation of the dataset costs in spending regulations. Those recommendations must be taken seriously by the Minister, and I hope she will be open to amendments accordingly.

Over the past year, we have sought to gain support in Parliament, and we are looking to lobby the Government, as well as those in Cardiff and Holyrood. We continue to make progress on those fronts. However, I want to finish by saying this: all around the world, democracy is in retreat. Authoritarian regimes outnumber democracies for the first time since 2001 and they are on the rise. Britain must be at the forefront of the fight to defend democracy and to stand up for human rights and international law. If we are to be effective and credible in working with our allies to do that, we must start by defending democracy at home—we must get our own house in order. It is our job to build processes, systems and institutions that inspire trust. It is our job to clear away the fake news, the dodgy data and the dirty money that is polluting our system. It is our job to save our precious democracy and to safeguard it for future generations. Our most dangerous enemy is complacency, and I will continue to work with colleagues across the House to make sure that Parliament is complacent no longer.

3.47 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP) [V]: It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Paisley. I commend the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) for securing a debate on such an important topic. He has long been a campaigner for transparent electoral campaigning and finances,

particularly through his time as Chair of the DCMS Committee. It was good to hear his reflections on non-party campaigning groups, which I will return to; campaigning and spending outwith principal election periods; and the sizeable impact of social media campaigns on citizens, even with relatively little spend. I found his warnings on the need to future-proof our responses to hitherto undreamt-of technological and digital advances particularly important.

I also want to mention the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Anum Qaisar-Javed) on her personal experience of campaigning in a recent by-election. Of course, social media can be used as a force for good and to enable our electorate to hear more about their candidates and the parties they would be voting for, but she also referenced recent examples of illegality in the 2019 general election and other actions taken by the Government in what certainly appear to many of us to be blatant attempts to circumvent democracy.

The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) called for a strengthening of our democratic system to fight what he describes as blatant corruption. He says, and I agree with him, that we have taken democracy for granted for too long and we have been complacent while shadowy groups have undermined that precious thing. He also ably outlined a few of the recommendations that our all-party parliamentary group on electoral campaigning transparency made in our report. I am sure the Minister, who I welcome to her place, is aware of those recommendations. It will be interesting to hear her reflections. This debate is vital. We need to restore confidence in the electoral process, and I hope today's debate goes some way towards raising issues that need to be examined properly by the Government and by all of us.

I welcome the report from the Committee on Standards. It is good to see an official body still committed to supporting higher standards in public life. Heaven knows this Government certainly do not. The view once held of a Westminster system with checks and balances sufficient to outweigh the lack of a written constitution has gone, stripped away by a group of self-interested and unreconstructed politicians. Scotland has bitter memories of Thatcher and the destruction that she and her party wrought on the communities of our country, but I think even she would blanch at this Government's approach to governance: ineptitude and slavering greed, shot through with a staggering sense of entitlement and a callous disregard for the difficulties of ordinary folk, and now further attacks on the democracy that underpins public life throughout these islands. Who cares for lost voting rights?

I am very proud to be a member of the all-party group on electoral campaigning transparency and of the report that we produced in January 2020 after a lengthy inquiry, with its 20 recommendations for improving the electoral system. I commend the many expert witnesses to the inquiry, as well as colleagues, and particularly Fair Vote UK, for all their efforts.

We cannot have a debate on campaign finance regulation without discussing the ways in which that regulation is so regularly circumvented, particularly through the use of social media and digital platforms in political campaigning. Electoral legislation more than 20 years old does not encompass the massive shift that there has

[Deidre Brock]

been to digital campaigning, so it certainly needs updating and strengthening—a point that journalists such as Carole Cadwalladr have been making, and something that we on the APPG have been arguing for.

The Elections Bill, hastily released to provide governmental cover before the Committee's report was launched, contained little more than a few scraps thrown to the campaigners, which is perhaps why the Government have decided to remove the word "integrity" from the Bill's title. Even Ministers cannot swallow it. Now that that report has been published, I look forward to the Minister indicating how the Government will incorporate the more than 40 recommendations that it makes for the Elections Bill. I would particularly like to see the Government address the long-standing dark money issues that hover around so-called non-party campaigners.

The infamous Brexit donation that came via a former Scottish Conservative chair and Tory candidate, routed through the Democratic Unionist party to take advantage of the less strict reporting regime in Northern Ireland, springs to mind. It came from a secretive body based in Scotland called the Constitutional Research Council. We still do not know who supplied the DUP with that record £435,000 donation, which it used to pay for a wraparound advert in a newspaper that does not even appear in Northern Ireland days before the EU referendum.

That is not the only example. Unincorporated associations are regularly used to funnel money into UK politics without revealing the sources of the money. The Scottish Unionist Association Trust provided 54% of the income for the Scottish Conservatives from December 2019 to December last year. Another 25% came from the Stalbury Trustees. What those organisations have in common is that no one knows where they get their funds from. We could also mention the Midlands Industrial Council, the United and Cecil Club, the political committee of the Carlton Club, the Leamington Fund, the Scottish Conservative Prize Draw Society, the spring lunch and so on.

Money with no proper sources declared is funnelled into party politics. It stinks. It reeks of corruption. The letter of the law was not broken, we are told, but the spirit of the law is bent beyond recognition. How can the recipients of the cash be sure that it satisfies the requirements of the legislation when they cannot know where it originated? We need a robust body, independent of Government, to monitor and have the powers to enforce when they find error, deliberate or otherwise.

I am delighted that the Committee on Standards gives the commission such strong support in its report. The commission's current powers are insufficient. I agree with the Committee that the commission's powers should be strengthened, not weakened or removed, and that non-party campaigners should disclose more information, such as, for example, the basics of a website address, and should register at each election in which they intend to campaign. Various campaign groups sprang up just before the last Scottish election, using Facebook adverts in particular to push political messages. It was impossible to establish who paid for the ads and the groups' political links. That is currently legal, but it cannot be right that non-party campaigning groups do not have to outline to the public who funds them. It cannot be right that we do not know what links

they might have to political parties or to political lobby groups, which are themselves funded secretly and might even present themselves as, say, educational charities.

I note that those calling the loudest for the weakening or even removal of the Electoral Commission's powers have clearly benefited in the past from the largesse of undeclared donors—people who do not want the slosh of cash in public life to be monitored. It is worth noting, as was made clear in the evidence of witnesses before the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee recently, that the quality and clarity of Electoral Commission advice depends largely on the quality of the legislation. These are not Electoral Commission rules; these are rules set by Parliament. If problems come about during elections and appear in Electoral Commission ambiguities reports, it is up to Parliament to address that. One could therefore argue that the Government and their supporters are taking issue with Electoral Commission methods while ignoring the part successive Governments have played in creating those methods before now.

Another important point is about oversight of the commission, which is in part conducted through the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission. I believe now is the first time ever that one party has a majority on that Committee, and it is the party of Government. That cannot be healthy. I urge the Government and the Speaker to look at how that undemocratic and unfortunate situation might be reversed. Will the Government also look at incorporating anti-money laundering regulations, including such features as risk assessments, enhanced due diligence and setting out specific procedures for record keeping, monitoring and the management of compliance with the policies? "Know your donor" needs to be integral to our campaigning culture.

What people are looking for in the regulation of election or referendum campaign finances is transparency; a level playing field; confidence and trust in the electoral processes, and for those to be simple and clear; strong accountability and enforcement action; and for the regulator to be independent of political or other influences. Our legislation needs to reflect that.

3.57 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Paisley. It is a pleasure to respond to this debate on behalf of the Labour party, and to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). I congratulate the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) on securing the debate and on his thoughtful remarks, which in places were worrying. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for his important comments on the prevalence of dark money and dirty data, the complacency with which this issue has been treated up to now, the shortcomings of the Electoral Commission, and his recommendations on transparency, deterrence and monitoring.

Members can certainly agree that the laws that govern our elections are complex, fragmented and confusing. We need the highest possible standards for electoral finances—free, fair and corruption-free—with strong regulation to guard the integrity of our democracy and to guard against the influence of foreign state and

non-state actors and all threats to our democracy, both at home and abroad. It is widely accepted that our electoral laws are not fit for the modern age, with many written before the creation of the internet. Such an archaic system has left huge loopholes in the way our elections are regulated. The Law Commission's report back in 2016 made a series of constructive recommendations about electoral law, but the Conservative Government have failed to take any action before now.

The fact is that, over the past decade, the Conservatives have failed to take any action to modernise our electoral laws or close the loopholes that allow foreign money to flood into our democracy. The reason is clear. The archaic laws benefit the Conservative party, allowing wealthy foreign donors who have never paid tax in the UK to bankroll their campaigns. Instead of closing these loopholes, the Government's Elections Bill announced this week will further weaken our donation laws, allowing rich Conservative expats unlimited access to our democracy and opening the floodgates to foreign money coming into our politics, at our peril.

It is disappointing that the Government have chosen to pre-empt the Committee on Standards in Public Life report with the Bill, which represents a step back in our democratic process. Indeed, as Dr Jess Garland at the Electoral Reform Society pointed out:

"The Elections Bill not only fails to take into account the comprehensive recommendations of the Committee, but continues to leave many of the most troubling loopholes in our election laws wide open."

Many of those loopholes have been listed by previous speakers today.

Labour welcomes the "Regulating Election Finance" report published yesterday by the Committee on Standards in Public Life. We certainly need this Committee more than ever. The report suggests practical steps to modernise and streamline the way donations are made. The report lays bare the damage that years of inaction by the Government has caused, undermining transparency in our democracy. A key issue at the heart of the report is the role of the independent elections watchdog, the Electoral Commission. Labour is clear that an independent watchdog is paramount in having proper accountability in our democracy. The Committee on Standards in Public Life's report overwhelmingly supports that view, recognising that an independent electoral watchdog is the cornerstone of any democracy.

I am sure that Members of the Committee were deeply concerned by the recent comments by the Conservative party co-chair, the right hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling), calling for the regulator to be abolished or radically overhauled, removing all independent oversight in the conduct of our elections. The regulator needs to be stronger, not weaker. Such action would be hugely harmful and a worrying step for the integrity of our democracy, and one that Labour will continue to strongly oppose.

This week's Elections Bill contains numerous worrying provisions that weaken and politicise the Electoral Commission, enabling the Tories to dictate the priorities and agenda of an independent watchdog. I hope that the Minister will respond to the concerns raised by the Committee's report regarding the unbalanced membership of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, which for the first time, as has been mentioned, has a

majority of members from the governing party. I share the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon about that. Can the Minister, who I welcome to her place, confirm that she agrees with the Committee that "independence can be ensured only if cross-party consensus is maintained"?

The report also highlights the weaknesses in laws governing online space, which allow foreign money and untraceable advertisements to threaten our elections and the security of democracy in the UK. In my own election, I was faced with advertisements placed by an opponent who claimed she was a Nobel prize winner; that was not true, but it was hard to counter these advertisements. We need rules that ensure that the data that is used and put out can be retracted and changed, and the record can be put straight during the election, not afterwards when it is too late.

I hope the Minister will take on board the Committee on Standards in Public Life's recommendations to tighten the requirements to identify the true source of donations. The public deserve and need to know how money is being spent and where that money comes from. It is their vote, after all.

Labour is clear that the Government could prioritise many of these changes right now, well in advance of any election. This is urgent. What is more, the Government have a clear opportunity to use the Elections Bill to introduce the measures. Instead, we have Tory Government who are scaremongering over voter fraud and pursuing dangerous voter ID policies, instead of working to genuinely increase the transparency and accessibility of our democracy. Indeed, I note that the Bill is no longer called the electoral integrity Bill. Can the Minister explain why the name was changed? Could it be because the Bill has nothing to do with integrity and everything to do with voter repression? I look forward to hearing the answer.

If the Government really want to improve the integrity of our elections, they should consider the findings of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, strengthen the regulation, close the loopholes and stop using parliamentary time to weaken the pillars of our democracy.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I should say that in the course of this debate a number of wide-ranging and wild allegations were made by some Members, without any reference to evidence. I took advice in the course of the debate to ensure that no allegation of impropriety was made against individual Members of the House and that no new crimes were alleged to have been committed. I am glad to say that all of this debate fell within fair public comment. I think it is important to say that, because of the importance of some of the things that have been said in the course of the debate.

It is a pleasure to call the Minister. Like others, I am delighted to see her back in her place.

4.5 pm

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): Thank you very much, Mr Paisley. It is an absolute pleasure to return to the House in person after some illness, but it is a particular pleasure to join you this afternoon and to respond to this debate under your chairmanship.

[Chloe Smith]

First, I thank hon. Members for the debate that we have had. It is extremely important that these subjects have been debated this week. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) for doing so with reference to his deep experience in these matters and the research that I know he and colleagues have done through their work on parliamentary Committees.

Let me also, at the outset of my speech, welcome the new hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Anum Qaisar-Javed). It is a pleasure to have her taking part in this debate and to congratulate her on her by-election victory. She is absolutely right: social media has indeed opened up our democracy, enthused many people and engaged many new voters. That is absolutely a good thing, and I join her in welcoming it. She is also correct to say—all of us here today know this—that the key electoral legislation that we work under is old. It is 20 years old or 40 years old, in the case of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 and the Representation of the People Act 1983 respectively, so it is time to update it, and that is the substance of what we are talking about today.

The Government are, and I personally am, committed to upholding the integrity of our electoral system. Before I take that sober tone too far, let me give the House today the amusement of why the word “integrity”, which everyone seems so keen on, is missing from the short title of the Elections Bill. That is because it is in the long title. People will be delighted to read it there. People will find it incredibly reassuring that we want to have a Bill that talks about our elections and emphasises their integrity.

As part of our commitment, we take the regulation of election campaign finances really seriously. We already have a comprehensive regulatory framework in the legislation to which I have referred; albeit that it is decades old in establishment, it is doing its work still. That framework governs the spending and funding of candidates, political parties, third party campaigners and other campaigners at elections. Those rules help to maintain the integrity of our elections and uphold the really important principles that we will all agree on, Mr Paisley, of fairness, transparency and controls against foreign interference.

At this point, allow me to acknowledge a particularly important point made by the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who says that we have the opportunity to lead the world. I am glad that he agrees with me, because this is indeed based on our strong democratic heritage. It is based on the work that we do with our international partners at the G7, and I commend to him the work that was publicised at this year’s G7 summit about the rapid response mechanism and, indeed, a speech that I made shortly after that about the ways in which our Defending Democracy programme here in the UK does this work internationally with our partners and domestically. The Bill that is now before the House also does this, so I will talk about how it does so, while setting out the strengths of the existing framework. I will start with donations.

It is absolutely right that voters and organisations in the UK are able to donate to political parties, to specific candidates, and to election campaigns. Our democracy

is strengthened by—indeed, it is built on—the idea that people may donate to campaigns that they believe in. The transparency of that, including the regulation of donations and electoral funding, is a cornerstone of our electoral system and contributes towards a healthy democracy. UK electoral law already sets out a stringent regime of donations controls to ensure that only those with a genuine interest in UK electoral events can donate to candidates or registered third-party campaigners and political parties. For political parties and third-party campaigners, a donation is any contribution with a value of more than £500, while for candidates the donation threshold is £50. Donations can be accepted only from certain permissible sources, such as individuals registered on a UK electoral register, and that includes registered electors overseas.

May I say in passing, Mr Paisley, that I am really sorry that the Labour Front-Bench team seems to think that all overseas electors are in some way dodgy. They are not. They are a vital part of the fabric of our democracy and they deserve their place, which is why we are extending that part of the franchise in the Elections Bill. Donations can also be accepted from registered companies that carry out business in the UK, trade unions appearing on a relevant UK list or a UK-registered limited liability partnership or friendly society.

I also gently pick up the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), who I think is misguided in the extreme—and possibly as unwise as her party leader was this week in the Opposition day debate—to try to have a go at unincorporated associations, from which her party has benefited; I hope that she will reflect on that while she tries to spray mud around. The key point I want to make here is that donations from foreign donors are not permitted. That is the key distinction, and it is the right one that we all depend on.

Turning to permissibility checks, how do we know that donations are fair? Political parties, registered parties, registered third-party campaigners and candidates are supported to carry out the necessary permissibility checks by the Electoral Commission, which provides guidance and advice. If a donation is not permissible, as we all know, it must be returned. In order to ensure accountability and transparency, as we all know, the details of donations received must be recorded and reported, including those that may be impermissible by the Electoral Commission. The commission publishes this online, ensuring that the details of donors of significant amounts are available for public scrutiny. That is one of the foundations of our system, and it is quite right. Political parties are in addition required to provide quarterly donations reports and annual accounts.

There are also important rules about proxy donations, which prevent donations from being given by a permissible donor on behalf of someone else who does not meet the relevant criteria to donate, and that means that the rules cannot be circumvented in that way. It ensures that only those people and organisations with a legitimate interest in UK elections are permitted to fund campaigns.

I want to pick up an argument that has been advanced this afternoon and that I recognise comes in the work of the APPG, led by the hon. Member for Aberavon and the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith. It is the argument that the framework I have just outlined is not enough in itself, and that darkness may still

creep in. I would share that concern if I thought that was real, but I think that the framework is enough. It is sound; it is sufficient. It rests on core principles. I look forward to more debate on this point as we get into the Elections Bill, but I want to place it on the record at this point that I think the donations framework is the right one and that it is based on sound principles. I think there is more that can be done in guidance, and a couple of hon. Members have mentioned the idea borrowed from financial services of what they would call the Know Your Client regime, or the idea that an entity can proactively check for itself where its donations or support may be coming from. I am sympathetic to those arguments. We may be able to look at providing guidance to help recipients be proactive in complying with the good framework that we have in place.

Let me turn to spending. The rules also carefully control the spending of political parties, third-party campaigners and candidates in the period before an election, as I suspect, Mr Paisley, we all know. The regulated period differs across the different elections, and we will be familiar with the lengths of time. Candidates are subject to regulation from the day when they become a candidate, and the regulated period for political parties and third-party campaigners is, for example in a UK parliamentary general election, 365 days.

At all those times, spending limits are applied. While they differ according to the type of campaigner or the specific election, these limits are in place to ensure that there is a level playing field and that no campaigner could unfairly spend more on an election campaign than anybody else. That avoids the situation that we see in some other countries, where election campaigns are all too often a fundraising race, which can be unhealthy. In the UK, our spending limits provide for an even playing field but also allow for a focus on the merits of the competing policy arguments at an election. I acknowledge the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe that there is a debate to be had about the regulation of arguments and of what happens during election campaigns. I will not cover that in my remarks, but I acknowledge his points and look forward to addressing them on another day.

I turn again to how we know our spending framework is good. We know it is good because reports on it must be made to the Electoral Commission or the returning officer. As we all know, that includes all spending on digital campaigning as well as on more traditional campaigning methods. Information is then made available for public scrutiny, and returns for political parties and third parties are published online by the commission. Once again, that brings us back to a core principle that is already in our regulation and that should stay there in pride of place: having transparency for the public and accountability for campaigners.

Let me turn to enforcement. It is absolutely critical that measures are in place to ensure that all campaigners, including parties and candidates, follow the rules on political finance. I have just made the point that transparency and public accountability play an important role. To facilitate that, the Electoral Commission publishes and regularly updates guidance on political finance, including on donations and spending, as well as information on donations. Campaigners can also contact the Electoral Commission for advice. It is really important that the guidance is accessible and comprehensive, and I note

another recommendation in the report published yesterday by the CSPL, which calls on the commission to improve its online resources and guidance. That is quite an important point, because campaigners must be supported in understanding how to comply with the rules, if this important regulatory framework is to be effective.

When political finance rules are broken, be it by a political party or a third party campaigner, the Electoral Commission has the necessary powers to investigate, has civil sanctioning powers to take action where it feels necessary, and can and does refer far more serious suspected offences to the police. Clear guidance and proportionate use of both civil and criminal sanctions are essential for ensuring compliance and communicating the seriousness of the rules.

I turn to some of the measures in the Elections Bill, which will further strengthen the rules on election campaign finances. I am acting on a recommendation in the House of Lords Democracy and Digital Technologies Committee's report to introduce a new tier of registration for third party campaigners. At this point, I acknowledge the political attack that the hon. Member for Putney attempted to make, which is that somehow I have jumped the gun on the CSPL by having the temerity to publish the Elections Bill this week. I am not sure that she can have it both ways. I have spent years listening to and reading recommendations from all quarters to ensure that the Bill is as good as it can be. I welcome the CSPL's work and that of many Committees, and I suggest that we now get on with the Bill.

Under the new rules, campaigners spending more than £10,000 on regulated campaign expenditure during a regulated period anywhere across the UK will be required to register with the Electoral Commission. That is particularly important, with digital campaigning proving far more cost-effective than traditional offline campaigning. The rules will ensure that campaigners spending significant amounts of money in any of those ways are transparent and accountable to the public—again, that is one of the core principles. The Bill will also protect the integrity of spending limits, and the even playing field that they provide, by removing the potential for anybody to register as both a political party and a non-party campaigner at the same time. I find it breathtaking that this has actually happened—a campaign group has done both, which is a slap in the face for those who believe that we should have a level playing field and that spending limits mean something.

I turn now to another thing that our Bill does: there will be provisions to clarify the law on notional expenditure for candidates. This clarification is intended to restore the understanding widely held before a Supreme Court ruling in 2018. It is really important that candidates are liable only for benefits in kind that they use themselves or that they or their agent directed, authorised or encouraged someone to use on the candidate's behalf. Doing that will allow candidates and agents to have confidence in their legal responsibilities again. It is really important that those involved in campaigning, spending and reporting—particularly volunteers, as election agents often are—understand their responsibilities and can execute their duties with certainty.

A theme that we will return to time and again with the Elections Bill is the broad-based nature of our politics in this country. It is something to be proud of that our democracy is built on volunteers and grassroots

[Chloe Smith]

participation. I acknowledge that there will be an argument for taking regulation to the extreme degree. One of the recommendations in the report by the hon. Members for Aberavon and for Edinburgh North and Leith and their APPG, which I have read carefully, is to reduce to zero the threshold for non-cash donations, for example.¹ I am concerned that such a recommendation might damage that space for legitimate grassroots participation in our democracy inside this country, which I will defend to my dying day. I am sure we will return to that in further debates, but I thought it helpful to set out my thinking on that at this point.

I will turn to digital imprints, on which my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe rightly focused when he said that he is seeking transparency of funding and of information. That is really important, and I entirely agree with him. I am proud that the Elections Bill will do something world-leading. Not many countries have so far succeeded in doing that, so it is really important that we take the opportunity to do that and do it well.

We are seeking to introduce a digital imprints regime for digital campaigning material. The importance of doing so is widely recognised. We have consulted in depth on the policy to ensure that we create something that will stand the test of time. As set out in the most recent Government response to our consultation, the new regime will require those behind online political adverts and other digital campaign material targeted at the UK electorate to declare themselves all year round, wherever they may be in the world, providing greater levels of transparency to online campaigning. We are also empowering the relevant authorities to access the information that they need, including from social media companies, to investigate suspected offences. As I have mentioned, through those proposals we will be introducing some of the most comprehensive digital imprint rules in the world. I really look forward to giving them the correct scrutiny through the Elections Bill.

I draw my remarks on this area to a close by thanking the Committee on Standards in Public Life for its review, which many hon. Members have spoken about. It included recommendations on a range of fronts. I am pleased to say that we are already taking forward a number of the recommendations as part of the Bill, including the new requirement for political parties to declare if they have assets and liabilities of more than £500 when registering with the Electoral Commission, and if so, to provide details on them.

Furthermore, the Bill will meet the CSPL's call for the Government to ban foreign organisations or individuals from buying campaign advertising in the UK. We will do that by restricting all third-party campaign expenditure to UK-based or otherwise eligible campaigners during a regulated period before an election. That will safeguard our democracy from foreign interference, in addition to a number of other measures—domestically and with our partners—to defend our democracy.

The Government keep all the rules on elections under close review. Therefore, in addition to what we are bringing forward in the Bill and what we have already covered today, I always welcome reports such as that of the CSPL and other bodies, because they help us to reflect on the most precious thing we have—our democracy.

I again thank the hon. Members who secured today's debate, and all those who have contributed to it. We have heard a number of arguments begin to be drawn out today, following in the tradition of the reports, investigations and evidence that have been drawn together by parliamentary Committees and—as I mentioned—by the many years of work that go into bringing a Bill before this House. I hope that hon. Members agree that we have begun to engage with those arguments, and that there will be much more to do as we go through the process of the Elections Bill. I really look forward to those debates.

My fundamental argument throughout will be that the existing framework is strong. It is built on the right principles and it serves us well, albeit it needs updating for our age, which, as I have outlined, is what we are doing, particularly with digital imprints. The rules on funding and spending in election campaigns—including, as I have said, by political parties, third-party campaigners and candidates—prize transparency and fairness, while placing important controls on foreign funding and spending. The Electoral Commission has a rightly important role to play in providing guidance to help campaigners comply with the rules. Both the commission and the police have the necessary investigatory and enforcement powers to ensure compliance with the law. As I have said, there will be further measures in the Bill to strengthen those existing principles by increasing transparency, preserving the integrity of spending limits, and extending the prohibition on foreign spending in elections.

The Government remain 100% committed to ensuring that our elections are secure, fair, modern and transparent. That is why I am very pleased to have been part of today's debate.

4.26 pm

Damian Collins: I thank the Minister for her response. I agree that it is good that the Elections Bill has been published: as she said, there has been a very lengthy period of consultation of many of the aspects of that Bill, so it is good to see it published. I am sure that Members will have the opportunity to consider the report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life alongside the Bill as it goes through its stages in both Houses of Parliament.

I thank the Members who have taken part in the debate: the hon. Members for Airdrie and Shotts (Anum Qaisar-Javed), for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), and for Putney (Fleur Anderson). I think it says something about the Putney constituency that someone tried to claim they had won a Nobel prize to impress its voters in an election—high standards are expected by the electorate there! I also say to the hon. Member for Aberavon that we seemed to struggle in the debate with different variations on the pronunciation of “Aberavon”, which I think is a consequence of “Grandstand” no longer broadcasting the Welsh rugby results live on Saturdays. Every other week, Aberavon would be the first name out of the hat.

We have had a very good debate on a very important set of issues. The Minister is right to say that the principles that underpin our system are well known, and they are based on transparency and fairness. The important challenge we face now is to make sure that those principles can be translated into the digital world,

1. [Official Report, 18 August 2021, Vol. 699, c. 12MC.]

which is a harder challenge than we have faced before, because in the system as we knew it before digital campaigning many safety brakes were built into the system.

Editors of newspapers are liable for the adverts that they publish; in some cases, the printers of leaflets have a liability for the leaflets that they publish; and so on. There is not the same level of transparency in the way that digital systems work, which is why the law requires reform and change. I am grateful for the debate we have had, and for the opportunity to discuss some of those points this afternoon.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Could I just reassure the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Anum Qaisar-Javed) that I have done a TikTok dance?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the regulation of election campaign finances.

4.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 8 July 2021

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Annual Human Rights and Democracy Report 2020

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): I have today laid before Parliament a copy of the 2020 Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) report on human rights and democracy (CP No. 458).

The report analyses human rights developments overseas in 2020 and illustrates how the Government work to promote and defend human rights globally.

The report assesses the situation in 31 countries, which the FCDO has designated as its human rights priority countries. These are Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Central African Republic, China, Colombia, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Libya, Mali, Myanmar, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Yemen, and Zimbabwe.

This is the first human rights report published by the new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. It therefore reflects the importance and strength of diplomacy and development working side-by-side to defend human rights and democracy. The report highlights our leadership on promoting media freedom, gender equality, girls' education and LGBT+ rights, our work to eradicate modern slavery, our partnerships with human rights defenders, and our commitment to deliver change for those who are abused, targeted, or killed for their religion or beliefs.

[HCWS159]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Communications Act 2003: 10th Report on Secretary of State's Functions

The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale): The Government have today laid a report before Parliament to fulfil their statutory duty under section 390 of the Communications Act 2003. Section 390 of the Communications Act 2003 requires the Secretary of State to prepare and lay before Parliament reports about the performance of the Secretary of State's functions under the following legislation:

- the Communications Act 2003;
- the Wireless Telegraphy Act 2006;
- the Office of Communications Act 2002; and
- the Broadcasting Acts 1990 and 1996.

This rectifies a historic oversight in discharging this statutory duty since the ninth report was laid in February 2014. Notwithstanding this oversight, the Government have been fully transparent because each time a power has been used, the relevant parliamentary procedure has been followed and/or a public/parliamentary

announcement has been made. A retrospective report to cover the period to 28 December 2020 is now, however, being laid to correct this.

The Department accepts full responsibility and apologises. Action has been taken to ensure the Department fulfils this statutory duty on an annual basis. The report will be published on gov.uk and a copy of the report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS160]

UK's First Periodic Report: Implementation of the 1954 Hague Convention and Protocols

The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale): I am pleased to announce the submission of the UK's first periodic report to UNESCO on our implementation of the 1954 Hague convention for the protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict and its two protocols of 1954 and 1999.

The convention and its two protocols are intended to protect cultural property from damage, destruction, looting and unlawful removal during armed conflict. The UK ratified the convention and acceded to its two protocols in 2017 following the passing of the Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Act 2017 which made provision in domestic UK law for the requirements of the convention and protocols.

The report sets out the roles of the UK Government and the devolved Administrations, who are responsible for the safeguarding of cultural property in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland respectively, and the measures each has taken to ensure that we are delivering our obligations under the convention and its protocols.

The report details the ways in which the UK Government have monitored the implementation of the convention and its two protocols over the past four years. It outlines measures taken by the Government, the armed forces and other associated parties including UNESCO, the British Red Cross, Blue Shield, the National Trust and Historic England to ensure that we are delivering our obligations under the convention and its protocols.

The UK Government remain wholly committed to safeguarding cultural heritage in conflict and crisis settings across the world.

The report is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-uks-first-periodic-report-implementation-of-the-1954-hague-convention-and-protocols>.

I will place a copy of the report in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS162]

EDUCATION

National Funding Formula Reforms

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Today, the Government are publishing a consultation document on the schools national funding formula (NFF), entitled "Fair School Funding For All: Completing Our Reforms To The National Funding Formula". This is an important step in our work to ensure that every school and academy trust has the right resources so that they can continue to drive up academic standards, as the school system recovers from the impact of the pandemic.

We are delivering the biggest increase in education funding in a decade, with additional funding of £2.6 billion in 2020-21, £4.8 billion in 2021-22 and £7.1 billion in 2022-23, compared to 2019-20: in total, over £14 billion across the three years.

We know it is critical that this investment is distributed fairly between all areas of the country and all schools. We have already taken significant steps to make the school funding system fairer.

The introduction of the schools NFF in 2018-19 means that funding is now distributed more fairly across the country. This was a major step forward from the postcode lottery of the previous funding system, in which historical funding levels, rather than current needs, drove the distribution of funding. A majority of local authorities have moved their funding formulae towards the NFF since its introduction in 2018-19, and 73 local authorities of 150 are now mirroring the NFF funding factors almost exactly.

As we set out when we introduced the NFF, our long-term goal is that every school's final funding allocation is determined by the same, national formula, and is no longer subject to further adjustment by local authorities. The current consultation presents our proposals for how such an NFF, directly applied to schools' budgets, should operate. It also sets out the next steps to ensure a smooth transition towards this goal.

This reform will bring several benefits for schools. It will ensure a fair funding system, with funding for every school matched to a consistent assessment of need. It will make the funding system simpler and more transparent for all involved. It will also help to underpin our ambition for all schools to be part of a strong multi-academy trust, so that all schools within each trust will be funded on a consistent basis, regardless of which local authority they are located in. This will provide academy trusts with the predictability needed to make the best use of resources to further raise academic standards.

The Government are mindful that completing the reforms of the NFF represents a significant further change for the school system. In the consultation, we present proposals to move local funding formulae progressively closer to the NFF to achieve greater fairness and consistency in funding. This will provide the opportunity to consider the impact of each step before making the next move. We are determined to complete these reforms and secure the benefits that they will bring, but we want to move carefully towards this end goal over the coming years, working with schools, academy trusts, local authorities and sector organisations to ensure that the transition is a smooth one.

The consultation will be open for 12 weeks, concluding on 30 September 2021. We plan to publish more detailed proposals in a second stage consultation over the winter following feedback to the first consultation.

[HCWS165]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Desogestrel Contraceptive: Availability from Pharmacies

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): I am pleased to announce that officials in the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) have granted two marketing

authorisations to allow the supply through pharmacies of the progestogen-only oral contraceptive—desogestrel—as an over-the-counter medicine. This follows a rigorous review of the safety of this medicine by the Commission on Human Medicines and a public consultation. The response to the public consultation which was carried out as part of the regulatory assessment is also being made publicly available today. The MHRA has a long-established process for reclassifying medicines from prescription-only status to being made available for purchase over the counter when it is safe to do so.

This landmark reclassification, which was widely supported by women and healthcare professionals in the recent consultation, will enable women to purchase a progestogen-only contraceptive from a pharmacy following a detailed consultation with the pharmacist. This will provide an additional route to access for those seeking contraceptive services and will help to reduce the pressure on GP surgeries and sexual health clinics with the potential to reduce the risk of unplanned pregnancies and abortions. Pharmacists already provide a range of services in the area of sexual and reproductive health and are trained practitioners who are experienced in checking eligibility for all the products they supply.

The reclassification of desogestrel to a pharmacy medicine supports the Government's wider commitments to improve women's health and to ensure the public receive the best possible sexual health and contraception services. A new sexual and reproductive health strategy and a new women's health strategy in England are in development, to be published later this year. The women's health strategy will have an overarching aim of improving the health and wellbeing of women and the sexual and reproductive health strategy will set out ambitions to reduce inequalities in sexual and reproductive health outcomes, and will include a focus on improving reproductive health and access to contraception.

This reclassification is therefore an important step towards meeting our ambitions to improve women's health by widening access and providing women with more choice in the provision of safe and effective contraception. Progestogen-only contraception will continue to be available free from prescription charge from GPs and sexual and reproductive health services as is the case for all prescribed contraception.

[HCWS158]

Dame Carol Black's Independent Review of Drugs: Publication of Part 2

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): Part 1 of Dame Carol Black's independent review of drugs was published last February and provided this Government with detailed analytical insights into the complexities of the illicit drugs market. It highlighted the considerable scale of the challenge we face with an illicit drugs market in England and Wales worth £10 billion a year and 3 million users of illicit drugs in the same population.

The drugs trade is also intrinsically linked to the crime experienced in our communities: 45% of all acquisitive crime is committed by people who regularly use heroin, cocaine or crack cocaine and nearly half of homicides are drug related. Increases in global production and

supply have led to a violent and exploitative supply chain in which ruthless criminal gangs exploit children and vulnerable people in our communities. This cannot and will not continue.

This Government remain committed to tackling drugs and the harm they cause to individuals, families and communities. Since part 1 of Dame Carol's review was published, we have built a powerful set of policies in co-operation with police and operational partners to tackle drug supply, exploitative criminal gangs, and we have increased drug treatment funding for 2021-22. We are also piloting a more co-ordinated approach to treatment and recovery support in some high areas of need.

In January 2021, we announced £148 million of new money to cut crime and protect people from the harms caused by illegal drugs. This has delivered the largest increase in drug treatment funding for 15 years. The funding means that we are delivering more interventions to reduce the number of drug-related deaths and we are making sure that more drugs users in contact with the criminal justice system get the treatment they need to reduce the amount of offending associated with drug dependency. It also ensured £40 million of dedicated funding is invested in tackling drugs supply and county lines. This has allowed us to expand and build upon the successful results of our county lines programme. This has seen over 780 lines closed, 5,000 arrests and 1,220 safeguards since it was launched in November 2019.

It is my honour to announce that today part 2 of Dame Carol's review has been published, providing this Government with concrete evidence-based recommendations for how we can reduce the demand for illegal drugs, turn the tide on drug related deaths and get more people into higher quality services. It intelligently and clearly wraps up three years of research and investigation into the treatment and recovery system and I would like to thank Dame Carol for her dedication to this agenda and for this accomplished review.

As part 2 highlights, many Departments of State need to redouble their efforts to tackle drug supply and also provide a stronger system of treatment and recovery support to people dependent on drugs, particularly those in contact with the criminal justice system. That is why I am pleased that today we can announce the establishment of a new joint combating drugs unit to co-ordinate and drive a genuinely whole-of-Government approach to drug policy, recognising that treatment alone is not enough and that housing and employment support is essential to aid recovery. This Government are determined to address the challenges raised in the review and the new Unit will oversee the Government's response to Dame Carol's recommendations which apply to numerous Departments across Government.

I am pleased to announce that in the coming weeks my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I, along with the Minister for Crime and Policing, will publish an initial Government response to the findings in part 1 and part 2 of the independent review. This response will set out our clear cross-Government commitment to this agenda and to taking effective action given the urgency of addressing these issues. Dame Carol has made a powerful case for a comprehensive drug treatment and recovery system coupled with the need for a more effective approach to enforcement. While many aspects of drug policy are devolved, we will continue to build partnership and collaboration with the Scottish, Welsh

and Northern Irish Governments on significant UK-wide issues. The Government response to Dame Carol's reviews provide a fantastic opportunity to engage with our colleagues and partners on combating drug misuse.

A copy of part 2 of Dame Carol's Review will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS167]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures: 1 March 2021 to 31 May 2021

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures (TPIM) Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of her TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

TPIM notices in force (as of 31 May 2021)	5
Number of new TPIM notices served (during this period)	3
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 31 May 2021)	5
TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period)	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period)	3
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period)	1
The number of subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (during this the reporting period)	4

On 29th May 2021 one individual was remanded having been charged with two breaches of the monitoring measure of the TPIM notice.

The TPIM Review Group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. Second quarter TRG meetings will be held throughout June 2021.

[HCWS161]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Free Trade Agreement: Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena): Today, Norway's Trade Minister Iselin Nybø, Iceland's Foreign Minister Gudlaugur Thór Thórdarson, Liechtenstein's Foreign Minister Dominique Hasler, and I are signing the United Kingdom-Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in London. This is another trade deal that the United Kingdom has struck as an independent trading nation, in which our partners have gone further and faster than they have with anyone else in a number of areas, demonstrating what is possible between trusted trading partners.

It is the first time these three European countries have included dedicated chapters on small businesses and digital trade in any trade deal, including some of the most liberalising and modern digital trade provisions

in the world, which simplify customs procedures, cutting red tape and making it easier than ever for our businesses to export across borders. Electronic documents, contracts and signatures will result in less paperwork, saving British firms time and money. Their offer to the United Kingdom on services and investment goes beyond what they have offered other FTA partners to date. Innovative FinTech firms will be able to provide financial services into Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein, without having to provide that service elsewhere first, helping the United Kingdom to maintain its status as a financial services hub.

The agreement contains robust commitments on trade and sustainable development, demonstrating our shared global leadership on pressing issues such as climate change and protects our “right to regulate”, supporting us in meeting our ambitious domestic climate targets, including net zero for the United Kingdom.

Building on our current goods agreement, this agreement will cut more Norwegian tariffs on high-quality British food and farm products and could help support British fish processing industries from Grimsby to Grampian with further reductions on our tariffs on certain white fish, shrimps and prawns. The agreement could help support businesses in every corner of our country, helping to grow a trading relationship already worth £21.6 billion in 2020.¹

This deal will deliver more opportunities for key British sectors especially those providing financial, legal, and other professional services. It will allow businesses in all sectors to send their staff on business visits or to provide services contracts to these countries, as well as the ability to transfer them for longer term projects. It means those with professional qualifications will have clear routes for the recognition of their qualifications for regulated professions. In addition, the agreement opens up new opportunities for British businesses to bid for a wider range of Government contracts in these countries.

HM Government is committed to transparency and the effective scrutiny of our trade negotiations. Following today's signature of the FTA, I can announce that the Department for International Trade and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will be formally presenting the signed treaty text and related documents to Parliament before the summer recess for scrutiny under the Constitutional Reform and Governance (CRAg) Act procedure. Laying ahead of summer recess ensures that the House has the maximum amount of time to scrutinise the detail of our trade deal.

Alongside the treaty text, we will lay an explanatory memorandum. An impact assessment of our trade deal, and a parliamentary report providing an overview of the deal, will also be placed in the Libraries of both Houses at the same time. All of the documents will be published on gov.uk in parallel.

[HCWS163]

¹ ONS, UK total trade: all countries, non-seasonally adjusted: October to December 2020

TRANSPORT

Crossrail: Annual Update

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): My noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Baroness Vere of Norbiton) has made the following ministerial statement:

In October 2020, the governance of Crossrail transferred over to Transport for London (TfL).

As part of the governance transition, the Crossrail sponsor board was stood down and the Mayor of London, who chairs the TfL board, established a new special purpose committee of the TfL board, called the Elizabeth line committee (ELC). The ELC is chaired by the Deputy Mayor for Transport and provides high-level oversight of the Crossrail project.

The TfL transport commissioner is now responsible for the successful delivery of the project and realising the required benefits. The commissioner chairs the Elizabeth line delivery group (ELDG), which was also established as part of the governance transition, to bring together the key TfL executives responsible for bringing the Elizabeth line into operation. The TfL transport commissioner reports to the ELC.

The transition of governance moves the Crossrail programme closer to TfL as future operator of the Elizabeth line, allowing it to bring management focus and effort, to “pull” the Elizabeth line into operation. These changes were a positive and essential step as we move closer to delivering the full operational railway.

Major construction work on the project is now completed and trial running began on 10 May.

Given the commencement of trial running and the transfer of governance to Transport for London, this will be the last annual written ministerial statement on Crossrail.

Further details on CRL's funding and finances in the period to 29 May 2021 are set out in the table. The relevant information is as follows:

Total funding amounts provided to Crossrail Ltd by the Department for Transport and TfL in relation to the construction of Crossrail to the end of the period (22 July 2008 to 29 May 2021)	£14,893,427,506
Expenditure incurred (including committed land and property spend not yet paid out) by Crossrail Ltd in relation to the construction of Crossrail in the period (30 May 2020 to 29 May 2021) (excluding recoverable VAT on land and property purchases)	£813,125,000
Total expenditure incurred (including committed land and property spend not yet paid out) by Crossrail Ltd in relation to the construction of Crossrail to the end of the period (22 July 2008 to 29 May 2021) (excluding recoverable VAT on land and property purchases)	£15,785,802,000
The amounts realised by the disposal of any land or property for the purposes of the construction of Crossrail by the Secretary of State, TfL or Crossrail Ltd in the period covered by the statement	NIL

The numbers above are drawn from CRL's books of accounts and have been prepared on a consistent basis with the update provided last year. The figure for expenditure incurred includes monies already paid out in the relevant period, including committed land and property expenditure where this has not yet been paid. It does not include future expenditure on contracts that have been awarded.

[HCWS157]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Disability Benefits: End-of-life Support

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): The Government are committed to supporting people nearing the end of their lives. The current Special Rules for Terminal Illness (SRTI) have been in place, unchanged since 1990 and the support they provide to people who find themselves in this terrible situation is crucial.

In response to requests for a review of the special rules the Department for Work and Pensions undertook a wide-ranging evaluation into how the benefits system in Great Britain supports those nearing the end of their lives. I can now provide honourable Members with an update on the outcome of the evaluation.

We have listened to the views of people nearing the end of their lives, their families and friends, the organisations supporting them and the healthcare professionals involved in their care, and I would like to thank all who contributed their views on this important subject.

I am today setting out the Department's intention to replace the current 6 month rule with a 12 month, end of life approach. This will mirror the current definition of end of life used across the NHS and ensure that people receive vital support through the special rules six months earlier than they do now. Supporting people nearing the end of their lives is a priority for my Department and I am pleased to be taking this step forward. The evaluation report will be published alongside the upcoming health & disability green paper.

[HCWS166]

Plan for Jobs: Supporting People Back Into Work

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Department for Work and Pensions has been at the heart of helping to deliver the Government's plan for jobs to support, protect and create jobs following the pandemic. A year on from its launch, I want to update the House on the progress we have made helping people across the country to move into work or gain the skills and experience that will open up job opportunities as the economy reopens and we build back better.

To ensure we can provide the vital employment support to help people get back into work, we have boosted our frontline jobseeker capacity and capability in towns and cities right across the country. Meeting our target in March to recruit 13,500 new work coaches, we have created Britain's biggest ever jobs army and secured premises for 139 additional Jobcentres, 52 of which are already open. We have also opened 138 new youth hubs, co-located and co-delivered with our external partners, which are delivering a mix of face-to-face and digital support to young people.

Kickstart

Young people have been affected more than most by the pandemic, with many having had the rug pulled from under them at a critical time. Our kickstart scheme has been helping them land on their feet, with over 40,000 so far benefiting from work placements, gaining

valuable skills, experience and confidence to build their future careers. It is fantastic to see that some kickstart graduates have already secured new jobs. As of 30 June, over 243,000 jobs have been approved for funding. With over 145,000 vacancies having been made available for young people to apply for, we are seeing more starts every day and we are working with employers to fill roles.

Alongside support offered across our nationwide network of Jobcentres, we have rapidly introduced a range of provision delivered through external providers, offering targeted and local help to job seekers.

JETS

For those out of work for three months or more, JETS—our job entry: targeted support scheme—has so far helped propel over 5,300 people into jobs by providing personalised support, including specialist advice on how they can move into growing sectors, CV advice and interview coaching. Up to the end of May there had been over 112,000 starts on the scheme in England and Wales since it launched in October last year and over 4,700 starts since the scheme started in Scotland in January this year.

SWAPS

We know some sectors have been impacted more than others during the pandemic and that many people will be looking for work in entirely different sectors. That is why SWAPs—our sector-based work academy programme—is helping people reskill, retrain and move towards growing sectors like construction, infrastructure and social care. Last financial year, 64,500 people benefited from this support, and we have increased the number of available placements to 80,000 to enable more people to take advantage.

Job finding support

Our job-finding support is providing digital help and support for newly unemployed people. Delivered online, and so available throughout covid restrictions, it provides one-to-one advice and group support to help familiarise jobseekers with recruitment practices, identify transferable skills, and develop a personalised job finding action plan.

Restart

And as our economy restarts, our £2.9 billion restart scheme is now offering a fresh start for a million long-term unemployed people in England and Wales. Specialist providers, charities and SMEs are complementing the important work of jobcentres to provide additional expertise, investment, innovation and capacity for tailored support.

With the success of the vaccine roll-out and as we continue to open our economy and society, there are encouraging improvements in the employment figures, a continued rise in vacancies, and increasing numbers of people on company payrolls.

The Government plan for jobs, through the coronavirus job retention scheme and other support, has protected jobs and kept millions of people connected to the labour market during our emergency response to the pandemic. Now, through the continued delivery of our part of plan for jobs, we are helping get Britain back on its feet.

[HCWS168]

**Minimum Income Floor, Universal Credit Gainful
Self-employment Tests and Start-up Periods**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mims Davies): To support self-employed universal credit claimants through the pandemic, in March 2020 the Government introduced a temporary suspension of the minimum income floor (MIF), removed the requirement for gainful self-employment (GSE) tests and paused start-up periods.

We have always been clear that these would be temporary measures, keeping them under review in light of the latest economic and public health context; as such, we have extended the MIF suspension on two occasions since March 2020.

With the success of the vaccine rollout and rising demand as the economy reopens, it is right that we now begin to reinstate our normal processes. Therefore, we are reintroducing the MIF, GSE tests and start-up periods when existing regulations expire on 31 July.

To ensure everyone has time to prepare, claimants will be given a month's notice that the MIF is being applied and no one will see a decrease in their universal credit award before September. As an additional safety net for those whose businesses continue to be heavily impacted by covid-19 restrictions, work coaches will be able to provide a suspension of the MIF for up to two months at a time on a case-by-case basis, for a maximum of three suspensions, adding up to six months in total.

The vast majority of claimants found to be gainfully self-employed will benefit from a one-year start-up period. Anyone who was in a start-up period when the easement came into effect in March 2020 will also not have the MIF applied for the balance remaining on their start-up period at that time.

Claimants who continue to be gainfully self-employed and are not entitled to a start-up period, will have the MIF applied. These claimants will be exempt from having to search for, or take up, any other employment, allowing them to concentrate on making a success of their business and maximising their returns up to and beyond the level of their MIF.

Claimants who are found not to be gainfully self-employed will receive support to move into employment through our comprehensive multi-billion-pound plan for jobs which is helping millions of people across the country. Our specialist work coaches will consider the circumstances of each claimant individually, so it will take time to return to our normal processes.

These new regulations, with the additional protection and support they contain, will be in place for one year, running up to and including 31 July 2022. To prevent there being any further delay to new claimants getting the support they need, all new claims during this period will have a gainful self-employment assessment at the start of their claim in the usual way.

[HCWS164]

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