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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 22 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.]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

National Food Strategy: Small-scale Family Farms

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What steps he is taking to help ensure the National Food Strategy provides a sustainable future for small-scale family farms. [903130]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The Government thank Henry Dimbleby and his team for their work on the independent review of the food system. We are committed to carefully considering the review and its recommendations, and responding in full with a White Paper in the next six months. That will set out our ambition and priorities for the food system to support farms of all sizes and our exceptional food and drink producers.

Mr Hollobone: Does the Secretary of State agree that the heart will be ripped out of the British countryside if small-scale family farms in Kettering and elsewhere go under as a result of industrial agriculture and the relentless pursuit of cheap food? What will he do to ensure that family farms remain an important and permanent feature of rural life?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the importance of small family farms in our agriculture system. A lot of the economic analysis done by the Government and companies such as AB Agri shows that some of those smaller family farms are technically the most proficient and often the most profitable, as they have attention to detail. The Government are going to be bringing forward more proposals to support new entrants to our farming industry so that we have a vibrant, profitable sector, with farms of all sizes.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): The National Food Strategy has recommended that the Government must define the minimum standards we will accept in future free trade deals and a “mechanism for protecting them”. The report says that without that there is “serious

peril” that tariff-free deals could not only “compromise” our own attempts to drive up these standards, but allow cheap imports, which would “undercut” our farmers. Given that the Trade and Agriculture Commission already made exactly that recommendation in its March report, almost five months ago, can the Secretary of State tell me when these core standards will be set out and whether that mechanism for defending them will be in place before the Australia deal is signed?

George Eustice: The Government are working on a sanitary and phytosanitary policy statement that will set out the UK’s farm-to-fork approach on these matters, the science of good farm husbandry and how that improves food safety standards. We also have some key things in our legislation, such as bans on the use of hormones in beef and of chlorinated washes. Those are in our legislation and will not change.

Livestock Worrying

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): What steps he is taking to help tackle livestock worrying. [903131]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): New measures to crack down on livestock worrying are being introduced as part of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. They will expand species and locations covered, and will enhance enforcement. Improved powers for the police will make it easier for them to collect evidence and, in the most serious cases, to seize and detain dogs.

Robin Millar: Farmers in Aberconwy have been speaking to me about the threat that dogs out of control pose to livestock. Dan Jones, who farms the Great Orme above Llandudno, told me just yesterday about how five ewes were killed in two attacks in just one day. This week, I was pleased to support my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) in her Bill to amend the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) Act 1953, because this is a UK-wide problem. Will the Minister meet her, me and other north Wales colleagues to discuss how we can strengthen legislation further to deal with this menace?

Victoria Prentis: I would be delighted to meet colleagues to discuss this important subject. New measures in the Bill specify that a dog will be considered to be at large unless it is on a lead of less than 1.8 metres or the dog remains in sight of the owner, who is aware of the dog’s actions and is confident that the dog will return if called. It is important that we continue to work on these details to get this absolutely right.

Abundance of Wildlife Species: Legislative Proposals

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): If he will bring forward legislative proposals to set a target for the abundance of wildlife species by 2030. [903132]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): We have amended the Environment Bill to require a new, historic and legally binding target for species abundance for 2030 to be set, aiming to halt the decline in nature. The details of that target will be set out in secondary

legislation and the target will be subject to the same requirements as the other long-term legally binding targets set under the Bill.

Mr Dhesi: The UK is among the most nature-depleted countries; half our wildlife has decreased since 1970 and one in seven species are now at risk of extinction. Given a decade of huge cuts, all the rhetoric and the modest uplift in Natural England funding cannot hide the fact that the Government have consistently missed United Nations biodiversity targets. Minister, in order to show leadership and set an example to the rest of the world, should a natural target not be set now, rather than wait, so that we can stop and reverse the decline of nature by 2030?

Rebecca Pow: I hope the hon. Gentleman will agree that the Government are taking this issue really seriously. We are the first Government to set a target such as this, aiming to halt the decline of nature, and indeed recover it by 2030. We are working on the detail of that target. It will be set, along with all the other targets, through the Environment Bill, which will enable us to work together to raise up nature everywhere, and we will be announcing those targets in October 2022.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab) [V]: I have become accustomed to the flurry of press releases from the Department and the long list of initiatives that the Minister has a habit of reciting when questioned about biodiversity and species abundance. Does she agree with the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), when he says:

“Although there are countless Government policies and targets to ‘leave the environment in a better state than we found it’, too often they are grandiose statements lacking teeth and devoid of effective delivery mechanisms”?

So, where is the plan?

Rebecca Pow: I hope the hon. Lady will agree that the plethora of press releases demonstrate just how much work is going on in this Department. We are bringing through groundbreaking legislation that will put in all the measures that we need to tackle these really serious issues. So we have the targets in the Environment Bill and we have a whole range of grants and funds, such as the woodland creation grant and the Nature for Climate peatland restoration grant scheme. They are open now, and people can start applying for them, and we really are moving on this.

Mr Speaker: Let's go to Captain Bob. Good to see you, Bob.

Tree Planting

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase tree planting. [903133]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): The England trees action plan, supported by £500 million from the Nature for Climate fund, announced a series of funds to support the creation of woodland over this Parliament. That includes over £25 million for our woodland creation partnerships this year, £6 million for

the urban tree challenge fund for the next two years, a £2.7 million local authority treescapes fund for 2021-22, and £15.9 million for the woodland creation offer this year.

Mr Speaker: Come on, Bob.

Bob Blackman [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank my hon. Friend for her answer, and for the work that she is doing. Clearly, in urban and suburban settings, new trees are a lifeline to encourage the green lungs of the cities and towns around our country. What more can she offer to encourage local authorities to implement new street trees, which are appropriate to the setting, not only on streets, but also in parks and open spaces?

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend raises a really important point. It is not just about planting trees in rural areas; our urban areas are so important, because that is where people engage with the trees. So I am sure he will be pleased to hear about the urban tree challenge fund, which is providing £6 million over the next two years to support trees in exactly the places he says—our towns and cities. We have also opened the £2.7 million local authority treescapes fund, to encourage more tree planting in non-woodland settings, but particularly along roads and footpaths, just as he is suggesting. I hope that he will be encouraging his local authority to apply for some of those grants.

Coastal State Fisheries Negotiations: Quota Share

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): What steps he is taking to maximise the share of quota for British fishermen in the next round of Coastal State fisheries negotiations. [903134]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): It is very good to see my hon. Friend back in the Chamber after his illness. For 2021, the Government have secured fishing opportunities of around 628,000 tonnes of quota across all the annual negotiations—approximately 55,000 tonnes more than last year. The Government are now preparing for the next round of annual fisheries negotiations. We have held a series of briefings with stakeholders this month on the latest scientific recommendations, and we will be developing our negotiating mandate in the months ahead.

Andrew Bowie: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. The decision not to come to an agreement with Norway was met with mixed reactions across the different sectors within the industry. While the pelagic sector is undoubtedly doing well out of our new status, there have been challenges for the demersal sector. So can my right hon. Friend give a commitment that the Government are determined to deliver honesty of opportunity for all sectors in the industry—demersal as well as pelagic?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend is right. The pelagic sector in particular has benefited from the UK becoming an independent coastal state with more quota and less competition from Norway and the Faroe Islands, which have not had access to our waters this year. For 2021, the fleet received an increase of around 5,800 tonnes of mackerel compared with the year before. My hon. Friend is also right: we want to deliver for all sectors, which is

why, in England, we have given a significant uplift to the inshore under-10 metre fleet with additional quota this year. It is also why, as I speak, we are in the final stages of negotiations on annual exchanges with the EU that will help the white fish sector.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The fishing industry knows that the Government have failed to negotiate real-terms quota data with the European Union, and it also knows that the Government have no idea—no idea—how much non-quota species are being caught by EU boats in our waters. With the shellfish ban on exports and British fishers being harassed for catch data that we do not require from EU boats, where in the Tory manifesto did it say that we would actually give away control of our waters, and where is the plan for fishing? Where is the plan?

George Eustice: I will take no lectures on these matters from the hon. Gentleman who wanted us to remain in the European Union and wanted to allow EU vessels to have the ability to fish in our waters without even requiring a licence to do so.

The Government have required all foreign vessels, including EU vessels, to have a licence to fish in our waters, and that sets certain conditions. We have access to vessel monitoring data so that we can track the precise location of all those vessels, and we are also working on methodologies now so that they must declare their catch when they leave our waters and when they enter our waters, and that will give us the data that he suggests that we need.

Compulsory Microchipping of Cats

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): What the planned timescale is for the introduction of the compulsory microchipping of cats. [903135]

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

Catherine McKinnell [V]: So despite widespread public support, as the Minister confirmed, we are yet to have a timetable for the compulsory microchipping of pet cats. We know that 2.6 million unchipped pet cats in the UK have less chance of being reunited with their owners if they are lost or stolen, despite how heartbreaking the loss of much loved pets can be and the recognised need to improve animal welfare. Will the Government ensure that the consultation on cat and dog microchipping reports as soon as possible and announce their timetable for introducing regulations to make microchipping compulsory for pet cats?

Victoria Prentis: I share the hon. Lady's enthusiasm for microchipping cats. A total of 74% are already microchipped, including my own I am pleased to say. We will be working hard, as soon as we have responded to the consultation, to legislate as soon as possible. Only

secondary legislation is needed to bring about changes if those are considered necessary, so I do not anticipate any great delay, and I reassure the hon. Lady that we are working on this at pace.

Seafood Response Fund

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What criteria his Department used to determine the allocation of the seafood response fund. [903136]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): The seafood response fund gave funding to shellfish, aquaculture and catching businesses across the UK when they had been affected by covid or by trade disruption. The size of each payment was based on the average fixed costs for each business. For catching businesses, this was based on vessel size, and for aquaculture businesses, this was based on the number of people they employed.

Alan Brown: Now that the Minister has had time to read the deal that the UK Government have signed, she will see that it is a bad deal and that there has been a lot of trade disruption. In January and February, Scottish companies were losing roughly £1 million per day. By the end of February, the Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation stated that its members had lost £11 million. What does the Minister estimate is the total cost of covid and Brexit on the Scottish seafood industry? How much compensation has been paid to Scottish companies? How much compensation is still to be paid, and what has she done to resolve the issue of exports to the EU?

Victoria Prentis: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the extensive work that has been carried out by the Scottish seafood taskforce, chaired by the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid), which has provided practical and sensible measures to assist with exports to the EU. On the specific fund, we were very careful to make it clear that Scottish businesses should not lose out, so the fund was available for all eligible UK businesses, and Scottish businesses were able to apply for a top-up if that was appropriate, so we were very careful to ensure that Scottish businesses were treated equitably.

River Health

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to help improve river health. [903137]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Measures in the Environment Bill will help to address the problem of untreated sewage entering the rivers. On 9 July, Southern Water was fined £90 million—the largest sum yet for a water company—for persistent illegal discharge of raw sewage. Ministers have been clear with water industry chief executive officers on their companies' legal duties. We are also tackling river pollution from poor farming practices. In addition to regulation and financial incentives, catchment-sensitive farming helps thousands of farmers to make water improvements.

Andrew Selous [V]: Leighton sewage works pumped raw sewage into the River Ouzel for 149 hours in 2019, and in March this year waste water was pumped into the river for several weeks at Mardle Road. Volunteers Ruth Mundy and Liz Hooper report the absence of ducks, egrets and kingfishers, which were common in the past. Will the new director of water quality at the Environment Agency be able to achieve a rapid and sustained improvement?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting this issue. It is clearly unacceptable. I hope he will agree that we now have many measures in place; he has been involved in pressing for them. The storm overflows taskforce has been set up to deal with the sewage overflows, which, in our view, are used far too frequently. Much more monitoring is in place through the water companies. They have to publish a plan on this issue and the Government have to report back. We are really cracking down on the whole issue of water quality, which my hon. Friend is right to raise.

Support for Farmers

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): What steps he is taking to support farmers. [903138]

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister to answer the substantive question.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): The agricultural transition plan sets out how support for farmers is changing. Instead of paying farmers subsidies based on the amount of land they own, we are introducing new schemes to incentivise good ecological practices. We will also offer grants to support new entrants to the sector, and to improve productivity and business planning.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The UK Government yesterday indicated that they were willing to break their own trade deal with the EU because of consequences that they told us would not happen. The EU may then very well implement tariffs on UK exports to the EU, as it has a right to do under the Tory-negotiated deal. That would be calamitous for our agricultural sector. The Minister will no doubt answer with reference to all the new deals that the International Trade Secretary is signing the UK up to, but just days ago the New Zealand Prime Minister warned that failing to keep to treaty commitments could threaten membership of the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. Will the Minister commit to covering the extra costs to farmers that this whole sorry mess is causing, or are the consequences of this ideological Brexit crusade to be borne by everyone but the UK Government and their Ministers?

Victoria Prentis: I do not think it is any secret to the House that I was no Brexiteer, but I must say that for farming and fishing I think we have really gained from Brexit. In England, we do not think the environment can wait. We want to start paying our farmers public money for public goods; that is how they will be supported in the future.

Scottish Seed Potato Industry

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for the Scottish seed potato industry. [903139]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The Scottish seed potato industry is renowned globally for its high health status and it is second to none. It exports to some 40 countries around the world and 80% of its exports are outside the EU—to markets such as Egypt and Morocco. As my hon. Friend knows, the EU has adopted a curious stance in respect of authorising Scottish seed potatoes. Although EU law provides a mechanism for equivalence to be recognised, the Commission has so far refused even to allow its Standing Committee on Plants, Animals, Food and Feed to assess our application. We are continuing to work with industry to unblock this issue.

Douglas Ross [V]: To remove the risk to Scotland's seed potato industry and respect the principle of reciprocal trade, will the UK Government agree to prohibit the importation of seed potatoes from the EU?

George Eustice: We introduced a temporary six-month marketing authorisation that allowed EU seed potatoes to be marketed in England and Wales earlier this year. That has now expired, as agreed with the industry and the devolved Administrations. If any applications are received for marketing equivalence, the UK will consider whether seed potatoes have been produced under conditions equivalent to requirements in GB regulations. Of course, the sensible thing to happen is for the EU to apply its own rules and laws, and to assess the application that we have lodged with it.

Food Security

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure food security for consumers in the UK. [903140]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The UK has a resilient food supply chain built on strong domestic production, open markets and an advanced logistics and retail sector. The impacts of the pandemic and labour shortages mean that it has been tested. We have been working with colleagues across Government to ensure that our food supply chain has the support that it needs. The Agriculture Act 2020 requires regular assessments of food security and the first of these will take place later this year.

Ian Byrne [V]: Department for Work and Pensions data has revealed the shocking fact that, pre-covid, 42% of households on universal credit were food-insecure. With the planned removal of the £20 uplift to universal credit, what impact assessment has the Secretary of State's Department completed on the impact of removing the uplift regarding the food security of the 6 million people on universal credit?

George Eustice: We regularly monitor household spending on food. It is important to note that last year household spending on food among the poorest 20% of households was the lowest on record, at about 14%. That said, we absolutely recognise that there are individual households that struggle to afford food. That is why the Government have brought forward a number of initiatives

over the past 12 months to support them through groups such as FareShare, as well as the holiday activities and food scheme.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): There are crops rotting in the fields due to a shortage of people to pick them, there is a self-inflicted shortage of HGV drivers due to the Government's poor Brexit deal, and there are now empty shelves across Britain because thousands of retail workers are doing the right thing and self-isolating. Why has the Secretary of State for food not got a grip on the lack of food security in the country, and where is the plan?

George Eustice: When it comes to labour, the hon. Gentleman will know that we have introduced the seasonal agricultural workers scheme, which has been crucial this year in providing farms with the seasonal labour that they need, and we have allowed 30,000 seasonal workers to come in under that scheme. We are also continuing to work with businesses on the issue of staff having to isolate. The Government will shortly be saying more about their approach on this to ensure that key critical infrastructure can continue.

Recycling Rates

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to improve recycling rates.
[903141]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): We are introducing reforms to the waste sector that will help us to increase the amount of material we recycle. These reforms include introducing consistency in household and business waste collection in England, extended producer responsibility for packaging, and a deposit return scheme for drinks containers. Together, these measures will help us to meet our commitment to recycle 70% of packaging by 2030 and 65% of municipal waste by 2035.

Jessica Morden [V]: Not only are we in Wales the third best at recycling in the world, but in Newport, under the leadership of Newport Council and Wastesavers, we are the top recycling city in Wales, and the reuse centre in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) is one of three nominated for civic amenity centre of the year, with rates of 90%. Does the Minister agree that the Government can learn much from Wales and Newport?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I am not going to be snippy about this: if we can learn lessons from anyone, I am never too proud. Equally, the challenges are different in every place. We have set our targets to increase our recycling rates here in the UK, but actually Wales, and Northern Ireland, will be joining us in the deposit return scheme. We very much welcome all the negotiations and consultations that we are having to ensure that that will work across the borders.

Leaks from Water Mains

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): What discussions he has had with Ofwat and representatives of utility companies on reducing leaks from water mains.
[903142]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Reducing leakage is an essential part of our ambition to improve water efficiency. Ofwat has set companies a performance commitment to reduce leakage by 16% by 2025. The water companies have further committed to deliver a 50% reduction by 2050, which could save up to 1,400 megalitres of water per day. I will require water companies to develop their water resource management plans on this basis.

Sir Robert Neill [V]: The problem we have in Bromley is that 95% of the mains are cast iron, according to Thames Water, and are therefore much, much more liable to breaking, rather than the average in London of 50% to 60%. It means we have repeated leaks, often in the same place, patched up time and time again. We had 133 in one postcode area in four months, in one instance. This is actually causing real issues for my constituents. Can we have a specific programme to replace outdated Victorian infrastructure and bring it up to purpose for the 21st century?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for that, and I do realise the challenges that people are facing in his constituency. Repairing and replacing leaking pipes is, as he points out, absolutely critical; obviously, it is particularly critical to maintaining clean, safe, reliable drinking water to our homes and businesses. Identifying those leaks is challenging, and water companies are looking at innovative ways to improve outcomes. It is really for the companies to decide how to maintain their infrastructure, but we are pushing them with the targets that have been set. To minimise the disruption caused, they are required to provide notice of planned work to customers and local authorities.

Topical Questions

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab):
[903090] If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Over the past 18 months, key workers in our food supply chain have worked incredibly hard to keep the nation fed during the difficult context of the pandemic. The recent hot weather has increased demand for some items, such as bottled waters, and staff absences have increased, but remain lower than seen earlier in the pandemic. We are working with colleagues across Government to support businesses in the food supply chain, and I take this opportunity to thank all those key workers working on farms, in food factories, in the distribution system and in our food retail sector for their extraordinary efforts.

Matt Western: In the past two years, we have seen tragic floods in Yorkshire, Cumbria and south Wales. We have seen the floods in Europe and now in China. The Government have cut spending on flood defences by 10%. Why?

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman is incorrect in that the capital spending on floods is increasing to £5.2 billion. That is almost a doubling of the previous

programme. We have held meetings around the Yorkshire area, and Yorkshire will be one of the key beneficiaries from that investment we are making.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): [903092] In many villages, such as Winchelsea Beach in my beautiful constituency, sewage or foul water drainage is not separate from rain water and storm water drainage. There is a combined system, which means that at times of high rainfall, many residents suffer sewage flooding in their gardens. Does my right hon. Friend agree that in view of environmental and health concerns, it is imperative that sewage is kept in a separate pipe from rainwater? If so, what steps will he take to ensure that these changes happen?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Some of the challenges we have are typically with houses built in the Victorian era where, as she says, the street drainage system goes into the foul water sewage system. That can lead to it being overwhelmed at times. Most developments that have taken place since the 1960s do have surface water drainage separated from foul water sewage systems. We have set up a taskforce to look at how we can address this problem and, in particular, reduce the use of combined sewage overflows.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I had a good trip up to Newcastle-under-Lyme recently to meet residents and the pressure group Stop the Stink and to see and smell for myself the horrific emissions from Walleys Quarry, the local landfill site that has the dubious honour of being the smelliest tip in England. What engagement has the Secretary of State had with the owner of the site, Red Industries, to restore residents' physical health and mental wellbeing and stop the stink? Where is the plan?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) has been raising this issue with me, the Prime Minister and others consistently. There is a challenge. I have met him twice to discuss it. I have also met the local team in the Environment Agency dealing with this, and I have discussed it with the chief exec of the Environment Agency. One of the problems is that it is thought that some plasterboard was illegally dumped at the site. That is what is causing the current problem with hydrogen sulphide. The Environment Agency is working on a plan to flare those gases off, and we are doing all that we can to support them in that endeavour.

[903094] **Claire Coutinho** (East Surrey) (Con) [V]: I am pleased to be hosting another "Green-tember" in East Surrey this year—a whole month of pushing for environmental progress and looking at the small actions we can all take as residents to protect nature. As this helpfully coincides with COP26, would Ministers consider my request to speak at the East Surrey COP summit this year?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this is a really big year for the environment internationally—not only with COP26 being hosted in Glasgow, but with the convention on biological diversity COP15, where we are going to be setting some crucial biodiversity targets. I am sure that either I or one of our

ministerial team would be more than happy to speak to her event, and we are speaking to many other such events around the country.

[903091] **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): When I visit schools in Luton North, including Lealands, where I went recently, I find that one of the top concerns for young people is plastic waste. The Government say they will eliminate plastic waste by 2042. By that time, the kids I met at Lealands will be adults, they would have jobs and many would have become parents. Will the Secretary of State work with Opposition Members to improve recycling rates, and actually deal with the plastics crisis affecting landfill across the country and the oceans across our planet before those children become adults?

George Eustice: I am regularly contacted by students in schools around the country on this great challenge. We have made some very important steps forward with the ban on some single-use plastics, and we intend to go further with such bans, and the levy on single-use carrier bags. We have, in our flagship Environment Bill, the proposal for extended producer responsibility, which will make the people who manufacture goods and use the packaging responsible for its recycling at the end of its life. That will be a significant change that will help reduce the use of plastics.

[903095] **Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): The annual scientific advice on fish stocks provided by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea is a crucial element in determining sustainable fisheries in European waters, but there are concerns that without an independent peer review process the Government may take that wholesale without considering other elements such as social or economic concerns. What steps are the Government taking to ensure there is a whole-industry process that takes all these factors into account when determining total allowable catch and quota for the year ahead?

George Eustice: The UK Government work very closely with ICES. Indeed, our chief fisheries scientist at the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science is the deputy president of ICES. ICES regularly receives submissions from CEFAS, and where we believe its methodology is incorrect, wrong or missing certain things, it is often our scientists in CEFAS who help to update that information. Of course, when we set quotas annually and set our position on that, we take into account a range of factors—principally the ICES advice, but other factors as well.

[903093] **Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): Almost 60% of people in England are living in areas where levels of toxic air pollution exceeded legal limits last year. Putney High Street and other local main streets are some of the most polluted streets in the UK, so my constituents know the dangers of air pollution only too well. Why has the Secretary of State rejected every attempt to include World Health Organisation air quality targets in the Environment Bill, and will he commit to doing this when the Bill returns to the House later this year?

George Eustice: We are doing a very detailed piece of work on all the targets we intend to set under the Environment Bill, including on air quality, but also on

water, biodiversity, and waste and resource management. We are looking very closely at two particular approaches to air quality. One is a concentration target for PM_{2.5}—and I know there have been representations from people that it should be 10 micrograms—and the other is population exposure.

[903096] [R] **Bill Wiggin** (North Herefordshire) (Con) [V]: As I understand it, the DIVA test is being piloted at the moment. When can we expect it on farm, and if we must wait for approval, why has the Secretary of State cancelled culling licences before approval has been given?

George Eustice: We have not cancelled culling licences, but it is the case that the intensive four-year culls in many parts of the country have run their course and have therefore ended. To answer my hon. Friend's question, we are running field trials at the moment on that DIVA test, and we plan to have that vaccine in 2025.

[903107] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Shortages of workers in warehouses and food-processing centres across the UK are having a real impact on packaging food for supermarket shelves, with Tesco bosses warning that every week 48 tonnes of food is wasted. This is exacerbated by an estimated 100,000 shortage of HGV drivers. What interventions will the Secretary of State make to address this shocking state of affairs?

George Eustice: The Department for Transport has already announced some plans to increase the speed of driver testing and to deal with some of those logistics issues. Secondly, we are working across Government to ensure that where isolation is needed we protect particularly important strategic infrastructure.

[903098] **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con) [V]: I am sure the Secretary of State was shocked to see the huge volumes of litter left around Wembley and London's west end after the Euro final. He referred earlier to extended producer responsibility for packaging. That seeks to put the blame for litter on manufacturers, making them responsible for the cost of the clean-up. Does he agree that this was all caused by illegal actions of the public, and while it is important to consider business responsibility, should the Government not also look to ensure that their citizens behave responsibly?

George Eustice: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We all have a role to play in this; people should take responsibility for their litter. We have taken some steps, such as fixed penalty notices so we can issue on-the-spot fines to people who do litter, but we need a culture change in this area.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for South Norfolk, representing the Public Accounts Commission, was asked—

NAO Report on Local Government and Net Zero: Government Response

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What the planned timescale is for a response by the Government to the National Audit Office's report on local government and net zero in England, published in July 2021.

[903180]

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con) [V]: The National Audit Office produced an important report recently considering how effectively central Government and local authorities in England are collaborating on net zero. The report emphasised the need for clear roles and responsibilities and for ensuring that local authorities have the right resources and skills to tackle net zero. The question of when the Government will respond is a matter for Government, but I can tell my hon. Friend that my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), the Chairman of the Environmental Audit Committee, told me this morning that his Committee will be taking evidence on this National Audit Office report on Wednesday 8 September.

Mr Hollobone: The National Audit Office report concludes that there are serious weaknesses in the Government's approach to working with over 350 local councils in England on decarbonisation owing to a lack of clarity on the councils' overall roles, piecemeal funding and diffuse accountabilities. Will my hon. Friend encourage the Public Accounts Committee to also scrutinise the Government's response to this important report when it is eventually published?

Mr Bacon: As my hon. Friend will know, the Public Accounts Committee approves the NAO's strategy and budgets and does not involve itself in individual reports, but he will also know that the National Audit Office report recommends that central Government carry out an analysis of the net zero funding available to local authorities, and it has highlighted that, despite the budget available going from £74 million in 2019-20 to £1.2 billion in 2020-21, the approach remains fragmented, so I hear what my hon. Friend says.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

Social Prescribing

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps the Church of England is taking to support social prescribing within its communities. [903182]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous) [V]: May I first apologise to you, Mr Speaker, and all Members participating for not being present in person as I am required to self-isolate at home?

I am very pleased the hon. Lady has asked this question because, like her, I am a big supporter of social prescribing, and I am delighted to be able to tell her that the Church of England is a member of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs green social prescribing advisory board and that we work closely with the members of the National Academy for Social Prescribing.

Rachael Maskell: While hospital chaplains play a crucial role in providing support within our NHS, our community chaplains and clergy are highly trained professionals and could play a far more integral role in the provision of community health, not least as primary

care is completely overwhelmed currently. What further discussions have taken place between the Church Commissioners and the Department of Health and Social Care and also clergy and their local primary care networks on how they can support the social prescribing agenda in their communities?

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for praising the valuable work that clergy do in this area. Examples of Church social prescribing include our therapeutic gardening projects, often in urban areas, and the new cycle routes to all our 42 cathedrals. Nearer to her, the Joyful Connections café at St Luke's church in York is linked to a GP social prescribing scheme and has run dementia-friendly church services. Indeed, a 2018 *American Journal of Epidemiology* study showed the positive impact on wellbeing and mental health of faith in Jesus and being a Church member.

Public Worship and Singing in Church

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): What guidance the Church of England is providing on (a) singing in church and (b) public worship following the move to step 4 of the covid-19 road map on 19 July 2021. [903183]

Andrew Selous [V]: The Church has published fresh guidance to help clergy and parochial church councils in their decision making, recognising that the circumstances in each parish may differ for space, age and demographic reasons.

Caroline Ansell: It has been nearly a year since people in churches could lift their voices in song, and this Sunday there will be joy. But for some church leaders, some concern seems to remain, despite the very well established and known physical and mental benefits associated with singing. Does my hon. Friend agree that those benefits should be very much in the hearts and minds of decision makers as they look at how to progress this summer?

Mr Speaker: Let us see if Andrew Selous can sing his answer.

Andrew Selous: Just like my hon. Friend, I am very much looking forward to being able to sing in church again—and if it stopped raining or being a heatwave, we could even worship outside. Clergy will want to do what is right in their own churches and cathedrals, recognising that we are many members within one body and are called to be responsible to and for one another.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

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

Elections Bill: Electoral Commission's Discharge of Functions

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What assessment the Committee has made of the potential effect of the proposal in the Elections Bill to introduce a strategy and policy statement for the Electoral Commission on the ability of the commission to discharge its functions. [903184]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester): Any changes to the commission's accountability are a matter for the UK Parliament through statute and not the Speaker's Committee. The Elections Bill was introduced to the House earlier this month. Members will have the opportunity to debate the proposals relating to the Electoral Commission during the passage of the Bill. The commission will provide briefings for parliamentarians to support their considerations of the Bill's content and impact, covering the full scope of the measures proposed.

Gavin Newlands [V]: I thank the hon. Member for that response, but under the Government's proposals in the Elections Bill, the Electoral Commission's powers to ensure that criminal offences under electoral law are prosecuted will be drastically curtailed. Given the numerous instances over recent years of sharp practice and outright criminality, and the corrupting influence of dark money in our democratic processes, will the Electoral Commission be able to fulfil its basic remit and properly regulate donations and spending if the Bill is passed?

Christian Matheson: The Electoral Commission tells me that effective enforcement when the rules are broken gives voters and campaigners confidence in the system. Where any political party or campaigner deliberately or recklessly breaks electoral law, voters have the right to expect that they will face prosecution. The Government do not consider prosecution to be an area of work that the commission should undertake. If the Elections Bill is passed, the commission will work with the Government and other prosecuting authorities to ensure that there is no regulatory gap across the full range of offences. The commission will retain a range of other powers and access to civil sanctions to continue its important work in regulating political finance.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

Persecution for Religion or Belief

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What assessment the Church of England has made of trends in the level of persecution of people for their religion or belief in 2021. [903185]

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): What assessment the Church of England has made of trends in the level of persecution of people for their religion or belief in 2021. [903188]

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): What assessment the Church of England has made of trends in the level of persecution of people for their religion or belief in 2021. [903189]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous) [V]: I am enormously grateful to all three of my right hon. and hon. Friends for continuing to bring the House's attention to the ongoing, horrific levels of persecution of people for their religion or belief.

Sir Desmond Swayne: How concerned is my hon. Friend about the rise of persecution of Christians in India, and is there anything to be done?

Andrew Selous: My right hon. Friend is right about the reports that keep coming out of India. The Church is pressing the Government to see India as a country of particular concern where targeted sanctions on individuals and entities responsible for severe violations of religious freedom may be needed. Overseas development assistance should be used to advance the human rights of people of all faiths in India.

Alexander Stafford: My hon. Friend will be aware of the terrible conflict currently raging in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. There have been disturbing reports of violence against Christians and shocking allegations that priests and nuns have been attacked and killed. What is the Church doing to help ensure that Christians are protected in Tigray and that Ethiopia's religious diversity is safeguarded?

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the situation in Tigray is truly desperate. Both churches and mosques are being attacked and looted and, in some cases, their worshippers killed. Our bishops have raised their concerns forcefully with the Ethiopian ambassador and have asked our Ministers to relay their concerns to the newly elected Ethiopian Government.

Jacob Young: In Nigeria, violence against Christians is ongoing. Since December, there have been 10 mass kidnappings and repeated attacks on churches and religious leaders. The week before last, 30 people were killed and 200 homes and four churches were destroyed. What is the Church doing to bring that to global leaders' attention so that this appalling suffering can be brought to an end?

Andrew Selous: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. We sometimes need to pause for a moment to take in the enormity of what is happening. The Church of England continues to press the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to provide the financial and technical assistance necessary to address these horrendous violations of religious freedom. The Church is also working to enable parliamentarians in Nigeria and elsewhere to hold to account those who perpetuate such horrific violence. These victims will not be forgotten by us.

PARLIAMENTARY WORKS SPONSOR BODY

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

Restoration and Renewal

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): What recent estimate that body has made of the total cost of the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster. [903190]

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire): The Sponsor Body, supported by the Delivery Authority, is currently developing the detailed plan that will for the first time give an accurate sense of the costs and timescales and the full detail of the work needed for restoration and renewal. It will be put before both Houses for a decision before works commence. Securing best value for money is fundamental.

David Simmonds [V]: Given that the House has debated the subject numerous times, supported the Joint Committee's 2016 proposal and passed the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019, does my right hon. Friend agree that continually re-examining the scope and cost of the project increases the risk that we are not making our national Parliament fit for purpose and runs the risk of us having our own Notre-Dame moment with our beautiful and historic building?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is right to mention the terrible fire at Notre-Dame, which serves as a reminder to us all of the risk to our great heritage assets. He is also right that putting off works tends to increase costs eventually, so I agree entirely about the time-sensitivity of action and thank him for his timely reminder.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

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

Voter ID: Electoral Fraud

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What assessment the commission has made of the adequacy of the data on electoral fraud used in support of Government proposals to introduce voter ID. [903194]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester): The commission collects and annually publishes data from all UK police forces on allegations of electoral fraud. The data show that the UK has low levels of proven fraud. In 2019, police forces across the UK recorded 34 cases of alleged personation in polling stations, which resulted in one conviction and one police caution. Cases of electoral fraud that are not reported to the police will not be captured in that data. The commission has no reliable method to estimate how much electoral fraud goes unreported.

Mr Carmichael: If the data show low levels, it is curious that the commission should have concluded that some measure of voter identification was necessary. May I ask the hon. Member to convey to the commission the view that, in fact, a rather more robust and substantial data-gathering exercise is required before the case can truly be said to be made for changes in voter identification?

Christian Matheson: I will indeed convey that. The commission has highlighted that polling station voting in Great Britain remains vulnerable to fraud since there are no checks in place to prevent somebody from claiming to be an elector and voting in their name. That distinguishes voting at polling stations from other parts of the electoral process where identity checks already exist, such as voter registration and postal voting. The commission's public opinion research shows that this issue concerns voters, but I will pass on the right hon. Member's view to the commission.

Voter ID: Electoral Participation

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What recent assessment the Committee has made on the potential effect of proposed voter ID laws on electoral participation. [903195]

Christian Matheson: The commission's independent evaluation of the Government's pilots held in 2018 and 2019 found that a large majority of people already had access to the forms of ID that were used in these pilots. There was no evidence that levels of turnout in the pilot scheme areas were significantly affected by the requirement for voters to show ID at polling stations. However, the commission was not able to draw a definitive conclusion from the pilots about the impact of a voter ID requirement, particularly for a national poll with high levels of turnout. The sociodemographic profiles of the pilot areas are also not fully representative of many areas of Great Britain. The commission has recommended that any ID requirements should be secure, accessible and realistically deliverable. The detail of the Government's proposals for a free, locally issued voter ID card will be key to ensuring that those who do not have another form of photo ID can vote.

Andrew Gwynne [V]: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. He knows that in the 2019 general election there were over 47 million people registered to vote and only six convictions for electoral fraud—a rate of less than 0.00001%. He knows that there are fears that mandatory voter ID could suppress turnout and discourage voting in some communities. I do not want that, he does not want that, and I do not believe any MP wants to exclude people from voting. With that in mind, will he tell the House what more the Electoral Commission is doing to try to increase participation and turnout in elections?

Christian Matheson: Increasing participation is one of the Electoral Commission's core missions. It tells me that it undertakes significant public awareness activity ahead of major polls to ensure that voters can understand how to participate and have their say with confidence. This May, the period of its voter registration campaign, saw over 1 million applications to register across Great Britain, breaking its targets. If the voter ID requirement is passed into law, the commission will be responsible for new public awareness activity to ensure that voters can understand the new requirements. This would significantly focus on audiences least likely to have the required identification and so most likely to need access to the proposed free voter card.

PARLIAMENTARY WORKS SPONSOR BODY

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

Restoration and Renewal: Opportunities for Harrogate and Knaresborough

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What assessment that body has made of the procurement opportunities for businesses in Harrogate and Knaresborough constituency as part of the restoration and renewal programme. [903196]

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire): Restoring Parliament will use UK materials wherever possible and create jobs and apprenticeships in the supply chain across the UK, from high-tech design to traditional stonemasonry. My

hon. Friend will be pleased to know that the project has already engaged with a Harrogate business providing professional services on procuring works on a value-for-money and UK-wide basis.

Andrew Jones: I am grateful to hear that—I did not know about that Harrogate business. In addition to promoting opportunities for businesses in Harrogate and Knaresborough, I was trying to get at an underlying point: the wider the contracts and benefits of the restoration project are spread around our country, the broader the support will be for the large sum of money involved in it. I am sure we have all heard people say, "You lot down in Westminster—", as if Parliament has nothing to do with them. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this project has the capacity to either compound or militate against that?

Damian Hinds: I do agree. My hon. Friend is right: it will be a large sum of money, and it is essential not only that best value is secured for that money, but that the benefits of it are spread, and visibly so, across the country. The programme is currently working on its supply chain plans and is already recruiting. The shared apprenticeship scheme is an example of an innovative approach to make sure that smaller firms can also share in the benefits of the programme.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

Church Repairs: VAT

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What assessment the commissioners have made of the effect of the charging of VAT on church repairs on the affordability of undertaking those repairs. [903204]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous) [V]: The Church believes strongly that it does not make sense to put value added tax on the repair and restoration of listed buildings. While the Church is grateful that the Government have extended the listed places of worship grant scheme to refund this VAT for another year, we cannot continue with these short-term, sticking-plaster measures. We need to put the maintenance of our listed buildings on a sustainable basis.

Matt Western: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his response. I am sure he will be aware that, in 2019, Historic England commissioned a report into the economic value of and repairs to a sample of 30 churches and discovered consequential costs of 26% to those projects. Obviously, if VAT is charged, it can be claimed back under the listed places of worship grant scheme, as he said. In two cases in my constituency—St Mary's church, Warwick, and All Saints parish church in Leamington—that consequential cost could be up to £750,000 for both. Does he agree that we should just be scrapping VAT on these projects?

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that when regular maintenance is not done, the final costs are much higher. We have had other one-off

grants in the past, such as the roof repair fund, which we have been grateful for but which have not provided a long-term solution. Having left the European Union, the Government have gained new tax freedoms and could use them to permanently reduce or, even better, zero-rate value added tax on the repairs and restoration of listed buildings.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

House of Commons Staff: Covid-19 Secure Workplace

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps the Commission is taking to ensure a covid-19 secure workplace for House of Commons staff following the lifting of restrictions on 19 July 2021. [903210]

Sir Charles Walker (Bromborough): The House of Commons Commission has ensured that the House service has implemented the “Working safely during coronavirus” guidance to ensure that we remain a covid-secure workplace. At every stage of the Government’s road map, or when updated guidance has been published, the parliamentary covid risk assessment has been reviewed and updated to ensure that the appropriate mitigations are put in place.

Chi Onwurah: I echo your repeated thanks, Mr Speaker, to the members of staff of the House of Commons, who do so much to ensure the smooth and safe proceedings of the House.

Members of the House travel extensively to our constituencies and within our constituencies. Being gregarious is almost a job requirement—we meet lots of people—yet there is no requirement on us to wear a mask in this place. Will the hon. Member give further consideration to what requirements can be placed on Members of this House to better protect those who do so much to protect us?

Sir Charles Walker: I would like to thank the staff as well. We are all gregarious—not just Members of Parliament, but House staff. I hope that when they are not looking after us, they are out enjoying the restaurants, clubs and bars of London that are reopening. Of course, our protective embrace cannot cover them there. However, face coverings remain one of the many mitigations available to the House to manage the risk of covid. The Commission continues to support their use, in line with

national guidance, but the Speaker has no power to prevent democratically elected Members from coming on to the estate or into the Chamber when the House is sitting. There is therefore no meaningful way to enforce a requirement on Members to wear a face covering in the Chamber, but they are strongly encouraged to do so.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—
Anti-Racism Taskforce Recommendations

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): What recent steps the Church of England has taken to progress implementation of the anti-racism taskforce recommendations. [903214]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous) [V]: The Church is hugely appreciative of the work of the archbishops’ anti-racism taskforce. It has already committed to implementing 34 of the taskforce’s 39 recommendations and is keeping the other five under review.

Janet Daby [V]: The Second Church Estates Commissioner appreciates, as I do, the importance of cultural change in the Church. Clergy from diverse backgrounds must be supported and given equal opportunities, from new ordinands settling in to those moving towards more senior roles. What powers will the new commission led by Lord Boateng have to hold the Church to account as it enters the implementation stage?

Andrew Selous: As the hon. Lady says, in the autumn a new racial justice commission will start work under the chairmanship of Lord Boateng and with Lord Wei as a member. I am delighted to say that we have the highest number of recommendations for stipendiary ordained ministry training in a generation: almost 600, of which 10.9% are from minority ethnic backgrounds—a 2% increase on the previous year. The Church is making gradual but steady progress to make sure that its clergy look like the nation it serves, and the racial justice commission will certainly hold the Church to account on future progress.

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

10.33 am

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Update

10.37 am

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister to make his statement, I have to say that I am far from happy that yesterday the House heard from a Health Minister giving an update with no mention at all of the NHS pay deal, which is a point of great political interest. I find it hard to believe that any negotiations were still going on beyond that time. I urge the Government again to ensure that the House is the first, not the last, to know. It is not my fault that the Secretary of State got pinged, and if he wants to make announcements from his garden, he can do so, but somebody could have been here and Ministers could have shared that information with us. Glorifying in the sunshine should not detract from this House hearing an announcement when it is made. It matters to all of us—we all have hospitals in our constituencies, and we all have constituents who work for the NHS, so the clear message once again is that this House should be told. Now then, let us come to a man who has come to the House to make a statement. I call Minister Nadhim Zahawi to make a statement.

The Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment (Nadhim Zahawi): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and may I offer the apologies of the Secretary of State and the Department of Health and Social Care on the inability of the Department to make a statement on the acceptance by the independent pay review body that NHS staff should get 3%? I hope you will accept my apology on behalf of the Secretary of State, as he is self-isolating.

Mr Speaker: I really do appreciate that, and the Minister is so courteous, but it makes it worse that a Minister was actually at the Dispatch Box when all that was going on outside, and for them to turn to the House and say, “I can’t tell you”—not “I don’t know”, but “I can’t tell you”—is even more worrying.

Nadhim Zahawi: You make a very powerful point, Mr Speaker.

Before I turn to my remarks today, I want to say something to you, Mr Speaker. I want to take a moment ahead of the House rising for the summer recess to thank you, sir, and everyone who works here in Parliament, your whole team, for everything you have done to keep us all safe over the past few months. The fact that we have kept our democracy running, and running safely, at this time of crisis is an incredible achievement, and we are all extremely grateful to you and your team.

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the covid-19 pandemic. This week, we have taken a decisive step forward, taking step 4 on our road map and carefully easing more of the restrictions that have governed our daily lives. Although we are moving forward, we must remember that we are doing so with caution, because the pandemic is not yet over. The average number of daily cases in England is around 41,000 and hospitalisations and deaths are rising too, although at a much lower level than when we had that number of cases during previous waves. So even as we take step 4, we urge everyone to think about what they can do to make a real difference.

Today, we are launching a new campaign to encourage everyone to keep taking the little steps that have got us this far, such as wearing face coverings in crowded public areas, making sure that rooms are well ventilated and getting regular rapid tests. We are also supporting businesses and organisations, helping them to manage the risk of transmission within their venues, including through the use of the NHS covid pass for domestic use. I know that this has been of great interest to Members and want to use this opportunity to reiterate the policy and offer the House the chance to have its say.

This week, after a successful trial, we have rolled out the NHS covid pass, which allows people safely and securely to demonstrate their covid status, whether that is proof of vaccination status, test results or natural immunity. Anyone can access a pass via the NHS app, the NHS website or by calling 119 and asking for a letter to demonstrate vaccine status. People will also be able to demonstrate proof of a negative test result.

Although we do not encourage its use in essential settings such as supermarkets, other businesses and organisations in England can adopt the pass as a means of entry, where it is suitable for their venue or premises and when they can see its potential to keep their clients or customers safe. For proprietors of venues and events where large numbers are likely to gather and mix with people from outside their household for prolonged periods, deploying the pass is the right thing to do. The pass has an important role to play in slowing the spread of the virus, so we reserve the right to mandate its use in future.

Next, I wish to update the House on vaccination as a condition of entry. We all know the benefits that both doses of a vaccine can bring. Data from Public Health England estimates that two doses of a covid vaccine offers protection of around 96% against hospitalisation. Today, we have new data from Public Health England that estimates that the vaccination programme in England alone has prevented 52,600 hospitalisations. That is up 6,300 from two weeks ago and is a fitting example of the protective wall that our vaccination programme has given us—a wall that is getting stronger every day. That protection has allowed us carefully to ease restrictions over the past few months, but we must do so in a way that is mindful of the benefits that both doses of the vaccine can bring. This strategy—this philosophy—will underpin our approach over the critical next few months.

This week, as part of our step 4 measures, we allowed fully vaccinated adults and all children to return from amber-list countries without quarantine—with the exception of those returning from France, because of the persistent presence of cases of the beta variant. From 16 August, children, under-18s and people who are fully vaccinated will no longer need to self-isolate as contacts, given their reduced risk of catching and passing on the disease. As I said when I updated the House on Monday, at the end of September we plan to make full vaccination a condition of entry to those high-risk settings where large crowds gather and interact. By that point everyone aged 18 and over will have had the chance to be fully vaccinated, so everyone will have had the opportunity to gain the maximum possible protection.

As a condition of entry to such venues, people will have to show that they are fully vaccinated, and proof of a negative test will no longer be sufficient. This is not

a step that we take lightly, but throughout the pandemic, like Governments across the world—in Singapore, Australia, Germany and France—we have had to adapt our approach to meet the threats of this deadly virus. This step is no different. We will always keep all our measures under review, with the goal of returning to the freedoms we love and cherish.

We should all be proud of the enthusiasm for and uptake of our vaccination programme. Now, 88% of all adults have had a first dose and 69% have had both. That uptake means that the latest Office for National Statistics data shows that nine in 10 adults now have covid-19 antibodies. However, there are still many people who are unprotected, including 34% of people aged 18 to 29 who have not had either dose. Ahead of the summer recess, I would like once again to urge everyone to come forward and get both doses, to protect themselves and to protect their loved ones and their community.

Our battle against this virus is not the kind of battle where we can simply declare victory and move on with our lives. Instead, we must learn to live with the virus, doing whatever we can to slow its spread while we maintain the vital defences that will keep us safe. That is exactly what this Government will do and I commend the statement to the House.

10.46 am

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. Let us be frank: it was a shambles yesterday. It was an insult to the House and a let-down for health and care staff.

Ministers have been dragged kicking and screaming to this 3% settlement. Can the Minister accept—and does he accept—that it is not an NHS-wide settlement, as it does not cover the health and care workforce who do not fall under the pay review body? For example, it does not cover our junior doctors who have had an intense year caring for sick patients on ventilators, who have been redeployed to other sites across the NHS and who have seen their training disrupted. Will the junior doctors get a pay rise, especially given that the pay review body, in paragraph 10.6 of its report, urges the Government to recognise the role of doctors who are out of scope? Will all health staff who work in public health receive the settlement? Care workers are obviously not covered by the pay review, and we know how valuable they are, so will care workers finally get the real living wage that they deserve?

How will the pay settlement be funded? NHS trusts do not even know what their budget will be beyond September. The Health Secretary has said that the pay settlement costs £2.2 billion, so where is that £2.2 billion coming from? Is he expecting trusts and general practice to find it from their existing budgets? At a time when the NHS is in a summer crisis, with covid admissions increasing and more patients on ventilators in hospitals, with operations being cancelled again and waiting times growing because of the pressures the NHS is under, rather than getting a funded settlement for the NHS we have seen this week briefing and counter-briefing from the Health Secretary, the Chancellor and Downing Street about what may or may not be coming for health and social care.

The NHS needs more investment now to cope with the pressures that it is under. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will break their manifesto pledge to increase national insurance, or is the Business Secretary correct in what he said this morning? He said:

“I don’t see how we could increase national insurance”.

The Prime Minister promised, on the steps of Downing Street two years ago this Saturday, that he would have a social care plan, but this is not a plan for health and social care; it is a Government in disarray.

That brings me on to the so-called pingdemic, with the problems of isolation. The problems of isolation that we are seeing are a symptom of what happens when Ministers allow infections to get out of control. The Government are apparently U-turning today and agreeing a list of workers who could be exempt from isolation, based on a negative PCR test. With infections running at more than 50,000 a day, and possibly on the way up to 100,000 a day, can the Minister absolutely guarantee that PCR testing capacity will be available to cope with the inevitable increased demand this summer?

If the Minister wants to avoid shutting society down, he needs to bring infections down, so why have the Government ruled out extending statutory sick pay to the lowest-paid, and what is he doing to drive up the vaccination rate among younger adults? He knows that allowing infections to rise among that cohort sets his vaccination programme back, given that somebody has to wait 28 days post-infection for vaccination.

Today the Minister has repeated his support for vaccine passports. Can he explain why he thinks it is safe to go out clubbing into the early hours this Friday, but in September it is only safe to go out clubbing if everybody is double-jabbed? Can he confirm when the relevant statutory instrument will be laid, and when the vote will be on introducing those passports?

The Minister has a proposal for nightclubs in September, but does he have a proposal for schools in September? A million children have been off school recently, so, as we asked him on Monday, will he use this summer to install air filtration units in schools in time for September, and is he considering bringing mask-wearing back in schools?

Finally, Mr Speaker, may I, like the Minister and others across the House, thank you, and all the staff especially, for the extraordinary work that you have put in, in these last 12 months, to ensure the smooth running of Parliament in these most unprecedented of circumstances? I hope you are all able to have a suitable rest over the summer recess.

Nadhim Zahawi: The right hon. Gentleman asks who is included in the 3% pay rise recommended by the independent NHS Pay Review Body. They are the 1 million NHS staff, including nurses, paramedics, consultants and, of course, salaried GPs. The junior doctors he mentions have a separate, multi-year pay rise over three years, amounting to 8%.

The right hon. Gentleman asks about the capacity for testing. I looked at that before coming to the House, and the capacity currently for PCR tests is not 600,000 but 640,000 a day, according to the latest data that I looked at. He asks about schools. There will be two supervised tests for schools. He knows that in Monday’s statement we announced our acceptance of the JCVI

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

guidelines on vaccinating vulnerable children, vaccinating children who live with vulnerable adults, and vaccinating those who are 17 but within three months of their 18th birthday. The JCVI will keep under review the vaccination of healthy children as more data becomes available from countries such as the United States of America and Israel.

The right hon. Gentleman asked a question around the covid vaccination pass and nightclubs, other crowded unstructured indoor settings such as music venues, large unstructured outdoor events such as business events and festivals, and very large structured events, such as business events, music and spectator sport events. They are the ones that we are most concerned about. We have seen other countries, whether it is Holland or Italy, opening nightclubs and having to reverse that decision rapidly. What we are attempting to do, and the reason we have the covid vaccination pass in place, is to work with industry while we give people over the age of 18 the chance to become double-vaccinated. It would be hugely unfair to bring in that policy immediately. Giving people until the end of September is the right thing to do, while at the same time allowing businesses to open safely, using the app now—because the app went live and the industry is very much engaging with it.

There are no easy decisions on anything to do with this virus. That is the one thing we have learned. The most effective tool we have against the virus is, of course, the vaccine programme, followed by the tool of self-isolation. If we want to get back to normal and get our lives back, we need to transition this virus from pandemic to endemic—from pandemic to manageable menace—as quickly and as safely as possible. If we release all restrictions now, including self-isolation, which I am sure a number of colleagues will ask about today, we risk the number of infections, which the shadow Secretary of State worries about as I do, rising rapidly. That could risk the transition of this virus.

We are working flat out with industry. I commend companies such as Lidl, which knows it is under pressure but will work through it with us. We will allow critical, frontline and key workers and health and social care workers to get back to work if they take a negative test, as I announced on Monday. By 16 August, everyone who is double-vaccinated will be able to do that.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): May I start by wishing you and your family a ping-free summer, Mr Speaker? Thank you for upholding the values of this House over the past few months.

The Minister of State will have heard of YouGov, which said this week that a tenth of the people who had the NHS covid app have deleted it, and that a further fifth are considering doing so. Given that he made his living from listening to public opinion, does he not think it is time for the Government to listen to public opinion and immediately scrap the 10-day isolation requirement for double-jabbed people who are pinged, in favour of having to isolate until they take a negative PCR test? Otherwise we risk losing social consent for this very important weapon against the virus.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would briefly like to ask you about the issue we were not able to ask Ministers about in the House yesterday, which is the

decision on NHS pay. I support the decision to accept the pay review body's recommendations. It is the right thing to do, but it costs £1.5 billion. Can the Minister confirm it will not be paid for by cuts to other parts of the NHS budget? If it is going to be funded through a new national insurance rise for health and social care, as *The Times* says today, will he confirm that the funding for social care will be ring-fenced, so that we do not have a situation in which social care, once again, loses out because of pressures in the NHS?

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman said “you,” but I was not responsible for the decision yesterday.

Nadhim Zahawi: I will take those questions in reverse order. I thank the Chairman of the Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), for his always diligent and thoughtful questions. As he will know, we gave the NHS in England an historic settlement in 2018 that will see its budget rise by £33.9 billion by 2023-24. We have provided over £27 billion to support the NHS in England since the start of the pandemic, including £9.7 billion so far for 2021-22. We will continue to make sure the NHS has everything it needs to continue supporting its staff and providing excellent care to the public, throughout the pandemic and beyond.

My right hon. Friend specifically asked about social care, and I know the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister are committed to making sure we deliver on our social care promise by the end of this year.

Public compliance is incredibly important, and I thank each and every person who has come forward and got themselves protected. Over the past few days, we have seen an almost doubling of the number of people going on to the NHS website to book appointments. There has almost been a doubling of appointments, too, which is incredible, considering where we are at the moment—we are almost touching 90% of all adults. These are the hard yards, and people are still coming forward. There are no easy decisions on this, as I said in answer to the shadow Health Secretary. We know that our most effective tool is the vaccination, but the second most effective is self-isolation. We are attempting to transition this virus from pandemic to endemic status. If we allow all these things to happen too rapidly and people then decide not to self-isolate, we run the risk of infection rates running away with us and challenging the strategy of our being the first major economy to transition. So we are working with business, and we are working flat out with the frontline critical infrastructure and key workers to get that guidance out. I am sure that colleagues in this House will be the first to receive it—I will make sure of that, even during recess.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: I wish you, colleagues and all the House staff a safe and happy summer recess, Mr Speaker. Clearly, vaccination is critical to fighting this pandemic. We all need to encourage uptake among younger adults, but is the Minister in a position to guarantee sufficient supplies of Pfizer or Moderna vaccines to vaccinate them before the end of September? Whether this is done legally, as in the case of care homes staff, or through excluding people from social activities, does he recognise that making vaccination mandatory can increase distrust

among those who are hesitant and drive them to become outright vaccine refusers? Despite the talk about caution, covid cases in England were already surging when the Government ploughed ahead with lifting all legal restrictions on Monday. Although vaccination has reduced the hospitalisation rate to between 2% and 3%, the Secretary of State suggested that covid cases could soar to 100,000 a day, which would result in 2,000 to 3,000 admissions, which is similar to what happened in the first wave. Does the Minister really not recognise that that would put health services under enormous pressure and cause the patient backlog to grow further? Are the Government even considering the impact of uncontrolled virus spread on vulnerable people, the incidence of long covid or the risk of generating yet another variant, with even greater vaccine resistance than delta? Finally, what contingencies are being put in place in case during recess the Government need to reintroduce covid restrictions, as has happened in Israel and the Netherlands?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Lady makes a number of important points, especially the final one, where she reminded the House, as I did in my statement, that a number of countries have opened up and then had to reverse some of their decisions, which is why we are being very careful to ensure that this transition is successful and then that transitioning the virus from pandemic to endemic status is as successful as possible. She asked about children's vaccination. She will know that the Scottish Health Minister, Humza Yousaf, has accepted, as the Welsh, Northern Irish and ourselves in England have done, the JCVI guidelines on vaccinating vulnerable children, children living with vulnerable adults and those approaching their 18th birthday. If the JCVI goes further, as it is reviewing more data on vaccinating all children, I assure her that we have available the supply of Pfizer and Moderna to undertake that, while we also continue to deliver on the double vaccinations of all adults by the end of September. She asked about the immunosuppressed and of course the guidelines have gone out on the precautionary measures that immunosuppressed people would take; similar to the rest of the country, they should be careful and wear masks in crowded indoor spaces—there is advice on ventilation as well. The JCVI has gone further in its interim advice for our booster campaign, where it has placed the immunosuppressed at the top of the priority list. That campaign will begin in early September—that is the operational target we are working to for beginning boosting and of course co-administering, wherever possible, the flu vaccination.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Given the massive opposition that there is among those who operate nightclubs and events, the decision of the Government to make the introduction of covid identity cards voluntary is probably a sensible one, but may I explore with the Minister what he means when he says, “We reserve the right to mandate their use in the future”? We might have hoped, Mr Speaker, that the right that the Government sought to reserve was the right to seek the permission of this House to make their use mandatory in the future. I hope that this was just a small piece of ministerial arrogance that led the Minister to mis-speak, but I would like his assurance that we will be given the opportunity to express a view on this before the mandatory use of covid identity cards is introduced.

Last week, I asked the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care a whole range of questions about the practical consequences of this voluntary scheme. I asked what constituted large events, who would be the judge of what they were, what was meant by encouraging businesses, and what would be the consequences for any businesses that resisted the encouragement from the Government. The Secretary of State had no answers to those questions. Will the Minister today answer the questions, if not necessarily for the benefit of the people in this House, then at least with a bit of respect to those who operate nightclubs, big events, restaurants, bars and others who have absolutely no idea what is going to be required of them?

Nadhim Zahawi: It is unlike the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) to accuse any colleague of being arrogant, and I certainly hope that I did not come across as such. He is always courteous and polite—I have certainly found him to be so over the years. He asks several important questions. On reserving the right, the Government will of course come back to the House if the decision is to mandate the double vaccination requirement for nightclubs, crowded unstructured indoor settings, large unstructured outdoor settings and, of course, the very large events such as business, music hall, and spectator sports events. In the meantime, we encourage the use of the NHS covid pass in facilities or at events where people are likely to be in close proximity to large numbers of people from other households. We are working with the sector. Indeed, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), met people from the sector yesterday, as he does regularly. The sector itself will have seen what has happened in other countries such as the Netherlands. It is in the interests of all of the sector and of businesses to reopen and reopen permanently, and not have to open and close, open and close, which is why we are working with the sector in this period and giving people a chance to get their double vaccinations by the end of September.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Just on that last point about the decision, the statement is very clear that the Government have decided. It says, “We plan to make full vaccination a condition of entry”. My reading of that is that a decision has been taken, so the Government need to come to the House to ask the House's permission to legislate; the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) was exactly right.

May I ask the Minister about the pingdemic? We have just had the data for last week. More than 600,000 people using the app were told to self-isolate. The Minister has set out clearly that, on 16 August, the right way to proceed is that those who have been double vaccinated will be advised to take a PCR test, and, if that is negative, they can then go about their business, reflecting the reduced risk of their being infected and therefore passing on the disease.

In a discussion this morning on the “Today” programme, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy was told that businesses in a key sector were operating in that way now, with the advice from the app, and he was asked whether that was appropriate and

[Mr Mark Harper]

safe. He said that it was not. If it is not safe now—I think it is safe—how does it suddenly become safe on 16 August? Given that it is safe on 16 August, because that is the Government's policy, can we not just implement it now? The danger is that large numbers of people will either delete or stop listening to the app, and then, when we get to 16 August, they will not be getting the advice to take a PCR test, and we will have actually made ourselves less safe and less well protected. I urge the Minister to think again and to bring it forward now, because people will then be taking tests when they are advised to. If he does not do that, people will simply stop listening, which is very dangerous for public health.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's questions, as always: challenging but nevertheless the right challenges to think through. As I said, there are no easy decisions in what we are attempting to do. We will, I hope, be one of the first nations, certainly one of the largest economies in the world, that will see a transition of this virus from pandemic to endemic status—to manageable menace—through our vaccination programme, which is our primary tool.

The second most effective method is to make sure that people do self-isolate: I take on board his point and the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt). That is why we are working flat out with critical infrastructure and key workers—of course with frontline NHS and social care staff, as I announced on Monday—to make sure that people have the ability to do a PCR test and then follow it up with a week or up to 10 days of daily lateral flow testing instead of self-isolation for 10 days. The honest truth is that there are no easy answers, because the very clear clinical advice and evidence is that if we do not do this carefully and slowly, we could risk the transition of the virus.

On the requirement around nightclubs by the end of September, I assure my right hon. Friend that we will be coming back to the House to make sure that it has an appropriate say on the matter. As we have seen with this virus in other countries, it is the right thing to do.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement and for all that has been done on the covid-19 vaccine roll-out. The Northern Ireland Assembly's Health Minister recently stated that at the end of July the closure of mass vaccination centres—for example, the SSE centre in Belfast—will come into force. The Minister in this House has today taken the opportunity through the press to urge people one last time to get the vaccine. Has he come to an assessment on the closure of mass vaccination centres in England, given the clear success of the vaccination process, and ever mindful that this autumn we will be doing a covid-19 vaccine booster process, which, along with the flu process, will add pressure to the health system? Will he ensure that there are options in place—for example, pharmacies and community centres—to bridge the gap?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank the hon. Member for his excellent question. He is absolutely right. We are preparing a pretty ambitious vaccination programme, beginning in early September, for the covid boost. The interim

advice from the JCVI could adjust as more clinical data comes through from the cov-boost trials that we are currently conducting. Wherever possible, we will co-administer flu vaccines at large scale. My big concern is that we have not had much flu circulating in communities and we could be in a position where in a bad flu year we could lose 20,000-plus people. Hence our ambitions are equally high for flu. We will look to co-administer wherever possible. We are looking to increase the number of pharmacies as well. We currently have over 600 pharmacies in the covid vaccination infrastructure, as well as the brilliant primary care networks, the hospitals and the vaccination centres. The cov-boost and the flu process will be equally ambitious as we look at the whole of the structure and how we utilise it, as well as making sure that GPs are able to get back to doing the work they need to do—looking after their patients.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I am seeing in Hyndburn and Haslingden that, as has been mentioned, there is a hesitancy in my age group to take up the vaccine. What work is being done with local authorities to target these groups and alleviate their fears, because the only way out is the vaccine and we really need to get that message across?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her excellent question and for the work that she does in her constituency to highlight the benefits of being vaccinated—and fully vaccinated. The work that has gone on in Hyndburn is tremendous. We are working with local government to ensure that the NHS has flexibility, whether that is to launch pop-up sites or to increase the hours of vaccination during this period of Eid celebration in order to encourage more of our Muslim fellow citizens to come forward and get vaccinated. Of course, we are ensuring that there is lots of messaging and that people are just pointed to information, including through hyper-local media as well as some of the media with which my hon. Friend's generation will be more familiar than mine, such as TikTok, social media influencers and YouTubers. That is all happening at scale. It is great to see that the number of appointments booked under the national booking system has almost doubled in the last couple of days, but there are also the walk-in centres, where people can just walk in and get their jab without an appointment.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): Mr Speaker, may I add my party's thanks to you, to the House staff and to everyone across these islands who has worked so hard to save and preserve life during the pandemic?

I want to pick up on a vital component of vaccination that I believe the Government need to give great attention to. It will not have escaped the Minister's attention, and anyone who has attended the regular briefings that we have had around the virus will have seen in Professor Van-Tam's heat maps the distribution and upward spread of the virus, whereby it seeds in the younger population and exponentially grows up through the ages.

I really want to ask the Minister why he thinks the JCVI are being extremely cautious in extending vaccination to 12 to 17-year-olds, given that the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention has now been vaccinating that population in the States—with some concerns, but,

I think, manageable numbers of concerns—and why we are not progressing more vigorously to vaccinate that population and are limiting it to those with underlying health concerns or those related to people with underlying health concerns. There is a fundamental advantage to vaccinating this group, because it will increase their wellbeing and improve their access to schooling after their holidays, but, more importantly, it acts as—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have to be quicker if we can or nobody else is going to get in today; that is not fair to other Members. Questions in a statement have to be short. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is going to finish in a second.

Neale Hanvey: I will finish now, Mr Speaker; I apologise.

Does the Minister not see the advantage of delivering those vaccines now, and what do we do if we decide that that needs to go live during the recess?

Nadhim Zahawi: That is a very important question. The JCVI is constantly reviewing the data from other countries that are vaccinating all children of 12 to 15 years old. Its concern has been centred around vaccinating healthy children. There is a very rare signal of myocarditis on first dose. The JCVI is awaiting more data on second dose. It will continue to review that and will come back to us, and, of course, we will come back to the House.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): In north-east Lincolnshire, the infection rate has been hovering at around 1,000 per 100,000 for the last couple of weeks, which is of obvious concern to my constituents. I am in regular touch with the Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust, which is doing an excellent job, but could the Minister reassure my constituents that if additional resources are required by the trust, the Department will provide them? The trust has had a big expansion in demand for A&E over the last few days and the trust management asks whether the Department could step up the campaign to encourage people to use the 111 service.

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend's constituency of Cleethorpes has now done 122,397 cumulative total of doses, which is a tremendous achievement. I will take away his request and come back to him once I have had the chance to discuss it with NHS England.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I must thank the Minister for our Friday mornings together. It is not just me; every Member of this House is grateful for that weekly fixture—the highlight Zoom-fest. Is he aware that there are already glitches in the shiny new NHS covid passport that he mentioned? Two of my constituents, Konnie and Charlie, have been going for a year for Novavax trials and now they are being treated as if they are vax deniers, with the texts they get from the NHS, and they are grounded. Another guy, Karl, returned to his native US to have his two jabs because he is not eligible for NHS treatment. He says that it is xenophobia that he cannot access events that Brits can. I am sure it is unintentional. People think that they are being punished for doing the right thing. Will the Minister rectify that?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am really grateful to the hon. Member for that excellent question, and I am grateful for her comments about our Friday morning meetings. Her constituents can rest assured that those who are in clinical trials, including the Novavax trial, will have their data on the NHS covid app as being fully vaccinated, whether they are receiving the placebo or the vaccine, across all trials. That is happening. I will take it offline to look at her constituents' case to make sure that that happens for them, because I am assured that the system already recognises that.

By the end of this month, UK nationals who have been vaccinated overseas will be able to talk to their GP, go through what vaccine they have had, and have it registered with the NHS that they have been vaccinated. The reason for the conversation with the GP is to make sure that whatever vaccine they have had is approved in the United Kingdom. Ultimately, there will be a co-ordination between the World Health Organisation, ourselves, the European regulator, the US regulator and other regulators around the world. Because we are working at speed, at the moment it is UK nationals and citizens who have had UK vaccinations who will be able to travel to amber list countries other than France and come back and not quarantine. We want to offer the same reciprocity as the 33 countries that recognise our app, and that will also happen very soon.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I warmly congratulate the Minister for working his socks off over the last year and doing such a tremendous job in vaccinating the nation. In Northamptonshire, the vaccine roll-out has been a tremendous success, with between 90% and 100% of each of the five-year cohorts above age 50 receiving both jabs, and over 67% of 18 to 24-year-olds already having received their first dose. Will the Minister join me in congratulating all the professionals and volunteers locally who have made possible that tremendous local success?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my hon. Friend for his work locally and for taking that local leadership, like many colleagues have, to get the message out that vaccines are safe and our way out of this pandemic. Of course I join him in congratulating the whole team—the professionals and the volunteers—on the tremendous effort they have made. The figure I have is 124,042 in the Northamptonshire sustainability and transformation partnership. Its numbers are tremendous; even among 18 to 24-year-olds, it is leading the way, at 67%. We want to get that number even higher as quickly as we can.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's acknowledgment that the virus is now endemic; indeed, the Government of Singapore have acknowledged that too. Unfortunately, Government dither on that may have scuppered the vaccine pass. Has the Minister had any indication from its diverse opponents of how the country can otherwise take a risk management approach, rather than the risk avoidance approach that has led, for example, to the pingdemic, or the wild west approach advocated by some on his own side, leading to a possible further lockdown? Will he also indicate whether the Treasury is actually engaged in this debate on the side of the economy and public finances—or is it still in Yellow Submarine mode, disappearing under the waves?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the right hon. Member's question. I would just remind him that the Treasury has put £407 billion to work to shelter the economy and people's livelihoods and, of course, protect jobs. He raises a number of important questions about looking at other countries. As I said earlier, these are all difficult decisions, but I think we are making the right, cautious decision as we transition—I hope—and see this virus move from pandemic to endemic status.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend give me a better sense of the scope of how the covid ID card may be used in the future? Would it apply to the London marathon? Would it apply to political gatherings: would someone need an ID card to attend a political gathering, whether supportive of or in opposition to the Government? Could he please rule out its use in educational settings such as sixth-form colleges or universities, which should be excluded? The focus now is on young adults, and the ID card should not be a passport to education or a denial of education.

Nadhim Zahawi: On the last question, I can certainly give my hon. Friend the assurance that in education or in any public buildings this will not be applicable. As to things such as the transport system or essential retail, that is our very strong commitment. Look, I keep repeating this message, but we know what we need to do. Part of what we are learning from the data here and around the world is about trying to work with industries, such as the nightclub industry and sports bodies, to make sure that we reopen fully as safely as possible and continue to be open. The worst thing for any industry or for any sport is to open and then, sadly, to have to shut down again, as people have seen around the world.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I listened very carefully to the Minister when he was saying that, for events where large numbers are likely to gather together and be mixing with people from outside their own household, deploying the pass would be the right thing to do. Given that, and to ensure that we keep in step with the public, do the Government intend that to apply here? Might they even reserve the right to mandate the adoption of the pass in this place, or is this another example of us and them?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the hon. Member's question. As I said in answer to the previous question, in public buildings such as this place, and of course in essential travel and essential retail, that will not be applicable. That is very clear.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con) [V]: Some 22,000 people died from seasonal flu in 2017-18, and the modelling suggests that this year's season will start early, be severe and affect younger people—a demographic that tends to go to mass events—than covid does. Have the Government also been considering mandating proof of flu vaccination, and can the Minister ensure that vaccination records are transportable between the NHS records of each of the home nations? That is not the case at the moment, to the huge frustration of those seeking second jabs or anticipating the need for the proof of vaccination that he has confirmed today.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's question, and for what he has done during this pandemic in vaccinating and protecting people and helping with the covid vaccination programme. He raises an important question about flu, which I addressed earlier. I am concerned about the flu season, which is why we are being ambitious and looking to co-administer wherever possible. The operational plan is to go early—in early September—for both the covid boost and the flu campaign. However, he will know that flu is not in the covid category in that it is endemic. We are hoping to transition covid towards where flu is with an annual vaccination programme, but it is a very different virus to deal with.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: On the vaccine roll-out, I would like to ask for the prioritisation of two groups. First, can unpaid carers be prioritised for boosters in the autumn? The JCVI has not put them on the priority list, but they were put in cohort 6 for earlier vaccines. Secondly, can I join my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) in asking for a solution to be found for the wonderful volunteers on the Novavax vaccine trial? They now find themselves not able to travel as they cannot get a vaccine certificate and their vaccines are not recognised in the EU. Will the Minister prioritise boosters for unpaid carers to ensure that they are fully protected this autumn? Will he also enable those trialists who have received live Novavax vaccines to have vaccine certificates?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the hon. Member's question. The Novavax trial participants will have their vaccine pass in the United Kingdom. We are working with other countries to make sure that that is recognised, but as far as the UK is concerned, they will be considered fully vaccinated, whether they have had the placebo or the vaccine. On her very good question on the booster campaign, the JCVI's interim advice is that phase 1 should be the old categories 1 to 4, plus the immuno-suppressed, and phase 2 should be categories 5 to 9, which include unpaid carers in category 6.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just say to everybody who is left, if we are short and quick on answers and questions, I will get everyone in? We are due to finish now, but I will give it a try.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con) [V]: Will the Minister join me in thanking Sylvia, Fahad and all the fantastic local team who have vaccinated more than 47,000 people in Honley, Slaithwaite and other pop-up sites across Kirklees? Can he respond to one of the questions they are regularly being asked, which is about the rationale of the JCVI guidance that there should be an eight-week minimum interval between jabs?

Nadhim Zahawi: I certainly join my hon. Friend in thanking Sylvia, Fahad and all the local team on the extraordinary work they have done. The JCVI advice on the eight-week interval is based on real-world data that suggests that it offers the highest level of protection in terms of antibodies and T cells. Anything below that—I know a number of colleagues have asked me this question—would not be advisable.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: Ministers should be aware of the fears of immunocompromised people. Unlike the Health Secretary, I know that the Minister is aware of the OCTAVE study. Does he know when it will be published? Can we have some plans for antibody testing? Immunocompromised people need to be allowed to make informed decisions. Has a ministerial directive been issued to the JCVI to investigate that? If people are seen to have low protection, what extra support are the Government looking to deliver for them?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for the hon. Member's questions. She knows—she and I discussed this on Friday morning—that there is OCTAVE and OCTAVE DUO as well. I know that OCTAVE is to report imminently, and I will share that data with colleagues on our group even when the House is in recess. I will make sure that happens as soon as we receive that data. We want to make sure that people are protected. There was some very encouraging data from Public Health England on the immunocompromised, with 74% production for some, not all, after two doses, but the hon. Member is quite right to point this out. We will look to vaccinate and protect them with a third dose—a booster dose—as the top of group 1 in phase 1 in September.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con) [V]: Nobody underestimates the huge challenges the Government face or the great success of the vaccination programme, but does the Minister recognise the frustration of the many hundreds of thousands who have been double-dosed but are pinged and self-isolating—following the guidelines—when they learn of the data suggesting how many people are turning off or deleting the NHS app, with Ministers reportedly advising businesses that this is only guidance? Does he not share my view that surely what is right on 16 August for the double-dosed is right now? Will he agree to consider implementing the measure as soon as possible so that businesses do not have to close, the hospitality sector does not suffer, and many of us do not self-isolate unnecessarily?

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point that he has made to me many times. It is important clinical guidance to people. It is important that people take personal and corporate responsibility, as we are seeing with some great companies, such as Lidl, which are coming under pressure at the moment because staff are having to self-isolate. As I said earlier, there are no easy decisions on this, but to be able to transition the virus from pandemic to endemic, we just need that careful, little bit more time until 16 August—it is not long to go—when everyone who is double-dosed will not have to self-isolate for 10 days.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab) [V]: We all know that a negative test is a crucial risk indicator. NHS staff are off work, restaurants and pubs are being forced to close, and there are empty supermarket shelves. This is a time-critical problem in essential parts of society, so when are the Government going to publish a list of sectors where staff can use a negative test result so that they can go to work now? Making employers apply for an exemption is simply not going to be enough, and the economy and society simply cannot wait until 16 August.

Nadhim Zahawi: In the interests of time, I should say that I have addressed this question fully. Suffice it to say that I gently disagree with the hon. Member in that society came together, as we saw with the vaccination programme, with 80,000 vaccinator volunteers and 200,000 other volunteers. People are doing the right thing, as are corporates. We are working flat out in terms of the critical workforce, critical infrastructure and the frontline, and we announced on Monday that this would apply also to NHS and social care staff.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I applaud the vaccination programme, but a number of my constituents have received the AstraZeneca vaccine from batches made in India, which is not recognised by the European Medical Agency. Will my hon. Friend reassure those constituents that they will be able to travel to Europe—to France and Italy, for instance?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his championing of his constituents' concerns. He is absolutely right to raise them, although I would say to him that the European regulator recognises all AstraZeneca Oxford vaccinations in the United Kingdom and recognises our pass. France has now issued clear guidance that it recognises all batches of the AstraZeneca Oxford vaccine, as well as most of the rest of Europe, and our regulator and the EMA are working with the Italian authorities to get that right. Suffice it to say that I also had a vaccine from one of those batches and it is an excellent vaccine.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab) [V]: Today it was announced that Australia and New Zealand have withdrawn from autumn's rugby league world cup, which we are proud to be hosting, citing safety concerns given the shambolic pandemic response by the UK Government. The New Zealand rugby league chief executive has said:

"The tournament organisers have moved heaven and earth to make this work, so it is not an easy decision, but the Covid-19 situation in the UK shows no sign of improving, and it's simply too unsafe to send teams and staff over."

Will the Minister therefore commit to meet rugby league MPs and officials to ensure that a safe and competitive tournament can take place with appropriate measures to protect and reassure team and fans alike?

Mr Speaker: Just for the record, I am meeting the rugby league chief executive in an hour's time.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker. I know that this is something that you focus on and that is important to you and your constituents. I will happily do the same and meet them, and bring the relevant officials to ensure that we reassure them as well.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): Will the Minister join me in thanking the many scientists and staff involved in developing and producing the covid vaccines in the UK, including the Wockhardt employees in my constituency, as their achievements have been truly world-beating and remarkable?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I would certainly join him in congratulating Dame Sarah Gilbert and her team and, of course, the team at Wockhardt, whom I know the Prime Minister has also visited and thanked on behalf of the whole nation.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab) [V]: Further to the question from the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), what does the Minister suggest that a constituent of mine who has had the Indian-manufactured Covishield jab should do if they are planning to travel to Portugal or Italy in the next two weeks?

Nadhim Zahawi: The MHRA, our regulator the EMA and, of course, officials are working with the Commission. Wherever we spot these inaccuracies we address them—we have addressed them with Malta and now France. I am assured, as of last night, that pretty much the whole of Europe, other than the Italian authorities—which we are working with—will accept the AstraZeneca vaccine from any batch, because all batches, all factories, are approved by our regulator before they enter the United Kingdom.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Today you could go to the Latitude Festival with a negative test or two jabs, and you could go to the open golf last weekend with the same, yet you cannot report for work in the NHS or put food on supermarket shelves. We are rightly worried about the 3 million healthy 18 to 30-year-olds who have yet to get a vaccine, but let us put ourselves in their shoes: they see us all get a jab and wonder what they get in return. So I ask the Minister: do we believe in our vaccine or not, and what is the scientific evidence to explain the difference between 19 July and 16 August when it comes to isolation for the double jab?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my hon. Friend, who always asks important yet challenging questions. The 18-year-olds can now look forward to travelling to 33 countries that have accepted double-jabbed Brits who can demonstrate that. If they have their jab now, they can go to those countries from mid-September. They can look forward to clubbing by the end of September as well—enjoying the Winchester nightlife. I hope I have made it clear to the House that giving ourselves that additional few weeks, given that self-isolation is probably the second most effective tool after vaccines, makes a huge difference as we transition this virus. It is not easy, but I certainly think we are doing the right thing by giving ourselves the space and time to transition this virus from pandemic to endemic status.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): The app forcing self-isolation is making our country grind to a halt. Delivery drivers, shops, transport, hospitality, factories, and essential public and blue-light services are at breaking point. The Minister has said that there will be no more exemptions to self-isolating. The Business Secretary said the same just this morning. Then, just over an hour ago, he told the press—not this House—that he had changed his mind. Who are we to believe—this Minister or the Business Secretary?

Nadhim Zahawi: I think the hon. Lady has just demonstrated how difficult these decisions are. I would just say to her that we are working flat out, in the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, to work with business—whether it is the critical infrastructure that the Business Secretary spoke about, or any other part of the economy—so that we can safely return to a place where we open up, and open up permanently.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Redcar and Cleveland had the highest covid rates in the country, at more than 1,500 per 100,000, yet in the past 28 days we have not seen a single death from covid, such is the protection provided by the vaccine. We need more people to get the jab to ensure that our hospitalisations and deaths stay low, so will the Minister work with me and Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council to ensure that we have the additional centres, supplies and vaccinators? Also, will he consider the chemical industry as part of our critical infrastructure, producing the pharmaceuticals for vaccines and the plastics for syringes, for exemption from the usual isolation rules, ahead of 16 August?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his championing of his businesses and his constituents. There is no shortage of the vaccine. I will happily work with him on the workforce and making sure that there is the resource to make it possible to continue to vaccinate at scale; and of course the industries that are delivering some of the essential products for the vaccination programme are incredibly important in that effort.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): In order to beat this virus, the Government must take care of not only their domestic responsibilities but their international ones. Will the Minister update us on what is being done to ensure vaccine supply to middle-income and lower-income countries, and update us on the international approach?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his excellent question. It is incredibly important, because we pledged to deliver 100 million excess doses, beginning with 5 million immediately and 20 million by the end of the year, and then the balance next year, as well as the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine being delivered around the world at no profit to AstraZeneca or Oxford. To update him, we have sent out our first deliveries of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, as per the Prime Minister's pledge, and speaking to the Serum Institute of India, they are now not producing 100 million doses a month of that vaccine but are up at 200 million doses a month. It really is an extraordinary achievement by Sarah Gilbert and her team and AstraZeneca in saving the world from this awful virus.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): We were very grateful to the Minister for helping us to secure the Tunstall mass vaccination centre, which has delivered over 50,000 jabs into the arms of people and is the City of Stoke-on-Trent's mass vaccination centre. As part of the autumn roll-out, when we will be getting a third dose into the arms of many residents, will the Minister confirm that the Tunstall mass vaccination centre will stay in place over the autumn and winter this year?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my hon. Friend for his effort in getting 116,657 jabs into the arms of his constituents and offering them that protection. I will certainly have a look at the vaccination centre as part of our infrastructure. We have a very ambitious programme to deliver to about 15 million people in the first phase and, with the second phase, a cumulative 32 million people. So we will be doing that at scale as well as, of course, flu vaccination wherever possible.

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

11.45 am

Sitting suspended.

Speaker's Statement

11.48 am

Mr Speaker: Today is the last day when we are operating under the orders relating to the proceedings in the pandemic. May I first say a big thank you to all the Members and their staff, who have continued to serve their constituents and this country in these difficult times? We are grateful to those parliamentary staff who have enabled us to maintain our work throughout the pandemic. I would like to mention, particularly, the virtual Chamber team, who enable Members to participate remotely in the proceedings, and the broadcasting, digital and procedural support teams, who have helped to establish and maintain the pandemic operating model, working with my office. In particular, I would like to say a big thank you to Jim Davey and all those who have created and supported the temporary physical modifications we needed to make in and around the Chamber. As we come to the summer recess, I would like to express my thanks to the whole House and to all our staff for all they do to support us.

Business of the House

11.49 am

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing Monday 6 September will include:

MONDAY 6 SEPTEMBER—Remaining stages of the National Insurance Contributions Bill.

TUESDAY 7 SEPTEMBER—Second Reading of the Elections Bill.

WEDNESDAY 8 SEPTEMBER—Opposition day (5th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 9 SEPTEMBER—Remaining stages of the Rating (Coronavirus) and Directors Disqualification (Dissolved Companies) Bill, followed by general debate on the legacy of Jo Cox. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 10 SEPTEMBER—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 13 September will include:

MONDAY 13 SEPTEMBER—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill.

I should like to take this opportunity to wish farewell to someone who has worked first in the House of Lords and then for the Government to support the legislative agenda. Talitha Rowland will be leaving her role as head of the Cabinet Office's Parliamentary Business and Legislation Secretariat after the summer recess. For the past three years, in not always easy circumstances, she has been ensuring that this House has had a good, well thought through legislative programme. Her contribution as a civil servant to the business of this House has been formidable. It was, of course, Talitha and her team who worked so hard behind the scenes to prepare for the state opening and Her Majesty's Gracious Speech, delivered on 11 May.

So, having been busily digesting the end-of-term report cards prepared for my children by their excellent teachers, I thought I might attempt one of my own for the House on the progress made in delivering the Government's legislative agenda. The Government remain committed to delivering their ambitious legislative programme, which will level up opportunities across all parts of the United Kingdom, supporting jobs, businesses and economic growth and addressing the impact of the pandemic on public services.

Between the end of the Easter recess and Prorogation, seven Government Bills received Royal Assent. Six Bills were carried over from the previous Session, including the Finance Bill, which has received Royal Assent and is now the Finance Act 2021, and 25 Government Bills are currently before Parliament, including the Health and Care Bill, the Nationality and Borders Bill, the Building Safety Bill and the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill. That is not to mention the more than 200 statutory instruments laid before the House since we returned from the Easter recess.

The Government's legislative programme is about unleashing the potential that exists in every part of the United Kingdom. It is a principal function of Parliament

to deliver for voters by making laws—a point that I hope is fully grasped by all those who have worked so hard to keep the House operating this term.

As we come to this recess, I join you, Mr Speaker, in thanking all the members of the staff and, as we end the virtual proceedings, in thanking the virtual Parliament team—the broadcasting team—who, from a standing start, worked absolute wonders. It is worth remembering that when we went away for the recess at Easter 2020, people wondered how Parliament would be able to sit at all, yet we were back just a few weeks later. That was a terrific achievement. Keeping Parliament going, although it mainly seems seamless, in fact requires a great deal of work behind the scenes.

I also want to thank everyone else who works here for all they have done to keep the parliamentary show on the road. I thank the distinguished Clerks, who keep their knowledge for us and present it to us in a way that ensures that we legislate properly. I thank the Doorkeepers, those founts of knowledge—as long as the Whips are not listening, I advise any Back Benchers present that if they ever want to know whether there will be a vote on a particular day, they should ask the Doorkeepers, because they will tell you and they will almost always be right.

I would like to thank the cleaners. It is amazing that they have been here the whole way through the pandemic: they have been going round sanitising everything every single day, and they do so without our normally seeing them. They do their work discreetly and quietly and they deserve our gratitude. I also thank the facilities team and the catering staff—it is true that, like Napoleon's armies, politicians march on their bellies, so we are very lucky to be so well catered for.

I thank the security staff, the police and *Hansard*—I am always grateful to *Hansard* because it takes the stuff that I unleash and turns it into pearls. I am very grateful for the grammatical enhancements, improvements and terminological additions that ensure that all our speeches are so elegantly phrased, although it is worth remembering that Dr Johnson got so fed up with writing better speeches for Whigs than they had actually delivered that he gave up reporting on Parliament. I hope that when my speeches are transcribed they will not have that effect on the current generation of *Hansard* reporters.

I thank everybody and wish everybody a most enjoyable recess.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. I will come to my own thank you list shortly, but I turn first to his report card. He really sounds as if he has been marking his own homework—or perhaps he has been on a creative writing course; I don't know. Contrary to what he says, the Government's past year has been so chaotic that if I were going to give them a report that covered any more than the past week, we would have to sit through recess. If they wanted to be graded, it would be Fs across the board. It would take a lot more than summer school and their own lacklustre education catch-up plan before we saw any improvements.

The Government are clearly desperate for a summer recess, but I am afraid that for the rest of us it is another summer of chaos, thanks to them: 1 million children off school last week, businesses facing closure, supermarket shelves empty, millions forced to isolate over the summer—

and they will not be able to do so from a country residence—and now more chaos in the sporting arena, as Australia and New Zealand have pulled out of the rugby league world cup on safety grounds. Can the Leader of the House please confirm that it will go ahead and it will be safe?

All this, and the Government still cannot make up their mind about whether to follow the NHS app or about who is exempt. On Sunday, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor clearly thought that it was one rule for them and another for everyone else. The Minister for Investment wrote to businesses saying that the NHS app was an “advisory tool”, and the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), said the same on Tuesday morning, but then No. 10 came out and said that it is crucial people isolate when told to do so. Yesterday, the Prime Minister—the Chequers one, Zooming in for PMQs—offered no answers, so for the avoidance of doubt, will the Leader of the House please clarify what the Government’s position actually is?

On mask wearing and social distancing, which is still Government guidance, people outside and inside this place have noticed the difference between the Government and Opposition Benches at Prime Minister’s questions. Clearly some people on the Government side do not seem to note that the Government’s own rules are encouraging us to wear masks and socially distance in enclosed spaces—it is clearly one rule for them and another for the rest of us.

Amid all this chaos, we must not forget that more than 150,000 people have died of covid. I met some of the grieving families yesterday and saw the photographs of 650 people—one for every constituency, just a fraction of the total number of deaths. The families are still desperately waiting for a public inquiry. The Government’s mistakes throughout the pandemic must never be repeated. The former Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), certainly has the time to appear before an inquiry. Will the Leader of the House please schedule time for a debate on that in the first week back?

I turn to the Government’s missing-in-action social care plan. All we have had is rumours of a national insurance hike to pay for it. I have heard one argument that that

“will hit...public sector workers...and someone earning £32,000 will pay exactly the same as someone earning £132,000.”—[*Official Report*, 17 April 2002; Vol. 383, c. 667.]

Those are not my words, but the words of the Prime Minister. Why has he changed his mind? The Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Health Secretary have not denied the reports of a national insurance hike, but there was more chaos this morning when the Business Secretary seemed to be saying that he did not see how there could be one. Two years after the Prime Minister first promised the social care plan, will the Leader of the House confirm when it will finally be published?

The Nationality and Borders Bill had its Second Reading this week. We have heard lots about a broken asylum system from Conservative Members, but they are the ones who have broken it. In the past year alone, 33,000 people were waiting more than 12 months for an initial decision on their asylum claim, and many were in my constituency—10 times more than in 2010. The appalling crime of people trafficking must be stopped,

but the Bill will not do that. It fails on its own terms because there are no commitments on refugee resettlement or family reunion and, despite a lot of rhetoric, safe routes have not been properly reopened. The Dubs scheme closed after having settled just a fraction of the 3,000 children promised. In March this year, just 25 refugees were resettled—so much for safe and legal routes. We have already had the cuts to international aid rammed through. The Bill further undermines the UK’s efforts to tackle the forces of poverty, war and violence that drive people from their homes. It criminalises those who had no other choice. The Home Secretary should think again.

Over the past year, the Leader of the House has kindly committed to ensuring that Members receive timely responses to ministerial correspondence. I thank him for that, but so far there seems to have been little improvement. Will he commit to sorting it out by September?

Finally, I would like to wish Team GB the very best of luck as they begin their Olympic campaign in Tokyo. My constituent Lily Owsley will be playing for the women’s hockey team. We are all very proud of her, and I will be cheering her on.

I would like to thank all the wonderful staff who have kept this place going in exceptionally difficult circumstances. It has been a very difficult year, and I hope everyone can have a peaceful and safe summer.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady makes a very important point about the number of deaths from covid. It is right that the House should pause briefly to pray for the repose of the souls of those who have died, and to think of those who have lost family members and friends:

Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine, et lux perpetua luceat eis. Requiescant in pace. Amen.

On the hon. Lady’s political points, it really is the pushmi-pullu Opposition. We have complaints about the Government’s immigration policy from an Opposition who opposed the Nationality and Borders Bill. We have complaints that we are not being tough enough on stopping people coming into this country, yet our efforts to make it tougher are opposed.

This country has a proud record on ensuring that there are routes for refugees. We have settled 25,000 refugees over the past five years, and a further 29,000 refugees through family reunion. We have to make our borders safe. We have to have safe routes for those who have a genuine fear of persecution, but we have to stop the people traffickers.

The Opposition have become the party of people traffickers. They do not want to do anything effective, and they cry crocodile tears while opposing the Government’s efforts to be effective in dealing with our borders. [HON. MEMBERS: “Shame!”] They are the ones who should be ashamed. They chunter on the Opposition Benches, but they could not even find enough speakers to fill up the time available for debate. We ended up with only Members on this side of the House speaking because the Benches on the other side were empty, aside from the most distinguished hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is always in his place and always doing his duty, unlike some others I could think of.

As we come to the summer, we still have an ongoing pandemic. Yes, the restrictions have been reduced, and yes, we are able to make decisions for ourselves, which is

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

quite right, but it is also right that people who are pinged should isolate. That is the Government's strong advice. If you are rung up by Test and Trace, Mr Speaker, which I hope you are not, it is the law that you must isolate. If you are pinged by the app, it is the strong advice of the Government that you should isolate. Advice and law are different, but the Government are right to give a very clear indication of what ought to happen.

On the wearing of masks, I have one in my pocket, along with a handkerchief. It is here in case the Chamber is full, but it is not. There is a good deal of space—an amazing amount of space—on the Opposition Benches, as some Opposition Members may have gone on recess early, but on the Government Benches even my hard-working, enthusiastic fellow Conservatives are not squeezed in, and nor were we at Prime Minister's questions yesterday. At a normal PMQs, we are squeezed in with hardly an inch between us, but yesterday there was space. It was therefore a reasonable decision for individual Members to take for themselves, in accordance with Mr Speaker's guidance.

The hon. Lady asked for debates and, as she has an Opposition day coming up in the first week back, she will be able to choose the topics of debate as she wishes. She mentioned that the Australians and New Zealanders have pulled out of the rugby league world cup because they think they will lose. I must confess that it is rather sad. I always thought the Australians, of all people—one of the countries that we in this House love most—would never be ones to pull out of a competition. But they think they are going to lose, so they are staying at home. That is a pity, and I am sure the rugby league will run the competition with enormous effectiveness, ensuring that covid security is followed.

Finally, regarding gossip on social care, the Government have consistently said that it will be announced by the end of the year. Therefore, reading tittle-tattle and coming up with bits and pieces of gossip is not necessarily particularly helpful to the House.

Mr Speaker: I will just say that I am meeting the chief executive of the rugby league in about 10 minutes, and I just want to reassure the Leader of the House that the competition does need Australia and New Zealand so that we can beat them.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I echo your words, Mr Speaker, but very much include you and your brilliant team in the praise that has been handed out. This is the finest Parliament in the world and that is in no small measure down to the people who run it. I wish everyone a very happy summer.

Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on delays at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, which are having an impact on drivers and businesses in general? The DVLA works terribly hard but I understand that the coronavirus pandemic has had an impact on staffing levels. Constituents are complaining about it. I hope that during the course of such a debate we would try to address those urgent issues.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this, because it has been raised with us all as constituency MPs. The DVLA's service is currently not

good enough and it has been hindered, unfortunately, by industrial inaction by members of the Public and Commercial Services Union, which has made the problems of the pandemic worse, by the Welsh Government's additional social distancing requirements, which have reduced the number of staff on site, and by an increased demand for its services, which has led to delays in dealing with paper applications. Her Majesty's Government are working to put that right and the DVLA has, for example, leased an additional building to accommodate additional staff. Driving licence applications made on paper are likely to take six to 10 weeks to process, although there may be additional delays in processing more complex transactions, for example if medical investigations are needed. I will obviously pass on my hon. Friend's concerns to the Secretary of State and there will be the end of term Adjournment debate to raise any further issues of this kind later today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We now go to Pete Wishart via video link.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: As you have rightly noted, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am participating virtually in what will be the last opportunity for me to make use of these simply amazing facilities. There was no way that I was venturing down to covid central this week in the middle of a raging pandemic. These facilities have been a great parliamentary innovation, allowing all Members to participate equally during the pandemic, and ensuring that all our constituents, regardless of where they are in the UK, have a voice and are being represented. It almost feels like democratic vandalism now to tear them down, but it also feels like madness to remove them when infections and hospitalisations are doubling weekly with the out-of-control Johnson variant. We have absolutely no idea where we will be when we come back in September.

Freedom day, of course, became farcedom day when the Health Secretary caught covid on freedom eve and half the Cabinet ended up as casualties of the pingdemic. This is the Government who could not organise a drunken event at happy hour in a nightclub where people may or may not need to be double vaccinated. Does the Leader of the House agree that the first thing we need to do when we return in September is have a debate to take stock of exactly where we are and what facilities we might require so that we can continue to represent our constituents?

With shops throughout the country reporting empty shelves due to a combination of covid, pingage and Brexit, a serious shortage crisis is coming and we might need at some point to recall this House. What provisions are in place if that is required, particularly as we might have a predicted 100,000 cases per day?

Let me follow Mr Speaker in paying tribute to the technical staff who delivered this facility at almost unprecedented speed. I wish all the staff—the Leader of the House has mentioned them all, although I do not have time to do so in the time available to me—a well-deserved break. We simply have an amazing team on this estate. I know that he is off to see the rugby league representatives, but I also commend Mr Speaker for his leadership during this past year. When this House needed someone to get us through, it got the man from Chorley. I thank all his deputies, including

your good self, Mr Deputy Speaker, for all the work you have done to ensure that order continues in this House. We will see you all in September—have a great break, everybody.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You are a wonderful man.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that Mr Speaker has been the pilot who weathered the storm, and we should raise a toast to him in that capacity. I am delighted to see that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) has started his holiday early, and clearly seems to be enjoying it already from his fastness in Perthshire. I thought he might be in mourning today, because it is of course the anniversary of the battle of Falkirk in 1298, which was not one of the most glorious events in Scottish history. The victory of Edward I on that occasion is one of which we are all aware.

On the hon. Gentleman's points on this House, let me say that this House works better when people are here; we do a better job of representing our constituents and of holding Ministers to account. Speaking as a Minister from the Dispatch Box, I can honestly say that remote participation is a doddle. It is so much easier than having that immediacy and spontaneity that we get from someone in the Chamber coming up and aiming to catch us out. Having the call lists makes life much easier for Ministers. We are here—I say this as a Minister, from the Dispatch Box—to make Ministers' lives testing, so that we hold them to account to seek redress of grievance for our constituents, and to check that Government policy is as well thought through as it should be. That leads to better government, because policy is then better thought through, better known and better argued for. We have a duty to be back for the good of democracy. I am sorry to tease the hon. Gentleman for going on holiday a day early, but actually that is the effect of virtual participation.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): Cash is used by many people to buy essentials, and constituents of mine such as Joseph from Drayton are very concerned that with the expectation now that people will pay with contactless cards, both their access to cash and their ability to pay with it will be restricted. My right hon. Friend will have seen the *Telegraph Money* “Keep Cash” campaign, which I warmly welcome. May we have a statement from the Government that makes it clear that people who want to be able to access and use cash will always be able to do so?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank my hon. Friend, whose constituency I much enjoyed visiting last week. He has a fine and beautiful constituency, with some of the greatest technological innovation in the country going on in it. I am also grateful for his question and for his support for the campaign by *Telegraph Money*. I reiterate what I said last week to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight): the Government indeed recognise that access to cash remains important to millions across the UK, and we are committed to legislating to protect access to cash and ensuring that the UK's cash infrastructure is sustainable in the longer term. So there is a one-word answer to give my hon. Friend: yes.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: I am afraid to say that today is the second of two days running that are sad days for the Scots. As the Leader of the House has said, today is the anniversary of the battle of Falkirk, and yesterday was, sadly, the anniversary of the death of Robert Burns in 1796. Being a Scotophile, I know of these things. I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for the return after recess and for writing to Ministers in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on my behalf following last week's business questions. Applications for Backbench Business debates continue to come forward, and I assure him that he will have willing takers for any time he can furnish us with after the recess. I also add my thanks to all the staff of the House for everything they have done in the last year to keep us all going. In particular, I thank our Clerk of the Committee and all the Committee staff who help the Backbench Business Committee to function so very well.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the distinction with which he chairs his Committee and manages to keep so many Members of the House happy, even with the difficult job he has of balancing the many, many requests that come for debates.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): Button batteries are found in many household items, from hearing aids and LED lights to birthday cards. My constituent, Harper-Lee Fanthorpe, tragically discovered the devastating effects of ingesting a button battery when her life was recently cut short at only two years old.

In 2019, the US recorded 3,467 ingestions of button batteries, with 53% of those by children under six. The data in the UK is unknown, but button battery ingestions pose a significant and considerable health risk for children. The effects of ingesting button batteries and what we can do as parliamentarians to make them safer merit a full debate in this House, so will the Leader of the House ensure that parliamentary time is made available?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises a very important and sad issue, and I know that the whole House will want to send its condolences to Harper's family.

The Government are working with the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, the Child Accident Prevention Trust and the British and Irish Portable Battery Association. The Office for Product Safety and Standards has produced safety messages on how to keep children safe. It is obviously important that children are kept safe and that this risk is understood more widely by parents. I note that my hon. Friend presented her Button Batteries (Safety) Bill yesterday, and it will receive its Second Reading, according to the will of the House, on the first sitting Friday after the recess. I will, of course, pass on her comments to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: I once said in a debate on the 1950s-born women's pension issue that wasps are a nuisance. They are pests and they buzz around. If we bash them away, they get angry, and when they get really angry they sting us. The WASPI women are nuisances; they are pests; they will not go

[Andrew Gwynne]

away; and they are stinging. This week, the ombudsman found maladministration in how the Department for Work and Pensions treated those women. Today, the House rises for the summer recess with no statement on this issue or an opportunity for Ministers to be questioned. There is great interest and support for this issue across party lines. I am co-chair of the all-party group on state pension inequality for women, along with the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous). Will the Leader of the House please guarantee that, in the first week back, DWP Ministers will come to the House and make a statement specifically on this issue? If not, what mechanisms does he think will be available to ensure that we make it happen?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The WASPI campaigners—they are in all constituencies—have campaigned hard and long in the cause that they support, and, as with all our constituents, they do so with the right to do so as part of parliamentary accountability. The ombudsman's report yesterday is part of a process. It is not the end of the process, as there is more to come from the ombudsman. It is worth remembering that both the High Court and the Court of Appeal have supported the actions of the Department for Work and Pensions under successive Governments, dating back to 1995, and the Supreme Court refused the claimants permission to appeal. It was a move towards gender equality that was decided more than 25 years ago to make the state pension age the same for men and women, and that seems to me to be a good and justifiable policy objective.

As regards how to achieve this matter being debated on the Floor of the House, there is, of course, the pre-Adjournment debate later today. Otherwise, the hon. Gentleman knows very well how to get debates in this House: through the Backbench Business Committee; Opposition days, of which one has been announced; and, of course, Adjournment debates.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I am working with South Gloucestershire and Stroud College, Business West, Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, the Wildlife Trust, the Conservative Environment Network, and Onward to highlight the green skills emergency. We know that 3.2 million workers will need to boost their skills if the UK is to meet its 2050 climate targets. Will my right hon. Friend grant me time to debate green skills so that we can explore how innovative Stroud businesses are rising to meet this challenge and how other areas are doing the same to get what they need to go forward?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right in so much of what she says and is aligned with Government policy. The 10-point plan has laid the foundations for a green industrial revolution, creating and supporting up to a quarter of a million jobs by 2030. It is innovation and technology that will deliver net zero while maintaining and, indeed, improving the public's living standards. Our lifetime skills guarantee will equip people with the training they need to take advantage of opportunities as they arrive, and we will need engineers, fitters, construction workers and others engaged in harnessing British science and technology to create and use clean energy. We have done great things already of which we should be proud. We were the first major economy to

commit in law to net zero by 2050, and we have managed to reduce emissions since 1990 while growing the economy. That is a fantastic achievement and must be the model for what we go on to do in future.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab) [V]: Next week will mark two years since the Prime Minister promised to build Northern Powerhouse Rail connecting Newcastle to the north's other major cities, yet in the past few days the Government's integrated rail plan for the north and midlands has been delayed yet again, and we have heard that construction on the eastern leg of HS2 has stopped. Delivering HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail in full, alongside upgrades to the east coast main line, are all essential parts of a transformational project to connect the country by rail. Please can we have a debate on this as soon as possible so that we can convey to the Government that building 21st-century rail links between London and Birmingham while passengers in the north are left behind makes a mockery of levelling up?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The integrated rail plan will soon set out exactly how major multi-billion-pound rail projects, including Northern Powerhouse Rail, will work together to deliver reliable train services. My right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary has published the Williams-Shapps White Paper. The Government will make railways the backbone of a cleaner, more environmentally friendly and modern public transport system across the country, and £40 billion of taxpayers' money will be devoted to that. The Government's record on rail infrastructure is an excellent one.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): This morning I met the African Caribbean Leukaemia Trust, which will be running a campaign in the autumn to encourage black communities to donate blood. This campaign will be in honour of my constituent Richard Okorogheye, who sadly died earlier this year. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is a worthy cause, and would he consider a debate on how we can encourage black and ethnic minority communities to donate blood, organs and stem cells?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the campaign that she is leading and supporting on behalf of the memory of Richard Okorogheye. It is an inspiring thing for her to be encouraging people of all races to give blood, because it is an essential part of a functioning health service. I congratulate her on the work she is doing with the leukaemia trust. I suggest that she carries on raising the issue in the House through all the usual mechanisms; Westminster Hall and Adjournment debates are the best first port of call.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): May I add my sincere thanks to all parliamentary staff across the estate, including our own staff, whether they worked remotely or not, for their incredibly hard work? They all deserve a very good break.

The Government say that they are committed to net zero, and that will require a doubling or tripling of the capacity of the UK's electricity grid. The grid is all privately owned and these private companies look to Government if they are to invest. We need to achieve the network capacity for new renewables and installations,

the replacement of fossil fuel transport with electric vehicles, and increased electric-powered heating. Can we have a debate in Government time, as soon as we come back from recess, on the Government's plan and timescale to increase electricity grid capacity as a matter of urgency?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I reiterate what we have achieved already: since 1990, emissions are down by 44% and we have grown the economy by 78%. That has required changes in electricity supply which have been carried out very successfully. We are on the way to becoming the Saudi Arabia of offshore wind, which is a great achievement. We will not have any camels wandering through the offshore wind turbines, because camels do not manage to walk on water, but we may have porpoises and heaven knows what sorts of sea creatures and sea urchins frolicking through them. We have done a lot. We have more to do—of course we have—but it is all about growing the economy and making our constituents' standard of living higher while at the same time making energy production cleaner.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Does the Leader of the House agree that, while it is rightly a matter for the Boundary Commission, it is important that constituencies reflect the history and geography of this great nation? Let me highlight just one example—the communities of Pulborough, Coldwaltham and Amberley. Despite being in the Arun valley and sometimes sitting literally in the middle of that river when it floods, as it too often does, they would find themselves in the constituency of Shoreham, 40 minutes' drive away. Does he agree that local residents should take advantage urgently of the opportunity to write to the Boundary Commission, which, in fairness, has said that it would welcome such representations by residents?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the Boundary Commission is independent, and it is important that boundaries are equal, but the Boundary Commission will not have got everything right. I cannot pretend that I am best pleased that the report for our area—I am looking at the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire)—keeps on referring to Avon. Avon was abolished in the late 1990s. What sort of planet were the people writing the report on, thinking that that excrement still existed, and chopping up the historic counties of Somerset and Gloucestershire and thinking that Dorset is more important? Dorset is a lovely place, but it is certainly not more important than Somerset. So there are issues, and I think it is very sensible that people should put in their suggestions, both for and against, but I must say that I am particularly irked by the Boundary Commission thinking that Avon still exists. It really ought to be a bit more up to date—and I am not the most modern person in the world.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I recently met Adam, who owns and runs The House of Botanicals, an award-winning small business in my constituency. The reason I met Adam is that exports to the continent that were taking just a couple of days are now taking almost six weeks. The Leader of the House was, of course, one of the leading proponents of leaving the

European Union, but what message does he have for a business in my constituency that is being battered by his Brexit?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Brexit has already proved to be a great success. We are already doing extremely well by not being tied in, for example, to the European Medicines Agency, which the Opposition would have liked but which would have prevented us from getting our vaccine roll-out going so quickly. Businesses have to meet the requirements of foreign Governments. Therefore, if the French have decided that they wish to be difficult, which is not an unprecedented habit of the French, then that is a matter that the hon. Gentleman should take up with the auld alliance.

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Southport is under attack from the vindictive policies of Labour-controlled Sefton Council, which is trying to impose a cycle network on my constituency. Residents, businesses, disability groups and safety campaigners are against it. Revenues are already down because of an existing scheme, and the inaccurate data used to support this scheme is truly shameful. Will my right hon. Friend make time available to debate these schemes, which I know concern many across the House?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I hear gossip that my hon. Friend is actually working in collaboration—whisper it quietly—with the Liberal Democrats in his area against these schemes. It shows how completely lunatic they must be that they have created an alliance between my hon. Friend and the yellow peril. I congratulate him on his broadmindedness. We have to remember the convenience of motorists and the need to have capacity on the roads for motorists, and cycle lanes need to be safe and take into account the views of locals. I understand that my hon. Friend has extended the consultation period to 25 July. I am sure that many people will want to send in their views to this terrible socialist council.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I have asked the Leader of the House this question before, but I will ask it again. Hammersmith bridge is still closed to vehicles, which is pouring between 500 and 4,000 extra vehicles a day into Putney, increasing congestion and air pollution. The £141 million bill to restore that historic suspension bridge is unaffordable for Hammersmith and Fulham Council and unaffordable for Transport for London; only the Government can now fund it. Will the Leader of the House make Government time available to debate the ownership and funding of all London's bridges, so that we can get the capital city moving again?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is right to campaign for this, but wrong to focus on the Government. The Conservative candidate, Shaun Bailey, had a proposal for dealing with it really quickly and getting on with things, had he been elected. Unfortunately, a socialist Mayor and a socialist council cannot run a wheel stall, let alone keep bridges open.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I am sure, Mr Deputy Speaker, that many of us in this House are looking forward to the possibility of catching up on some reading for pleasure during the recess, and with this in mind I have been working with

[*Nickie Aiken*]

the UK Publishers Association to compile a summer recess reading list for parliamentarians and note that your own submission is “God save la France” by Stephen Clarke, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister’s is “Scoop” by Evelyn Waugh, the choice of the Speaker of the House is “The Prime Ministers” by Steve Richards, and my own is David Baddiel’s “Jews Don’t Count.” Will my right hon. Friend welcome the publication of the reading list and provide us with his own book recommendations?

Mr Rees-Mogg: “Scoop” is such a wonderful and amusing book, so I am very tempted to crib from the Prime Minister, but, as I expect is the case for many Members, I have a number of books on the go, some in Somerset and some in London. I would particularly recommend “The Anglo-Saxons” by Marc Morris which is a terrific read. I am currently also reading Ellis Peters’ “The Holy Thief”, one of the Cadfael novels, so that is not a bad choice for those who like a whodunnit from the middle ages, and on the middle ages theme there is also Walter Hilton’s “The Ladder of Perfection”; it is perhaps not the most popular book in the world at the moment, but it is still in print and has been since the middle ages. But over the summer how can one resist reading anything other than P. G. Wodehouse? So I will give two suggestions: “Love among the Chickens”, Wodehouse’s first novel, which explains the complexities of compound interest, to anyone who is unaware of how compound interest works, in relation to the breeding of chickens; and, as always, there is “The Code of the Woosters”, and I am particularly thinking of that at the moment because in one of London’s leading silver stores a Schuppe cow creamer is on offer, and I must confess I am quite tempted.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab) [V]: Forest Hill in my constituency is one of the highest points in London yet there are multiple flight paths over the area, meaning my constituents are subject to incredibly low-flying aeroplanes. As we move out of lockdown and airports bring forward expansion plans again, we will have more noise, pollution and disturbance for our constituents. Please may we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Transport because communities up and down the country are being blighted by this?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am not unsympathetic to the hon. Lady because as airports get back to normal there will of course be more flights, but this has to be balanced: flying gives an enormous number of people an enormous amount of pleasure as they go abroad on their holidays, but there is some disadvantage to it. The House has legislated for the expansion of Heathrow airport, but it is a private project that is in the hands of the private sector. As with so many things, there are competing interests, but I would not wish to see the airports remaining as unused as they currently have been.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: I am sorry I am not in the Commons today to thank the staff personally and also particularly to thank Mr Speaker for putting Parliament first, but unfortunately I, like many others, have been pinged.

Yesterday there was a statement updating the House on the NHS. The Minister refused to comment on the pay rise for NHS staff; in fact, she said that discussions were still going on. Yet just a couple of hours later the Government announced the pay rise to the media. Yet again the Health Department has shown contempt for Parliament; yet again Mr Speaker has told off the Health Department; and yet again a Minister has come to the Dispatch Box to apologise on its behalf. The Leader of the House is an exceptional Leader of the House and parliamentarian; he must be as concerned about this as I am. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement on this in the first week back after recess, and if he fails to do that, will he consider summoning the Health Secretary to the Bar of the House to apologise?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The last person summoned to the Bar of the House—the gift of Jamaica, if one inspects it closely—was an editor of the *Sunday Express*, Sir John Junor. He had had the temerity to say that Members had been abusing petrol ration coupons, and the House was very upset about that. Unfortunately, it made the House look ridiculous, which is why we have not done it since. So I am not going to take up my hon. Friend on his suggestion, but I do take what he says very seriously.

Yesterday, the fact is that the decision had not been completed through Government channels at the point at which the statement was made, but a written statement was laid in the House with the information concerned. It is sometimes the case that a statement by the Government that is being made at one point has other information that is still in the pipeline, and I know the House is aware of this. However, I take what my hon. Friend says seriously. I am concerned about issues—because of the pandemic, so for excusable reasons—of responsiveness to correspondence and written questions, so I am aware that this is a problem. I will of course pass on his comments to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): In recent weeks, nations across the globe, from China to Germany, have been hit by flash flooding, while here at home we have endured a summer heatwave, and parts of the UK have recorded their highest ever temperatures. The Leader of the House must agree that we can no longer sit back and ignore the impacts of climate change—a topic close to my heart given the impact of the devastating flooding that hit my constituency of Pontypridd last summer. Will he therefore join me in supporting the need for a debate in Government time on the devastating impacts of climate change and its links to flash flooding?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I reiterate the sympathy that everyone in this House feels for people whose homes are flooded? Even a year later, people are probably still suffering from the effects of that, and it is the disruption, the loss of treasured possessions and all that goes with flooding that makes it so difficult for people and their families. The Government take climate change more seriously than I think any predecessor Government—we are the first major economy to commit to net zero and have continued ambitious climate change targets. We also recognise that the way to deal with this is through

technology that will improve people's standards of living, and to ensure that the technology is there so that people can do more, but cleaner.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): And we will use such technology now.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con) [V]: May I welcome the decision by the Government to implement a single unitary local authority in the existing county of Somerset geography? This is a fantastic opportunity to improve economic development, placemaking and planning, service delivery and value for money for local residents. The single unitary proposal was clearly superior. Will my right hon. Friend please make time for a debate on how all parties can now come together to implement this in the most expeditious way to transform outcomes positively for local people and interact well with neighbouring areas?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support for the proposals approved by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. It is of course only part of Somerset that is included in this. The former county council area will become a unitary authority, but it does not, for better or worse, include the whole of the historic county. From a personal point of view, it is a sadness that the whole county is still suffering from the vandalism of the 1974 local government changes. However, his idea that we should all work together is a very beneficial one, and I think one that will be well received by all parties across both the old county council area and the whole historic county of Somerset—God's own county.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab) [V]: The Leader of the House will be aware that cuts in fire and rescue services across the country have caused deep concern over many years on all sides of the House. In my case, we have lost 50% of our pumps in Leyton and Wanstead, and crewing per pump has also fallen from five to four and in some areas from four to three. Now, with the notably warmer weather, this is causing great anxiety. Could we have a statement from the Home Office in the near future?

On the subject of summer reading, or at least the Wodehouse summer reading, may I make two recommendations of my own? They are "Uncle Fred in the Springtime" and "Leave It to Psmith", which are two of the very few books I have ever read that can make you laugh out loud.

Mr Rees-Mogg: "Leave It to Psmith" was my recommendation last time, and I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is a book that does make one laugh out loud. "Uncle Fred" is one of PG Wodehouse's greatest, although least known creations.

As regards the serious issue of fire brigades and their crewing, the number of fires has gone down in this country pretty consistently. We are very safe in terms of fire outbreaks, and the resources in the fire brigade need to be proportionate to the risk, but I will, of course, pass his comments on to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) [V]: Parliament created the Greater London Authority deliberately with an elected Mayor and an elected London Assembly to act as a check and balance on the operations of the Mayor—a constitutional function. The current Mayor, for financial reasons of his own making, has arbitrarily decided to vacate the purpose-built City Hall, which is iconic in London, and move the Assembly's scrutiny staff functions to a building in the east part of the capital—out of sight and perhaps out of mind—that has been described as "too small" and "unfit for purpose", while he retains offices in central London for his own political appointees and staff. Can we have a debate on the governance of the Greater London Authority so that we can discover whether this behaviour by the Mayor is consistent with the intentions of the Greater London Authority Act 1999?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who was himself a distinguished member of the Greater London Authority. I cannot promise him a debate, because if we were to set out a debate on the failings of the Mayor of London, I fear I would have to announce business on that subject for Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. We would have even lost private Members' Bills on the week that we are back.

We were lucky in our Mayor between 2008 and 2016. We had the greatest Mayor that London has ever seen, who knocked Dick Whittington into a cocked hat. Since 2016, things have gone sadly downhill. We have a socialist who is, as I said earlier, incapable of running a wheel stall—that stall that is so famously run by many competent people who are good at running things, but he cannot. He has failed in so many ways. He has failed in terms of planning and getting the number of homes built in London. He has failed in terms of Transport for London. He has failed in terms of bridges, so that part of Putney is disrupted by excess traffic. I am afraid that it is only a Mayor with that sort of record who would try to get rid of his scrutinisers. I note he has one rule for himself and one rule for his scrutinisers. There is a word for that, but it might be unparliamentary.

Anum Qaisar-Javed (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) [V]: This time last week, I shared in the Chamber just a small snippet of the racial abuse that people of colour receive on social media. I, along with many colleagues, have previously asked for a debate in the House to discuss racism on social media. That request has been effectively ignored. Can we have a clear yes or no from the Leader of the House? When we return from recess, will he make time for a debate within Government time to discuss this matter? It is simply not enough for the Government to claim they are not racist; they must actively be anti-racist. On book recommendations, I suggest "The Boy at the Back of the Class", by Onjali Rauf. It tells a child's perspective of the refugee crisis. It might be an enlightening read for many on the Government Benches.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Following our exchanges last week, I wrote to the Home Secretary to inform her of what the hon. Lady had said to ensure that the Government know some of the shocking abuse that hon. Members are receiving. Yesterday, the House voted to put forward its members for the Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill, which will be the main way of

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

dealing with online abuse. The process in the Joint Committee will be to consider the Bill line by line to ensure that we get these laws right.

The Prime Minister has already said that people who use racist abuse online in relation to football should expect bans from football matches, so the Government are acting. In terms of debates, Backbench Business debates and Opposition day debates—we had an SNP Opposition day debate recently—are available, where Members can raise this issue. The Government's programme is pretty full with legislation, but there are many other opportunities for debates.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con) [V]: I apologise to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to the Leader of the House for not being present in person to ask my question; I was asked to self-isolate last Friday. As we approach recess, may I offer my personal thanks to Mr Speaker, all his team and all House staff for the amazing support given during these fraught times?

A feature of my Dudley North constituency is the strong and humbling commitment of so many individuals towards supporting disadvantaged people. Will the Leader of the House join me in praising Paul Gough at the Priory Park boxing club, Wade Cooper at the wellbeing centre in Upper Gornal and so many others for the amazing work they do in their local communities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I join my hon. Friend in very much commending the fantastic work that Paul Goff and Wade Cooper do in supporting young and the most disadvantaged people in their communities. Similar activities go on in my constituency, and I know how important they are in helping people who have had a difficult start to life. We should be proud of people like Paul and Wade whose heroic work to help others is such an important part of life in our communities and our constituencies.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab) [V]: On summer reading, may I recommend that Ministers read Members' correspondence and respond to it? The latest figures show that across Government just 70% of responses are achieved within target. Ironically, the Cabinet Office, which compiles the figures, achieved only 58%, but the prize goes to the Department for Education, which managed to answer a pathetic 17% of Members' correspondence on time. What can the Leader of the House do to help Members debate how they get timely answers to their correspondence? When will the Education Secretary be carpeted in the headteacher's office for being the biggest dunce in the Government?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman has come up with the best summer reading list of all of us and makes his point well. I am concerned about this issue and have taken it up in Government with the previous Cabinet Secretary and with Ministers. It is a matter of the greatest seriousness that letters should be answered, and answered promptly. I will help any individual Member in getting answers to letters that are overdue. I have had some success with that. I fear that if I were completely overwhelmed by Members asking me to get a response from another Department, that system may not work so well, but, as long as it is a manageable number, I will do

my best. I absolutely will take up his point with the Department for Education, because 17% is not where the figure ought to be.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I speak in my capacity as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women, alongside the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), from whom we have heard. I would be most grateful if my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House emphasised to his colleagues in Government the need for them as quickly as possible to outline the action they will take in the light of the ombudsman's report on the communication of changes to women's state pension age. That should include how they will address the systemic shortcomings that date from 2005, the finding of maladministration and the failure to comply with the civil service code. Will he also ensure that they follow the ombudsman's advice to be proactive in considering both the impact of those failings on hundreds of thousands of women and what remedies would be appropriate, with that work taking place in parallel with the ombudsman's further investigation as well as the separate work programme that the APPG will be instigating?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is an effective campaigner on this issue and is right to raise it. The Department for Work and Pensions will of course look carefully at the ombudsman's report, which has only just been published, but it is, as I said earlier, part of a process and there is considerable commitment to the fundamental principle that it is right that there should be equality in the retirement age. This was accepted 25 years ago and I do not think that anybody is any longer arguing that there should be a different retirement age for men and women. The legal avenues have proved successful for the Government: both the High Court and Court of Appeal have supported the DWP's actions since 1995, and the Supreme Court refused the claimants permission to appeal. Yes, of course, the Government will listen carefully to further information that comes forward, but the basic principle is a fair and just one.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On 8 July, civil violence and unrest became rife in South Africa after former President Jacob Zuma started to serve a 15-month prison sentence for contempt of court. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has strong economic, historical and cultural links and contact with South Africa—there is a special relationship. Nelson Mandela's election as President of South Africa offered hope; today, South Africa is in danger of slipping back into chaos. I know that the Leader of the House and others present share my concerns, so will he say what we in this House can do to offer support to save democracy and stability in South Africa?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We have been thanking people for their attendance and work for the House, and we ought to thank the hon. Gentleman, who is the most assiduous attender and is a model to all Members of Parliament in the seriousness with which he takes this Chamber, which is the beating heart of our democracy. I wish him an enjoyable summer, although I have a nasty feeling that he will suffer from what I believe is known as cold turkey during the month of August.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue—he often raises issues that no one else in the House raises but that are of fundamental national and international importance. I am grateful to him for that, because this should be the Chamber that debates such issues. Her Majesty's Government are obviously concerned by the recent violence in South Africa, which has sadly resulted in the loss of life, injuries and significant damage to buildings and businesses. The Government continue to monitor the situation closely and our high commission remains in regular contact with the South African authorities.

Her Majesty's Government strongly support President Ramaphosa's emphasis on the importance of the rule of law and the South African Government's determination to restore calm. The South African Government have put in place a number of measures that have restored calm, including the deployment of the South African national defence force to support the police.

As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, this country is a friend of South Africa and, as a friend, the UK works closely with the South African Government, businesses and civil society on a shared agenda of security, health, economic and social issues, and will continue to do so. I will of course pass on the hon. Gentleman's comments to my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I wish that today we could all be at the Royal Welsh Show in Builth Wells in my constituency to celebrate the very best of Welsh farming and hospitality, but the rural community is deeply unhappy after the First Minister of Wales laid the blame for rising cases of bovine tuberculosis at the door of farmers by saying that they were deliberately moving infected cattle round the country. He also ignored the concerns of pubs and landlords when he told the Senedd that he was “not an agony aunt” for the hospitality sector. The First Minister clearly does not want to represent rural Wales, so will the Leader of the House please grant time for a debate on the ways in which the UK Government do want to support rural areas like mine?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. I, too, am a rural MP with dairy farmers among my constituents, and they tell me, and have told me for some time, that TB is passed around not by farmers but by badgers. That has been the cause of TB in dairy cattle, certainly in Somerset and, I believe, in other places as well. It is shameful to blame the farmers, who may lose their whole herd with an outbreak of TB. There is not only a financial cost; most farmers have a feeling for their animals, so it is a personal distress as well as an economic cost.

To be so frivolous about the hospitality and tourism sector when it has been so hard-hit by the pandemic is really very poor. The sector has suffered more than many other areas of the economy. I hope that Welsh publicans will decide to toast Conservatives rather than socialists as they try to get back to business and that they have noted what the First Minister had to say.

We want to work as a United Kingdom Government and to ensure that, as a United Kingdom Government, we level up the whole of our great nation and that that includes those parts with devolved responsibilities, because there are policy areas that are the responsibility of central Government.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) [V]: May I add my thanks, as you did, Mr Deputy Speaker, to everyone in the House who has kept us going throughout the pandemic, with all the challenges that we have faced? My thanks go to everyone. Yesterday, the Government sneaked out their response to the Cumberlege report in a written statement. In that response, the Government have refused to implement many of the report's recommendations, most importantly those relating to redress for those affected by Primodos, sodium valproate and mesh. The Leader of the House is well aware of Primodos, as he has been a long-standing supporter of our campaign. Does he think it fair that, despite the Government apologising for their wrongdoing, they will not compensate those families, who continue to suffer and struggle through life? Will he convey to the Secretary of State for Health that this is not acceptable, and that we will not let go of this until we have justice for those victims?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I begin by congratulating the hon. Lady on receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Bolton? That is a well-deserved accolade for a most impressive constituency Member of Parliament and campaigner on the subject of Primodos. As she rightly says, I was a member of her all-party parliamentary group on oral hormone pregnancy tests when I was not in government, and the campaigning that she has done has been absolutely formidable. Working alongside her was, to me, one of the really important things that I have done as a Member of Parliament. There would never have been the Cumberlege report without the hon. Lady's campaign, and there would never have been the written ministerial statement without the work that she has done. I will pass on what she has said to the Secretary of State for Health, and I will add a little note pointing out that the hon. Lady is a very effective campaigner.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I, through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, add my thanks to Mr Speaker and every member of staff of the House who has enabled us to continue to function through the pandemic? But of course, as we have now protected the vulnerable and, increasingly, every adult through vaccination, we can thankfully go back to something close to normal in September. I welcome the Leader of the House saying that it was every Member's job to test Government Ministers, and I can confirm that I will continue to do so. I enjoyed being tested when I was the Minister, and good Ministers bringing forward good policies have nothing to fear from that.

The Leader of the House will be aware that I raised a point of order earlier this week because a definition in the statement from the Health Minister appeared at least to raise the possibility that Members would be required to show proof of vaccination before attending the House later this year. That would clearly be an outrage. It is our job to come here to represent our constituents, so can I ask the Leader to confirm, first, that the Government—the Executive—have no power to limit the right of Members to come here, and also that the Government will not attempt to legislate to put in place any restrictions on our ability to come to this place to serve and represent our constituents?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend touches on one of the key constitutional rights that we have as Members of Parliament, and it is of great antiquity. Unmolested

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

entry to Parliament, whether Parliament is sitting or not, as long as it is not dissolved, has been our right since 1340, and the reason that it is our right is that we are here to hold the Government to account. There have been occasions when Governments have not wanted people turning up, and Pride's purge obviously comes to mind, when force was used to keep Members out. That right is a very precious one, and it is not a right on our own account. It is not because of who we are or what we are; it is because of who we represent.

We represent 70,000 people—sometimes a few more, sometimes a few less—who have a right to have redress of grievance sought for them and a right to have the Government held to account on their behalf, and for no expenditure or taxation to be agreed without the agreement on their behalf by their representatives. No Government could get rid of this by any means other than primary legislation. Primary legislation can, of course, do anything, but it would require primary legislation to change any condition of membership. That is why, for example, the Valuing Everyone training could not be compulsory in this House: we cannot add new conditions of membership without legislation. Otherwise, the Government could decide that we needed, I don't know, to have passed a maths exam before we come in or that we should have good handwriting, or heaven knows what obstruction that could be put in our way to come here to do our constitutional duty. We must protect that right—it is absolutely fundamental—and I cannot think that any Government, and certainly not this Government, would try to take away fundamental constitutional rights.

Point of Order

1.1 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I seek guidance from you on what options are open to me. I regret that I was not able to raise this with the Leader of the House personally beforehand, because this relates to something that has happened in the course of the last hour. Unfortunately, and I hope that the Leader of the House is doing this unintentionally, he made use of an extremely offensive racist term—I find it really difficult to understand, but I am sure it may be possible that he was not aware that it was—in relation to the Liberal Democrats. It would be really helpful if he could reconsider his words. He has spoken powerfully and correctly over the last few months about the scourge of racism and his commitment to ending it. I would like to know, Mr Deputy Speaker, what guidance you can offer to Government Ministers, Front Benchers and to all of us here about how we can be more temperate with our language. This use of casual racist phrases, however unintentional, has a corrosive impact on the fight against racism, which I know the right hon. Gentleman shares as an aim.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I think that every Member needs to redouble their efforts as far as that is concerned. I do not know a single racist Member of this House, to be honest. I think the Leader of the House is indicating that he may wish to directly respond to the issue at hand.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. If I have used a term that is offensive, I apologise profoundly. I had absolutely no intention of using any term that was offensive. I do not actually know what term I used that was offensive, so if out of ignorance I have, I apologise.

Mr Deputy Speaker : Thank you very much for that statement. May I say as well that I will pass on all the thanks to the Speaker's Office that I have heard today during business questions? I, too, would like to add my thanks to all the staff who have worked tirelessly and beyond the call of duty during what must be the most difficult time in the 29 years that I have been a Member of Parliament, and particularly to the broadcasting team, who have been quite simply beyond amazing in ensuring that the democracy that we all cherish has not been tarnished and has been allowed to carry on during the covid pandemic. I thank each and every one of them.

I suspend the House for the sanitisation of the Dispatch Boxes.

1.3 pm

Sitting suspended.

Awarding Qualifications in 2021 and 2022

1.6 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement regarding the arrangements that have been put in place for awarding qualifications this year and next year.

Fairness to students was at the heart of the decision that a national exam series this summer could not go ahead, and fairness will remain our guiding principle in 2022. I believe and this Government believe that, all other things being equal, exams are the fairest way to assess students, but we cannot ignore the fact that covid-19 has caused disruption to education throughout the year as we took steps to reduce the spread of this virus, protect our NHS and save lives. It would simply have been unfair to ask students to sit exams as they would in a normal year, which is why in 2021 students will receive grades decided by the people who know them best: their teachers. To ensure fairness, that applies to GCSEs, AS-levels, A-levels and the vocational and technical qualifications that are most like those general qualifications and that lead to similar outcomes and destinations for students.

There was widespread support for our approach because it was the fairest approach. In January, we launched a joint consultation with Ofqual on the methodology for determining grades. It was the largest consultation in the Department's history, with more than 100,000 responses from students, parents, teachers, school leaders and other stakeholders. We considered those responses very carefully.

Supported by teachers, parents and students, the approach taken means that every student has the best possible chance to show what they know and can do, enabling them to progress to the next stage of their education, training or employment. We took this course of action because teachers are the people who have the best understanding of their pupils' performance. Teachers were given flexibility to choose from a range of evidence to underpin their assessments, including coursework, in-class tests set by the school or college, optional questions provided by exam boards, and mock exams.

Importantly, teachers assessed students only on what they had been taught, with students able to see the evidence used to assess them before their grades were submitted. Schools and colleges received guidance, support and training on how to do so fairly. Exam boards also issued grade descriptors pegged to performance standards from previous years to help teachers to make sure that their assessments were fair and consistent. Although teachers will determine grades, headteachers and principals have to sign off all grades, and there have been further quality assurance checks by exam boards to provide meaningful assurance of the system and root out malpractice.

I am pleased to update the House by saying that more than 99.9% of all teacher-assessed grades have now been submitted for this year. After submitting teacher-assessed grades, the exam boards asked all schools and colleges to submit evidence, a sample of which was checked to ensure that the process by which grades were awarded was correct and that they represented a reasonable exercise of academic judgment. More than 90% of that evidence was submitted within 48 hours.

I am pleased to report that the process of evidence checking is almost complete. As of 21 July, 99.5% of centres have submitted the evidence requested. Where the evidence has raised questions, centres have received a virtual visit and, on some occasions, have been asked to review grades. Once the quality assurance process is complete, the exam boards will go through the process of final checks ahead of the issuing of results to students in August.

Teacher-assessed grade results will be issued on 10 and 12 August, and we want all students to feel proud of their achievements this year. These results are meaningful qualifications, and they will help young people go on to the next stage of their lives. Although I hope all students receive the grades they need to progress, any student who feels disappointed when they open their results will have many options open to them. Students should talk to their school or college, university or prospective employer to discuss these options. They can also make use of the exam results helpline run by the National Careers Service.

It is only fair that, where students wish to improve their grades, they have the opportunity to sit an exam this autumn, as was the case last year. Exam boards will offer autumn exams in all GCSE and A-level subjects, and in maths and science AS-level subjects. These exams will take place over October, November and December.

We have also set out an appeals system for this year, should students believe a grade is wrong. Students can ask their school or college to check for errors first and, if necessary, submit a formal appeal to the exam board—as in any other year, grades can go up or down on appeal.

This approach, taken together, is the fairest for every student, and it retains faith in our grading system. This approach gives universities and employers the confidence they need that students have achieved grades that align with their ability and their work. Ultimately, the grades that students receive will do what they have always done: they will be young people's passport to the next stage of their lives.

As we look forward to results day, I would like to thank all universities and colleges for their commitment to ensuring that students have access to the opportunities needed to succeed. I know that universities across the country stand ready to put students' interests at the heart of decision making, and to ensure they have the time to carefully consider their options and make the best choice for the future.

As I have said, all other things being equal, exams are the fairest way of assessing students, and it is our firm intention that exams should go ahead in summer 2022. The Department and Ofqual launched two joint consultations on 12 July on proposed adaptations to exams and other assessments, to recognise the disruption to education that the 2022 cohort has faced as a result of the pandemic.

For GCSEs, AS-levels and A-levels, we are proposing a package of measures that includes four elements. In those GCSE subjects where it is possible to do so without undermining the assessment, we propose that exam boards should provide a choice of topics on which students will be assessed. In all other examined subjects at GCSE, AS-level and A-level, we propose that students and teachers should receive advance information about how the content of exams will be focused. We propose

[Nick Gibb]

to reduce the burden of non-exam assessment in some subjects. Finally, we propose that students will be allowed to have access to support materials in the exam room in a small number of GCSE subjects.

For vocational and technical qualifications, the consultation sets out a range of proposed measures for those qualifications that are included in performance tables, including adaptations such as streamlining assessments, early banking of assessments and providing revision guidance. We are working with Ofqual and wider stakeholders on contingency plans to ensure that students are able to receive grades that are fair, even if further disruption occurs.

In putting together these proposals, we have been guided by the overarching principle of fairness. The proposed measures on which we are consulting are intended to help students progress to the next stage of their lives, and to succeed when they are there. We look forward to receiving views on the proposals and plan to announce final decisions on adaptations, as well as further details about contingency plans, in the autumn term.

I know that students who will take these exams next summer have faced a huge amount of disruption to their education this year. In addition to these measures, we are already investing huge sums to help them catch up so that they are ready to sit these exams. That is why schools have access to both a catch-up and a recovery premium to enable them to assess what will help their pupils to catch up on any lost education and to make provision available to ensure that they do so. It is why we are targeting support for 16 to 19-year-olds to those who need the most support through the 16 to 19 tuition fund, giving disadvantaged students access to one-to-one and small group tuition.

This year, the fairest possible approach to awarding qualifications has been to empower teachers to decide the grades that allow students to move on with their lives, whether that be in education, training or work. None of this could have been achieved without the hard work of our headteachers, teachers and wider education staff, to whom we all owe a great debt of gratitude. I also thank parents and students who have shown patience and flexibility over the past 18 months. I commend this statement to the House.

1.15 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

On the final day before the House rises for recess, I pay tribute to teachers, school leaders and support staff in every part of our education system for all that they have done this year and will be doing over the summer.

Last summer, the Government's incompetent eleventh-hour cancellation of exam results and the chaotic arrangements for awarding qualifications created confusion and huge distress for thousands of young people. The Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and the Minister have had a full year to learn from their mistakes and to get things right this time, but that time has been squandered. For months, school leaders, teachers, teaching unions and the Labour party, among others, warned of the need for a plan B if exams could not go ahead this year,

yet it took until January, even as some young people were actually sitting their BTEC exams, for Ministers finally to announce that exams would not happen this year. That has resulted in concerns about fairness.

The Minister boasted about catch-up support, but this year, more than 560,000 year 11 pupils will be leaving school having received no support to recover lost learning. Even those pupils who did are likely to have received less than an hour of tutoring a fortnight, despite missing well over half a year of face-to-face schooling. Does the Minister believe that he has done everything in his power to ensure that this year's process is as fair as possible? Will he outline what discussions he has had with universities, colleges, employers and training providers about how all pupils will be able to progress on the basis of their results this year?

I am glad to hear that the overwhelming majority of grades have been submitted. Can the Minister confirm that the work will be fully completed before the end of term? How many grades have been or are likely to be changed in the quality assurance process? I welcome the fact that the appeals process will be free, but to work for pupils, it must be accessible and it must be quick. Can he give me a cast-iron guarantee that all appeals will be processed in time for pupils to take up a place at university, at college, in an apprenticeship or in employment?

Education staff have worked incredibly hard to make work a system that the Government chaotically imposed on them. Will the Minister tell me what support staff are receiving now and what support they will receive over the summer, both professional and personal? Does he really believe it is right that schools will receive the same rebate from exam boards as they did last year, even as the workload of teachers has rocketed under this year's system? Will he consider following the example of Labour in Wales, which is providing additional financial support to schools to recognise this?

Young people, families and education staff are worried about qualifications this year, but next year will be just as challenging. Once again, the Minister and Secretary of State have had plenty of time to plan before the start of the new academic year this September, yet they have only just launched a consultation, only days before the start of the summer holidays, which is an insult to education staff who desperately need and deserve a break.

Will the Minister tell us why greater topic choices will be available only for some GCSE subjects, and is he not concerned that providing advance notice of exam content, rather than building in greater optionality, could simply embed unfairness, whereby pupils who have spent more time than others on a given topic will do better simply through chance?

Is the Minister really sure that now is the right time to return to national published league tables, unchanged to reflect the disruption that has continued in this year and remains likely next year? Can he say with certainty that league tables will fairly and accurately reflect school performance? I am glad that he acknowledged the need for contingency measures. Will he tell me when they will be in place and when schools and other settings will know what they are?

In his statement, the Minister thanked education staff across the country, but teachers and school leaders will find his gratitude hollow after the shameful way in

which he snuck out a real-terms pay cut to their salaries last night. Can he confirm that at least 94% of teachers face a real-terms pay cut as a result of that announcement? Instead of saying that he is grateful with one breath while slashing pay with the next, will he apologise to teachers, pupils and families for the shameful way in which the Government have treated them as an afterthought throughout the pandemic?

No one wants to see a repeat of last year's exams fiasco, but once again the Government are making policy late and failing to listen. Today the Minister must reassure anxious pupils and parents that every young person will get the support they need this summer and next year, that staff will be supported and that every student will be treated fairly.

Nick Gibb: I realise that the Opposition have to have a critique, but at every stage we worked methodically with Ofqual, the exam boards, stakeholders and the teachers' unions to ensure that we devised a process for awarding grades in 2021 that was the right approach. We worked carefully and methodically with Ofqual and the exam boards, learning from what happened last summer, to determine the right adaptations for the 2022 exams in order to ensure that they are fair given all the disruption that students have suffered. We wanted to launch the short consultation before the summer break, which we did on 12 July. We want to confirm the position early in the autumn term, so that teachers know at the earliest point in the next academic year the structure for exams in 2022.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of the appeals timetable. For priority cases—where students have missed out on their firm university choice and wish to appeal results—students should request a centre review by 16 August. For non-priority cases, students should request a centre review by 3 September. Centres will need to submit priority appeals by 23 August. Students will be informed of the outcome of priority appeals in most cases by 8 September.

The hon. Lady asked about exam fee rebates. The exam boards have all confirmed that they plan to provide rebates to schools this year. Some have made announcements on the rebate already. The Department will be providing funding to exam boards directly to support the appeals costs and any autumn series losses they make. This will enable the exam boards to pass more funding back to schools via rebates.

The hon. Lady mentioned performance tables. There will be no performance tables in 2021. In 2022 there will be performance tables for GCSEs and A-levels, but not for primary school SATs, given that adaptations cannot be made in that regard.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of teachers' pay. We do know, and I acknowledge at every possible opportunity, that teachers and support staff have worked incredibly hard over the last 16 months, adapting schools to covid and learning and preparing to teach children remotely for the first time. Teachers are very much on the frontline in the fight against the pandemic. In the September 2020 pay award, teachers received an average increase of 3.1%, with starting salaries rising by 5.5%. The cumulative pay award for teachers since 2018-19 is 8.5%. The pause on pay rises this year is across the public sector, except for health, and is designed to help address the public

finances following the financial response to the pandemic. Of course, the pay pause does not prevent pay rises as a consequence of promotion or performance-related pay.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Mr Deputy Speaker, may I quickly take the chance to thank Mr Speaker, you, all the staff of the House of Commons and the other Deputy Speakers for the incredible way in which Parliament has gone on and enabled people who have been shielding to participate? It has been a miracle. I would have liked to say that had I been called in business questions to the Leader of the House.

Of course, we all want exams to take place, but given that we know that 1 million pupils were not in school this week and that 93,500 children have hardly returned to school since schools reopening on 8 March, what analysis did the Department make of the lost learning of pupils—particularly pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, many of whom have not yet benefited from the catch-up programme—who have not been in school for one reason or another in exam years before setting out the policy that the Minister has announced today?

My worry about the approach the Minister set out is that requiring exam boards to provide advance information about exam content and support means that the Government are in essence reducing a 100 metre race to a 50 metre race while keeping all the pupils at the same starting point whatever their disadvantage. The pupils who have experienced the most lost learning will still be the most disadvantaged compared with those who were in school more at the time. Could he at least consider ensuring a level playing field and taking a more nuanced, data-driven approach that takes into account the fact that millions of children have experienced lost learning? That could be done by increasing the time allowed to do the exams or adjusting the grade weighting to reflect the number of days that pupils have lost.

Nick Gibb: My right hon. Friend's thoughtful question raises an important point. We did consider a range of alternatives to the proposal on which we finally consulted on 12 July. We worked very closely with Ofqual and the exam boards, and optionality and advance notice disproportionately help students who have had more time out of school compared with those who have remained in school the most, who will have covered most of the curriculum. It helps those pupils. That is also why we are allocating more than £3 billion to catch-up, and the recovery premium and the 16-to-19 tuition fund are deliberately targeted at students and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I ask all Members to focus on shorter questions, as we have two other pieces of business before we get on to the general debate.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD) [V]: Last month, the Secretary of State said:

"We very much hope and intend for exams to go ahead in 2022".

That was a statement not exactly brimming with confidence. As the school year draws to a close, more than 1 million school pupils in England, including a third of all secondary school students, are absent because of covid. Are the Government confident that the decisions they have

[Daisy Cooper]

made recently will not affect the ability of schools to reopen safely in October or to stay open safely for the whole academic year, and that young people sitting exams will not be let down for a third year running?

Nick Gibb: There is a clear plan that exams will go ahead next year. A large proportion of the pupils who are not in school at the moment are out as a consequence of self-isolating because they have been a close contact of somebody who has tested positive for covid. From 16 August, anybody under the age of 18 will not have to self-isolate as a consequence of coming into such contact. They will be asked to take a PCR test, and when students start school in September they will be asked to take two lateral flow device tests on school premises in that first week of term.

We are determined to do all we can to identify asymptomatic cases of covid, and all the measures in schools—including ventilation and hygiene—will remain in place despite the move to step 4 to ensure that we minimise any risk of transmission of the virus on school premises. As I mentioned in my opening statement, we are also working on contingency plans should it be necessary to cancel exams next year because of the direction of the pandemic. Our very firm plans are to proceed with exams, because they are the fairest way of assessing young people.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Does he agree that exams are the fairest way not only to assess the pupils' ability in their subjects but to give them certainty about how they will be assessed? The rigour of the tried and tested exam system will help avoid the sad cases of anxiety and mental health challenges that far too many of our young people have suffered given the disruption of the pandemic.

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is right. When we considered the raft of options, we took that into account. Some adaptations may appear on the surface to be fair, but because they are so different from what has happened in the past teachers are not used to teaching to that approach and students are not used to taking exams with it.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Can the Minister promise the House that on results day it will be him, the Education Secretary and the Prime Minister who will take responsibility for what happens, instead of pushing the blame on to hard-working teaching staff?

Nick Gibb: We have been working very closely with the education sector, the teaching unions, Ofqual and the exam boards, and we have, I believe, devised the fairest approach to ensuring that students are able to receive their grades, have their qualifications, and, most importantly, move on to the next stage of their life. That is what we are all seeking to do. There are rigorous quality assurance processes at every stage, from within the schools to the exam boards, and they are designed to ensure that grades are awarded fairly and consistently.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) [V]: I thank all the teachers and staff in Dudley South and across the country who have gone above and beyond throughout

this pandemic. Clearly students completing qualifications this summer have had their studies disrupted hugely, but those who will sit exams next summer have also faced massive disruption and could be competing against others who were awarded grades this summer or last summer for college and university places. What action is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that students completing courses next summer will not be at an unfair disadvantage?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend raises an important point. That is why we have set out in the joint consultation document with Ofqual all the adaptations to exams next year, taking into account the fact that most students will have suffered some disruption to their education by next summer. The issue of grading is a matter for Ofqual and decisions about grading will be made in the autumn term.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Despite warning after warning, this Government have let covid disrupt the education of millions of children this summer. Young people have had to endure so much this year. Does the Minister not recognise that young people need certainty over the next few years, not more U-turns, for the sake of fairness, their planning and their mental health? Assessing their whole learning journey through a range of different teacher-based assessments with robust moderation will bring that certainty, not the final exams.

Nick Gibb: I understand the point the hon. Member is making but I have to say I disagree. I believe very firmly, as do the Government, that exams are the fairest method of assessing pupils' attainment. It is also a workload issue for teachers. Throughout the pandemic, as we have devised a system to ensure that young people can move on to the next stage of their lives, we have always taken into account the workload implications for teachers and schools.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. I agree with what he said and what he just said about exams. I pay tribute to teachers in Newcastle-under-Lyme who have gone above and beyond this academic year, as I know they will next year, to help pupils catch up with lost learning. Can he confirm that the measures he has set out will not be putting any undue additional pressure on teachers?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. Teachers, support staff and headteachers have worked incredibly hard in schools and colleges during the pandemic, making sure that schools are covid-secure, adapting to remote education, teaching both remotely and in class, and keeping schools open throughout the whole period for vulnerable children and the children of critical workers. We do absolutely have teacher workload at the forefront of our minds as we devise policy.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): My local schools have collated and moderated hundreds of pupil grades, while facing a mental health crisis and catch-up, with none of the assistance from the exam boards that the Minister spoke of—presumably they have all been on full pay throughout. Can he guarantee that the A-level students of next year who missed their GCSEs last year will have in-person exams? Can he also guarantee, for a profession that in west London has

significant staffing gaps and faces burn-out, that teachers can now have five weeks completely offline, or are they going to have nasty surprises as they did last year? His boss, again absent, seems to think that the holidays have already started.

Nick Gibb: Teachers have been very well supported by the exam boards, with guidance, training and grade descriptors. We want to try to ensure that we are doing everything we can to support teachers through this process. We know that, despite all that support, it has been a big task for teachers to get these grades, and it is a remarkable achievement that a very high proportion were delivered by schools on time by 18 June. That training and those grade descriptors have ensured, I believe, that we will have consistency and fairness in how grades are awarded in 2021. For 2022, it is our very firm plan that exams will go ahead, because, as I said, it is the fairest way of assessing young people.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con) [V]: I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement that students will be examined only on what they have actually been taught, in recognition of the acute impact that this year has had on their studies. Both students and teachers need certainty. Will he ensure that teachers will have the materials and resources they need to give their students that confidence?

Nick Gibb: Yes. We have set out in the consultation document on 12 July all the different options for the different subjects. For some subjects the adaptation will be optionality of choice of questions, whereas for others it will be advance notice or formulas and aids in the exam room to help students. This is to give students confidence that, despite all the disruption they have had over the past 16 months, they will still do well in that exam. We will respond to the consultation in the autumn so that, as my right hon. Friend requests, teachers have the certainty they need to teach the remainder of the curriculum.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Students and teachers in Luton North are deeply concerned by the Government's plans to cut BTEC qualifications. The Association of Colleges warns that the plans risk closing down routes for training to work for many working-class young people, but should we expect anything else from a Tory Government who do not know what levelling up is, let alone have the ability to deliver it? BTECs are valued, successful and popular at Luton sixth forms, so will the Minister confirm whether BTECs will continue to be funded? If so, for how long?

Nick Gibb: This is all as a result of the consultation on level 2 and level 3 qualifications. There will be a process that exam boards, with employers, will go through before decisions are taken.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to exams going ahead in 2022. Does he agree that they are particularly important for disadvantaged students, as we know from a number of studies that their potential is often underestimated by their teachers and it is only with their exams that they show what they are capable of?

Nick Gibb: Yes, my hon. Friend makes a very good point, and his example is one reason why exams are the fairest system of assessing students. But we are also aware

that disadvantaged students have suffered disproportionately compared with the average in terms of disruption to their education, which is why the recovery premium and the 16 to 19 tuition fund are designed for and targeted at students from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab) [V]: As the Minister implied, students currently in year 10 have arguably been hit harder than any other cohort, having missed most of year 9 and had a hugely disrupted year 10. So is it not ridiculous to reintroduce performance tables, given the massive disparity of the impact of covid on different schools and different pupil cohorts? He said that fairness is the guiding principle, but how can the Government possibly build fairness into performance tables for 2022?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. As he acknowledged, there are no performance tables in 2021. In 2022, there are no performance tables for standard assessment tests, but there will be performance tables for GCSEs and A-levels. By 2022, we will not have had performance measures from secondary schools in either 2020 or 2021. These are qualifications for young people that really matter to their life chances, and we are able to make adaptations to them, as I have explained. There is also the notion of comparable outcomes, so they will be a fair reflection of schools' performance. Parents do need to have that data and that information when making a choice of secondary school for their children. By contrast, in primary schools we have not been able to make adaptations to the SATs in 2022, so we did not feel it was fair to continue with performance measures for the 2022 SATs.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: I thank all the heads, principals, lecturers, teachers, staff and, indeed, pupils and students across Harrow for all their work during the pandemic. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving an early indication of what is going to happen next year, but we know that the teacher assessments may, in some cases, produce unusual and strange results. Will he come back to the House in the autumn to report on the number of appeals, on the number of individuals who have opted to take the examinations and on what the impact of that has been? Then we can all learn from the experience of teachers and lecturers during the pandemic.

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We will of course be able to publish data on the number of entrants to the autumn series. Undoubtedly, Ofqual will be publishing details of the appeals process. I assure my hon. Friend that the quality assurance process is rigorous. The exam boards have carried out a check of each school and exam centre's approach to assessment and internal quality assurance. Headteachers have to sign a head of centre declaration form, to confirm that the grades submitted are fair, accurate and in accordance with the processes they have agreed. Schools submit a sample of evidence of how they determined those grades, and the exam boards will review centres whose grades are significantly out of line with previous years. They will challenge schools where the evidence does not support the grade awarded. I hope that quality assurance process will provide some reassurance to my hon. Friend.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD) [V]: In my recent visits to secondary schools in Twickenham, year 10 and 12 pupils told me how anxious they are because of the lack of clarity on exams in 2022—whether they will even go ahead, how they might be assessed and what they might be assessed on. Teachers told me that, with all the disruption, they want to focus their precious face-to-face teaching time on parts of the syllabus that will definitely be assessed next year. Can the Minister please commit to putting pupils, parents and teachers out of their misery by providing a clear steer on 2022 assessments, and not sometime in the autumn but by the beginning of September?

Nick Gibb: We published the consultation, jointly with Ofqual, on 12 July, and it sets out our proposals for how we will conduct exams in 2022. The Secretary of State has made it very clear that our plan is for exams to go ahead, and we want schools to teach the full curriculum. The purpose of the adaptations is to make the exams as fair as possible for students and to give them confidence in taking those exams, given the disruption they have suffered over the past 16 months.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): It is likely that this summer will see a huge rise in grade inflation, beyond what we saw last August. This benefits nobody in the long term, particularly those in future exam cohorts from disadvantaged backgrounds in places such as Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke. Can my right hon. Friend explain how grade inflation will not be baked into the system, to use the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), in the 2022 exams and beyond?

Nick Gibb: Parents and pupils can have confidence that the grades awarded this summer will be valid. They are supported by detailed guidance, as I said in answer to a previous question, and there is a robust quality assurance process. We trust teachers' judgment, as they are best placed to understand the content that their students have covered, their students' performance and how it compares with other students this year. Grading is a matter for Ofqual, and some decisions will be made about that in the autumn term.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his personal hard work and fortitude as schools Minister throughout the pandemic. He has done a fantastic job. Will he join me in

congratulating all the students and teachers in Kettering on their efforts to keep education going over this very difficult period? When it comes to A-level exam students in 2022, will he bear in mind the important point that normally, when a person takes their A-levels, they have taken GCSE exams two years before? This cohort of A-level students will never have taken exams. Can he confirm that, all things being equal, we will be back to normal in 2023?

Nick Gibb: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind comments, and I join him in paying tribute to teachers and staff in schools in Kettering—indeed, throughout the country—for what they have achieved during the pandemic and for the way that they have managed to cope with the teacher-assessed grading system this year, which has been very well handled. He raises an important point that, of course, this year's year 12 have not taken GCSEs. All this was taken into account when we devised the adaptations that we have proposed for 2022, and I can give him the assurance that we will return to normal in 2023.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): As teachers and students across the Aylesbury constituency begin their summer holidays, I thank them all for their incredible efforts this year. Will my right hon. Friend join me in doing so, and will he reassure them that the plans he has announced today will not penalise them for the disruption that they have suffered, but will mark an important step back to an exam regime that is both rigorous and fair?

Nick Gibb: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to teachers and staff in schools in Aylesbury, who I know have worked as hard as teachers throughout the country in making sure that children can catch up as swiftly as possible on lost education. He is right that we want to get our exam system back to normal as swiftly as possible, but I believe that, given the disruption that students have suffered over the past 16 or 17 months, the adaptations that we proposed, together with Ofqual, in the consultation document that we published on 12 July are the fairest approach to exams in 2022, as a stepping-stone to full normality in 2023, which I know will please my hon. Friend and, indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone).

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for his statement and for responding to the questions asked.

Personal Statements

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Mr Speaker has granted leave to the hon. Member for Gravesham (Adam Holloway) and the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) to make personal statements following the recommendations of the Committee on Standards in its second report of Session 2021-22. I remind the House that there can be no debate arising from such statements.

1.46 pm

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con) [V]: I wish to apologise to the House. Yesterday, the Committee on Standards adjudged that I and four other MPs were wrong to write a joint letter to two senior judges, copied to the judge who was hearing a case, which was followed by further letters to the Lord Chief Justice and the case judge, judged to try to influence the way personal references in court cases were made public. I now know it was improper to do so. I regret that and repeat and emphasise my apology.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much, Mr Holloway. I now, via video link, call the right hon. Bob Stewart. *[Interruption.]* Hold on, Bob; we cannot hear you. *[Interruption.]* No, we still cannot hear you. Do you have someone to help you? Can you unmute your microphone? *[Interruption.]*

We will suspend at this moment, as we would have done before the next business, and then come back, hopefully, to Colonel Bob for his statement.

1.48 pm

Sitting suspended.

1.51 pm

On resuming—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Let us see whether a miracle has happened and we can hear Colonel Bob Stewart.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con) [V]: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I hope that the miracle has happened.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It has.

Bob Stewart: I want to apologise to the House. Yesterday, the Committee on Standards adjudged that I and four other MPs were wrong to write a joint letter to two senior judges, copied to the judge who was about to hear a case, followed by further letters to the Lord Chief Justice and the case judge, which it concluded were an attempt to try to influence the way references in court cases were made public. I now know that it was wrong to do so. I regret it and I repeat my apology to the House.

Post-pandemic Economic Growth: Levelling Up

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY COMMITTEE

Select Committee Statement

1.52 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab) [V]: I am grateful for the opportunity to make a statement on the third report of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee's inquiry into post-pandemic economic growth. The report focuses on levelling up.

In the 2019 Conservative party manifesto, the Prime Minister said:

"We have mapped out a fantastic programme for the years ahead: to unite and level up, spreading opportunity across the whole United Kingdom."

Since the election, however, the Government have failed miserably at translating the political slogan "levelling up" into a real programme for government. Although the Prime Minister said that he had a map for levelling up, it seems that either he has lost it or he is not willing to share it with us. That is important, because the promise of levelling up was a major part of the Conservative party's success at the last general election, yet so far we do not have any clear answers on what the Government think levelling up is, how it will be paid for, who is responsible for delivering it or what a successful delivery of the levelling-up agenda will mean for people in their day-to-day lives.

Crucially, the Government have failed to set out how the special focus on levelling up will differ from the normal day-to-day functions of government and whether funding for the levelling-up agenda will equal or exceed the funding to local communities that has been cut following Brexit and the previous period of austerity. In the Committee's year-long inquiry, we took evidence from many stakeholders, including the Government and a number of their Ministers, to ask many of those simple questions. Unfortunately, answers were not forthcoming.

We therefore concluded that levelling up, in our view, is about a more equal distribution of economic and social opportunities across the United Kingdom. We agreed that that is a laudable aim, and one that has been pursued by many Governments of different colours over many years. We took evidence from local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, city and regional Mayors, powerhouses and Ministers, as well as businesses, local chambers of commerce and academics. In considering their evidence, we have made several recommendations to the Government.

First, the Government should urgently publish the promised levelling-up White Paper, which we understand will incorporate the devolution White Paper, so that we can be clear on how they define levelling up, what the priorities are and which tiers of local and regional government will be responsible for delivering it. Secondly, they should work with the Office for National Statistics, the cities and local growth unit in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the National Audit Office to agree a set of metrics for the routine reporting of progress in delivering levelling-up priorities.

[Darren Jones]

Thirdly, they should establish the functioning of a Cabinet Committee on levelling up that collaborates with devolved regional and local leaders. Fourthly—this is important—the Government should recognise that inequality exists across the whole of the United Kingdom, including within cities, so levelling-up priorities should not be focused only on some regions or sub-regions of the country. Lastly, they should ensure that each region in England has the capacity to bid competitively for Government funding, given that some areas in England—for example, those with metro Mayors—have a greater capacity to engage with Whitehall than others.

Devolution in England is inconsistent, and some areas perform better than others irrespective of whether they have multiple tiers of local or regional government. If, therefore, the Government are committed to levelling up in so far as it relates to empowering local communities, I encourage Ministers to be bold and progressive in the devolution sections of the levelling-up White Paper expected later this year. Ultimately, the Committee concluded that the lack of clarity in what levelling up means and how it translates into specific policy initiatives and strategies risks its becoming an “everything and nothing” policy, not owned by any particular Minister or Department and without any means of evaluating or assessing its impact or efficacy in improving people’s lives. It seems as if Ministers are trying to hide the fact that they do not have a real levelling-up policy by saying that every other policy from Government, be it about bus stops or football pitches or the obesity strategy, is in fact levelling up. The Prime Minister’s spokesperson, in response to my Committee’s report, said that more detail would be forthcoming in the levelling-up White Paper later this year. The imperative is therefore on the Government to hear our request, as well as those from others, and step up with the level of detail expected of any competent Government in delivering on their manifesto commitments.

Everyone on the Committee agreed that sharing economic and social opportunities more fairly across the country is a good thing, and we want the Government to succeed in delivering on their promises and improving people’s lives. In the meantime, we will continue to scrutinise the Government and hold Ministers to account, but ultimately, if they do not step up, it will be for the British people to decide whether their promises have been delivered. I thank all the witnesses who gave oral and written evidence to our inquiry, my parliamentary colleagues on the Committee and, as ever, our excellent Clerks. I commend the report to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I will now call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and will then call Darren Jones to respond to them in turn.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the hon. Member agree that, as the Government better define levelling-up, they should not lose sight of the leading role and ideas of the private sector, including those announced yesterday in the Richard Koch breakthrough prize, which can supercharge growth in left-behind Britain, such as “zoom towns”, distributed policy making, reinvigorated provincial stock exchanges and—the overall winning idea—a people’s rebate?

Darren Jones: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; it is great to see you, as a fellow member of the Committee, in the Chair. Congratulations on your appointment.

I am always grateful for the counsel of my Committee colleague, the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller). We agree that delivering meaningful economic growth for people across the country requires a growing economy that is free to innovate and to make profits. I support many of his points about ensuring that we have a successful, inspirational, innovative economy that delivers for people and businesses across the country.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his statement. Clearly, the main focus of this report was on aspects of levelling up as it applies to England, but the agenda is being applied across the whole United Kingdom. Can the Chair of the Select Committee tell us what he thinks of a situation where substantial amounts of public money are being spent within the devolved nations on areas of service that quite clearly fall 100% within the competence of the devolved national Parliaments and Assemblies, but where decisions are being taken with no consultation whatsoever with those devolved Administrations? Is that something that he would find acceptable?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We looked briefly at the role of the devolved Administrations and concluded that pretty much everybody agrees that a more equal distribution of economic and social opportunities for people across the country is something that everybody supports, irrespective of place in the country or political party membership. We did also point to a recommendation where devolved Administration leaders, alongside local and regional leaders, are engaged in a Cabinet-level discussion on the levelling-up agenda in Whitehall, because, together, all of us would wish to achieve these outcomes and we should therefore all be working together to do so.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I commend the hon. Gentleman for his statement and his Committee on its report. I note that, in paragraph 66, the Committee recommends that

“the Government establish a Cabinet Committee to oversee the co-ordination and delivery of the levelling up agenda across Whitehall”.

Why did his Committee recommend a Cabinet Committee and not a specific Cabinet Minister responsible for levelling up, as suggested by some of the Committee’s witnesses?

Darren Jones: It is a discussion that we had in some detail on the Committee. The hon. Gentleman will know that the distinction between a Cabinet Committee led by the Prime Minister and a Cabinet member delivering on behalf of the Prime Minister is perhaps important, but we concluded that, given the Prime Minister’s personal commitment to this issue and his personal desire to want to lead it, he therefore ought to chair the Cabinet Committee that he has suggested should be put in place. Importantly, given that levelling up relates to lots of Departments, there needs to be a cross-departmental function, which, ultimately, is why we landed on a Cabinet Committee as opposed to a specific member of the Cabinet leading on levelling up.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Time and again, I have urged Government to fairly fund areas most in need, not create competitions that are often won by Cabinet members representing wealthy areas. We must have a fair levelling-up fund based on need, with power going down to local communities that know best. Does my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee, agree that this damning report shows that the Government should be focused on genuine efforts to tackle deep-rooted inequality rather than continuing with these failed competitions and wheeling out hollow soundbites?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. This issue of competition versus collaboration in bidding for funding was a really important part of our inquiry. I referenced in my remarks today how some areas of the country are better equipped and resourced at engaging with Whitehall to receive funding. There is a root problem here in that we do not understand what the Government's levelling-up priorities are, what funding is then being allocated to solve them, and what data are being used to ensure that funding is distributed in a fair and equitable way—where it is needed, not necessarily, perhaps, where the loudest voices or the political priorities are placed. That is the bedrock of our report, which, I think, would go some way to solving the problems that my hon. Friend has raised.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con) [V]: Has the Committee looked at how, quite often, a range of interlocking opportunities for levelling up require joint working between agencies and businesses, and at how having one single voice, as we are now in the process of establishing in Somerset, can unite all the work that has gone on—whether through the local enterprise partnership, the county plan, the priorities, the local industrial strategy and now the skills agenda that the Government are championing, which I welcome? How much does the hon. Gentleman think that these things need to be integrated when the Government are thinking about how to champion them?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Member for his question. I would make two observations. First, we recognised an inconsistency in the tiers of local and regional government across England. I have mentioned that we spoke to powerhouses, metro Mayors, city Mayors, local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, chambers of commerce and others, and evidently that means there is an inconsistency across England.

The other thing we found was that in areas where there is a sense of co-ordination between those different tiers, with a single voice focusing on priorities that matter most to those local communities, they tended to be more successful in being able to bid for funding and to deliver on levelling-up agendas. That is why I say that, in the levelling-up White Paper later this year, the devolution aspects are really important to ensure that there is a consistency and an equality of opportunity for regions across England in order to bid for funding and support as part of the levelling-up agenda.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Congratulations on being in your place, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is quite clear to the Committee that levelling up is really just a political slogan. There are no clear ways of measuring outcomes, and there is no clear avenue or

looking ahead on funding streams. Of real concern to me is this phrase, “levelling up across the UK”. The Chair will understand that the Scottish Parliament is there for a reason, which is that Westminster was not delivering for Scotland or the other devolved nations.

At the moment, the way the levelling-up funds are going to be distributed is by the UK Government's withholding the equivalent in Barnett consequential to allocate that amount directly to Scottish local authorities, pitting them against each other. Convention shows that it should be the Scottish Government, in conjunction with local authorities, who decide their priorities. Does the Chair agree that, as a Committee recommendation, the UK Government should be working with the Scottish Government transparently on the allocation of funds, and should let the Scottish Government distribute these funds by the conventional method?

Darren Jones: The hon. Member is a hard-working member of the Select Committee, and he will know that we are only able to delve so far into the functioning of devolved Administrations. However, we did conclude in our inquiry that leaders in the devolved Administrations should be around the table with local and regional leaders in discussions with Ministers in Whitehall, so that we do have a joined-up and collaborative approach to delivering on a shared objective to level up the whole of the United Kingdom.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend and his Committee on this very serious report, which shows undeniably that the Government lack any clarity as to what they mean by levelling up. In fact, the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) said this week:

“One of the things about ‘levelling up’ is...it's quite a sort of ambiguous phrase—it means whatever anyone wants it to mean”, but clearly that should not be the case.

It is at least welcome that there is now political consensus that for too long the UK has been scarred by deep regional inequalities. The single biggest challenge for levelling up is that people have to leave their regions and head south to get good work. This has to change, and it can only happen by making the quantity and quality of jobs in regions our priority. Levelling up must be about investment to combat those inequalities, including between regions, within regions and between socioeconomic groups across the whole of the UK.

Can I ask the Chair, first, what his Committee's conclusions were in relation to fair funding for levelling up, particularly in the light of how the levelling-up fund's piecemeal funding does not make up for the failure of austerity over the last decade, with services decimated as £15 billion of cuts have been made to local government? Secondly, on extending democratic power, what is his Committee's view on how we should reach consensus on which tiers of devolved and local government should have responsibility for achieving those important shared levelling-up outcomes, because quite clearly this can no longer be done from the centre?

Darren Jones: I thank the shadow spokesperson for those points, and for her kind remarks about the work of my Committee. On the funding allocation, of course the issue here is that if there is not a clear strategy about what levelling up is and therefore clear funding allocated

[Darren Jones]

to it, it is unclear what funding is being made available above and beyond the day-to-day functioning of government, and indeed in comparison with historical funding cuts through periods of austerity and following our withdrawal from the European Union. Because of that lack of clarity, we have no answer as to how local communities can fairly bid for funding for the levelling-up agenda, above and beyond what already exists through the day-to-day work of government.

On democratic engagement in defining local economic areas, that of course is a very difficult issue. It is one we did not delve into in any great detail in our own inquiry, not least because it goes a little beyond the remit of our Select Committee powers. However, we do recognise that there needs to be more consistency across England in democratic structures so that there is an equality of capacity to bid to Whitehall for funding in advance of—this is my personal view—a more devolved level of decision making and funding across England in the years ahead.

Backbench Business

Government Response to Covid-19: Public Inquiry

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee on 16 June 2020, 23 June 2020, 14 July 2020 and 23 July 2020 on Responding to Covid-19 and the Coronavirus Act 2020, HC377; e-petition 302576, Hold a Public Inquiry into the handling of the Covid-19 crisis, and e-petition 577292, Launch a judge-led public inquiry into the Covid-19 pandemic.]

2.10 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House notes the Fifth Report of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee of Session 2019-21, A Public Inquiry into the Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, HC 541; and calls on the Government to provide an updated response to that set out in the Committee's Fourth Special Report of Session 2019-21, A Public Inquiry into the Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic: Government's response to the Committee's Fifth Report, HC 995, setting out how the Government intends to implement the Committee's recommendations, to ensure that the administrative arrangements necessary to set up the public inquiry committed to by the Prime Minister to the House on 11 May 2021, in particular the appointment of an inquiry chair, take place in a timely manner and no later than the end of this year, and to agree: that the Government's preferred candidate to chair the inquiry should be subject to a pre-appointment hearing by the relevant select committee for the sponsoring Government department.

It is a privilege to move the motion, in the name of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, into the very important subject of the Government's response to the covid-19 pandemic and the promised public inquiry.

We, as a Committee, have taken evidence from some very well informed help, if I may put it that way, and we have brought our deliberations forward in the reports under discussion today. We thank our witnesses who gave evidence—Emma Norris from the Institute for Government, Dr Alastair Stark from the University of Queensland, Jason Beer, QC, Lord Butler of Brockwell, Sir Robert Francis, QC, Dame Una O'Brien and Baroness Prashar of Runnymede—and all those who submitted written evidence to the inquiry. I also thank fellow Committee members for their well-informed deliberation on these matters.

We are all used now, I think, to public inquiries as a routine part of the UK political landscape, and it is clear that the issues with which we have been grappling over the past 18 months, and the very difficult measures that the Government have taken to combat the pandemic, are very much the right subject for a public inquiry. However, although we are used to public inquiries, there is very little guidance about how public inquiries should be established, Chairs appointed and terms of reference agreed, so, in the absence of such guidance, our Committee has happily stepped into that void with a view to taking discussions forward.

The Prime Minister has committed in principle to establishing a public inquiry, and in May 2021 he suggested that it should be established in spring 2022. The first message that the Committee would like to give is that that timetable really ought to be brought forward, for

the simple reason that it takes a number of months before an inquiry can get under way in terms of establishing its secretariat and so on. I guess one issue that we were keen to grapple with is that the farther away from events an inquiry is established, the less we can learn in a timely fashion. So we would strongly encourage the Government to think about how they can be setting up that inquiry from now. It really should not get in the way of the fight against the pandemic, especially given where we are with regard to vaccination.

Obviously, we need to be very sure about the purpose of the inquiry. As a Committee, we were very keen to ensure that the inquiry should be about learning lessons, not apportioning blame. The facts of the matter are that the Government, and all our public services, were dealing with unprecedented challenges, and there can be no right or wrong answers when the evidence on which you seek to make decisions is changing before your very eyes from day to day. Ultimately, it will come down to a matter of judgment exercised at the time.

I really hope that we can enter the inquiry very much in that spirit, because although I have not agreed with every aspect of the Government's decision making on this matter, I absolutely recognise that everyone involved in that process was doing so honourably, with the best of intentions. We are not going to be honest about lessons learned unless we can approach the inquiry on that basis. We in this place need to give some very clear messages that we are doing so in the spirit of learning.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I commend the Committee for its thoughtful and thorough report.

I listened carefully to what the hon. Lady just said about one of the recommendations, and I understand about learning lessons; that is often what Committees do. I would challenge any Member, particularly Members who have been in this House for a long time, to remember the lessons learned and recommendations from the mad cow disease inquiry; my guess is that nobody will.

We already know that there have been heroes and villains over the last 18 months, and I would hope that any inquiry would identify those heroes and villains. Mistakes have been made in some cases because mistakes were bound to be made, but some mistakes have been made wilfully and we need to know who was responsible for them.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Clearly, where there is wilful bad behaviour it should be exposed, but we need to set the tone: this inquiry is about how the Government and society have dealt with a very difficult set of issues. The heroes and villains to whom he refers will find a way of being outed, if I can put it in such a way, without it being the entire focus or ethos of the inquiry.

We obviously need to be very clear about the inquiry's terms of reference, to inform what the focus will be, and about how the various themes that could be looked at will be examined. The chair will obviously be a very important appointment. This is by tradition the choice of the relevant Minister, but, again, respect for and the authority of the inquiry will be very much set by who the chair is. The Committee was very attracted to the idea of a chairman and panel approach, recognising that some of the issues that will be considered by the

inquiry are broad-ranging so it would be right for the chairman to have access to appropriate expertise in various areas. The Committee also felt that the appointment should be subject to a pre-commencement hearing with the relevant Select Committee, given the very high level of parliamentary interest in this inquiry. That would be an unprecedented step, but, again, in terms of setting the tone of how the inquiry will be progressed, it could be a very important innovation, and I hope the Government will consider that.

One of the issues that needs to be considered by the inquiry is of course the response by the Department of Health and Social Care in terms of management of risk of transmission and so on, but we need to consider in the round the tools adopted by the Government to deal with that, including the impact on liberties and the impact on our economy. There will be obvious consequences in the longer term for the nation's wellbeing in the round. We also need to consider the wider behaviour of public services in that regard.

There also needs to be a way of considering the impacts in the devolved nations, including whether this should be a UK-wide inquiry or there should be separate inquiries; quite possibly there should be a combination of both.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Will the Committee also be considering whether the ministerial code has been broken, either by deliberately misleading the House or other actions?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I would clearly expect any inquiry to consider such matters, but there are other ways of bringing complaints forward about breaches of the ministerial code, and any action taken on that is of course a matter for the Prime Minister.

As I have mentioned, in taking forward the public inquiry we must work on the basis that everyone did their best, making decisions based on information known at the time. I would expect an inquiry to consider whether the impacts of policy interventions on individual liberties were proportionate and whether they were effective. We need an examination of the tools employed and whether they were effective in delivering the outcome intended. For example, we had a whole programme of local lockdowns, as you will be well aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, but was it a legitimate tool to close down legitimate business activity when the areas of mass infection had high housing density and multigenerational households, and was that the right tool? Again, we need to consider that to ensure that the Government properly assessed the balance between economic harm, liberty and health.

I imagine that any inquiry will find that the development and deployment of vaccines has been an unqualified triumph. In terms of lessons learned, we need to learn from the good things as well as from things that did not go quite as well as they should have. We need a proper examination of how test, track and trace took so long to get off the ground, because that really was not an unqualified success, and we need to consider whether the balance was right between the centre and local government. We also need to consider the issues around the supply of personal protective equipment. Having reacted to the suggestion that there were huge shortages, the fact of the matter is that we now have massive stockpiles and

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

there are considerable costs to the taxpayer of maintaining those stockpiles. Again, we need to properly consider how those decisions came to be made.

I invite the House and the Government to consider the reflections of Bishop James Jones following his distinguished chairmanship of the Hillsborough inquiry. He talked about:

“The patronising disposition of unaccountable power”.

I think that phrase is a very convenient way of expressing how institutions of the state can often operate to protect their own reputations at the expense of the public, whom they are meant to serve. This is a really important principle to consider, given that the inquiry will judge not just lives lost, but the impact on business and jobs, as well as the wider impact on health and the harm that has been caused by the decisions taken over the last year, even though they were perhaps the best decisions that could have been made. It is a behaviour that public institutions can fall into unless we in Parliament give them proper challenge.

Perhaps another of the lessons we need to learn about the last year is that quite often Parliament has not played its full role in scrutinising decisions made by the Government. We have often been asked to give retrospective authority to decisions, and I hope that we all share the view that parliamentary scrutiny actually makes for better decision making.

I will leave hon. Members with a final thought. Our liberties are not in the gift of Government—they are ours. It really is down to consent given by Parliament on behalf of the public to ensure that those liberties, when we do surrender them, as we have in the last year, are not taken for granted by Government. In that regard, considering the behaviour of all our state institutions over this year is a very important job of scrutiny that the new inquiry would have to do to make sure that the shift towards state power that we have witnessed over the last year is not one that becomes permanent.

2.22 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I want to focus my comments on page 1 of the report—in particular, the fact that the Government accept that there will be an opportunity to look back at some undefined “appropriate time” in the future. I raise the concern that at some “appropriate time” in the future does not deal with the problems that we know exist already today. That underscores the necessity of building public confidence in the decisions that we make in this place by holding an inquiry as quickly as possible. We already know from comments today that public confidence is waning and app usage has dropped off, and other compliance concerns have been raised. At no time is that more important than in the grip of a public emergency such as the pandemic.

The Government have repeatedly called for the House to get behind their plans. However, the message that they give has been mixed and the information that has been requested to enable Members like me to get behind those plans has often not been forthcoming. Observant Members will have noted that my efforts to seek transparency in respect of the surveillance and testing of covid have largely fallen on deaf ears. In July 2020,

at nadir regarding the number of cases following the first wave, I first raised my concerns with the chief medical officer. More recently, I raised concerns about the sensitivity of Innova lateral flow devices to the delta variant—on 29 June and again on 6 July in a follow-up email. On each occasion that I raised my concerns with the Minister for Prevention, Public Health and Primary Care, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), I was advised that information would be forthcoming, but I have still not received those data.

So concerned was I that I wrote a piece, published in *The Scotsman* yesterday, that raised the concerns on which I have not been able to get answers from the Government. Last night, *The Scotsman* took down that article after legal representatives of Innova intervened with quite wrong accusations that I was comparing lateral flow devices to PCR tests. I made no such assertion or comparison. Innova questioned the US Food and Drug Administration’s decision, which I will not go into, given the time I have, but which is pretty well set out in various articles, including in *The BMJ*.

That there was such action—when I cannot get an answer from the Government, when I have raised my concerns in this House, and when I have written a piece for a reputable newspaper and the contractors the Government are working with seek to shut the conversation down—is an unacceptable position for any democracy to find itself in. I feel I am being prevented from carrying out my role and that the Government are preventing me from properly scrutinising their actions. We need urgent action to change that.

2.26 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I be one of the many to congratulate you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on being pinged into your position at such short notice?

Let me pick up on the remarks of the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) about his being unable to do his job. Collectively, Parliament is doing a great deal of scrutiny of the whole covid pandemic.

Neale Hanvey: I agree that scrutiny must be done, but if I cannot get a sensible answer from a Minister at the Dispatch Box, am given glib replies and am not provided with the information that I have rightly requested, that makes scrutiny almost impossible.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s frustration, but I have recently served on the Public Accounts Committee, I am Chairman of the Liaison Committee and I have served as Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, and I see the Science and Technology Committee, the Health and Social Care Committee and other Committees of this House doing a great deal of really drilling-down scrutiny, so it is not as though no scrutiny is taking place.

I suspect that during this debate we will hear a mixture of the Opposition claiming it is an outrage that there is not an instant, fully comprehensive public inquiry lining people up against the wall to be shot and the Government saying there is not possibly any time for any of this. I have some sympathy for the Government’s position. A senior permanent secretary told me that

Secretaries of State regularly complain, “Where is my permanent secretary?”, and it turns out they are preparing to go before another Select Committee. So much scrutiny is going on that it is already almost impeding the Government in what they have to do.

We have to remind ourselves that a public inquiry is only a means to an end. The overriding aim of any public inquiry—this is a case in point—is that it should be part of a process that will restore justified public confidence in our system of government, which would satisfy the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath. We must therefore prioritise: it is going to be an enormous undertaking. A lot of it should be set aside for the future and we should concentrate on what is most urgent.

What lessons need to be learned now to prepare better for the next pandemic, which could be imminent? Why was our response so slow to build? Why, like so many Governments around the world, did we continue to pretend that there was not going to be an impending emergency? That happened not just in this country but everywhere. What planning had been done and why did it prove so ineffective? What new, permanent machinery of government and capability does there need to be to address the failings so that early indications of a pandemic threat lead to timely and effective action? What parliamentary Committee should oversee all this and hold the Government accountable?

The role of Parliament is to stop the Government fudging the terms of reference, to guarantee the independence of the chair and to prevent the Government from kicking all the difficult issues far into the future. Under my chairmanship, we looked at the Chilcot inquiry. So often, inquiries are actually a means of delaying scrutiny and delaying a reckoning on the issues, as opposed to learning the lessons.

I just add that the public would expect wilful wrongdoing to be punished—backward accountability, I call that—but not an inquiry to apportion blame, least of all for party political reasons. What the public want is honest and open truth about what has happened, which will not happen if witnesses are seeking to avoid blame, so I fully support what my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) said about making sure that the inquiry is not about apportioning blame.

The purpose of an inquiry like this is to establish truth so that we can hold those in power accountable for what they will do in future to make sure things are better planned and turn out better. That is what I call forward accountability, and I think that is what Select Committee scrutiny in this House should be about.

2.30 pm

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) for introducing this debate this afternoon. She has very well summarised the report by the Committee, and I completely agree with everything that she says. I just take the opportunity, if I may, to thank the Clerks, the Committee staff and the witnesses who attended the Committee for their help in putting this report together.

The Government are right to commit to a public inquiry, and the report that the Committee produced is wide-ranging. I will limit my remarks to the scope of the inquiry, the power of the inquiry and the establishment of a secretariat. Coronavirus has been very broad; it has affected every aspect of our lives, so careful thought

needs to be given to what an inquiry should cover. The Committee’s report has recommended, as my hon. Friend identified, a focus on learning lessons as the primary purpose, rather than apportioning blame. I was struck by Lord Butler’s evidence to the Committee. He referred back to the Scott inquiry and said that the terms of reference had been extended so far that it took three years to complete the report, which was far longer than necessary to determine the original question.

As a Committee, we also considered what powers the inquiry should have. The report recommends that it should be a statutory inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005. The Committee heard arguments for and against a statutory inquiry. Sir Robert Francis, who chaired the Mid Staffordshire inquiry, said he valued the non-statutory basis of the inquiry, because it allowed him to speak to people privately. We heard also from Dame Una O’Brien, who is the former permanent secretary at the Department of Health and was secretary to the Bristol inquiry. She said that the full statutory powers will ensure that all material is handed over, especially WhatsApp messages and texts outside the departmental system. As recent events have shown, that will certainly need to be the case with any coronavirus inquiry. It makes the case for a statutory inquiry very strong.

I was surprised to hear that there is no standing secretariat for public inquiries. They are established from scratch. Sir Robert Francis told us how it had taken six to nine months from his appointment to the start of the inquiry to get going. He started with a blank piece of paper, and there was even a four-month process to go through tendering to appoint a firm of solicitors to the inquiry. There is a strong argument for putting together an inquiry sooner rather than later, to allow that important preparatory work to be undertaken.

I have seen the Government’s response to the report. I see that in many respects the Government notes the recommendations. I have seen, however, that sadly they have not accepted recommendation 5, on the timing of setting up the inquiry. While that is unfortunate, I look forward to seeing the Government’s plans for the inquiry develop so that in time the Government, the national health service and society as a whole can learn the lessons from this terrible period.

2.33 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): The covid-19 outbreak has been one of the most significant and consequential periods of our lifetimes. It has led to a tragic loss of life in this country and around the world. We salute the fortitude and courage of the British people and the bravery of our NHS and key workers, which means that we have now passed the peak of deaths and hospitalisations.

I am very pleased that this inquiry will have full powers under the Inquiries Act 2005 and will have the ability to compel the production of relevant material and to take oral evidence in public under oath. I support this approach, rather than having a non-statutory inquiry, as it allows statutory safeguards to be put in place and ensures that it is carried out to the highest standard.

I must emphasise, however, that the pandemic is not over. The threat of new, more transmissible covid variants remains, as is only too clear to us all, and the Prime Minister has warned of a likely surge in cases this winter. That is why the right time for an inquiry is spring next year.

[Simon Baynes]

I understand calls for an inquiry to be held sooner, but this timetable will avoid inadvertently distracting those whom we continue to need this year in the fight against the virus. Furthermore, lessons are being learned all the time by the Government and health authorities during the pandemic, and measures are being implemented accordingly. So we are dealing with an organic, rather than static, response to the crisis.

I fully support the approach of the Committee's report, which makes it clear that resorting to blaming individuals is not conducive and we should be looking to learn lessons to guide our response to future pandemics and to the ongoing covid-19 pandemic. As other speakers have said this afternoon, this inquiry should be forward-looking in its approach. It is, of course, vital to ensure the impartiality of the chair and that the inquiry will have the widest possible consultation and engagement. Having the highest levels of confidentiality is also of particular importance, particularly when we are looking at the personal experiences of people who have suffered as a result of covid-19.

As a Welsh MP, I am particularly interested in how the inquiry interacts with the devolved Administrations, which was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price). We need to ensure that the inquiry can take into account the full scope of the UK response to the pandemic, in my constituency, in the rest of Wales and in the rest of the UK. The report recommends that each of the devolved nations must

"establish its own inquiry. This is because most aspects of the response to the pandemic are devolved matters but doing such also ensures proper attention is granted to each of the nations' response".

The problem is that so far the Welsh Government have refused to hold their own inquiry. If the UK Government are prepared to incorporate a thorough assessment of the handling of the pandemic by the Welsh Government and by the other devolved Administrations in their inquiry, as part of a truly UK-wide approach, that would have my support, not least because it would be a welcome recognition of the vital importance of the Union of the UK in fighting covid, particularly in the development and roll-out of the very successful vaccination programme. But this approach must not inadvertently result in the Welsh Government and the other devolved Administrations being less rigorously assessed in the inquiry. With power comes responsibility for all Governments to account fully for their actions in an open and transparent way.

2.37 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I would like to start by reading out a testament from Jane Roche from Castle Vale in my constituency. She lost her father and sister to coronavirus last year. She says:

"Losing my amazing Dad, Vincent Pettitt, and my amazing Sister Jocelyn Pettitt just 5 days apart has been the hardest thing to deal with in my life so far, and I am still grieving and will always grieve for them as they didn't die in a natural dignified way with their family around them, telling them how much we loved them. We were such a close family.

My Dad was such a lovely man, no fool and strong in every way, I always felt loved and protected by him, he was so funny and had a very dry sense of humour, always making people laugh, his will to live was amazing, he fought other illnesses but always fought on.

My Sister was beautiful inside and out, very kind and loving, a wonderful Mother and Grandmother and her 3rd Grandchild was due to be born a month after she died so she never got to meet him and she was really looking forward to it. I feel robbed of Dad and my Sister as they were snatched away by Covid-19."

She goes on:

"Only someone who has lost their loved one to Covid would understand how I feel, and unfortunately there are thousands of us. I feel heartbroken and I always will, I feel anxious most days and cry most days, and I miss them so very much...I need the Public Inquiry to happen this year, dragging it out until next year only makes me angry and the grief is made worse by thinking that nobody cares about all the people that have died from Covid...This has changed my life forever, I always feel like something bad is going to happen as I would never have expected this double tragedy last April. I will never get over this."

The voice of the relatives; the voice of loss; the voice of pain—a voice that should be listened to.

I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have contributed to this debate from across the House of Commons and those who participated in the work of the Committee, leading to the recommendations before us. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), who chairs the Committee; the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who gave a comprehensive report today; and Members, including the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), who have made contributions on the importance of learning lessons now if we are to avoid mistakes in the future.

The Committee's report calls for a public inquiry into the Government's response to covid-19 to begin immediately. We owe it to the families that this happens. The covid-19 public inquiry should be a landmark event in our nation's history.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I thoroughly endorse the hon. Gentleman's remarks, which underline the importance of giving settlement to the aggrieved and bereaved. That is an important role for a public inquiry. Does he also agree that the vast task that the public inquiry will represent means that it needs to be segmented, and that there are urgent bits that need to be done now and other bits that could be done later? Will he join me in perhaps working with some Select Committees, to come up with some terms of reference for which parts of the inquiry should start now that would not disrupt what the Government need to carry on doing at this very pressured time, but would enable us to start the learning process on what is urgent?

Jack Dromey: The hon. Member makes a good point that a sensible debate can and should take place on how the inquiry can commence immediately and then be conducted in stages. Surely the first priority is the learning lessons from what has gone wrong in order to avoid that in the future and to avoid us seeing yet more people die needlessly. That approach is sensible. Exactly how the public inquiry is conducted should form part of the debate.

Over the past year, the country has experienced tragedy and human suffering on a scale not seen since the second world war. No one could have imagined that 130,000 lives would be lost to this terrible virus, which has turned whole lives upside down as family and friends mourn the loss of loved ones. That is why this debate matters and why a public inquiry is so important. All Members across the House will have heard

heartbreaking stories from their constituents over the past 18 months, like from Jane, who quite simply says, “I want to know why my dad and sister died. What were the mistakes that were made?” She always asks, “How can we ensure that no one else in future suffers the loss that I have suffered?” It is therefore vital that the covid-19 public inquiry has the confidence of the bereaved families, such as Jane.

The Committee’s report is a vital contribution to ensuring that the Government get the process right. In the time since the report was published, the Government have announced that a public inquiry will take place. However, that should not be reason to be relaxed, because I am afraid that the Government’s approach thus far to the inquiry falls far short of what the Committee recommends should be expected. As a consequence, the Government risk the trust and confidence of the bereaved families if they do not place them at the heart of the process going forward, about which I will say more later.

I wish to focus on three key areas highlighted by the report in which, frankly, the Government’s approach is lacking: first, the timetable for the inquiry to begin; secondly, the selection of the chair and the terms of reference; and thirdly, the implementation of the inquiry’s recommendations. On the first point, the Government have set a timetable for the inquiry to commence in the spring of next year. That is simply too far away. Everyone understands the challenges that the country had to face during the first wave, but the Government’s failure to learn the lessons of the first wave has already left us with an even more tragic second wave during last winter, with too many lost lives and our stretched economy under even more strain. Then, this spring, we have had the debacle of the borders policy, with the delta variant sweeping through the country and a third wave developing with cases now rocketing.

It is therefore critical that we learn the lessons that need to be learned now. The Government cannot kick the can down the road to next spring. I stress again that we need to go forward to the next stages. We know that the Government have conducted internal lessons learned reviews. What are these reviews? Why will they not publish them? What is there to hide? The Committee recommends that such in-house assessments by Government Departments should be handed to the relevant Select Committees and the summaries also made public, and that has got to be right. Surely, on a matter so important to the future preparedness of the nation to rise to the challenge of coronavirus, the Government should publish these reviews now.

I now turn to the selection of the chair and the terms of reference of the inquiry. Paragraph 24 of the Committee’s report is clear that the setting up of the inquiry’s secretariat and administrative functions must begin “immediately” as

“delaying the set-up will inevitably delay the inquiry’s ability to start work in earnest”.

The Committee is absolutely right. I completely agree, and we have been clear, that the work must commence now and that it must be transparent and in consultation with the bereaved families. Just how long do the Government expect the families to wait for this process to begin? Other family members have said to me, “Jack, justice delayed is justice denied. We, the bereaved families, deserve better than this.”

I understand why the Government do not wish to redirect officials and frontline staff on a wholesale basis from the work of combating the pandemic, but surely the consultation with the bereaved families and other stakeholders on the selection of the inquiry chair, its secretariat and terms of reference can and should begin now. The Committee highlights that consultation with the bereaved families could make a “significant contribution” to the inquiry. I absolutely agree. The House will therefore want to hear from the Minister how much progress has been made on consulting the bereaved families on these matters.

Yesterday, dozens of members of the Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice campaign came to London. It was heartbreaking to walk down row upon row of photographs of loved ones who had died. They wanted to bring home the impact on them, the relatives and the bereaved, but they also wanted to know, in telling their often heartbreaking stories, why no one was talking to them. One mother whose grandmother had died said, “Why is it that they are not talking to us?” She wanted to know why the Government had not contacted relatives’ organisations, particularly the Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice campaign, to start to engage in a dialogue going forward at the next stages. It is inexplicable and absolutely unacceptable.

I share the concern of the relatives over the foot-dragging by Ministers who have avoided repeated requests to meet the bereaved families and hear their concerns. I can give an example that I have been engaged in personally. Before resigning, the former Health Secretary was good enough to agree at the Dispatch Box last December to meet families from Birmingham, yet not once did he or his office contact them or me to make the arrangements, despite numerous phone calls and emails from us. Not once. He had lifted the expectations of dozens of relatives that they would at last be involved in dialogue and consultation, but the door was shut in their face. I hope the Minister can today give a clear assurance that the bereaved families will be consulted on the chair and the terms of reference—and now.

Finally, there is the question of implementing the inquiry’s recommendations. The hon. Member for Thurrock, in a powerful contribution, mentioned Bishop Jones, the Hillsborough inquiry and the mistakes that were made before fully exposing the truth of what happened. That point was well made. We cannot let this be a public inquiry whose recommendations are quietly shelved or swept under the carpet. The national trauma that the country has endured over the past year demands more. Despite the crisis last year, this country has achieved great things, but a decade of austerity weakened the foundations of our country and undermined our national defences against the pandemic.

We cannot simply go back to business as usual when the pandemic subsides. Lessons must be learned. The Government should therefore make a clear commitment both to set up the inquiry and to engage with it. It is only by beginning the inquiry that we can learn those serious lessons to avoid future tragedies. Without that, we cannot build a better future for our country, built on the strength and resilience we tapped into to get through the hardest of times. Only then can we be ready for whatever challenges come next.

In closing, I refer once again to those who should be at the heart of the covid-19 public inquiry: those who died and their families. On both sides of the House,

[Jack Dromey]

right hon. and hon. Members have been meeting bereaved families over the past year. Those meetings have been some of the most difficult and emotional I have ever been involved in. The families simply want to know why their loved ones died, when many of them should not have, and for the right lessons to be learned so that no one else has to suffer the loss that they have. That is a noble aim, and it is one that the Government must rise to in setting up the public inquiry. We owe nothing less to the bereaved families.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Penny Mordaunt.

2.52 pm

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations.

I have answered many debates on the pandemic from this Dispatch Box, and it has always been right to start by thinking of all those who have lost so much and who have been through such pain and distress in this cruel pandemic, which has even denied people the ability to grieve properly. Inquiries have many purposes, as the chairman of the Hillsborough inquiry ably stated. They are a stepping-stone to closure for families, although the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) is right to say that they bring no comfort for their loss.

It is incredibly important that we place those individuals and others, such as NHS and care staff who have given so much during this crisis, at the heart of the inquiry. Having had the privilege of being the sponsoring Minister for the infected blood inquiry since February 2020, I know how it can be done well. I have just announced the compensation study, which will involve a consultation on the terms of reference for that study with those affected by infected blood. That is how we do things, and I would give people comfort by saying, “Look at how we do these very sensitive inquiries. Look at how we can do them really well.” We want to do the covid-19 inquiry really well, and we will place those affected at its heart.

I want to answer the many points that have been raised by hon. Members and put on record my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for this debate. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have made contributions, and I thank the Chair, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), and the Committee for their work. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) for opening the debate.

Clearly, the Government agree with the Committee that there needs to be a statutory inquiry, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister confirmed that in a statement to the House on 12 May. The public inquiry will be established on a statutory basis with full powers under the Inquiries Act 2005.

Several Members have raised the timing of the inquiry, and I agree with many of the comments that have been made. We want to do this as swiftly as possible, but not to the detriment of the pandemic response. Several Members have recognised that this would place a significant burden on the whole of Government, our scientific advisers, our NHS and many others.

Although we want to start the inquiry in the spring—on the timetable, given what I have said about the work that needs to be done to set the inquiry up, I hope that I

will be able to give hon. Members some comfort that that will start very shortly—of course we do not want to wait for that before commencing other work. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), the Chair of the Liaison Committee, has suggested, we need to learn lessons now to enable us to continually improve our response, not just to this crisis but to other threats that may be out there. And we have continually learned—not just in Government, but ably supported by the excellent work of this House and its Committees, as well as the National Audit Office and many others.

We are already taking important steps to improve our resilience, which is why last week we launched the call for evidence to inform the development of a new resilience strategy. That call for evidence starts a proper national debate about what effective resilience should mean for us all, and will allow us to move towards a whole of society approach to resilience and build resilience into our everyday lives.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am fully aware that the Government are learning lessons as quickly as possible, but they are underpowering their ability to strengthen public confidence. This just looks too much like the ordinary activity of Government. For example, if the call for evidence was going to be independently assessed—not by a statutory inquiry but at least by an independent chair, supported by a panel of independent people—and a report more independent than just a Government White Paper was going to be compiled, and if the panel was going to be able to take evidence from victims and others who have participated in the crisis, not necessarily Ministers and Government scientists, would that not strengthen public confidence that there was an element of independence injected into the process and that things were being done that they were not aware of?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree with the thrust of what my hon. Friend says. Leaving the inquiry to one side for the moment, the call for evidence and, indeed, all the work that we have done improving not just our risk register but our risk assessment tools, because we recognise that we need to reform the methodology that sits behind it, are with external partners. For example, on the risk assessment, we are using various external stakeholders—with engineering skills, for example—to kick the tyres on our methodology, and it will be much more open and consultative than any previous process.

I will move on to how the inquiry could be established. Many Members have commented on having a panel. Clearly, some inquiries have taken that model. That is a very good point, and it is one that I know my colleagues are listening to. We have not rested on those findings; we have established many things to improve our response. I will go into this in slightly more detail, as many Members have raised these points. We have established a joint organisational learning system, jointly managed by the emergency services interoperability principles team and the civil contingencies secretariat. We established the UK Health Security Agency in April this year. We have a new situations centre. We have the Boardman reports, the first of which set out 28 recommendations that the Department is committed to implementing in full. The second report, which is a wider review, has identified a further 28 recommendations for improvements to procurement in Government. We are also steadfast in

our commitment to intensify international co-operation. We want to reflect on the central role that the World Health Organisation has played over the course of the pandemic in achieving resilient healthcare systems.

We are seeking to implement improvements to systems and processes so that we are better prepared for any future crisis, whether it is a health issue or any other. Those improvements need to be embedded into the development of new capabilities such as the situations centre or the launch of the catastrophic emergency planning programme. With regard to those on the frontline, particularly local resilience forums, a huge amount of learning has gone on. We are currently funding a pilot to build capacity in local resilience forums. They are on the frontline. They should be in the driving seat for local decisions, and we want to build their capacity in that respect.

I very much welcome the Committee's conclusions, and also the views of other Members of the House who have said that the inquiry should be forward-looking and primarily focused on improving our policy. I know that many are in agreement on that.

With regard to the chair of the inquiry, the Committee recommended, as we have heard, that the Government give proper consideration to a non-judicial chair. There are many ways that that could be set up. There could be a panel to sit alongside the chair. What is critical is that there is a genuine breadth of experience. While not wanting to slow the inquiry down, we really do need it to be led and supported by people who have that expertise.

The Government are extremely grateful to the Committee and this House for their thoughtful considerations on these issues. I hope that some of what I have said may provide reassurance to all those who have been affected by these terrible events. Retaining their confidence, and the confidence of all who have been involved in this crisis, is vital if we are going to get a good result in this inquiry. I want to assure Members that we will also be working with the devolved Administrations in this regard.

Jack Dromey: I welcome the Minister's comments about the importance of engagement with the families. Will she agree to meet the Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice campaign?

Penny Mordaunt: I would be happy to meet anyone who has been affected. I am not the sponsoring Minister for this inquiry. However, I have always found in my engagements with victims in inquiries where I am the sponsoring Minister that they are incredibly helpful in making sure that we are doing the right thing. I may not be the Minister whom it would be most beneficial for that campaign to meet, but the hon. Gentleman certainly has my assurances and my commitment to ensure that the inquiry is the best it can be.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will my right hon. Friend place on the record who is the sponsoring Minister?

Penny Mordaunt: At the moment the Prime Minister is the sponsoring Minister. Clearly, he will want to delegate some functions to other Ministers. I tend to do

a lot of this work in the Cabinet Office, and I stand ready to play my part, but the Prime Minister himself is taking the lead. I think that is very understandable given the nature of this inquiry. In closing, I wish all colleagues well for the recess.

3.3 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank everyone who has contributed to this debate. There is a great degree of consensus: we all want this inquiry to be very much focused on learning lessons. I guess the real issue of contention is timing, more than anything else. That reflects the tension between doing the job properly and thoroughly, and potentially making timely reflections so that we can act quickly. I want to associate myself with the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin). We need to focus on the outcome of the inquiry to get it right, and that outcome must be confidence—confidence from the public that we have learned those lessons and confidence across the system that we have taken steps to ensure that we deal with such issues more effectively in future. In that regard, I welcome the tone with which my right hon. Friend the Minister addressed the issues we considered today. I hope that that reflects how the Government take this issue forward.

It will take time for the inquiry to get up and running, so the sooner we can get on with making the appointments and setting the approach the better. It will be some considerable time before the inquiry starts to impact on those parts of the Government that are dealing with the pandemic now. I hope that we will be able to reflect on that again in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the Fifth Report of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee of Session 2019-21, A Public Inquiry into the Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, HC 541; and calls on the Government to provide an updated response to that set out in the Committee's Fourth Special Report of Session 2019-21, A Public Inquiry into the Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic: Government's response to the Committee's Fifth Report, HC 995, setting out how the Government intends to implement the Committee's recommendations, to ensure that the administrative arrangements necessary to set up the public inquiry committed to by the Prime Minister to the House on 11 May 2021, in particular the appointment of an inquiry chair, take place in a timely manner and no later than the end of this year, and to agree: that the Government's preferred candidate to chair the inquiry should be subject to a pre-appointment hearing by the relevant select committee for the sponsoring Government department.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I shall now suspend the House to enable the necessary arrangements for the next business to be made.

3.5 pm

Sitting suspended.

3.9 pm

On resuming—

Point of Order

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In the light of the recent dramatic developments in the rugby league world cup, with Australia and New Zealand pulling out of the competition, will the Minister come to this Chamber to make a statement?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member, who raises an interesting point and gave me prior notice of it. I have not been given notice that the Government will make a statement, but there is time yet. I have to say that I never thought I would see the day when rugby union players looked tougher than rugby league players. Rugby union is sending players here, yet Australia and New Zealand seem to have bottled it. Perhaps they are afraid of the competition. However, I thank the hon. Member for her point of order, which is now on the record for all to see, including those in New Zealand and Australia.

Summer Adjournment

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I should advise the House that there will be a three-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches after the opening speech. I call Ian Mearns.

3.9 pm

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, and add my congratulations to you. At this juncture, I would normally be sitting at home or in the Chamber watching and hoping that someone would thank the Backbench Business Committee for facilitating the debate, but for me to do that seems hardly appropriate.

Dunston coal staiths in my Gateshead constituency are, at over 600 metres long, a huge timber construction dating from 1893. They were significantly renovated for the Gateshead garden festival in 1990, when they were on show for all to see and really looked splendid. Sadly, in recent years, this significant monument to Tyneside and the coal industry's industrial heritage has been subjected to several arson attacks. From the structure, as much as 140,000 tonnes of coal per week were shipped to places further afield, along with coke from the coking works at Norwood in Team Valley and the Redheugh gas works nearby. So, when someone says, "That would be like taking coals to Newcastle," they probably mean Gateshead.

The Dunston staiths, at almost 130 years old, are a spectacular part of our industrial heritage and need to be rebuilt and refurbished, but heroic local fundraising efforts are hardly scratching the surface to repair the damage. The staiths should be rebuilt and maintained properly, but it will take Government support to do that properly. I really look forward to the day when I can meet the Minister from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to discuss how we will do that for this important industrial structure.

Earlier this week, my attention was drawn to a letter to the Chancellor, written with extreme concern, about the proposal to withdraw the £20 per week uplift to universal credit. That will impact disastrously on 34% of all working-age households across the north-east of England, where households already languish well below the national averages for individual and household income. The letter was signed by, among others, nine chief executive officers of citizens advice bureaux in the north-east region, the director of the North East Child Poverty Commission, the Bishop of Durham, the regional secretary of the TUC and the chief executive of the North East England chamber of commerce. Their appeal should be heeded, or the slogan of levelling up will start to ring very hollow indeed among the poorer people of the north-east of England.

It was hoped that last year's stalled takeover of Newcastle United would rescue the club from the clutches of the current owner, Mike Ashley. The issue has been referred to arbitration. Many of my Newcastle-supporting constituents have contacted me and colleagues, desperate for a positive outcome. Sadly, with the proposed takeover having already gone on for 15 or 16 months, we heard earlier this week that the arbitration hearing has been

adjourned until early 2022. Meanwhile, it seems that Richard Masters, the chief executive officer of the Premier League, has point blank refused to answer questions, severely calling into question the Premier League's transparency, integrity and capacity to act honestly on behalf of its main customers, the fans of clubs across the country.

The fact that the Premier League's administrators took in the disgraceful "project big picture" and the proposal supported by six clubs to help form a European super league raises questions about who the administrators are working for in reality. Again, it is clearly not football fans—the paying customers. The fan-led review of football governance is under way, and it is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, so let us not spurn it.

I am afraid to say that, particularly here in the north-east of England, the pandemic has not gone away. In my constituency's hospital, the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, we currently have more than 50 covid-positive patients and, sadly, in the seven days to 15 July, four died. Between 600 and 1,000 people per 100,000 population are testing positive in every part of the LA7 area—Northumberland, Durham, and Tyne and Wear—so I urge my constituents and the people of the north-east to do not what they can or are told to do, but what they should do and help keep themselves, their families and their communities safe.

I urge all Members and all staff across the House to stay safe and have a good summer—they all deserve it.

3.14 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: It is a pleasure to follow the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns). Before we rise for the summer recess, I think it important to cover a number of issues.

As those who follow these debates know, no speech from me is complete without mention of Stanmore station. I am pleased to say that the Mayor of London's planning application is coming before Harrow Council's planning committee on Monday. He wants to build thousands of flats on the car park and remove car parking spaces for commuters. I am pleased to say that the officers of Harrow Council have recommended refusal; I trust that the councillors of Harrow will turn down this ridiculous application, and indeed call on the Mayor of London to withdraw all these plans for removing car parks across London. A similar application was refused for Canons Park station and could now go to appeal, having been turned down by the planning committee earlier on.

I wish to raise some international and local issues in Parliament. The first, of course, is the election in Iran of the mass murderer Ebrahim Raisi as President. He needs to be brought to justice at the International Criminal Court. I call on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to make representations to make that happen.

Secondly, I have been told today that the all-party parliamentary group for justice for Equitable Life policyholders, which I co-chair with the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), has reached 297 members. This is the longest-running scandal that the Government are having to deal with. I call on them to come up with the £2.6 billion that has been promised to the Equitable Life policyholders to fully compensate them.

I have been a champion for the homeless over my time in Parliament, and I am delighted that this week our all-party parliamentary group for ending homelessness has published a report on the need to continue with Housing First and assist those who have no roof over their head but who need a network of support and help.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health, which has launched a report that says that unless the Government take action, we will not achieve a smoke-free 2030. I call on the Government to implement our report's recommendations.

In the autumn, when we consider the Building Safety Bill, I look forward to appropriate amendments to enable the Bill to be passed and protect leaseholders.

I hope that this will be the last time that I have to address the House virtually; I look forward to coming back physically in September. I send particular good wishes to all the people on the virtual team who have done such a magnificent job to enable me to participate in debates. This is Captain Bob, signing off to ground control.

3.18 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Throughout this pandemic, we have seen the Government award almost £1.5 billion to Tory friends and donors; send covid patients into care homes, leading to thousands of deaths; fail to equip our heroic health service with adequate PPE, then deny health workers a fair pay rise; row back on manifesto promises to pensioners, our armed forces and foreign aid; deny refuge to children fleeing conflict and persecution; repeatedly ignore the crisis in adult and children's social care; exclude 3 million people from financial support; be shamed into feeding hungry children; silence any dissent and clamp down on freedom of speech, proposing to jail journalists who print the truth; and disfranchise millions from voting in future. Recently, we heard the Prime Minister tell us all that we need to simply accept that more people are going to die. If anyone is not deeply frightened or concerned about the trajectory in which the Government are taking our country, they have not been paying attention.

In spite of the Government, we have seen communities like mine in South Shields do the exact opposite. In the pandemic, we have fundraised and delivered food and essentials to our friends, neighbours and wider community. Stuart Hatton provided online ballroom dancing lessons, Stevey Sullivan held "Storytime with Stevey" and Shah Lalon Amin delivered free curries every single night. South Shields Volunteer Life Brigade, Women's Health in South Tyneside and North East Animal Rights kept on with the volunteering. South Tyneside council staff, my amazing team and other key workers went above and beyond every single day. Our Port of Tyne secured us as the base for the biggest offshore wind farm in the world. Richmond and Westoe Taxis offered free taxi transport to elderly and vulnerable people to help them shop for essential supplies. Our pharmacists filled the gap left when GP surgeries were shut and they made sure that essential medication was delivered across the constituency.

Communities across the country, including mine in South Shields, have shown the absolute best of our country. My constituents make me proud every single minute of every day, but I have never felt more proud of

[Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck]

them than I have done throughout this pandemic. I have a simple message to the Government: do better, be more like South Shields.

3.20 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Before the House adjourns for the summer recess, I wish to raise a number of points.

There should be no disparity in care costs between private self-payers and council-placed residents. No one should have to give up their family home to pay for care. Political parties should agree on a way forward.

Too often, new housing developments do not allow for the immediate accompanying infrastructure to be built alongside them, making housing more accessible for people with disabilities. I am pleased that the Government are at last reviewing building regulations. Significant costs are created by switching from a gas to an electric boiler. The cost of environmentally friendly alternatives needs to be assessed if we are to meet our target of net zero carbon emissions by 2050. We should look into using tidal power.

My constituents are worried about their safety because of jet skis in the water. Those jet skis must be used and managed responsibly.

We urgently need to reduce the production of single-use plastic to cut the amount of waste we export abroad that eventually ends up in landfill. I am looking forward to proposing amendments to the Environment Bill, which will see the Government publish a plan by September 2022 to reduce sewage discharges from storm overflows.

As part of the celebrations for the platinum jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen, Southend will be bursting into leaf. Many trees will be donated by the embassy of the Maldives and by local businesswoman, Mrs Barbara Coxell, and will grace our parks, schools and churches.

The United Kingdom will be the first country in Europe to ban the live export of animals for slaughter, and I look forward to seeing a ban on cages as well.

I have been contacted by a constituent expressing concern about how his case was dealt with by the pension ombudsman. It seems that, currently, there is not an effective system in place to make a complaint about the conduct of this body. We should change all that.

One of my constituents, Angela Greenwood, has written a book that explores the development of a thoughtful, understanding and relationship-based approach to working with vulnerable children. The contents of this book could not be more relevant now in the light of the coronavirus pandemic.

Last month, I helped to launch the public appeal for a permanent memorial to the great, late Vera Lynn in Dover. A memorial is the very least that we can do for this wonderful woman. I urge everyone to turn to the JustGiving page and give whatever they can afford.

As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for the Olympic and Paralympic games, I join everyone in wishing our athletes every success. Congratulations to my constituent, Kelly Swain, on completing a wing walk last month. She raised more than £20,000 for the charity, N.O.W's the time for change, and she is now planning

for a parachute jump next year. We must not forget the centenary of the Royal British Legion in September, and, of course, we must make Southend a city.

3.23 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): In May, East Midlands Railway promised passengers in Nottingham and many other east midlands constituencies that the new timetable represented

“an exciting new chapter for train services in the region and will bring significant benefits to the communities we serve...helping people get to work and enjoy their leisure time”.

and provides a timely and welcome boost to our local economies. Hmm. After just four weeks of services beset by cancellations and delays, the train operator, with the blessing of Transport Ministers, withdrew the new timetable, leaving us with fewer trains and worse services, just as people were starting to return to public transport. These services may not be restored until December. East Midlands Railway will rightly be penalised for failing to deliver the promised timetable from mid-May to mid-June, but seems to be set to get away with leaving my constituents with an inadequate timetable for the next six months. Why are Ministers not standing up for passengers' interests—particularly when this Government put up fares by more than the rate of inflation in the middle of an economic downturn?

The operator will blame others for the reduced timetable, but I am afraid those problems are largely of its own making. I have been astonished to hear from railway staff across the region who are completely demoralised, not least because they are the ones who, having worked on the frontline throughout the pandemic, now face angry passengers complaining about the timetable. Why are Ministers not holding East Midlands Railway to account? What is the point of allowing the private sector to run our rail services when they do such a poor job?

The east midlands has suffered decades of underinvestment in our rail network. Successive Conservative Governments have promised big but delivered little. Midland main line electrification was promised in 2015, 2017 and 2019, only to be paused, delayed and scrapped when the election campaigns were over. The transport decarbonisation plan promises a rolling programme of electrification. The midland main line must be top of the list. But when will we actually get the cleaner, greener, quieter, faster, more reliable electric trains that we need?

Finally, can the Minister confirm or deny rumours that the HS2 eastern leg, including the East Midlands station at Toton, is about to be kicked into the long grass? That is the litmus test of the Government's levelling-up agenda, and in the east midlands we will not stand for being failed again.

I take the opportunity to wish everyone a very happy summer recess—and if you get the chance to visit the newly refurbished Nottingham castle, I urge you to do so.

3.26 pm

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): As I have had the chance to digest it overnight, I can say that there was much to welcome in the Government's Building Safety Bill, unveiled yesterday. I would like to thank my

constituents in Portishead for taking part in the consultation; it seems that their voices were listened to. I particularly welcome the fact that there will be no EWS1 form for buildings under 18 metres, and that there will be increased duties on developers, construction companies, building owners and managers. Those who create the problems should pay to sort them out. I welcome the increased right of redress for shoddy workmanship extending to 15 years, and the increased right of building owners and leaseholders to seek redress through the Building Safety Regulator. I also welcome the potential for binding arbitration, to avoid disputes going to court. We will look for further detail during the Bill's passage, but redress must not be determined by those who can afford to go to lawyers.

The issue remains, however, about the bills that are still dropping through my constituents' letterboxes today. Even if the abuse of systems such as waking watch is redressed, we need to look at how to compensate leaseholders through the money already allocated by the Government. We in North Somerset will also be paying close attention to the forthcoming planning Bill. I will be looking to see that there is continued, if not increased, protection for the green belt. Green belt serves five purposes, according to the planning guidelines, including to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas, to prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another, and to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. In North Somerset, the application to build on the green belt at Chapel Pill Lane will be seen by residents over our whole county as an indication of the council's approach, and I will not hesitate to ask the Secretary of State to call that application in if it seems that our rainbow coalition council is intent on vandalising the green belt, in clear breach of their election promises. We will also be looking, in the planning Bill, to see whether there are proposals on build-out. Many Members across the House feel that it is a scandal that big companies are building up land banks, then not building the houses for which they have permission, leading the Planning Inspectorate to instruct councils to release more land for building. This Catch-22 has to end. With all due respect to the Government, I would suggest that no build-out clause equals no Bill.

Finally, in wishing everyone a happy and safe recess, may I say how much I am looking forward to coming back to a normal Parliament in the autumn? Despite all the best efforts of those involved, this Parliament has not held the Government to account in the way that it should; the Government need to be held to account. It will be wonderful when we get back to having a length of time in which to develop arguments greater than the attention span of the average "CBeebies" viewer.

3.29 pm

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab) [V]: Like everybody else, in the limited time available to me I want to address a number of local and other issues that affect my constituents.

The first, the cladding issue, was touched on by the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox). I have been contacted by more than 150 constituents, which probably means nearer 300 people since many of them are families, who have been affected by the cladding scandal. A number of blocks in my constituency are entirely excluded from the Government's building safety

fund owing to their height, and, like many others across the country, individuals face bills of £15,000 to £20,000 to correct safety defects.

Even with the Government's loan scheme, those bills will be charged against the property and therefore make it very difficult to sell when the owners choose or have to do so. I know of buildings put up over the last few years in my constituency whose materials were not compliant with the current or previous legislation, but evidence is very scant because the buildings inspectorate was being cut or in some cases being privatised. I would also like to ask that registered social landlords as well as leaseholders receive help from the Government in pursuing those builders, because at present they are struggling to do so.

The second issue I want to raise is sick pay. A quarter of workers receiving statutory sick pay—and there are a lot on SSP at the moment—are on the lowest rate of £96 a week. In my constituency in east London that is very low as housing and other costs are very high. One in 12 workers on the scheme are key workers, including carers, retail workers and teaching assistants, just the sort of people I represent. For instance, in Waltham Forest, one of the boroughs I represent, there are 4,200 people working in the care sector; in Redbridge that figure is nearly 8,000. These are just the sort of people who are subject to covid or to injuries, and so are just the sort of people who will end up on SSP. That is why I am supporting the TUC campaign and the campaign by unions to abolish the lower limit and put people who are on the current low limit of SSP on the living wage of £320 a week.

The last issue I want to raise is overflying, an environmental issue. London City airport has plans to expand which I fear will now be taken up so we will face increased overflying and therefore increased pollution—noise pollution and other types. More generally I have to say that we cannot carry on simply dumping more and more pollutants into the atmosphere while more and more planes are put up there.

Finally, in a rush I would like to thank the many staff in Parliament for all their hard work and for making the past year and a half more bearable and workable, and wish everybody a happy and safe recess.

3.32 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I shall not pretend to emulate the Member for the city of Southend, my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), but I will do a quick scoot around a number of issues. Talking of scooting, constituents are raising issues about e-scooters, and I hope that when Transport Ministers review the regulations on the use of that mode of transport, they will consider vulnerable pedestrians in particular.

As treasurer of the all-party group on heritage rail, I draw the House's attention to a report published a few days ago about the impact of heritage railways on tourism. Those with, in particular, a steam railway in their constituency should get visitors out there supporting it—and do not forget when passing environmental regulations that they do need a bit of coal to keep them in steam.

A couple of weeks ago I met representatives from the Royal National Institute of Blind People who made important points about the changes they would like to

[*Martin Vickers*]

the voting system to enable the blind and partially sighted to fully participate and maintain the secrecy of their vote.

On constituency issues, I am pleased to say that the Humber ports got freeport status. Indeed, we scored highly in every category, and the advantages to the area are already being seen in increased investment and ever more inquiries. It is vital that the Government do not lose sight of their ambitions; let us be real free marketeers on this issue.

Fortunately, the Greater Grimsby town deal, which includes my constituency, was established three or four years ago. I can assure Members involved in the levelling-up agenda that these deals and all the associated issues connected to levelling up can be a great success story for our constituencies. The criticisms of levelling up are not fair, because the reality is that every area is different and these deals have to be tailor-made for specific areas.

The local plans will be crucial, but the reality is that people do not know what they are. There is a particular scheme that affects my constituency—the western relief road in north-east Lincolnshire. It has been in the local plan for many years, but only now that we are talking about the possibility of determining the route has it got through to people.

On devolution, we want three unitary authorities to cover the county of Lincolnshire.

Finally, thanks to all in the House and in my constituency who have been involved in fighting the pandemic. They have done a fantastic job.

3.35 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): The last 18 months have been a tale of the good, the bad and the ugly.

The good is that the people of Brent and elsewhere have joined together to form mutual aid groups, religions have come together to find common ground, and strangers are now firm friends. The bad is this Government's catastrophic handling of the pandemic, the mixed messages, the corruption in plain sight, the authoritarian laws and the erosion of our democracy. And the ugly is that racism in society has reared its ugly head, spurred on by Government reports and the hyping up of the culture war and the war on woke.

While the NHS was coping with 130,000 people dying from the pandemic, the Prime Minister was making his mates rich. Cronyism is rife and old chums are given jobs regardless of their skillset—and some a little bit on the side. This has been one big experiment for this corrupt, authoritarian, racism-laden Government, and I am not scared of saying it like it is.

The Government said we need to talk about class, so let us do it. Let us call out this toxic elitism once and for all. *Byline Times*, the Good Law Project, Novara Media, openDemocracy, Amnesty and Liberty have all exposed the Government, and the Government's response is to spend public money defending the indefensible.

It is funny how there is no money for NHS staff, yet £1 billion of covid contracts have been awarded to Conservative donors. We were told that Ministers were not involved, but then the Good Law Project exposed emails from the Prime Minister's advisers and the Home

Secretary, lobbying for money. The corrupt, authoritarian approach of this Government would be condemned and investigated if it were happening anywhere else in the world.

The 1% believe they owe nothing to society. They do not believe in the NHS, and they do not support it. This week I spoke to Orwell Foundation youth writer Manal Nadeem. She wrote:

"Let anti-racism be both common logic and law. May we have more accountability than apologies. May performative, placeholder posts be followed by policy... When the future arrives, let the minimum wage be a liveable wage... Let survival be a birthright... When the poor cannot pay with anything else, let us not ask them to pay with their lives."

Poor people in our country have paid with their lives because the Prime Minister spent the last 18 months misleading this House and the country.

Peter Stefanovic from the Communication Workers Union has a video with more than 27 million views online. In it he highlights that the Prime Minister says: that the economy has grown by 73%—it is just not true; that he has reinstated nursing bursaries—just not true; that there is not a covid app working anywhere in the world—just not true; and that the Tories invested £34 billion in the NHS—not true. The Prime Minister said

"we have severed the link between infection and serious disease and death."

Not only is that not true but it is dangerous.

It is dangerous to lie during a pandemic, and I am disappointed that the Prime Minister has not come to the House to correct the record and correct the fact that he has lied to this House and the country over and over again.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I am sure the hon. Lady will reflect on her words and perhaps correct the record.

Dawn Butler: What would you rather, Madam Deputy Speaker, a weakened leg or a severed leg? At the end of the day, the Prime Minister has lied to this House time and time again. It is funny that we get in trouble in this place for calling out the lie rather than for lying.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Can you please reflect on your words and withdraw your remarks?

Dawn Butler: Madam Deputy Speaker, I have reflected on my words. Somebody needs to tell the truth in this House that the Prime Minister has lied.

The Deputy Speaker ordered Dawn Butler, Member for Brent Central, to withdraw immediately from the House during the remainder of the day's sitting (Standing Order No. 43), and the Member withdrew accordingly.

3.39 pm

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): On a lighter note, I hope that before the House adjourns today we can celebrate the colourful display that we can currently see in Parliament Square. Tomorrow is Historic County Flags Day. It has been celebrated for some days now, with the flags of the historic counties of England, Scotland and Wales in Parliament Square. The flags on display span the nation and also time. We can see old flags such as the St Piran's Cross of Cornwall and the Warenne Checks of Surrey, which dates from the 13th century, as well as some more modern designs.

Many of those modern designs are thanks to the work of charities such as the Association of British Counties and the Flag Institute. I declare an interest as a former editor of the Flag Institute's magazine. People at that charity, such as Graham Bartram and Philip Tibbetts, have worked tirelessly to encourage community groups and individuals to design flags, with Philip Tibbetts in particular criss-crossing the country. I congratulate him on his recent appointment as honorary vexillologist to the Court of the Lord Lyon.

One very good example of a modern flag design is the flag of Nottinghamshire, which was designed following a competition organised by Andy Whittaker of BBC Radio Nottingham in 2011. I am pleased to see that a decade later Leicestershire has finally caught up, and as the vice-chair of the flags and heraldry all-party parliamentary group, I was pleased to be in Parliament Square this week to attend the first flag raising of the flag of Leicestershire there. However, Leicestershire does not yet have its own day. I am pleased that Nottinghamshire County Council has today voted unanimously for 25 August to be Nottinghamshire Day. I look forward to seeing the flag of Nottinghamshire flying across the county, in the Houses of Parliament and, I hope, also across the country.

Although we are forever one United Kingdom, as we leave this place I hope that we can admire the diversity of our country, return to our constituencies and see all the best that there is in our counties—and I believe that the best of our counties are embodied in our county flags.

3.42 pm

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to reflect on what we have lost over the last year. For us in this House, it is the scrutiny of the Government, as the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) highlighted, but it is also the direct face-to-face contact with constituents. I have had the privilege of being out on my doorstep surgeries in recent weeks, which has reminded me—not that I needed reminding, but I feel that I should remind the House—of the very real housing challenge that so many of my constituents are facing.

We have a Government who are fuelling demand for housing through things such as stamp duty holidays, but who are doing nowhere near enough to increase supply. There are far too many people in my borough living in seriously overcrowded conditions. I have visited many in recent weeks, some of whom I have known for some time because they have been living in this situation for a very long time. Many have been forced into temporary housing accommodation. Only five or six years ago, they would have been told, "You will be there for six months and then you will get a proper home; now they are often there for years at a time. One woman was discharged from hospital with her baby to live in a room with her husband and toddler. Another woman, who works, is living with her seven-year-old, who has been off school and therefore home-schooled in a hostel room.

Others are outpriced, such as the Homerton Hospital porter who brings home £1,300 net per calendar month and pays £550 a month for a room in a private rented house. It was £400 until the pandemic hit and his landlady had to put up the rent. He rented a room for himself and his daughter. When the rent went up to

£550 a month, he could no longer afford to do that because it would have cost more than £1,000 a month, so they share a room. She is 17 years old. He is embarrassed by this, but there is no prospect of anything else. Although he is a health worker, he has no recourse to public funds because he is, legitimately and properly, going through the immigration system. With his salary he could never afford to rent a property privately in London, and with no recourse to public funds, he would not qualify for housing benefit and certainly not for the scarce social housing that we have. For many people, there is no prospect of renting or owning their own home, with the price of a typical two-bedroom property now at £750,000.

I also want to raise the challenge and cost of childcare, which is always an issue. Co-op providers, which I know from my work as a Labour/Co-op MP, and other childcare providers in Hackney and nationally are now seeing huge absences because of a ping by the app. In some cases self-isolation among staff has increased by a third in the last week alone, so will they be on this little list that the Government keep promising—which, I have just checked, is still not published—of key workers able to go back to work if they have double vaccinations? The impact is not just on the setting and the business or the co-op; the crisis is for children under five who are losing out and are severely affected by this pandemic, and of course it is about the impact on working parents. I pay tribute to the educationalists in my constituency, who have done so much to keep young people educated. We need to make sure that the catch-up is funded and we cannot afford to leave a generation behind. I hope that the Government rethink and come forward with a long-term plan for making sure that our young people are supported to catch up on the education they have had to lose this year.

3.45 pm

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I have spoken many times about my opposition to High Speed 2, a project ripe for scrapping, with post-covid rail demand uncertain, the unbelievable and still ballooning cost and further legs now deemed unachievable. Worst of all with HS2 is the destruction that it brings to my constituency and our environment and the real day-to-day human misery its construction is bringing. Likewise, although East West Rail enjoys broad support, it brings similar disruption and destruction to Buckinghamshire.

Already burdened with the toll of these state infrastructure projects, surely the principles of basic fairness and natural justice should exempt my constituents from any more big construction by Government—but no. Despite a massive cry of opposition from the villages of Edgcott, Grendon Underwood, Steeple Claydon and others—concerns that I have relayed to Ministers on many occasions—the Ministry of Justice persists in its plans for a new prison adjacent to HMP Spring Hill and HMP Grendon. I know how hard local residents, our parish councils and Buckinghamshire councillors, such as Angela Macpherson, Frank Mahon and Michael Rand, have worked to make the case against it at consultation stage. I pay particular thanks to Rod Baker, whose detailed analysis and presentations on why these proposals are so wrong have been second to none. However, it seems that the Government's drive for a rapid increase in prison places has overridden our serious concerns.

[Greg Smith]

This new prison is proposed in a rural area, served by rural, often unclassified roads—roads that cannot cope now, let alone with yet more construction traffic and thousands of vehicle movements once it is built. The proposals would take existing green space, so when planning reforms talk the language of brownfield first, surely Government projects must walk the walk of brownfield development. There are plenty of brownfield sites that this prison could be built on. That is before we get on to all the other legitimate planning concerns—there are too many to mention in the time I have this afternoon.

So as we depart for recess, my work will continue throughout the summer, working with my constituents to make the case for the planning application to be rejected. I call on the Government to think again and to introduce a new policy that exempts constituencies already struck with big infrastructure from any more. It is not too late on this particular one. Let us find a different brownfield site and give Buckinghamshire a break.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Jon Trickett.

3.48 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, after you helped me to set up my parliamentary office 25 years ago, I think, this month.

As we are thinking about what will happen after covid, a couple of my constituents recently asked me to raise in the House the question of why our area has been left behind. It is not only my area, but many other areas, and we are not just being left behind—we have been held back by successive policy failures. It is plain as the nose on your face that this is now an acute and chronic problem for the whole country, yet policy makers have simply turned their backs for so many years on so many communities.

There was rapid and unconstrained deindustrialisation; an economic system that generated colossal inequality. Just look at my constituency. The average wage is £5,500 per person less than the national average. It is a scandal. There are 4,200 children in poverty. Food banks are springing up everywhere, and it is not simply Hemsworth, is it? There are 14 million people now in poverty in our country, 7.5 million of whom are in work. We have the worst regional inequalities of any advanced OECD country. Social mobility has come to an end—that is according to the Government's own Social Mobility Commission. We have a class system that is now clearly ossified. In a three-minute speech I can only hint at the powerful processes that brought all this about; I will come back to these issues in the coming weeks.

Our office has identified seven interconnected processes: austerity; unconstrained markets; the dominance of finance over the economy; inadequate investment; globalisation; the domination by commercial interests of too much of the public sector, including the Government themselves; and repeated attacks on organised labour, leading to a reduction of the wage share as a proportion of GDP. All these together form a single neoliberal policy consensus that is embraced by the British establishment and has done massive damage to our national interest.

Suddenly, Government Members are talking about levelling up—as if someone somewhere just woke up to what has been happening in plain view for more than a decade. So what should we do? First, let me say to the Government that market-led solutions are not a solution; they have been the problem, and so has austerity. The Government's towns fund barely scratches the surface; it is purely empty sloganeering.

Let me say now to my own Front-Bench team and to our leadership: as all of us know, social justice is, as all of us know, right at the heart of Labour's DNA. The country has drifted so far away from justice that it now requires big change. Timidity will not deliver what is plainly now in the national interest: only a radical and transformative politics in a dynamic campaigning party can lead to our national renewal. Nothing less will do.

3.51 pm

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): I wish to take this opportunity to thank some people in my constituency. I thank Newbury Racecourse, which in January this year threw open its doors and saw 33,000 people troop through them—twice—to get their vaccination. I thank Dr James Cave and Dr Ellora Evans, who led the eight GP surgeries that participated, and I thank Beverley Sunderland, Jon Cross, Tim Marston, Graham Stanley and Mike Howie, who led the volunteers—people from every walk of life and every corner of my constituency who gave up their time to make things work like clockwork. I put on the record my thanks to them.

I also pay tribute to Ruth Saunders, who is not well known but at the tender age of 104 walked a marathon over consecutive days around the streets of Newbury, inspired, of course, by Captain Tom. She raised £50,000 for the Thames Valley air ambulance. She is now 105, and next week I will be presenting her with a Points of Light award from the Prime Minister.

In the limited time that I have remaining, I wish to talk about two environmental issues that affect my constituency. The first concerns public transport. It is my ambition to secure a bus route that will link Newbury and Oxford, stopping at the Harwell science park, the Milton business park and many other significant employers along the route. One of my favourite local anecdotes is about a farmer who many years ago used to have the brass neck to put a couple of his cows on the train at Didcot and take them off at Newbury. The sad thing about that story is that that train line is long gone—and so is the bus route that replaced it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) will correct me if I am wrong, but at the Harwell science park some 10,000 jobs are coming in the next few years. Talented apprentices from Newbury College are increasingly getting jobs there, but their only way of getting to work is to get two trains and a bus that takes more than an hour to go a distance of 14 miles—of course, they can get there in their cars. In the next year, I would like to see a bus route, preferably hydrogen, that is cheap, practical and environmentally friendly for Newbury's workers.

Finally, I have been working with my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Danny Kruger) on chalk streams, and particularly the River Kennet, which flows between our constituencies. It is so alarming to see the state they are in and the effect of sewage, pollution and water extraction. The damage that is being done to them now puts those

precious streams and the habitats they support at serious risk. In the coming months I will work closely with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, ahead of the Environment Bill's return to this House, to seek to resolve that.

3.54 pm

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I believe I have three minutes, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will be unable to cover so much that could have been covered. I could have covered universal credit, the Government's shoddy handling of the £20 uplift and their desire to plunge people back into poverty; covid and the Government's sleaze and corruption when it comes to the multitude of contracts that have come out—friends or family members of the Government would of course have been on the VIP list throughout the pandemic; or Brexit and the destructive impact it is having on my constituency, the one constituency in the UK meant to be harder-hit than any other in the UK. Indeed, I raised that issue with the Leader of the House earlier today in relation to a business in my constituency and the export challenges it is facing—it has gone from taking three days to export a good to almost six weeks. His shameful answer was, "Ask the French about it." What an utter abdication of responsibility. Shame on him and shame on this Government.

However, in real terms the biggest issue—perhaps the biggest issue of our times—is not the pandemic, but climate change. As an Aberdeen Member, it would be remiss of me not to talk about energy. Aberdeen has faced the triple whammy of covid, Brexit and an oil price crash, which has painted into clear focus the challenge that is going to face my city in the future. What did the Government do? They did almost nothing. They had to be dragged kicking and screaming to deliver their North sea transition deal. Where is the hydrogen strategy? Where is the commitment to a carbon capture and underground storage facility in the north-east of Scotland? Where is the desire to ensure that there is sufficient capacity within round 4 of the contracts for difference auction to ensure that Scotland does not lose out? That is an important point, because Scotland is going to lose out.

The great renewables robbery that this Government are undertaking is alive and well, because offshore wind projects in Scotland will have to pay to access the energy grid, whereas offshore projects in the south-east of England will be paid to access the very same grid. We face the highest grid connection charges in not only the UK, but the entirety of Europe. If this Government are serious about levelling up and about delivering for Aberdeen and for Scotland, that renewables robbery needs to end—it cannot continue.

3.57 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): One aspect of my role as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief is to represent the UK on the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, which comprises 33 like-minded countries committed to championing FoRB. The UK has led the way in securing a statement from alliance members published today on the gov.uk website. Time precludes me from reading it all, but extracts read:

"We stand in solidarity with the victims of human rights violations by the Myanmar security forces. People of all faiths and beliefs have come together to condemn the military's actions since the 1 February 2021 coup.

Faith actors have played prominent roles in the anti-coup movement, including by supporting human rights defenders and vulnerable communities. As a result, some have been subjected to inhumane treatment by the military regime. We remember those who have been killed and call for the release of all those unjustly detained...

We condemn any attack on places of worship... and support all"—

including faith communities—

"who pursue peace...in Myanmar."

Such expressions of support mean a lot to people suffering on account of their faith or beliefs; they know they are not forgotten.

I thank the alliance member countries supporting this statement and our hard-working Netherlands chairman, Jos Douma, with whom it is a pleasure to work. I also thank my parliamentary FoRB team and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office FoRB team for their support for my role. This week, we celebrated the launch of new training materials for all FCDO staff titled "Religion for International Engagement" to bolster understanding of faiths and beliefs and make the UK stronger in its work as a force for good globally. For me it was a moving moment, having previously chaired a report by the all-party group on religious education calling on Government to improve religious literacy across departments.

Let me take my envoy hat off now and speak as co-chair of the all-party group on North Korea. We published an in-depth report this week on human rights violations in North Korea, to ensure that the 2014 UN commission of inquiry report remains a live document.

Our report updates the litany of atrocities meted out by the North Korean regime on its own people: murder, torture, sexual violence, rape, human trafficking, forced abortions, infanticide, slavery, persecution, inhumane punishments and more. Time precludes me from going into detail. I hope to secure an Adjournment debate. The full report can be found at appgnorthkoreainquiry.com, but I urge colleagues today to support the early-day motion I have tabled this afternoon. I thank all those who helped produce this report, particularly the inquiry's lead adviser, Dr Ewelina Ochab.

Turning to Nigeria, we must not forget the victims of horrendous violence there. We hear of attacks, of the complete breakdown of law and order, and of rural communities suffering. Here is one quote from a reliable source:

"These continued attacks are causing horrific suffering and long term instability...The village was attacked again last night, more homes burnt down and a third church set on fire. No government security forces to protect the village. Several people hacked to death and bodies burnt."

In response, I cannot improve on the well-chosen words of the Bishop of Truro:

"So, what is happening in the Middle Belt?...I would argue strongly that...it's about much more than faith, but it's not about less than that."

4 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) [V]: I want to repeat my thanks and appreciation to all those who have helped deliver the covid vaccination programme. It has been a pleasure to volunteer at some of those local vaccination centres and see how much patients—young and old—appreciated their vaccines. None of that would

[Mike Wood]

have been possible without all those doctors, nurses, pharmacists, staff and volunteers who make a difference every day.

I also thank the many community groups in Dudley South that have supported people throughout this pandemic, such as Lions boxing club in Brierley Hill, which offers top-quality training for people of all backgrounds locally, and the “Black Country Blokes” podcast, which is based out of that boxing club and is helping men to talk about and address mental health. Congratulations to Kev Dillon, who helps run both groups, on his recognition as a Birmingham 2022 home town hero. We look forward to the Commonwealth games coming to the west midlands next year. Grassroots coaches and volunteers like Kev do so much to make it so special. Applications for the Commonwealth games volunteering programme are now open, and I hope that my constituents in Dudley South will take full advantage of the incredible opportunities on offer.

As we look forward to a time after covid, we must build back better and deliver better opportunities for our children and for the next generation in places such as Dudley South. I have started work on my seventh annual jobs fair for this September, to help people back into jobs and develop their skills for new careers. I thank the Department for Work and Pensions and local staff for all their help and support in organising that event.

Delivering a brighter future for the next generation is not only about jobs and prosperity. It was a pleasure to meet Dudley’s Members of the Youth Parliament, Jake Cartwright and Laiba Kiren, to talk about protecting our global environment, and in particular tackling plastic pollution. That is a major challenge that our generations must take up in order to leave a better world for those who follow.

Our local environment is also important. The new planning framework must help bring derelict brownfield sites back into productive use, while allowing communities to protect valuable green-belt sites such as those at Holbeache and the Triangle in Kingswinford, without worrying about decisions being overturned by the inspector. The draft Black Country plan is wrong to include those two sites, and communities need to be supported in getting them replaced with better alternatives. Levelling up means making sure that people in Dudley have equal opportunities, as they would elsewhere in the country. If we succeed, Dudley has a future that is every bit as bright as our proud heritage.

With apologies to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), Dudley borough is the clear choice to become a new city to mark Her Majesty’s diamond jubilee next year.

4.3 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Last year on 16 July, similarly at the end of term, I asked the Leader of the House in business questions for a debate on human rights abuses in Kashmir. Over a year on, no Government time has been provided for a debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) held a Westminster Hall debate on it in January, and that is the only debate that has taken place on the issue.

Members from all parts of the House will have constituents, as I do in Luton South, who have family and friends in Kashmir, and our constituents need the Government to be involved in ending human rights violations and tackling the impact of the pandemic.

On 5 August, it will be the second anniversary of the Indian Government’s Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act 2019, which unilaterally revoked article 370, replacing the autonomous state of Jammu with two territories governed directly by Delhi. The following Indian army-imposed lockdown and communications blackout in Jammu and Kashmir have had a profound and far-reaching impact on every aspect of life in Kashmir, including health services, school closures and press freedom. Human rights abuses must be confronted at the international level through diplomacy. At 72 years, the situation in Kashmir is the longest unresolved conflict on the agenda of the United Nations, and there needs to be a concerted effort from the UK Government to bring about an international, multilateral response.

I am proud that the Labour party will always uphold international law and stand up for human rights and the rule of law. It is a basic, fundamental human right that Kashmiris are empowered to decide how they are governed and by whom. Kashmiris must be able to express their right to self-determination. I want to reiterate my call for a debate in Government time on how the UK Government can take further action to support multilateral efforts to end human rights abuses in Kashmir.

I would like to take this opportunity to invite everybody to come and visit Luton this summer, and join the herd to follow the big trunk trail, which is a beautiful, free, fun, family-orientated trail of 40 beautifully decorated elephants through our town centre and our beautiful parks. This is part of the fundraising for our local hospice, Keech hospice, as it celebrates its 30 years. I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate both the Luton Council of Faiths and the Luton Irish Forum on receiving the Queen’s award for voluntary service this week. They are a fantastic asset to our town, and I am delighted for them both.

4.6 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I begin by wishing you and all colleagues a very happy summer recess?

We have come a long way this year in the fight against coronavirus, and as a former NHS worker myself, I want to take a moment to pay tribute to all NHS staff at St Helier Hospital in Carshalton and Wallington, but also all NHS staff in places such as pharmacies—they include Reena at S. G. Barai Pharmacy, who gave me my first jab only a few weeks ago—and Matron Wendy Dyer and all the volunteers across the borough for everything they have done at the vaccination centres, as well as local community leaders who have been encouraging people from all backgrounds to get the vaccine, volunteers who have stepped up to help others throughout the pandemic and all the other frontline workers who have kept going in difficult times.

It is the honour of a lifetime to represent my home town of Carshalton and Wallington in this place, and everything I try to do in this Chamber addresses the concerns that constituents have raised with me. In fact, I am told by *Hansard* that this is my 100th mention

of Carshalton and Wallington in this place in the last year and half. These 100-plus contributions have been about some of the most pressing issues raised by my constituents.

These are crime and antisocial behaviour issues, including catalytic converter thefts, the antisocial use of vehicles on Roundshaw Downs and in Hackbridge, and the antisocial behaviour in and around our town centres. These are public transport issues, such as the need to invest in unlocking the Croydon bottleneck scheme to unlock congestion on the railways and allow more trains to run through to suburban London, including to Carshalton, Wallington, Hackbridge and Carshalton Beeches stations.

These are issues involving the local economy, such as helping our small businesses through this difficult time and accessing Government support to ensure that our local high streets can be a place for businesses to thrive in the aftermath of a pandemic. These are issues relating to the local environment, such as championing better recycling, standing up for our parks and open spaces against the threat posed by the Lib Dem-run council and, of course, standing up for residents living in the shadow of the Beddington incinerator, who are concerned about air pollution.

These are schools and education issues, such as ensuring that every local schoolchild has a “good” or “outstanding” place to go to and standing up to the council on education, health and care plan failures. But, of course, these are issues involving St Helier Hospital and local healthcare, including delivering the £500 million commitment from this Conservative Government to improve Epsom Hospital and St Helier Hospital, and to build a third, brand-new hospital in Sutton, protecting A&E and maternity services in our borough.

However, this is only the beginning, and throughout the summer recess and beyond, I will try to do my best to continue to champion those issues that my constituents care most about.

4.9 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab) [V]: As we adjourn for summer recess, one of the most important pieces of legislation that we must consider is the Health and Care Bill, which had its Second Reading last week. The Bill has profound implications for the quality and availability of healthcare for all of us, and implications too for the staff who work in the NHS. It is a matter of very real concern that the Bill removes the requirement for social care needs assessments of vulnerable patients to be carried out before a patient is discharged from hospital. This will put patients at risk and leave families to pick up the pieces, and those without family at risk of isolation and lack of care.

The Government’s plans will lead to a postcode lottery as each integrated care board develops a different plan for its area, and strict financial limits will lead to increased local rationing of care. The Bill provides for the deregulation of NHS professions, and this has the potential to impact on the status and, over time, the level of expertise of the people who work in the NHS, which we value so highly. It is also likely to lead to a downward spiral in the pay and pensions of the workforce, and a reduction in the quality of services that patients can access.

The implications for NHS staff are immense. Professor Kailash Chand, an honorary vice-president of the British Medical Association, has said:

“The core thrust of the new reforms is to deprofessionalise and downskill the practice of medicine in this country, so as to make staff more interchangeable, easier to fire, more biddable, and, above all, cheaper.”

The introduction to the NHS constitution states:

“The NHS belongs to the people.”

It is an important principle, and one that the Government’s Bill threatens to tear apart. Big business will be able to sit on ICB decision-making boards and provide services, embedding conflicts of interest in the system and opening the door to widespread cronyism. The Bill will also remove the procurement of health services from the scope of the Public Contracts Regulations 2015, so we will see a regulated market become an unregulated market, with contracts handed out without the stringent arrangements that one would expect in the awarding of public money. Instead of respecting the fact that the NHS belongs to the people, the Government are handing it gift-wrapped to big business. The vision of a comprehensive, universal national health service that is valued so highly is torn apart by the Health and Care Bill.

I pay tribute to the many NHS campaigners around the country who are working so hard to defend our NHS and to keep our NHS public. I hope that hon. Members who voted for the Bill on Second Reading will have time to read the analysis of its impact beyond this place and reflect on just how damaging the changes will be for their constituents, themselves and the future of the national health service.

4.11 pm

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): It is an absolute honour to be called to speak in this debate. This has been an extremely difficult year for many, with lockdowns, social distancing and not being able to be with friends or family. It has been a year in which many people have been quietly working in the background to keep the country running. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all those people in my constituency who have kept the town, the country and international business going.

Our NHS staff and care workers have our thanks and gratitude, but I would also like to especially thank the school and college teams: the teachers, support staff, cleaners, cooks and caretakers. I thank our port and logistics workers who have kept products safely moving in and out of the country, our food producers, and our shopkeepers, who have been staying open every day to ensure that we have access to goods and supplies.

I also thank the energy workers who have kept the country running. While many people will remember the last year and a half as a year when people worked from home, in constituencies like mine there are many people who do not, such as those who maintain and operate the UK’s wind energy supplies, and 70% of the fish we eat in the UK is processed in Great Grimsby. Many of my constituents have never actually stopped going in to work. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all of them for continuing to go in to work for us all.

This debate allows me to tell the House about the progress in Grimsby since the general election. The levelling-up agenda and the Prime Minister’s 10-point

[Lia Nici]

green plan have encouraged more than £300 million-worth of private investment to come into the area. Greater Lincolnshire local enterprise partnership tells me that it has never seen such inward investment coming into north-east Lincolnshire. My jobcentre tells me that it has more job vacancies than jobseekers, and—this is very important to me—my local employers are telling me that they want to work with me to get local people trained to get ready for the high-quality, high-skilled jobs that they have.

Our next focus in towns such as—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady has exceeded her three minutes. I was trying to let her conclude, but I am afraid that she has taken too long now.

4.15 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I refer the House to the declarations I have made relating to Glint Pay and the Covid Recovery Group.

I begin in a spirit of thankfulness—thankfulness for the Government's programme, because we are in a much better place today than we might have expected. The pandemic is moving into an endemic phase, and that is a positive decision of the Government to move us forward with overwhelmingly voluntary measures. Although I have disagreed with the Government and continue to disagree with the Government on some matters, I recognise that the Prime Minister is providing very considerable leadership in a time of very great difficulty. For that I am extremely grateful.

Our trade deals are advancing at pace; there is the prospect of better domestic regulation; our aircraft carrier is heading to the Asia-Pacific—this is a time when the Government have a great story to tell, and I am looking forward to hearing my right hon. Friend the Deputy Chief Whip tell it a little later. I am very grateful to start in a spirit of thankfulness.

I think that my electors in Wycombe and people across the country expect us to be responsible and realistic about what we face, so I want to look forward to where I think we will be in September or October. There are two big factors that we will all need to reflect on over the summer.

First, the NHS is, of course, going to face a difficult winter. It will face a difficult winter because of the enormous backlog, which arises not only from covid but from the response to covid, and because respiratory viruses will be back. I think that means that there will be a moment of decision. The Government will, I am quite sure, face a moment when the NHS will ask for further lockdowns and restrictions in order to deal with those pressures. If the Government give way and once allow our liberties to be used as a tool of NHS capacity management, I think we will then face that issue every single winter. It is with great hope and some faith that I look to the Prime Minister and think that he is a man who will not allow that to happen. I fervently hope that turns out to be the case.

Secondly, I think we are going to run out of other people's quantitative easing. We have spent absolutely enormous amounts of money, which has catapulted us

forward on the debt trajectory set out by the Office for Budget Responsibility in its fiscal sustainability report, and that is going to begin crystallising some extremely hard spending decisions.

It was with enormous sorrow that I learned as I came into the Chamber that a survey published today says that Wycombe is the most food-insecure place in the United Kingdom. I am sorry to say that I am not surprised, because I have been supporting our food bank and we are there on the London fringe, with very expensive housing and other pressures—pressures that are repeated across the country. I am very sorry to say that my constituency appears to be the most food-insecure place in the United Kingdom.

I have stood down from the Treasury Committee after a long period because I recognise that I need to work much more closely with my councillors to make sure that we have our plan for Wycombe. I have to say, as I look forward to those two big factors that I mention, that we are going to have to make sure that food insecurity is at the very top of the list.

4.18 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Shock and anger, heartbreak and confusion—stirred again by knowing that the person elected to protect us, and not least the vulnerable, sacrificed our most elderly and frail for political expediency. Ministers rallied around their master, seeding covid in care homes, embarking on herd immunity, instituting eat out to help out to help the virus to spread, locking down late and opening up early. Many died alone, locked away from loved ones. Covid is a cruel disease.

Now, as the covid wall of broken hearts stares back at this Parliament, inscribed with the names of the 129,000 lives stolen, we see the same rationale behind the Prime Minister's plans being instituted once more. As infection levels spike, with 100 or more each day currently being sacrificed on his pyre of pride, he shouts "freedom day". There is no freedom from the grave. There is no freedom for those retreating back into their homes, too scared to come out. There is no freedom for the millions of children missing school. There is no freedom for the shops and businesses having to close for want of staff.

Like in the story of the Pied Piper, this country is being lured into a dark place again by our Prime Minister, and tragedy awaits some. GPs are telling me that the whole system is overwhelmed. NHS waiting lists cannot cope. Businesses are teetering on the edge. People are needlessly dying. If people had not realised, he is using us as pawns in his political games to boost his ego and power, and as for Mr Cummings, he may well be revealing all, but he too is playing games; otherwise, he would have spoken before so many families were torn apart, when he could have saved them. Our politics is not a game, and I want no one to be used in this way.

Three things: first, from this point we need the management of the pandemic to move from No. 10 to public health professionals. They are perplexed by the strategy being deployed, and they could turn this around. Secondly, the public inquiry process into covid-19 must commence immediately. After this week, the families of the bereaved and those suffering with covid and long covid need answers. To delay is just another of the

Prime Minister's games as he avoids scrutiny ahead of an election while others are hurting. Thirdly, I implore everyone: hands, face, space. This is our defence against both the economic and health catastrophes, if not for your sake then for that of others.

The solidarity that we have shown in this last year is my hope. It goes to the core of who we are as a nation. We care about our country, and we care about one another. I wish everyone in my constituency of York Central and across the country a very safe summer.

4.21 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I want to talk about Terry Melia. Terry is a great man. He is in his 70s, and he watched Bury football club for just about the whole of that time. He went to every match, home and away, for 60 years. That was Terry's life, it was his family, it was the thing that mattered to him, but a couple of years ago that was wrenched away. I want to talk about how we must never underestimate those important sporting, cultural and historical assets that we have in all our constituencies and that matter so much. Bury and its people and its football fans have been badly let down by the Football Association, the Football League and numerous others. A great football club such as Bury with a great history that matters to the heart of my town was just ignored, and it continues to be ignored. I welcome recent Government funding opportunities to ensure that the fifth-oldest football stadium in the country is bought back, and that we see football being played again at Gigg Lane. We must use that not only as one of the real hearts of our community but as a regeneration tool to support everyone.

I want to follow on from that theme and talk about preserving those things that are important to my constituents. On 28 July, councillors in the Metropolitan Borough of Bury will have the opportunity to vote against "Places for Everyone", a strategic planning document championed by the Mayor of Greater Manchester that will destroy large areas of green belt in my seat, specifically at Walshaw, Tottington and Elton reservoir. Each and every councillor has the opportunity to make sure that that plan does not come into existence, and that those beautiful areas of countryside and open spaces are going to be there for us all to continue to enjoy. The power of a politician to be able to decide the way our area looks is in the hands of councillors, and I trust that they will make the right decision.

In other areas that involve working closely with Bury Council, we need to bring Ramsbottom Co-op Theatre back to life. It is one of the original unique co-op theatres from the late 1870s. It has sat dormant for the past 50 or 60 years, but it can be at the heart of the Ramsbottom town plan, bringing back life, culture and support for all members of our community. We can work together to do that.

We also need a functioning special educational needs and disability hub. Children in my constituency are being let down by the SEND support they are getting in their schools, and we can work together collectively in my seat, across party, with the public sector and with schools to ensure that we have better support. We need a fully functioning youth employment hub to make a difference. We need a veterans hub to support our brilliant veterans in the local community.

Through these cross-party efforts, and by ensuring that we preserve those things that are important to us and support all members of our community, we can change Bury, Ramsbottom and Tottington for the better.

4.24 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in an important debate at the end of a very difficult and heartbreaking year. I send my condolences to anyone and everyone who has lost loved ones during this past year. The Government were not prepared for this pandemic. Those in other countries were, and that showed us what could have been done. The Government failed to stop the devastating second wave, they contacted cronies instead of public services and now the track and trace system that has been shown to be so flawed is being relied on. We need to build back better based on social justice and addressing these inequalities.

I want to raise some urgent issues for the Government to think about and act on during the summer. The first is the "pingdemic" for nursery schools. Nursery schools in my area and across the country are reporting a third of colleagues having to self-isolate. They are struggling to find temporary staff to cover and they need that addressed urgently. If lots of nursery schools close, it will not only be the young children who will suffer. It will be parents—parents who are essential service workers and NHS staff who will not be able to go to work.

Another issue is aid cuts. A lot of my constituents from Putney, Southfields and Roehampton have written in because they are very angry about that. One area of immediate concern is Tigray. The Government of Ethiopia effectively have Tigray under siege as we speak—now. In Tigray, Afar and Amhara, 5.5 million people are facing a crisis. The British Government need to adopt far more effective means of influence with the Government of Ethiopia to let the aid in and to stop the war.

A third area is universal credit. We need to keep the £20 uplift or even more people in Wandsworth will rely on food banks. It is shocking that 2,300 families have used the food bank in the past year. In Roehampton, 200 communities rely on the amazing community food box that is delivered every week. It should not have to be this way. Within the next year these numbers will only increase if we take away the universal credit uplift.

Fourthly, I hope that during the summer the green homes grant will return, mysteriously, from the Government. We will not achieve our environmental aims otherwise.

My fifth point is that we should stop the privatisation of the NHS and cut the waiting lists. I would like to end by thanking all the vaccine centres and NHS staff and volunteers. An amazing 218,000 vaccines have been given in Wandsworth and I urge everyone to get their vaccine. I thank all the charities in Putney, Southfields and Roehampton who have done so much to keep us going. To everyone who does not do it for the thanks, I send huge thanks—to every single charity in our wonderful community. They are the best of us and we are very grateful. I wish everyone a great summer recess.

4.27 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): My pre-politics career was spent working on social mobility, and I continue to work on it in this place. Like education,

[David Johnston]

housing is important for social mobility. It is important that we help people get on the housing ladder in a way that their parents and grandparents did. Nobody who rents has ever written to me to say that too many houses are being built; they only say that they are unaffordable. If we want key workers for our public services and not to tell people that they have to move away from the area they have always lived in because they want to get on the ladder, we need to build homes.

Constituents in areas such as mine are unfairly characterised as nimbys for having legitimate concerns about the house building that has gone on. There are four big areas in which they have concerns. The first is volume. Across the two district council areas that my constituency covers, more than 15,000 houses were built between 2012-13 and 2019-20. There are thousands more to come. One concern is whether we are getting a disproportionate share of the new houses. The second concern is affordability. The average house price is £335,000—9.2 times the median income in the 2018 to 2020 period—so these so-called affordable houses are out of reach for most people. The number of affordable houses is often driven down on the grounds that the development would not be viable if they were built as intended.

The third concern is infrastructure. We have GP surgeries bursting at the seams, roads that are hugely congested and unsafe, such as the A420, and a crying need to reopen Grove station to connect the people of Grove—some of my constituents have wanted that for more than 40 years.

The fourth concern is the environment. It is not just about what might happen to the landscape or that in a lot of cases the houses built are quite low-quality. I am frequently asked why, given our other climate change goals, we are building homes that we know we will have to retrofit, with lots of gas boilers but not enough electric charging points or solar panels. Why are we still building on floodplains when we have had so many floods in the area?

The proposals that will come in the planning Bill in the autumn are not published yet; I hope that when they are published we can allay some of the concerns. There has been plenty of scaremongering—it is particularly rich coming from the Liberal Democrats, who had a house building target of 300,000 a year, the highest of any party at the election—but there are legitimate concerns about the community's voice being taken away. I hope that we can address them when the Bill comes before the House.

4.31 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I pay tribute to key workers in the Greater Manchester city region. I am also grateful to the Mayor of Greater Manchester: when the Government ignored the north and when businesses and other workplaces were left in the lurch, he showed leadership and stood up. Even now, when the Government have dropped the legal requirement to wear face coverings, putting transport and service sector workers at disproportionate risk, Andy Burnham has called for passengers to continue wearing face coverings to protect themselves and workers alike. In the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), my good friend, there is some graffiti that reads:

“The north is not a petri dish”.

That is quite right, and it is Andy Burnham who has exposed the Government's unfair treatment of our northern communities.

Despite so-called freedom day, the pandemic is not over and cases are still rising, but as Sir Patrick Vallance confirmed this week, 60% of people being admitted to hospital are unvaccinated, so we can seek solace in the fact that as people continue to get both doses of the vaccine, we will emerge from the pandemic. However, even when it feels as if there is light at the end of the tunnel, there is still so much to recover from. Covid's long-lasting damage can be seen in our schools, our national health service and so much more.

We have seen the disgraceful use of the fire and rehire tactic by some employers. Although the tactic existed before the pandemic, some have used covid as an excuse to erode terms and conditions and pay. I am sure that Members on both sides of the House agree that the practice is a national scandal.

We have also heard that owing to the pandemic, 35,000 people may die of cancer in the UK in the next year because of delays in diagnosing and treating the illness. In February, it was revealed that almost half of people with possible cancer symptoms did not see their GP in the first wave. As a matter of urgency, the Government must set out a proper plan to address the cancer backlog and make sure that people get the treatment they need.

While I am on the subject, I pay tribute to Macmillan Cancer Support for its work supporting people affected by cancer. Sadly, a family close to me lost one of their loved ones recently, and I know that Macmillan gave them so much support. Tragically, we recently lost Mr Neil Brookfield. He was a dedicated family man and a lifelong supporter of Crewe Alexandra football club. He will be sorely missed by his wife Suzanne, their children and all his friends. I am sure that everyone in this House knows someone who has received support from Macmillan. We should all give it our thanks; we owe it a massive debt of gratitude.

Before I finish, I would like to raise one more issue. This week, more than 50 people were set to be deported to Zimbabwe. Because of a last-minute legal challenge, only 14 people were on the flight last night, as *The Guardian* reported, but despite widespread violations of political and human rights, the Home Office has deported people to a country that has harassed and detained political opponents, trade unionists and journalists.

As we all go back to our constituencies for the summer and look forward to returning in September, I hope that Members across the House recognise the uncertainty that so many people under threat of being deported back to countries with grave human rights abuses face. I thank Lord Oates in the other place for his consistent and unwavering support for the Zimbabwean people and his work for the all-party parliamentary group on Zimbabwe.

4.34 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Due to time constraints, and because I have not had an opportunity to raise this before, I will talk exclusively about one issue. We have heard a lot about the struggles faced by many leaseholders and had debates about the Fire Safety Act 2021 and the Building Safety Bill, but I want to talk about St Francis

Tower in Ipswich. Its leaseholders were successful in getting funds through the building safety fund to carry out remediation work to the tower block, but I have been shocked by what has happened since.

The building manager, Block Management, has decided to cover the entire tower block in shrink-wrap, which could be on there for up to 12 months. I was invited by the residents to see the conditions in which they are expected to live and I was absolutely shocked. They are living in small, one-bedroom flats with no balconies and, in the middle of a pandemic, in a hot summer, they have got virtually no natural light. To make it even worse, they were not consulted or informed that it would happen. Then the building manager put bars on the windows, so now the residents can barely open their windows to get fresh air. So the residents have no natural light and barely any fresh air.

In all the time that I have been a Member of Parliament, seeing 100 of my constituents living in those conditions is probably the most shocking thing that I have come across. I find it deeply disturbing that Block Management has behaved in this way. Despite many interventions from me, and despite local media including the *Ipswich Star* and BBC Radio Suffolk highlighting the issue, I have still not had a proper response to a letter I wrote to Block Management about six or seven weeks ago, although we should be having a meeting soon.

We hope that a lot of remediation work will be carried out through things like the building safety fund—a lot of it needs to be carried out because dangerous cladding needs to be removed and various defects must be resolved—but it must be done in a way that is sensitive to the quality of life and mental health of those living in these structures. We need to have a debate on that.

I would like to work with the Government in holding Block Management to account and to support my constituents, who are going through great distress because of its behaviour. They are being treated like animals, not human beings. It is a disgrace, and I will fight for them. I will mention Block Management and its behaviour in the Chamber as many times as I need to until it meets the residents and resolves this issue.

4.37 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure, as always, to lead for the SNP in these debates that are uncharitably referred to as the whinge-fest. I could not disagree more. We have had a quality debate covering a number of important issues.

The hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) kicked off with a football theme that many continued through the debate, and I agree with what was said about the shocking situation in Bury. He, of course, supports England's greatest football team, Newcastle United football club, and he was right to raise issues around the ownership of football clubs. I want to see fan ownership extended across these islands.

At the previous Adjournment debate, I said that I hoped the tartan army could be at Wembley in June. I was delighted to see that happen and to see them cheering on the boys, who were the only team not to concede a goal against England.

There are many constitutional debates, and some people seem to suggest that there is deadlock between those who support Scottish independence and those

who do not. There is also the fact that the Government seem unwilling to grant us a referendum. I have an alternative idea: if they are not willing to give us a referendum to decide the issue, perhaps they could give us a penalty shoot-out. Scotland's record at penalty shoot-outs is rather good—we managed to qualify for the Euros by winning one—and of course England's is perhaps somewhat different. In fact, let us not sugar-coat it—it is as poor as the trains going to and from Southend that we regularly hear about from the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess). Perhaps we could do that.

I do want to make a serious point. It was rather strange and disturbing that some Cabinet Ministers found themselves at the wrong end of a culture war in having a go at the England football team. In all seriousness, it is hard not to like this particular team, who are a credit to themselves and to England. The racism that England players got after the final was completely and utterly despicable and should be condemned by every Member of this House.

We are obviously here to hold the Government to account and a number of Members have raised the Building Safety Bill, with the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) raising a rather shocking example, but I am pleased that the Government have listened to those of us who represent companies such as Bell Building Projects Ltd, which specialises in cladding and is struggling to get the appropriate indemnity insurance to carry out its work. The Government seem to have moved substantially, with a Government-sponsored scheme.

I agree with many of the hon. Members who raised the issue of sick pay. I think the Government will need to revisit this as the low level of sick pay was responsible for many workers having to decide whether to turn up to work or self-isolate. I was particularly pleased to hear a number of Members across the House mention poverty and the proposed cut of the £20 universal credit uplift. This Parliament will need to debate that in September and I hope the Government will use the recess to rethink, because new analysis that will be published by the Independent Food Aid Network and Feeding Britain shows that in 2020 the relative poverty rate for individuals in a family where someone is disabled was as high as 31%, so there is a lot of work to do. I thank the Members, particularly the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), who raised the issue of holiday hunger, and thank organisations in Glasgow South West—Drumoyne Community Council, Crookston Community Group, and G53 Together—for combating holiday hunger. The sad fact is that when MPs are on recess—and it is a recess—there are children suffering from holiday hunger. I will be particularly delighted to see the Threehills community supermarket project in the Glasgow South West constituency take place, the first community supermarket project in Scotland.

I hope that in the next few weeks the Government will come to their senses and resolve the industrial action disputes in the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. It is frankly incredible and a disgrace that ministerial interference stopped a proposed resolution to that between DVLA officials and the Public and Commercial Services Union, and the Government need to apologise for that. I hear that yesterday's Transport Committee sitting was very interesting indeed.

[Chris Stephens]

You gave me a wee row in relation to my face mask, Madam Deputy Speaker, but we should recognise this week that the 1950s-born women have got something of a result and I want to pay tribute to the 1950s-born women across these islands who have been campaigning on this issue, particularly the WASPI Glasgow and Lanarkshire group, which does excellent campaigning work; I especially congratulate Rosie Dixon and Kathy McDonald who lead those women superbly.

I hope we will not see a culture or any other sort of war between the Home Office and the city of Glasgow. I was proud to be at Kenmure street in Pollokshields exercising my right to freedom of peaceful assembly to ensure that the Home Office did not take away a fellow Glaswegian whose only crime seems to be that he fell off the Home Office's radar. This was not a criminal or a terrorist; this was someone who just happened to fall off the radar. That was a completely unacceptable way of dealing with that issue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on the issue of freedom?

Chris Stephens: Yes, on the issue of freedom of peaceful assembly.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. One of my great concerns has been the 309 million Christians across the world who are facing extreme levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that issue should be at the core of what we in this House are trying to sort out?

Chris Stephens: Yes I do, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for the regular work he does in highlighting those issues.

As I said, this recess is not a holiday but a recess and I pay tribute to the parliamentary staff and constituency office staff of every single Member of this House; they have worked extremely hard. I pay particular tribute to Justina, Greg, Dominique, Keith, Scott, Tony and the great Roza Salih who leads the Glasgow South West team superbly, and I hope that all hon. Members of the House will have a good summer.

4.44 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: I am pleased to be making my first and, I hope, last virtual appearance at the Dispatch Box as shadow Deputy Leader of the House for today's convivial debate.

We have heard many hon. Members talk about the issues that are close to their hearts, and it has been a pleasure to listen to them as they spoke from all parts of the House and all parts of the country. There have been a host of excellent speeches today. The hon. Member for Gedling (Tom Randall) gave an insightful speech on the upcoming Historic County Flags Day. I may be biased, but I would argue that the flag of Lancashire is superior by a long way.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) spoke about a wide variety of issues, including the future of social care, a memorial for Vera Lynn, the safety of jet skis, and the upcoming Environment Bill. However, his speech would not have been complete without a final call for Southend to be designated a city,

although it sounds as though he has competition on his hands from the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) who is gunning for Dudley to gain city status.

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) gave a glowing recommendation of the Government's towns deal, but we can agree to disagree. On the subject of levelling up, my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) asked why the Government had turned their back on his constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) raised the poor services on East Midlands Railway and the lack of accountability, while the hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) put on record his strong feelings about HS2 and East West Rail.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) made a moving contribution about the ongoing situation in Kashmir, while my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) raised the crisis that continues to rock Tigray and Ethiopia. I was also pleased to see the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) raise the issue of freedom of religion and belief and the prosecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.

As a fellow member of the all-party group on ending homelessness, it was good to hear the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) raising the scandal of homelessness and the all-party group's recent report on the need to continue with Housing First. Meanwhile, the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) and my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) both raised the ongoing plight of leaseholders involved in the dangerous cladding issue and the skyrocketing costs of remediation work. I was shocked to hear the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) raise the issue of the St Francis Tower in his constituency. I hope that he succeeds in supporting his constituents to resolve this matter. With the demand for housing only rising, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) spoke powerfully about the overcrowding that her constituents are experiencing due to the housing shortages. Similarly, the hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston) spoke of how housing shortages were affecting his constituents.

The hon. Members for Newbury (Laura Farris), for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) and for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici) all paid tribute to local people for their hard work in supporting the covid vaccination efforts in their constituencies. That is a sentiment, I am sure, that we would all echo about our own constituencies.

If there was a theme among the many speeches that we have heard today, it was the ever-present concern about covid infections and the terrible toll that the past year and a half has taken on our country and our hard-working people. My hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) gave an excellent summary of the Government's long list of failures over the past year. It was fantastic to hear how the community of South Shields, like so many around the country, stepped up during these difficult months. I wholeheartedly agree that the Government should be more like South Shields—or perhaps, if I may say so, more like Manchester, Gorton.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) for raising the disproportionate impact that this pandemic has had on Greater Manchester and the north. My hon. Friend the Member

for York Central (Rachael Maskell) spoke powerfully about the need for an urgent public inquiry into the Government's handling of the pandemic. Bereaved families need answers now and we must learn the lessons of the pandemic to avoid making the same mistakes again. On that point, I would encourage all those in the House today who have not yet had an opportunity to visit the covid memorial wall opposite Parliament to do so before they return home.

Several speakers, including the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) and my hon. Friends the Members for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) and for Putney, raised the scandal of Ministers handing their friends huge contracts throughout the pandemic. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) for her powerful words opposing the Government's Health and Care Bill. That legislation would be deeply damaging, and she is right to call for the House to join Labour in rejecting it.

I hesitate to say it, but I agree with the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) on his concern about how the NHS will cope this winter, and his call for food insecurity to be placed at the top of the Government's agenda.

Like many other Members, I look forward to catching up on constituency visits while we have this fine weather. I very much look forward to attending, on Saturday, a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new Debdale nature centre in Debdale park in my constituency. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is a renewed appreciation for the green spaces that became a sanctuary for so many during lockdown.

With football on their mind, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) spoke of the scandalous takeover of Newcastle United and the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) spoke passionately of the future of Bury football club. Despite the Euros disappointment earlier this summer, Manchester continues to benefit from thriving grassroots football. Later this month I shall be visiting Rushford park in Longsight to open two new football pitches, which may well be used by the next Marcus Rashford or Harry Kane.

As the summer of sport continues, I wish all of Team GB—Great Britain's athletes—the best of luck for the Olympics and Paralympics in Tokyo. The Olympics is always a fantastic occasion, showcasing the very best of human achievement and endeavour. However, I remind the House that dark shadows hang over the Beijing 2022 winter Olympics, as the genocide perpetrated by the Chinese Government on Uyghur Muslims continues unchecked and unchallenged by the international community. Now is the time for a political and diplomatic boycott of the Beijing games.

I thank all the staff of both Houses for their tireless work, and I wish them all a restful summer. Special thanks must also go to all the wonderful staff who work for us as MPs. My personal thanks go to my own staff—Tom, Josephine, Anisa, Alice, Sam and Naeem—for all their hard work. Finally, I would like to thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the Speaker, and all the rest of the Deputy Speakers, and your deputy, for keeping us all in check. I hope that everyone has a peaceful summer and I look forward to seeing you all in person in September.

4.52 pm

The Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household (Stuart Andrew): I confess that I have grown to really enjoy responding to this periodic debate. Not only does it give us a tour of the United Kingdom, but we learn a great deal about a range of issues, raised by Members from both sides of the House. Nevertheless, the medal still goes to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who managed to raise 15 issues in three minutes. That is quite an achievement.

The SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), offered a penalty shootout. He talked about the independence referendum. My reply to him is that we gave the people of Scotland a choice, a “once in a generation” opportunity—not my words—and they took it: they decided it was better to stay in the United Kingdom.

Many Members mentioned the pandemic, and I join them in paying tribute to all those people who have worked tirelessly to keep our country going, and to care for those who needed it the most. The community groups that we have heard about today have been extraordinary, and I have seen that in my constituency. Those who kept our hospitals going, those who kept our schools going, and those who kept the shops going—who have not had as much credit as they should have—really have been a credit to this country, and I thank them most sincerely for all that they have done in what has been an incredibly difficult time.

I probably will not have time to respond to all the issues raised, but I will do my best. Football has come up a fair bit. The hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) talked about their clubs, and I am sure it will not have escaped their notice that DCMS Ministers are taking the future of the game very seriously. Their review will of course include the governance of the game, and I look forward to their reporting back as soon as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) continued his campaign on Stanmore station. I will raise those issues with Ministers in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. He also talked about the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health. Given my habit, I had better keep quiet.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West raised many issues, and two particularly stand out. Of course, one is his tribute to Vera Lynn. I think we are all united in wanting to support him in that campaign. I wish him well in his bid for Southend to become a city.

The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) mentioned investment in railways. I point out that, under this Government, we have given £40 billion to our railways, one of the biggest investments since the Victorian era. We stand on a proud record.

A number of hon. and right hon. Members mentioned planning and cladding, and these are important issues. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), the hon. Members for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) and for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), and my hon. Friends the Members for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), for Dudley South (Mike Wood), for Bury North, for Wantage (David Johnston) and for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) show

[Stuart Andrew]

what an important issue this is. The planning Bill that will be coming before this House is an important opportunity for us to make sure that we build the houses that my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage talked about, so that young people have somewhere to live, but that we do it in the right places—the right houses in the right places. My community groups, such as Aireborough neighbourhood development forum, successfully challenged their local council at the High Court on its plan to build on the green belt, and they won. That demonstrates that local voices can count for a great deal.

I cannot ignore the disappointing tone of the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). It was disappointing to hear the constant accusation of cronyism and corruption. I took particular offence at being described as a member of a racism-enabling Government. I have faced prejudice in my life, and I have ended up in hospital, as did my father, because of my sexuality. I took offence at being told that I do not believe in the NHS, as I spent most of my working life working for the hospice movement, and at being told that we do not care about poorer families, as my dad spent a lot of time in unemployment—I had to have free school meals. I take exception to such accusations.

I will stand up to anyone who discriminates against any single person for who or what they are, or for who they love. I will defend the NHS for as long as I am alive. I believe that the best way to help our poorest families is to give them the opportunity to have a job that pays well, because being able to support themselves is their best opportunity for a better life.

I am conscious that my time is coming to an end, but I want to say thank you to all hon. and right hon. Members who have taken part in this debate. It has brought out a host of issues, and we have heard that the Government's agenda to build back better is working across the country.

Despite what we heard from some hon. Members, the town centre deals are delivering improvements in our towns across this country. If hon. Members think that is not working, they should look at the successful Conservative Members who have lobbied hard to get that money and are now seeing the investment they need for their towns. Look at the infrastructure that is being invested in in all parts of the country.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) said, let us concentrate on being an outward-looking nation that is determined to build on the trade deals that will create the jobs we need in this country. Let us be proud of our armed forces, which work tirelessly in all corners of the world so that we can show we are, as he said, a truly outward-looking country.

I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and Mr Speaker, the Clerks and all our staff who support us in our daily work, and the catering and cleaning teams who look after us. I give a special mention to the Doorkeepers. Having to wear those outfits in this weather is incredibly difficult, but they are always there to help us all.

I look forward to our coming back to normal. As someone who has carried the proxies, I cannot wait to see the back of them.

I finish by wishing all our Olympians the very best of luck. The whole nation is behind you. I wish everyone a very happy recess.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I think there is unanimity on the wish for a happy recess.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

PETITIONS

NHS Pay

5 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): I am pleased to present this petition on behalf of 815,000 people who have expressed their views about the Government's paltry offer of 3% to NHS staff.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that throughout the pandemic, thousands of NHS workers have been working around the clock, putting their lives at risk to protect the public; notes that the average nurse in the UK has lost 20% of their income the last 10 years and that it is not surprising that there are 100,000 vacancies within the NHS currently; declares that many NHS workers are using food banks to get by; notes that earlier this year, the Government announced a pay rise for public service workers "in recognition of their efforts in tackling Covid-19" but many NHS staff including nurses, porters and cleaners were not included; declares that the wellbeing of NHS staff is more important than ever—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman is not meant to be making a long speech at this point. He is just meant to be presenting his petition. Perhaps he could just get to the end of the petition.

Jon Trickett: I wonder if you could give me guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am reading out the words of the petition; it is not a speech.

Madam Deputy Speaker: It is meant to be short.

Jon Trickett: It is just the petition, as agreed with the office. I will take your advice, for which I thank you, and perhaps I shall just say that the petition is available for people to read.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that throughout the pandemic, thousands of NHS workers have been working around the clock, putting their lives at risk to protect the public; notes that the average nurse in the UK has lost 20% of their income the last 10 years and that it is not surprising that there are 100,000 vacancies within the NHS currently; declares that many NHS workers are using food banks to get by; notes that earlier this year, the Government announced a pay rise for public service workers "in recognition of their efforts in tackling Covid-19" but many NHS staff including nurses, porters and cleaners were not included; declares

that the wellbeing of NHS staff is more important than ever due to the most recent wave of Covid-19 and with morale at an all time low amongst staff; notes that a recent survey showed that 36% of nurses were considering leaving the profession altogether.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to liaise with the NHS Pay Review Body to urgently review the pay of Agenda For Change staff and take into consideration the 10 years of pay caps/freezes while acknowledging their extraordinary efforts throughout the pandemic. The petitioners also urge the House of Commons to urge the Government to reallocate funds to enable a 15% pay rise for NHS workers.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002682]

Planning applications in Richmond Park

5.2 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD) [V]: I know you want me to be quick, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I would like to mark the fact that I am the final MP to be participating virtually. With your permission, I should like to mark that occasion by saying a huge thanks to all the technical staff who have made our virtual Parliament possible over the past 18 months. It really is an extraordinary, and dare I say, historic achievement.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I appreciate what the hon. Lady has said, and let us fervently hope that she is the last Member of Parliament to participate virtually by video link. Let us hope that when we next meet everyone will be able to be here in this Chamber.

I say to the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) that I hope I have not stopped an important part being recorded in *Hansard*, but his petition will be there.

Sarah Olney: I will now quickly present my petition. I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of the UK regarding planning applications in the constituency of Richmond Park.

The petition states:

The petition of the residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that localist planning principles must be applied to the Former Stag Brewery planning application, GLA references 4172, 4172a & 4172b and the Homebase, Manor Road planning application, GLA reference 4795; further that weakening the planning decisions made by local authorities at local level risks allowing unsuitable development, including architecturally displeasing development, environmentally damaging development, and development that is not primarily designed to meet the need of the local community; further that the Former Stag Brewery planning application cannot be seen in isolation from the Homebase, Manor Road application, the partial closure of Hammersmith Bridge and other relevant issues; further that GLA must institute a holistic approach by assessing the Former Stag Brewery application and then reviewing the Homebase, Manor Road application accordingly.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government, and in particular the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government of the United Kingdom, to meet with Sarah Olney, MP for Richmond Park, to discuss the implications of the Former Stag Brewery planning application and the Homebase, Manor Road planning application.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002685]

Review of the Gambling Act 2005

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

5.4 pm

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): It is a pleasure to lead this Adjournment debate on the review of the Gambling Act 2005. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and to my position as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on betting and gaming. I thank the Minister for Media and Data, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), for his engagement with the industry and the APPG on this issue. It would be remiss of me not to mention the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), as I know that he did the same when gambling fell under his ministerial remit.

Betting and gaming is a key part of the UK's dynamic and diverse leisure and entertainment industry. Betting and Gaming Council companies alone support 119,000 jobs. The figure is even higher if we include wider bingo, adult gaming centres and arcades on seaside piers. The online sector in particular is responsible for a growing number of well-paid tech jobs. The Government desperately need those jobs and the tax revenue they bring as we rightly build back better from the pandemic.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Is there not also a very big supply chain for these outlets, and is it not a fact that the industry adds to the life of this country, and is one factor that makes us an attractive venue for visitor attractions, greatly to be encouraged?

Scott Benton: The right hon. Member makes a brilliant point. It is not just about the jobs, directly and indirectly, and the taxation to the Exchequer; it is also about the contribution of the industry to the cultural fabric of our society. I appreciate that point and will refer to it later.

The industry's contribution to the national economy and local economies such as mine in Blackpool must be taken into account during the upcoming gambling review, which provides a golden opportunity to upgrade much of the legislation in an area that is increasingly becoming analogue in a digital age.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): There have been concerns that the Gambling Act is not fit for the digital age, as the hon. Member is saying. Does he agree that there is an issue with offshore gambling organisations, which are not illegal, and that a review of this legislation should look at the loopholes that prevent control of offshore gambling, which is equally dangerous to gamblers who have addictions?

Scott Benton: The hon. Member makes a valid point about the so-called black market or offshore gambling. Billions of pounds of UK customers' money is spent on black market websites every single year. Of course, the problem is that, unlike UK online gaming operators, those offshore operators are not regulated and the propensity for online harm for people who have a problem is much higher. I thank him for raising that important point.

[Scott Benton]

The key decisions in this review need to be taken by Ministers and Parliament. It is vital that the Government hear the views of both the industry and those who have concerns about problem gambling. I stress that the review has to be grounded in the evidence rather than blind ideology. We must not lose sight of the enjoyment that millions of people get from gambling, with recent polling suggesting that seven in 10 people in the UK gamble every single year and that 73% of people see betting as a leisure activity. This approach cannot be compromised by what some perceive to be the perspective advocated by the Gambling Commission.

Questions have to be asked about whether the Gambling Commission has extended its role beyond that expected of a regulator. Over the years, it has been said that the commission has taken a stance similar to the personal feelings of its chief executive at any particular time. Although the commission is there to support businesses and enable them to operate within the guidelines, it has on occasion unnecessarily made negative comments, been overly critical of the industry as a whole and faced criticism for being obstructive to firms trying to engage with it.

There is a real risk that over-regulation and intrusive precautions could push people towards the black market. Indeed, a PwC study has estimated that the size of the active black market in the UK has doubled in the last couple of years, and over 400,000 customers were predicted to have used an unlicensed operator in the past year, with an estimated spend of around £2.8 billion. The existence and potential growth of the black market poses a significant threat in terms of lost tax revenue, lost jobs, limited player protections and fewer money laundering protections.

When appraising the opportunities for necessary changes in regulation, we must take proportionate steps to continue to protect the small number of people who do have problems with gambling. The estimated rate of those with a gambling problem is around 0.5% of the adult population and has been stable for the past 20 years—a very small number in comparison with rates reported in other nations around the world, which is testament to the safeguards already put in place by the sector here in the UK. However, we must ensure that the necessary support is offered to those people. Those I have spoken to in the industry have acknowledged the need for such protections and appreciate the importance of protecting problem gamblers and young people. Over the last couple of years, the industry has voluntarily taken steps to increase safeguards for vulnerable people, including increasing funding for GambleAware, reducing TV advertising and educating children on the risks of gambling, as well as investing heavily in technologies that better identify and interact with customers who might start to have problems.

Above what the industry has voluntarily committed for funding for research, education and treatment for problem gambling, a blanket levy across the industry has been mooted. The evidence would suggest that this is simply not necessary. The Gambling Commission's report reviewing the research, education and treatment arrangements states that a plausible sum for annual requirements would be in the range of £21 million to £67 million. I understand that, in 2019, the largest members

of the Betting and Gaming Council agreed to increase funding for RET by up to £100 million over the next four years and committed to giving 1% of gross gambling yield to RET by 2023, bringing the total funding within that required range. A blanket levy would therefore be unnecessary and not be of any additional benefit to consumers. It is worth bearing in mind that these funds are already given voluntarily by the industry over and above the billions of pounds paid in taxes and duties to the Exchequer.

I understand that the Gambling Commission is looking into a system that aims to restrict a customer's gambling spend to a limit based on a person's discretionary income—known as affordability—to try to protect gamblers. Inherently, without an incredibly invasive and cross-industry system in place, this is a deeply flawed concept. All it would require to circumnavigate the limit would be for the player to open an account with another operator. Without the individual's spend with all operators being tracked, their affordability limit would thus instantly be doubled. Most regular gamblers already have multiple accounts. Instead, this would create an off-putting and burdensome process for customers who wish to place a few bets simply for fun. There is no evidence to suggest that this reduces problem gambling, only that it reduces gambling overall. It is also morally questionable—where would all this end? Should we place affordability criteria on other areas of peoples' lives, perhaps limiting spending on fast food, alcohol or anything else that people deem to be potentially addictive?

Further questions would also need answering if this were to be implemented. It would be near impossible to ask all the land-based gambling sector, including betting shops and casinos, to manage this directive. Would they even fall under the same regulations imposed on online operators? If not, that clearly creates an unlevel playing field for businesses while undermining the whole affordability strategy. How would all this actually work in practice?

Understandably, the whole industry, from bingo operators to casinos to sports betting companies, believes this to be an ill-conceived, blunt instrument that targets all gamblers. Its only real consequence is to reduce gambling overall, rather than focusing on protecting those vulnerable people with a genuine gambling problem. It is right that operators intervene where harms are identified, and support must always be made available, but this completely ignores the demand for gambling and, if we are not careful, will turn people instead to the black market if they are asked to provide intrusive documentation such as payslips.

Flutter, a leading operator in the industry, has developed its own "affordability triple step", three layers of protection as part of a flexible risk-based approach, while Entain has developed the ARC—advanced responsibility and care—platform, which uses cutting-edge behavioural science to spot whenever someone's play becomes problematic, so that an intervention can immediately take place. Such schemes are just a couple of examples of the industry proactively taking steps to protect customers without the need for an over-reactive and invasive approach that targets all customers. Market research suggests that 40% of customers would not comply with affordability checks, and three quarters of them would look to evade restrictions by opening other accounts, playing in various

physical locations and turning to unregulated online gambling sites, as alluded to by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Also of concern, for many of the same reasons, is the so-called single view of the customer, a proposal for a national database that will contain the betting information of every single gambler, as well as any personal information on their betting behaviour and information gathered about their financial position. The industry has been looking at more appropriate options whereby it shares information about those who are most at risk and have been flagged as having problems. It is far less intrusive to focus on those who need support rather than on every single person who likes a bet. Although the legal case is uncertain under general data protection regulation legislation, the Gambling Commission is looking to implement the proposal unilaterally. As previously mentioned, such policy proposals must be considered only within the context of the Gambling Act review.

Advertising and sponsorship provide valuable support for sports throughout this country. Betting sponsorship of sports such as horse racing, football, rugby league, dart, and snooker amounts to more than £70 million per year. Many clubs in the English football league are adamant that they could not survive without the income that they gain from gambling operators, which would not easily be replaced.

Importantly, advertising plays a role in keeping consumers safe, allowing operators to distinguish their offers from unregulated websites and communicating safer gambling messages to drive awareness and usage. Sky Bet's Three Simple Tools campaign resulted in a 69% increase in the use of cool-off periods; a 10% rise in customers setting deposit limits; and 83% of Sky Bet customers using the profit-and-loss tool. There is little evidence to suggest that gambling advertising leads to problem gambling. In any case, the industry has voluntarily introduced a whistle-to-whistle advertising ban during live sport; support for safer gambling campaigns; and the newly released code on Adtech to minimise under-25-year-olds' exposure to gambling advertising. The cumulative effect of these measures should be considered when we look to place any further restrictions on this already tightly regulated area.

Although the number of reported issues is incredibly small, when problems arise the Gambling Commission does not deal with individual complaints from consumers. That helps to build a case for an independent consumer-redress system, such as an ombudsman, for regulatory complaints. That would improve the process and make it more consistent for those who raise concerns.

Finally, with regard to the main commercial operators in the gambling industry, there are several needs for land-based casinos in the gambling review, but I do not want to give my right hon. Friend the Minister a sense of déjà vu, so I shall just reiterate my thanks to him for his thoughtful and engaging response to the recent Westminster Hall debate on some of the asks from the sector, the review of a super-casino and the opportunities that one could bring to a town such as Blackpool.

Quite distinct from the industry's commercial operators sits the successful charity lottery sector. Charity lotteries exist purely to generate funds for good causes across Britain, with advertising fundamental to their ability to deliver this funding. It is vital that Ministers recognise, as the gambling review progresses, the distinct contribution

of charity lotteries and the positive role that advertising plays in helping them to support good causes. In Blackpool, for example, the People's Postcode Lottery has funded small grants totalling over £100,000, supporting local organisations such as Donna's Dream House and the Blackpool football club community trust. Given that lotteries are widely seen as being low-risk for any problem gambling, changes to policy must allow them to thrive so that they can continue to do more for the good causes they support throughout this country.

In conclusion, I welcome the Minister's further engagement with this important review, and I look forward to his response to many of the key issues alluded to in this speech, both in this debate and before the review finally comes back to Parliament in the autumn.

To finish on a political note, my constituency and many more like it with significant working-class communities were hard-won by supporters of this Government. Betting, and the sports that depend on betting, are part of our national culture. What is more, many of these people are sick and tired of being told what they can and cannot do, so the Government must tread very carefully here. Completing the review will not be an easy task. I am fully aware that the Minister will have to weigh up competing viewpoints, but I hope he can progress with a rational and evidence-based assessment that takes into account the need to protect the small number of people who have a gambling problem with the huge economic and cultural benefits that the industry has across the UK. The voters will not thank us if we get the balance wrong.

5.21 pm

The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale):

I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) on obtaining this debate, which comes hard on the heels of the debate we had last week in Westminster Hall about casinos. I also thank him for his work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on betting and gaming and all the members of the group for their engagement with us over the gambling review and the assessment of what further measures are necessary.

Let me start by making it clear that the Government have a very simple vision for the gambling sector. We want the millions of people who choose to gamble in Britain to be able to do so in a safe way. The sector needs to have up-to-date legislation and protections, with a strong regulator with the powers and resources needed to oversee a responsible industry that offers customer choice while protecting players. As the Minister for sport, heritage and tourism, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), set out last December, the aim of our gambling review is to ensure that those objectives can be delivered in the digital age and that we have the balance right between protecting people from harm and maintaining freedom of choice in how they spend their money and leisure time.

Gambling is a legitimate leisure activity, and there are millions of gamblers in this country. In the year to March, 40% of all adults surveyed had taken part in at least one form of gambling in the previous four weeks, which is down from 47% in the pre-pandemic year to March 2020. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool

[Mr John Whittingdale]

South has mentioned—indeed, it was endorsed by the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar)—businesses such as casinos and the bingo provide jobs and opportunities for social engagement in towns and cities right across the country. In some areas, online gambling is also an important source of skilled technology jobs.

While every single type of gambling comes with an element of risk, some forms are undoubtedly associated with higher risks than others. When I first took on responsibility for this brief, one of the first meetings I had was with the lived experience advisory group set up by the Gambling Commission to hear from those who have suffered from gambling addiction, members of their families and those affected by it. We know that something like 300,000 people are classified as problem gamblers in this country, and we are very much aware that it can devastate not just their lives but those around them. This morning I had a meeting with the Gambling with Lives charity, in which it described some of the most tragic cases where gambling addiction had certainly contributed to someone's decision to take their own life.

We already have a public health approach to gambling regulation, with preventive rules designed to minimise the risk of harm to all consumers, and the provision of treatment to help those who suffer harm. However, in this review, we are taking a very close look at whether further measures are needed to deliver the Government's objectives and to protect people in proportionate but robust ways.

Of course, that has to be based on evidence, which is why we started with the call for evidence. That closed at the end of March and received around 16,000 responses. I am grateful to the huge range of individuals and organisations that made submissions, including representatives of the industry, academics, researchers, charities, campaign groups and, as I said earlier, Members of this House and the other place. It is our intention to publish a White Paper later this year, which will set out the Government's vision for change and allow all those with an interest to continue to shape policy. Ahead of that, I can give some indication of one or two of the areas in which we are thinking of making further change.

It has become clear that we need to take a holistic approach to gambling reform, recognising where parallels apply across sectors and issues that have traditionally been thought of as entirely distinct. We need to design a coherent package that is flexible enough to respond to future changes and innovation.

I was the Opposition spokesman during the passage of the Gambling Act 2005. Online gambling was hardly mentioned during the entire course of the debate on that Bill. Then, it was in its infancy, yet now it has become one of the major forms of gambling, and in some ways it has created greater risks. It has transformed the industry, and certain safeguards have come with it. Operators can and must use customers' data to identify where they may be at risk of harm and to intervene accordingly. It is also now possible to self-exclude from all forms of online gambling through one single request. Since April last year, membership of GAMSTOP has been a requirement for all licensed operators.

On the other hand, online gambling has given rise to new products, which are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That challenges the assumption in the 2005 Act

that controlling availability is a way of controlling risk. As I said, online gambling now accounts for more revenue than gambling in person, and the shift in how people gamble has become even clearer over the last 18 months as a result of the pandemic.

John Spellar: It is not just online but offshore, which very often is unregulated.

Mr Whittingdale: The right hon. Gentleman is quite right to draw attention to the threat posed by the black market, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) did in his intervention. That is certainly something we need to bear in mind. It is very important that we create a safe space where people are given protection if they are gambling online, but we do not want to drive them away from the regulated sector and into the black market. That is certainly something that we will bear in mind during our consideration of these things.

We are looking at whether further controls for play online would be effective in preventing gambling harm, including whether greater controls are needed at account or product level. We are also working closely with the Gambling Commission on its parallel work to improve how operators interact with customers, and we will ensure that any new checks that it introduces to increase protections for those who are financially vulnerable, binge gambling or losing significant amounts over time harmonise with the aims of our own review.

While it is the case that more people are now gambling online, the land-based sector is still very important in our gambling landscape, and of course it accounts for more than four fifths of the jobs in gambling. I absolutely recognise the important social role that some gambling clubs play in communities. We know in particular that bingo clubs attract a wide demographic of players who rely on those places as spaces to socialise and see friends. I am looking forward to my visit to Buzz Bingo in Clacton-on-Sea on Monday.

We recognise the importance both of a well regulated sector that keeps people safe wherever they choose to gamble and of a strong gambling industry that supports jobs. I will not repeat what I said last week about the casino sector, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South knows, there is a need to look at the existing restrictions within that sector. In some cases, they have become steadily more anomalous, and they clearly need to be updated.

Another matter that we are considering is consumer redress, which has featured in a lot of the submissions to our call for evidence and in the public discourse. It is a condition of their licence that gambling operators must provide customers with free access to alternative dispute resolution services to handle complaints. That applies where customers are unhappy with an operator's service or its response to a complaint, for example about paying out on a bet.

I recognise, however, that the current arrangements deal only with contractual disputes and do not allow for individual resolution if a complaint is about whether the operator has breached its social responsibility obligations, for example by failing to step in when someone shows signs that their gambling is getting out of control. That means that consumers may end up having to pursue action through the courts. Understandably, concerns have been raised that the current system makes

it difficult for individuals to seek compensation or support. We are looking carefully at the evidence in that area.

My hon. Friend talked about the Gambling Commission. The commission has broad powers under the Gambling Act that enable it to tackle new and emerging risk through licence conditions without the Government having to take legislation through Parliament. In the past 18 months, for example, the commission has banned gambling on credit cards, tightened rules on VIP schemes and introduced new rules to limit the intensity of online slots, as well as permanently banning reverse withdrawals. We are consulting on and have now approved proposals for a fees uplift for the commission, which will take effect from 1 October for remote operators and from April next year for the land-based sector. This will allow the commission to continue to cover its costs. As my hon. Friend will know, a new chief executive, Mr Andrew Rhodes, has just been appointed to the commission and we are in the process of selecting a new chair. The commission is undergoing a reboot and we are looking at its powers and performance as part of the review.

My hon. Friend mentioned advertising. It is too early, I think, to say where we will end up on the issues around it, but we are looking at the evidence very closely indeed. It is worth emphasising that there are already many rules that govern gambling advertising in this country. The UK advertising codes make it clear that all gambling advertising must be socially responsible, that it must not be targeted at under-18s and that its content must not encourage irresponsible gambling behaviour. Gambling adverts are not permitted to be

shown in or around children's programmes. Compliance with the codes is a licence condition, so breaches can and do result in enforcement action by the Gambling Commission. Licence conditions also set out additional controls on gambling advertising, and the gambling industry code for socially responsible advertising includes rules such as the 9 pm watershed on most television advertising and the whistle-to-whistle advertising ban around live sports.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing us an opportunity to debate the issues. As I say, work is ongoing, particularly on scrutinising the 16,000 submissions that we have received as part of the review. I look forward to coming back to the House later this year with a White Paper that sets out our conclusions and recommendations.

Madam Deputy Speaker, may I end by wishing you, my hon. Friends, all hon. Members and all those who work for us so well in this House a very happy recess?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I echo what has been said many times today: we are all extremely grateful for the amazing service given by everybody who works in this amazing building during these very difficult times in order to keep our precious democracy working, and working well. Let us hope that when we return it will be back to normal and working even better. I wish everybody a happy recess.

Question put and agreed to.

5.34 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 22 July 2021

[STEVE McCABE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

COP26 Conference Priorities

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

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

1.30 pm

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): Members will be aware that social distancing no longer applies, but Mr Speaker has encouraged us to continue to wear masks. Given the hybrid procedures, there have been some changes to arrangements. The timings of the debates have been amended to allow technical arrangements to be made, and there will also be a suspension between debates.

Members participating physically and virtually must arrive for the start of the debate, and Members are expected to remain for the entire debate. Mr Speaker has asked me to remind Members participating virtually that they must leave their cameras on for the duration of the debate and that they should be visible at all times to each other and to us in the Boothroyd Room. If Members have any technical problems, they should email the Clerks at westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk. I also remind Members to clean their spaces when they arrive and as they leave, and by all means feel free to remove your jackets.

1.31 pm

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con) [V]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the priorities for the COP26 conference.

I want to place on record how grateful I am to the Backbench Business Committee for awarding us today's debate and likewise how much I appreciate the support of my cross-party co-sponsors, especially the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), who addressed the Committee in my absence.

In a year dominated by coronavirus and the brilliant efforts of our scientists and the health service to overcome this terrible threat to our way of life, we must not lose sight of the huge importance of what lies ahead of us this autumn. In November, COP26 in Glasgow will be the biggest international summit the UK has ever hosted, on a subject that remains the single most significant long-term threat to our security, economy and environment. This is the first full debate that we have had on it in the House.

The extraordinary weather events that we have recently witnessed in Germany and Belgium have reminded us just how serious the threat of climate change is. The facts are clear: if left unchecked, climate change will render vast swathes of the world, including parts of our own country, uninhabitable and trigger a huge upsurge in poverty, mass migration and political instability that will have ramifications across the whole planet. On current trends, the world economy could be 10% smaller

if we do not hit net zero by 2050. It is not just for the sake of our environment that we need to act; it is for the sake of our economy and security.

This is our problem, and it is the challenge of our generation. In that context, we should all be delighted that the UK, and specifically my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), has assumed the COP presidency at this vital time.

Six years ago in Paris, the world came together and agreed a robust framework for action on climate change, committing to limiting temperature rises to an absolute maximum of 2° above pre-industrial levels by 2050 and to pursuing efforts to limit those rises to 1.5°, which would avoid the very worst effects of climate change. COP26, under our presidency, represents the first raising of ambition envisaged by the so-called ratchet mechanism of the Paris agreement, whereby each nation must submit updated emissions reduction plans covering the period to 2030. The decisions we take this year are therefore absolutely crucial to keeping that 1.5° cap within reach, and I hope today's debate will focus on what those decisions need to be. We do not need a big, new global deal—the Paris agreement remains the right foundation—but at home and abroad it is time to turn promises into action, and COP26 is our forum to make that possible.

I know that our country will lead by example. We can be rightly proud of what we have achieved so far. Our emissions have nearly halved since 1990, while the economy is 75% larger. We were the first major economy to legislate for net zero emissions by 2050. We have world-leading plans to cut emissions by 68% by 2030 and 78% by 2035. We have announced the almost total removal of coal for power generation and boast a raft of important policies in the Government's 10-point plan for green growth.

However, we cannot rest on our laurels. What we have done has allowed us to keep pace with the seriousness of events. We will have to continue to stretch ourselves if we are to get ahead of the problem and deliver net zero by mid-century. On decarbonisation, for example, the trickier half of the battle is still to come. With home heating and insulation, heavy industry, agriculture, aviation and shipping, the clean solutions we need cannot simply be left to work themselves out. There is a clear case for the Government to take a lead, to mandate priorities and enable solutions, as has happened so successfully with the contracts for difference mechanism, which has delivered a market-led solution whereby offshore wind is now cheaper than new gas-fired electricity generation. That is a really good example of how Government and the market can work together to deliver the most effective solutions at the least cost to the consumer.

In that same spirit, we need leadership from the Government now to support more research into new technologies such as green steel and to back technologies such as heat pumps, helping to reduce costs and enhance performance, as well as protecting those who cannot afford them.

This whole process will undoubtedly generate costs. It will also create economic opportunities. The UK has been adding low-carbon jobs at nearly three times the rate of the whole economy in recent years, and these are sustainable jobs in sectors with huge growth potential and are disproportionately in parts of the country with high historical unemployment rates.

[Mr Simon Clarke]

My home region of Teesside is a really good example of that. The recent announcement by GE Renewable Energy that it is creating 2,250 jobs in our new freeport zone, manufacturing offshore wind turbine blades, is just the tip of the iceberg. Last week, 8 Rivers Capital and Sembcorp Energy UK announced the Whitetail Clean Energy project at Wilton, a 300 MW net zero power station, which will create 2,000 jobs during the construction phase alone. That is on top of the immense potential of technologies such as hydrogen and carbon capture, utilisation and storage to create good jobs for the long term.

Moving to a nationwide focus, a proper home insulation scheme, a major heat pump roll-out and significant research and development in the hardest to reach sectors all have immense economic potential. We need to make bold policy decisions in these areas now, and we will reap the rewards for the environment, our quality of life, the economy and the wider world as we export good policy and technologies overseas. Set against that, we always need to remember that the cost of our taking action would be dwarfed by the cost of doing nothing.

I want to look more broadly at our wider strategy for carbon and how we will engage with our partners to encourage the most effective possible global response. The COP26 President-designate deserves huge credit for the clear increase in ambition shown by the number of major emitters, including countries and private companies, that have followed our lead and adopted net zero targets. It has been especially heartening to see countries such as the United States and Japan joining the many who have done so. We need to maintain intense diplomatic activity to encourage others to follow their lead and to show that it is possible to decarbonise without jeopardising economic growth. The targets and commitments really matter.

Hon. Members will also recognise that long-term ambition, while welcome, is meaningless without the action required in the intervening period in order to get there. The world is still falling short in that area. The UK, the United States and the EU can all boast strong 2030 nationally determined contributions, but too many other large polluters have insufficient near-term targets and, frankly, in some cases, no real plan as to how to achieve their goals.

To give some idea of how seriously off track we are, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has said that we would need to almost halve net greenhouse gas emissions from 2010 levels by 2030. However, before the pandemic struck, global emissions had continued to rise every year since 2010. The Paris agreement does not contain mechanisms to enforce action, so we rely on diplomatic carrots and sticks to persuade and cajole those nations hoping for a free ride to do their duty now and make significant emission cuts. Without a significant increase in the level of ambition and, especially, action during this decade, across the whole world longer-term net zero targets will fall at the first hurdle, and we will miss the opportunity to keep that 1.5° goal within our grasp well before we get to 2050. The urgency of the situation is clearly real. Every tonne of coal we burn, every hectare of forest we fell, and every house we fail to insulate in 2021 is part of the problem.

For many countries, especially those in the Caribbean, the Pacific and large parts of Africa, which make little or no significant contribution to the world's greenhouse gas emissions but which bear the brunt of the impacts, action is going to be hard, and in some cases probably impossible, without our help. At the 2009 Copenhagen conference of the parties, developed nations agreed to provide \$100 billion a year by 2020 in climate finance to support developing countries with adaptation and mitigation. Again, that pledge has not been met—estimates vary but they all show a significant ongoing shortfall. COP26 should be the moment that promise is honoured, and that should be a key negotiating target of the United Kingdom delegation. If we use climate finance wisely, we can help developing countries enjoy more jobs, better infrastructure and more trading opportunities. We should be clear that the UK is showing real leadership here, driving agreement at the G7 to end funding for overseas fossil fuel projects and doubling our climate finance to £11.6 billion over the next five years. However, we must use our COP presidency to ensure that our friends and allies follow our lead, because failure to do so would be a huge obstacle to progress.

COP26 will be a huge conference and it has a lot to live up to. There is more I could add, but looking at the call list for this afternoon, and it is great to see so many Members here, I am conscious that I should leave time for others to contribute. My main point in closing is to re-emphasise that we must rise to the level of events this autumn. It will be the last chance, frankly, that this sort of conference lands on our watch in the timeframe we have to deliver meaningful action.

The UK has a great story to share about our own progress, and we can set out a compelling template for the next stage of progress for other countries to follow, in a way few others could match. In a debate that sometimes becomes obsessed with targets, language and process, we need to show true British leadership at COP26 because it is the time for action and it is our chance to make sure that that clarion call is heard around the world.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): We have a full house for this debate. If everyone sticks to four minutes, we will get everyone in. If not, someone will miss out or we will have to impose a reduced time limit.

1.41 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green) [V]: It is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you in the Chair, Mr McCabe, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) on securing it. It could scarcely be more timely, as the extreme weather events around the world demonstrate how climate breakdown is accelerating.

With tomorrow marking 100 days to go until COP26, it is more urgent than ever to ensure it delivers. As hosts, the UK Government need to show bold and ambitious leadership, but last month the Climate Change Committee pointed yet again to the yawning delivery gap between the Government's net zero ambitions and the absence of policies to achieve them. We urgently need clear direction from Government detailing how they plan to decarbonise each and every sector, raising global ambition and giving other countries a clear reason for why they too should go further and faster in their national commitments to limit global heating. Failure to act is not just dithering—it is dangerous and often deadly.

Turning to some of the goals set out by the COP26 unit, the first is to:

“Secure global net zero by mid-century and keep 1.5 degrees within reach”.

We need to face the fact that even if all the current nationally determined contribution pledges were fulfilled, that would still lock the world into well over 2° of global heating. The inconvenient truth is that a target of net zero by 2050 simply does not equate to keeping 1.5° within reach. Yet 1.5° is an absolute lifeline for those in climate-vulnerable countries, and exceeding that threshold would have devastating consequences. That is why I recently reintroduced the climate and ecological emergency Bill to Parliament, which would put 1.5° in statute. I welcome the cross-party support of over 100 MPs who are backing the Bill, and urge the Government to get behind it, too.

The unit's second goal, to

“Adapt to protect communities and natural habitats”,

is crucial. Ministers need to deliver on what the Climate Change Committee recently described as an “underfunded and ignored” area of policy. If adaptation is often ignored, loss and damage is even more overlooked. Countries are already experiencing climate impacts that they simply cannot adapt to. The damage caused by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in Dominica amounted to 226% of that country's GDP, and 100% of its crops were destroyed. That is just one example of what loss and damage means. That is why we urgently need the Santiago Network for Loss and Damage to be fully operationalised, with new sources of finance to pay for it.

With its vast ability to store carbon and cushion us from shocks like flooding, nature can be our biggest ally in the fight against climate breakdown. Yet biodiversity is declining faster than at any time in history. The leaders' pledge to protect 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030 is a step forward, but that protection must be delivered urgently in order to reverse nature's terrifying decline. The UK is one of the world's most nature depleted countries, and when looking at our seas, the case is even more stark. England has 40 offshore so-called marine protected areas, but in reality, there is little protection to speak of. In order to restore nature and protect our blue carbon stores, the Government must use their new powers in the Fisheries Act 2020 to ban destructive fishing practices in these areas.

The third goal is mobilising finance, yet as it stands we are still \$20 billion short of delivering on the \$100 billion commitment from 10 years ago. That amount must be delivered in full before COP26, so I ask the Minister how the COP26 presidency plans to meet the \$20 billion shortfall. What steps are being taken to ensure that it is delivered as grants, rather than loans, and does she recognise that by slashing our aid budget, the Government have further undermined any leverage they might have had in persuading others to step up? Ministers like to boast that the UK has increased its climate finance to \$11 billion, but they fail to mention the fact that that money came from an overseas development aid budget that is being cut by £4 billion, a move that goes against the commitment for climate finance to be new and additional sources of money. Unless we deliver on all of these issues, I fear we will not have the success that is necessary in Glasgow at the end of this year.

1.46 pm

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe, and to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), who is an important member of the Environmental Audit Committee. I agree with her and with my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), who opened this debate, that it is hard to overstate the significance of the opportunity that hosting the COP26 conference gives the Prime Minister to show leadership in climate action on the world stage. He needs to seize this opportunity in front of every nation on Earth to set out clear signals of UK Government action, to meet the ambitious targets set to achieve net zero Britain.

Obviously, the pandemic has been the Government's priority for the past 16 months, but now the Prime Minister and the whole of Government need to give the same urgency to tackling climate change, which—as we are seeing from the extreme weather events happening this week around the world—is getting ever more pressing. We need delivery of more plans and more action to implement them, to show world leaders that it can be done. We can decarbonise our economies and still improve our prosperity with more and better jobs, but we are running out of time as a country to get these plans in place. Today, the innovation strategy was published, which provides a welcome focus on clean technology. Yesterday, in the Select Committee on Science and Technology, we learned that the hydrogen strategy will be published during the coming weeks, during recess. That is welcome, but many more strategies need to be published ahead of COP26 to show our intent. The heat and buildings strategy is foremost among them, alongside the Treasury's net zero review.

I will focus my remaining remarks on how Parliament can help deliver a successful conference of the parties. The Environmental Audit Committee has been at the forefront of co-ordinating parliamentary scrutiny ahead of this great conference. We brought together the Chairs of 10 relevant Select Committees to establish a Committee on COP26 to provide routine scrutiny each month, covering climate finance, climate diplomacy, cross-Government support for COP26 objectives, and net zero delivery. We intend to follow this up after COP26 as part of our overall monitoring of delivery on the net zero agenda across Government Departments, and we will be chairing the first post-COP26 session in December to review the outcome of that conference and examine its implications for UK climate policy: how will the UK deliver on any multilateral commitments made?

Achieving our commitments is going to require a huge cross-Government effort that cuts across departmental boundaries—an area of interest for our Committee. We regularly scrutinise across Departments, and the Government need to develop delivery mechanisms across Departments, too. I was pleased to see the presidency programme for COP26 published yesterday, inviting MPs and peers to register interest in attending the blue zone. It is encouraging to see young people and community engagement being offered a focus, and many groups around the country are keen to know how they may participate; frankly, our Committee is keen to know that, too. Along with other Select Committees, we put forward proposals—some 14 Select Committee Chairs put forward proposals, I think—for an engagement programme around COP26 in Glasgow or London. As

[Philip Dunne]

yet, we have not heard any formal response on whether they will go ahead. The purpose is to engage with parliamentarians across the globe at this conference. There will be many people attending virtually and physically, and we need to harness their enthusiasm.

I hope the Minister sheds some light on whether there will soon be a formal response to that Committee request. How have the machinery of government changes introduced to support the president designate in bringing COP26 issues to the top of every departmental agenda across Government worked in practice? Will they endure to help the Government to deliver commitments that they make in Glasgow in November?

1.50 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Before I proceed, let me put on the record the apologies of the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), who cannot be here. He was a co-sponsor of the debate, but as Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, he has to be in the main Chamber for a Select Committee statement.

It is 100 days until COP26 begins in Glasgow, and it is more important than ever—it is vital—that the Government get their own house in order. This is the biggest opportunity for real climate action since the great moment of hope that was the 2015 Paris agreement. It is deeply unfortunate that in recent months the Government have consistently chosen lip service over climate action. They have scrapped the green homes grant, which could have significantly reduced emissions from our homes. The planning Bill denies councils the ability to block new developments for environmental reasons. Most significantly, the Government have failed to set any direction on how to heat our homes in the future and how to expand the electricity grid for the doubling or trebling of our electricity need, let alone on tackling emissions from heavy industry, shipping or aviation.

Those changes and many more serve only to undermine our climate credibility on the international stage. The climate crisis is already damaging health through extreme weather, polluted air, food and water shortages, forced migration and the aggravation of disease. Just this week, the Met Office issued its first extreme heat warning. The British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing, *The BMJ* and *The Lancet* all agree that climate change is the biggest health threat of the 21st century.

We hold the COP26 presidency. It is our responsibility to push for serious ambition from countries worldwide—not only to influence them to legislate for net zero, but to achieve it as soon as possible. We have had a string of incredibly disappointing COPs in the years since the Paris agreement. Big decisions have been kicked further and further down the road.

If we want the negotiations to solve our climate crisis, and if we want this forum to be trusted by stakeholders and Governments around the world, the Paris rulebook must be finalised by the end of this COP. The responsibility for that lies with the Government as host. We must not only break the deadlock on article 6 and transparency; the UK must use this opportunity to make progress on the issue of loss and damage, as we have already heard.

We have seen nations ravaged by the covid pandemic while also facing climate impacts that are causing devastation. Those vulnerable communities deserve new and additional finance to compensate for the irretrievable non-economic loss caused, as well as the more quantifiable damage caused by natural disasters. I welcome the COP president's commitment to operationalise the Santiago Network for Loss and Damage by COP26. It is so important that we ensure that that network is more than just a website; it must be a living, breathing network of organisations and countries delivering technical assistance on loss and damage to those who need it.

COP26 must be a COP of global solidarity. It is time for the Government to put their money where their mouth is. The world is watching to see whether the UK will step up to the plate.

1.54 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con)[V]: One hundred days to save the next 100 years—that is how John Kerry, the US climate envoy, described this moment in our planet's existence. It may sound dramatic, but the scientific consensus is that he is right. The United Kingdom bears a heavy responsibility to get the world to commit to doing the right thing, for the mainly poorer people who are dying today because of climate change in the global south, and for all future generations, as our own climate will definitely be affected if global warming goes above 1.5°C. The recent extreme heat in the western United States and in Canada, and the floods in Germany and in Belgium, have demonstrated that amply.

While not having one shred of complacency, we can take some encouragement from the fact that although only 30% of the global economy was committed to net zero by 2050 when the UK assumed the COP presidency, that figure has already risen to 73%. To achieve even more, we need to get three areas to work together in perfect harmony: technology, policy and markets. We need to get all three in the right place, because without any one of them, we will not achieve success. In my constituency, I am delighted that the A5 electric bus and car charging station has been given planning permission. It will provide a replicable model of how renewable energy can be used to charge buses, taxis and cars. I am also pleased that many more electric vehicle charging points will be installed across central Bedfordshire.

I will focus the rest of my remarks on agriculture. Two facts may surprise hon. Members. First, if food waste was a country, it would be the third highest greenhouse gas-emitting nation on earth. Secondly, in Africa, greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture are higher than fossil fuel emissions, which are themselves much higher than they should be. At COP21 in Paris in 2015, the United Kingdom and many other nations—although not, unfortunately, the United States—committed to the “4 per 1000” initiative. Soil can hold more carbon than all organisms and plants on the planet combined. Only nature can increase the carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus and water in soil while producing copious nutrient-rich food.

An annual growth rate of 0.4% in soil carbon stocks in the first 30 cm to 40 cm of soil would significantly reduce the carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere due to human activity. If we managed to achieve that,

we would not only stabilise the climate, but ensure food security to provide food in sufficient quantity for a rapidly growing global population. To achieve it, we need to reduce deforestation and encourage agroecological practices that increase the amount of organic matter in soils to meet the “4 per 1000” target.

Agroecology is sometimes referred to as regenerative agriculture. Recently, I was pleased to attend the Groundswell regenerative agriculture farming conference with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Thousands of UK farmers have started to farm in a nature-friendly way and are making more money as a result.

In the past 40 years, a third of global crop land has been abandoned due to soil degradation. That disrupts the small water cycle, which desertifies land and causes soil desertification on a massive scale. As Walter Lowdermilk observed, those civilisations that have not practised soil conservation have quite literally ended in dust, so my plea to the Minister is to ensure that we build on the achievement of COP21 and ensure that agriculture is front and centre of everything we do to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

1.59 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr McCabe. I thank the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) for securing the debate, and for highlighting global green finance in particular.

I extend my thoughts to all those impacted by the flooding in China and in central Europe these past weeks. The loss of life is devastating, and the emergency response heroes have my deepest respect. The flooding should be a wake-up call for us all about the unpredictable but inevitable impacts of rising temperatures. We urgently need serious action. Two priority areas for COP26 this autumn are to protect and restore ecosystems and to build resilient infrastructure to mitigate effects of the global heating we have already seen. It is right that those are priority areas, but because we cannot tackle either the problems with nature or the climate emergency without tackling the other as well, it is important that they are thought about equally.

I am concerned about what the Government will bring to the climate negotiations on both those issues, because although Ministers like to talk up their record on carbon and on nature restoration, the reality is far from the rhetoric. For example, we hear a lot from the Government about how they are taking unprecedented measures to restore nature, but we are in an unprecedented crisis and nature is in freefall—41% of UK species are declining, and one in 10 is threatened with extinction.

Faced with that shocking decline, it would be odd if there were any precedent for the action that the Government are taking, which is simply not enough. It is not just me who thinks that. The Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne), who spoke earlier, has commented on the Government's plans for species abundance and nature restoration, saying they are “toothless”. The Committee's recent report said:

“There is no strategy indicating how new biodiversity policies will work together. Implementation of these policies could be piecemeal, conflicting, and of smaller scale as a result.”

Similarly, the recent Climate Change Committee progress report made this call on the Government:

“Publish an overarching strategy that clearly outlines the relationships and interactions between the multiple action plans in development for the natural environment, including those for peat, trees, nature and plant biosecurity. This must clearly outline how the different strategies will combine to support the Government's climate change goals on both Net Zero and adaptation, along with the wider environment and other goals.”

On one of the two key themes of COP26, the CCC and the EAC both say that the Government have no clear strategy. Without a joined-up plan for the UK, how do the Government hope to negotiate one for the entire United Nations?

Ministers are right to say that the UK's global leadership starts with our ambition and delivery at home. However, I am worried that our representatives at the conference simply do not have the credibility to talk about the issues with any authority. One of the key pieces of natural infrastructure to mitigate the effects of the climate emergency is our peatlands. The CCC is clear that we need a plan to restore all blanket bogs. Instead, we see Ministers putting forward legislation that protects only 40% of our deep peat. Another piece of important natural infrastructure is our trees and woodlands. Again, the CCC is clear that we need 17% woodland cover by 2050 to meet net zero. Instead, Ministers propose only 12% coverage.

While a third of the UK's seas are apparently protected, only 1% are well managed and only 5% of protected areas are safe from bottom trawling. The CCC says that there has been no significant improvement in the management of marine habitats since 2019.

Those are just some examples on adaptation. The Government have made progress on only five of 34 sectors mentioned in the CCC's progress report. The stream of Government action plans, grants and press releases represents a litany of piecemeal half-measures. Now the Government say they will wait until after COP26 to publish their species abundance targets, but Ministers should take a plan to the conference, lead the debate by example and push for ambitious targets, not wait for an international consensus to emerge before taking any action.

Today, I challenge the Minister. What plans is she taking to COP26 for nature recovery? What ambitious targets will she press for at the negotiating table? How will she establish Britain as the leading light in the debate?

I know that my constituents care deeply about this issue. Every month, I meet with them to discuss different aspects of the negotiations and what they want to see coming out of COP26. They have a clear plan. If the Minister does not, I urge her to meet with us before the conference. If the Government are out of ideas, my constituents have plenty.

2.3 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe.

This is an incredibly important debate ahead of a crucial conference—COP26. Making a success of the conference and delivering for everyone across the globe is more important than ever. Covid-19 has shown how fragile humanity is and that we face some challenges together, as the human race. Whether the challenge is

[Sally-Ann Hart]

covid-19 or climate change, we need to tackle it together, internationally. Given that, the priorities for COP26 must aim to build on the work done so far, but also take a leap forward, so that we can take more action to ensure that we secure the global net zero target by 2050 and keep the 1.5°C pledge within reach.

As host and president of this year's United Nations COP26 conference, the UK is in a unique position to bring nations together, set ambitious targets and commit to accelerating plans to transition to a cleaner, greener and more resilient global economy. As the parliamentary champion of nature-based solutions for tackling climate change, I will focus my remarks on that area.

COP26 is an opportunity for the UK to utilise our expertise and political will to become a world leader in deploying nature-based solutions to tackle climate change, such as tree planting, nurturing kelp forests, stopping the burning of peat bogs, revitalising our hedgerows and much more. We can all now become hedgerow heroes as part of the Campaign to Protect Rural England campaign to protect and expand hedgerows across the UK.

I am delighted that the Hastings town deal includes a partnership between Plumpton College and the Education Futures Trust, introducing seven new land-based skills programmes to our local area. Globally, nature-based solutions have huge scope to mitigate climate change, with the potential to provide over 30% of the global climate mitigation effort required to limit temperature rise to 1.5°. The Prime Minister has already suggested that as one of his priorities for COP26, and he has pledged to increase investment in that area. Moreover, the G7 recently committed to a 30x30 target by aiming to conserve or protect at least 30% of land and oceans by 2030.

As a Member of Parliament who represents a coastal constituency, I take particular interest in our oceans and marine environments. As the Marine Conservation Society has been saying for some time, our seabeds are significant carbon stores, accounting for an estimated 205 million tonnes of carbon—some 50 million tonnes more than there is within our standing forests. It is not only our seabeds that do this, but our vegetated coastal habitats. That is why it is so important that we invest in the growth of our seagrass meadows, kelp forests and salt marshes. By taking a global lead in the use of nature-based solutions, the UK can demonstrate that tackling climate change does not have to be a huge financial burden on household income. Instead, we can enhance and nurture our natural environment for the enjoyment of all and future generations, while also meeting our net zero targets.

COP26 offers the UK a unique opportunity to lead in nature-based solutions and to achieve global agreement on the need to protect our natural environment and do more to preserve it for future generations. I know that, as president of COP26, the Government will take the opportunity to pursue that agenda.

2.8 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab) [V]: It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, McCabe, and I thank the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) for securing this important debate.

The timing of the debate could not be more appropriate. In the last few weeks alone, Germany and China have been devastated by catastrophic flooding, while more than 200 people have lost their lives through unprecedented heatwaves in the Pacific north-west and in south Asia. Such extreme weather events are a stark illustration of the scale of the challenge before us, and an urgent reminder of the need to take bolder action to combat climate breakdown. In a few months, the COP26 conference will present the world with its best, and perhaps last, chance to avoid the worst fallout of climate breakdown. With the United Nations' "Adaptation Gap Report 2020" warning that the world is on course to be 3° warmer by the end of the century, it is clear that we need to go much further and much faster if we are to live up to the promise of the Paris climate agreement.

This month, we learned that large stretches of the Amazon—the lungs of the planet—are so utterly degraded that they are emitting more CO₂ than they absorb. As the shadow International Trade Secretary has said, that is one of the worst manmade tragedies in human history, and our Prime Minister is one of the guilty men. His refusal to support EU action against the destruction of the Amazon in 2019 was symptomatic of the wider failure to tackle ecological breakdown. In November, we have a chance to put that right. That is why I call on the Government to push for a global strategy that links together the climate and ecological crises, and that will ensure that, by 2030, the abundance and the population of species are well on the road to recovery.

We will achieve nothing at all if the poorest people in the world are asked to shoulder the cost of decarbonisation. That is why the needs of people living in the global south need to be at the very heart of the discussions in Glasgow. Developing nations have contributed least to the catastrophe that we now face, but all too often suffer the most from climate breakdown.

Leaders across Europe and America often talk about a "just transition"—in November, they have to prove that they mean it. That means not just delivering on the commitment of \$100 billion a year in climate finance, but developing a far broader and more radical stimulus package that helps the world's poorest countries decarbonise their economies, while also improving standards of living and life outcomes for their citizens.

I also believe that the world's wealthiest countries, the UK among them, must now also begin to look at how they can accelerate their decarbonisation proposals to give nations across the global south more time to reach net zero.

2.10 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr McCabe.

We have come a long way since the Paris agreement, which was secured at a time before it was commonplace to have national targets for emissions. Six years later, many nations have set unilateral net zero targets and are beginning to publish plans to meet them. I am pleased that the UK has now significantly scaled up our nationally determined contribution to 78% by 2035, although, as the Minister will know, I have many criticisms about the progress we have made to date.

The problem is that not all countries are prepared to pull their weight. Many have yet to set net zero targets, have set targets after 2050 or have failed to present more

ambitious NDCs ahead of COP26. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on small island developing states, or SIDS, I want to focus today on the impact on them. They are in the frontline when it comes to the consequences of climate change, whether that is rising sea levels, extreme weather events, ocean acidification or collapsing biodiversity. These are all existential threats to these states. If we act to save them now, we will all benefit from the global scale of the action that is implemented.

Nation-based solutions have a real role to play in both mitigation and adaptation, whether that is reversing the collapse of our natural carbon sinks or restoring the coral reefs, planting mangroves and so on. There is much more that could be done. As one of the Marine Conservation Society's blue carbon champions in Parliament, I know that measures to protect the marine environment are particularly important for these countries. They are vital, given their dependence on the blue economy. I hope that the Government will seek to prioritise agreements on protecting and restoring blue carbon stores at COP26, along with stopping the global decline in marine biodiversity and protecting our oceans.

While mitigation is, of course, crucial, I am pleased that a day at COP will be dedicated to the theme of loss and damage alongside adaptation. SIDS often do not have the funds to pay for the work that is needed—for example, the shift to renewable energy or the work that has to be done to rebuild after natural disasters. The pandemic's impact on tourism has made the financial situation much worse for many of them. The recent volcanic eruption in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines could cost up to 50% of GDP, which shows the inherent economic vulnerability of these nations.

I am pleased that there is a day dedicated to climate finance at the conference, which will be vital for less developed countries. In 2009, richer nations committed to mobilising \$100 billion in climate finance per year by 2020 for vulnerable nations, but that commitment has not yet been met, and much of what has been delivered has been via loans with standard repayment rates, which tiny little countries such as the SIDS would struggle to pay.

Developing nations saddled by debt are often trapped in a vicious cycle. Belize, for example, has defaulted on or restructured its debt five times in the past 14 years. The cut to the UK aid budget has already been mentioned, but many SIDS do not qualify for official development assistance because of the flawed metrics used, which do not take into account their vulnerabilities. We need a multidimensional vulnerability index, with looks particularly at climate vulnerability.

Finally, we need to make sure the voices of the small island states, including even the tiniest little islands, are heard in Glasgow. I hope the Minister will be able to tell us what arrangements are in place to make sure that is the case.

2.14 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: It is a pleasure to be here, Mr McCabe. The basic situation is that, globally, fossil fuel subsidies amount to 6.3% of global GDP. That has grown from 5.5% in 2010. We are already 1.2° above the 1850 baseline. The Paris threshold of 1.5° will be breached by 2025 and, in fact, has

already been breached across Europe, at 2° over, and in the Arctic, 3° over, because there is a differential impact. That means that 8,500 metric tonnes of ice are melting every second of this debate. A lot of that is due to the fact that China now has 28% of emissions, which is more than the EU and the US combined, with no plan to peak until 2030. It plans for an extra 300 coal-fired power stations, on top of the 1,037 it already has.

What we want in COP26, first, is a border carbon tax, which is being considered by the EU, so that we do not end up with dirty Chinese steel, for example, displacing UK steel, which produces half as much carbon. It is all very well saying that we produce less carbon than we did—here, it is 5.8 tonnes per person, but 7 tonnes per person in China—but that is because, basically, we have offshored our manufacturing and dirty energy production. On a consumption basis, it is 8 tonnes per person here.

With something like the Australian deal, BA has ended up buying Welsh farms to offset carbon that it uses to fly more people in planes and then we buy thousands and thousands of tonnes of Australian beef to shift across the world. That is plainly ridiculous. On agriculture, 12% of global carbon emissions are from ruminants. We cannot have a situation in which we eat more and more beef in our country or in developing countries.

On air quality—I chair the all-party group—the latest figures show that 8.7 million people die each year, or one in five, from air pollution. In eastern Asia, it is one in three—that includes China. We need to take leadership in COP by saying that we want the World Health Organisation air-quality standards of 10 micrograms per cubic metre for PM2.5 introduced by 2030. To do that, we will need to ban wood burning in urban environments, which contributes 38% of PM2.5. We should also stop burning wood in our power stations. Wood is a carbon store. We should use it in buildings instead of concrete. If concrete were a country, it would be the third biggest emitter, with 8% of global emissions. We want wood instead of concrete.

I turn briefly to incineration. The Government plan is to double incineration by 2030, even though we now know that ultra-fine particulates breach the filters and cause leukaemia. The Climate Change Committee has said that we need to halve our incineration by 2035. We therefore want a moratorium on incineration. We also want the same tax regime, or taxes on incineration, as there currently are on landfill, to stop the local authorities from building incinerators. Internationally, we cannot have the Asian Development Bank giving £73 million for the Maldives to have another incinerator there.

In a nutshell, our focus for COP26, in my view, should be a border carbon tax, World Health Organisation limits, and the UK taking leadership in such things and actually doing it itself.

2.18 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the collaborative effort of the hon. Members for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) in securing this important debate.

[Claudia Webbe]

In addition to covid-19, an even more devastating crisis is already here. In recent weeks, we have seen extreme rainfall and deadly flooding in Germany, Belgium and China; volcanic eruptions in St Vincent and the Grenadines; heatwaves and devastating fires from Siberia to Canada; and the Amazon rainforest releasing more carbon than it can absorb. The upcoming COP26 conference in Glasgow provides a crucial opportunity to address such an existential threat.

The most urgent priority for COP26 is to ensure that we stick to the 1.5° target set in the Paris agreement of 2015. The scientific community is clear that anything more than that is a death sentence for millions of people around the world. It is therefore vital that we align the UK's emissions reduction pathway to a fair-share analysis of the remaining global Paris-compliant carbon budget.

Research from the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research warns that the UK's current emissions pathway implies a carbon budget at least two times greater than its fair contribution to delivering its 1.5° commitment. Not only is the Government's commitment to reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 perilously unambitious; they are not even on track to meet it. A 2030 net zero target is essential to meet the scale and severity of the crisis. The Institute for Public Policy Research is clear: the UK needs to invest £33 billion per year if it is serious about meeting its own 2050 net zero target. Will the Minister do all he can to commit at least to that?

The UK Government will host COP26 in just 100 days. They must use their leadership role to push for an approach to the climate crisis that is integrated with the active restoration of nature, especially ahead of the COP15 biodiversity summit in October 2021.

Worldwide fossil fuel subsidies amount to \$5 trillion per year. It is estimated that eliminating those subsidies would cut global carbon emissions by at least 21% and air pollution deaths by over half. The UK Government claim that they do not have any fossil fuel subsidies. However, the fossil fuel subsidies tracker estimates that the UK Government's subsidies equate to £165 per person. The UK Government must come clean with the public and end their subsidies for dirty energy.

As we emerge from the pandemic, we must raise our ambition to forge a new social settlement: a green new deal to rebuild the country with a more just and sustainable economy. We must take every urgent and radical action, including the nationalisation—yes, the nationalisation—of fossil fuel companies, to save our future. Without much more ambitious Government intervention, the urgent action required to preserve a habitable planet will be too slow. That will cause unimaginable disruption and could cost millions of lives, most of them in global south countries that have contributed the least to the climate disaster.

It is vital that the protection of all workers and communities is guaranteed during the transition to renewable energies. The big polluters and corporate giants must bear the costs—not ordinary people. Most of all, the Government's catastrophic handling of the coronavirus crisis cannot be replicated when it comes to tackling climate change. Only an unprecedented collective restructuring of our society will guarantee the wellbeing of both people and planet.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): Finally, no Westminster Hall debate would be complete without Jim Shannon.

2.22 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): You are most kind, Mr McCabe. I do like Westminster Hall—it is no secret. I love to participate, so here I am, along with all the other right hon. and hon. Members who have come to make very valuable contributions. I thank them all.

Today's topic has been and is at the forefront of the political agenda. It certainly is in my constituency; the emails tell me that, as do those who contact me—and they have for some time now. I thank the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) for asking for the debate, along with others, so we can participate in it.

Environmental awareness and climate change are becoming very prominent factors in everyday life. Climate change must be taken seriously, and I believe that it is. The Government have set out their priorities for the COP26 conference in Glasgow, and I will address some of those today.

I welcome what the Government have done—credit where credit is due. Through many of their policies, the Government have committed themselves to achieving targets and goals. It is always good to set targets and goals; they allow for success rates to be measured, which is very important. I have also been contacted by environmental organisations that feel that there are missing priorities, which I will discuss in the few minutes that I have.

A major aspect that I hope will be extensively discussed at the conference is the goal of all parties to submit more ambitious national contributions targets for cuts in carbon emissions by 2030. It is important that we commit ourselves to do it and then achieve those goals.

Since 2018, UK carbon emissions have fallen by 3% and they are 44% lower than in 1990, which is a significant fall and shows commitment by Government and others to try to achieve those goals. We are certainly taking a step in the right direction, but we all need to put in more effort. There needs to be a national contribution from all parties partaking in the conference.

The Committee on Climate Change has recommended that the UK should aim to be net zero on all greenhouse gases by 2050, which is a crucial aspect of the Paris agreement that we have signed. I want the UK to persuade other countries to commit to the national determined contribution. We need to maintain the efforts we have been putting in to pioneer our own credibility. I know the Minister will always respond and that she is very interested in this subject, but can she tell us what has been done to persuade other countries to sign up and commit themselves to the NDC?

Our recent efforts as a nation have been extremely promising, particularly in regard to limiting our carbon emissions. Transport was the largest emitting sector in the UK, responsible for 27% of emissions. We can all take small steps on a daily basis to reduce that figure. In addition, there has been a major revision to better represent peatland emissions. I have raised that with the Minister at the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs back home in Northern Ireland and asked what further action can be taken to decrease emissions.

The Climate Change Council has stated that getting to net zero is

“technically feasible but highly challenging,”

meaning we could do it, but not without continued efforts. This work starts right here by Government, centrally at Westminster and in conjunction with the regional Administrations. As we know, the UK is committed to working internally and externally, to lead on the frontline and to inspire thought on climate change. The issue is about reminding people how important it is and then moving forward.

Back home, I am in frequent contact with the Castle Espie Wetland Centre. As the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) said, there are concerns and issues about blue carbon. Blue carbon assists in coastal habitat conservation, which needs to be taken into consideration by Government in legislation and in trying to achieve those targets. Through protecting, creating and restoring these habitats, we can invest in nature-based solutions that help us to adapt and mitigate climate change. Coastal and ocean blue carbon stores are a crucial part of the urgent and varied solutions required to address the climate crisis and meet our net-zero goals.

I am concerned about the correlation between how we deal with climate change and public health. The UK Health Alliance has stated:

“Despite the climate impacts already being felt, international targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions are currently not sufficient”.

To conclude, I welcome the priorities initiated by Government to take to COP26 and I look forward to the Minister’s response. This Minister is interested in this subject, and I am not saying that because she is here. I am convinced that her response will be one that everyone wishes to hear and that will encourage us. I urge the President of COP26 and the Government to take these points into consideration when discussing our strategy for climate change in this House and across the whole of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We are always better together, and we can get better together as well.

2.28 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr McCabe. I commend all the Members who secured this important debate from the Backbench Business Committee and all those who have spoken so far. Every single person has made important points about the ambitions that we should have for COP26 and for addressing the world’s climate crisis.

COP26 in November is a critical moment for the world to deliver its most ambitious and tangible climate actions. Scotland will play its part in tackling the twin crises of climate change and ecological decline. I want to acquaint Members with a few things that Scotland has been doing to demonstrate that. Our aim is to work closely with the UK Government and our many other partners to deliver a safe, secure and successful Glasgow COP and engage, in particular, with those who have been historically sidelined in climate discussions, to ensure those most affected by the climate crisis have their voices heard.

The year 2021 is “humanity’s defining moment” in the fight against climate change, as the UN Secretary General stated. COP26 is the world’s best chance to deliver a global deal that supports the goals of the Paris agreement and delivers lasting action towards a net zero future, in a way that is fair and just. We are delighted that the vital COP26 is taking place in Scotland. There is still so much more to be done and there is a very long way to go, but I am proud that our SNP Scottish Government were the first in the world to declare a climate emergency and one of the first to set binding net zero targets earlier than 2045. Scotland has led the way in decarbonisation, recently producing 97% of its electricity requirements renewably, and managing to reduce emissions by 31% between 2008 and 2018, faster than the rest of the UK and any G20 nation. We aim to be the world’s first net zero aviation region by 2040 and to decarbonise passenger rail by 2035.

We are also tackling a necessary and just transition to renewable energy. That is a really important issue. We saw what happened in Scotland in the ’70s and ’80s when a Government did not care about protecting individuals and communities from the impact of economic transformations. As our First Minister said recently:

“We must not make that mistake again. Failing to plan for the transition to net zero is not an option, which is why”

the SNP Government

“are working with trade unions, businesses and communities to develop just transition plans to ensure that our approach is a fair one.”

The First Minister has appointed a Just Transition Minister. The Scottish Government will implement the recommendations of the Just Transition Commission and intend to retain the commission and call on it for advice all the way through this Parliament.

The Scottish Government also created the world’s first climate justice fund—recently doubled to £24 million—which supports vulnerable communities in Malawi, Zambia and Rwanda to address the impact of climate change. Our Scottish Government have been active elsewhere on the world stage, leading the Edinburgh process on biodiversity and publishing the Edinburgh declaration, calling for increased action to tackle biodiversity loss. Scotland also serves as European co-chair of the Under2 Coalition—a group of more than 220 Governments, representing more than 1.3 billion people and 43% of the global economy.

It is vital, as I have mentioned, that COP26 engages with those who have historically been left out of climate discussions, to ensure that those most affected by climate change have their voices heard. Young people, indigenous communities and disadvantaged groups must have a say. Indigenous communities are often those most affected by the activities that contribute to climate change, such as deforestation, and are more likely to live in the areas hardest hit. Young people are those who will have to live longest with the consequences of climate change, and those from disadvantaged communities are less able to afford mitigation of its consequences. The Scottish Government have sought to include the voices of young people at COP through their youth climate programme, which will manage a series of events putting the voices of young people from around Scotland at the heart of the climate conversation, and will recruit local champions from every local authority to connect their communities in the fight against climate change.

[Deidre Brock]

We need to remember that it is not only states that have a stake in our future and it should not be only their voices that are heard. Although the green zone is a welcome aspect to COP26, it cannot be an excuse to separate civil society from any serious discussion taking place. Climate justice is a simple and powerful message. Poor and vulnerable communities are the first to be affected by climate change and will suffer the worst, yet have done little or nothing to cause the problem. Establishing a UK climate justice fund ahead of COP26 would be a powerful signal that justice and equality issues will be a priority at COP and that previously marginalised voices will be heard. It is also important, of course, that technology is deployed in a way that helps to facilitate the involvement of those typically unable to participate in conferences such as COP. I hope that the Minister might address both those points in her closing remarks.

The Scottish Government have been working closely with the UK Government, and partners including Glasgow City Council and Police Scotland, with the aim of delivering a safe, secure and successful COP26 in November. Our Government intend to play a full and active role at the summit, and I am particularly excited about the opportunities that there will be to showcase Scotland's world-leading approach to tackling the climate emergency and delivering that just transition to a net zero future.

I of course also have questions regarding the priorities specifically of the UK Government in the run-up to COP, which many others are also looking for clarity on. After all, how can this Government persuade other countries to play their part if they are failing domestically to keep to their own targets? How will the Government keep to their 1.5°C commitment when research says that their own current emissions pathway suggests a factor some two times greater? What urgent actions will the Government take to keep them on track? Is all of Whitehall's thinking on this joined up? For example, we have seen a challenge from the UK board of international trade to the news that the Chancellor is reportedly musing over a carbon border adjustment tax, although I see that the International Trade Secretary has now come out saying that she is actually up for considering it. That is an odd one, because she is the president of the UK board of international trade. It looks a little like a string leading from the Treasury has been yanked hard.

I would be interested to hear what updates the Minister can give us on the progress on the Green Jobs Taskforce, which is a very important initiative. When will we see a replacement for the green homes grant scheme, with an equivalent level of funding? I have heard it described as the only big-ticket item in the Government's policy store cupboard that could make a real difference to carbon emissions relatively quickly. Why has its replacement not been announced?

When will the Government back a fairer charging system for renewables developers in Scotland looking to plug into the national grid? One cannot help but feel that if the Government were really serious about their commitment to net zero, they would accept that that extra levy on Scottish projects, despite Scotland being one of the best sources of renewable energy on these islands, is just plain daft, and that they would talk to Ofgem about it and do something about it.

So many questions and so little time. I look to COP with some hope but not a little trepidation, knowing how important its outcomes will be to our planet and future generations. I ask the Minister to take back some of the messages that she has heard expressed here today and persuade her Government to make the sort of rapid and serious changes to their policy approaches that this climate crisis deserves.

2.36 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr McCabe. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). This has been an excellent debate, with a great many heartfelt and incisive contributions from Members from both sides of the House. I congratulate, as others have done, the hon. Members for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), and for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) for sponsoring it.

We really do need more debates of this kind over the next 100 days. COP26 is, as others have said, a critical moment in the fight against runaway global heating, the impact of which we have seen over recent months in the devastating extreme weather events across the globe. The House has a real duty to engage with the complexities of this summit far more than it has done to date.

The Minister will know that over the past 15 months, the Opposition have not held back from criticising the Government for their lack of clarity on what they believe should be achieved over the course of those 12 days in Glasgow. Until a few months ago, Ministers had merely identified five key themes for the conference. They were then followed by four aims, one of which was the goal of

"working together to make the negotiations in Glasgow a success". That is all entirely laudable but also betrays a notable lack of strategic intent.

I will be more generous in saying that, although it needs to be built on further, there has been a noticeable sharpening of focus over recent months, particularly when it comes to being explicit about the objective that Labour believes must be the overriding priority for the summit, and that is the need to put the world decisively on course to deliver the upper ambition—it is only the upper ambition—of the Paris agreement, namely limiting global heating to 1.5° over pre-industrial levels. The problem is, as I am sure the Minister will acknowledge, that there is clearly not yet a global consensus on 1.5° being a core objective of the summit, as opposed to merely an aspiration. Indeed, Bloomberg reported just this morning that for the second time this month, G20 climate Ministers are struggling to reach agreement on that 1.5° target. We believe that, over the coming weeks, keeping 1.5° within reach must be hardened into a headline target for the summit. It is incumbent on us, as the host of COP26, to do everything possible to ensure it is.

Let me pick up some of the themes of the debate. I want to touch on four areas where greater progress is absolutely essential if we are to realise that aim, with an explicit focus not on the domestic but on the international, given that this is an international summit. First, the Government need to do much more with the presidency to initiate a genuine global debate on how we deliver at

the scale and pace that the science requires. In particular, we need much more openness and transparency about the commitments required from each of the parties by the time they arrive in Glasgow to ensure that a limit of 1.5° remains a possibility. Put simply, if current country climate plans have the world emitting, as they do, about 54 gigatonnes of greenhouse gas emissions in 2030, and 1.5° requires that they fall to about 24 gigatonnes by that date, what collective commitments do we need in November at COP26 to put the world on course to meet that 30 gigatonne ambition gap by the end of the next nine years? That is the question, but there is no real debate around it at present and, in its absence, no collective understanding of what is necessary to keep 1.5° within reach.

Secondly—this is a point that a number of hon. Members raised, particularly the hon. Members for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—when it comes to mitigation ambition, we are currently way off track as a world. With just 100 days to go, the Government need to be straining every sinew possible to persuade, cajole and pressure those who have not yet done so to bring forward more ambitious nationally determined contributions. Countries such as Brazil that are making a mockery of the ratchet process by submitting new targets that are less ambitious than their previous ones need to be called out; those such as India and Saudi Arabia that are resisting the very proposition that the Paris agreement requires them to revisit their current plans at all need to be persuaded to think again, and quickly; and key allies such as Australia that are stubbornly refusing to improve on their inadequate 2030 targets need to start facing some public opprobrium for doing so. Perhaps the Minister could tell me whether she agrees with those points.

Thirdly, as others have said, we have to make good on the promise of building back greener, not only in terms of domestic credibility and what that means in terms of our consistency and our leadership of the conference. The Chancellor has now passed up three fiscal opportunities, by my count—the 2020 summer statement, the 2020 comprehensive spending review, and the 2021 Budget—to lock in a genuine green economic recovery from the coronavirus crisis, with only £9.3 billion of funding focused on decarbonisation, £1 billion of which has been cut in the new green homes grant. That is dwarfed by levels of funding in other countries around the world, but the Chancellor's failure is not unique: the International Energy Agency's sustainable energy tracker estimates that only 2% of fiscal support across the globe is being directed towards clean energy investment. That is lower than the level of green spending we saw in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. The world has simply got to do better if we are going to lock in that green recovery.

Fourthly and finally—this point was made powerfully by several hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) and for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy)—we must ensure that the voice of the global south is heard. We must ensure that climate justice is prioritised, and we must do more on a practical level to urgently forge a coalition between high-ambition developed countries and highly vulnerable developing countries, not least because that is the only way in which we will apply sufficient pressure on major emitters such as China. The occasional ministerial meeting

cannot hide the fact that these issues have not been prioritised diplomatically over the past 15 months, and that ground needs to be made up urgently. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is going to need to be far more agile and focused on using all of the levers available to it to knit together that coalition.

The Minister may not say so, but she knows as well as I do the serious damage that the decision to cut the overseas aid budget has caused to our standing with those on the frontline of the climate crisis. She will also know how critical trust will be if we are to secure a successful outcome in Glasgow. That makes it all the more important, as many others have said, that we honour the 2009 promise of \$100 billion in climate finance annually to support developing nations. I would like to hear the Minister's assessment of how that target will be reached in the coming weeks, and what more, if anything, the UK needs to contribute to ensure it is reached. Specifically—this is the one question I will ask the Minister, so I would really like an answer today, or subsequently in writing from a colleague if appropriate—can she confirm that a plan for meeting that \$100 billion commitment will be brought forward by the UN General Assembly in September at the very latest, as 100 developing countries, including key Commonwealth allies, called for last week? Can she also assure the House that the UK will use its influence at the World Bank to ensure that it has a climate finance plan in place by the International Monetary Fund meeting scheduled for October?

In addition to that \$100 billion, as others have said, we also need to make tangible progress over the next few months on the share of climate finance flowing towards adaptation; on financing for loss and damage; on arrangements for post-2025 climate finance; and on the wider issues, which are really important in their own right, of vaccines and the debt burden that developing countries are facing as a result of the pandemic. There are a range of other issues on which greater progress is required, whether that is the rules for article 6 and transparency that the hon. Member for Bath mentioned; financial flows for the phasing out of coal; or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) brought home powerfully in her contribution, nature and biodiversity. However, time prevents me from exploring any of them in this debate.

What is important for the purposes of today, as we approach the 100-day marker, is that the House realises that the window for securing the outcomes necessary to make COP26 a success is closing rapidly, and that the outcome of the conference hangs in the balance as a result. There is a pressing need to accelerate progress markedly in a range of areas where the UK, as COP president, can make a real difference, but for that to happen, this critical summit has to be made a whole-of-Government priority, with the sustained engagement and focus from the Prime Minister, Chancellor and Foreign Secretary that that implies. It is an open secret that we are not seeing that engagement or focus at the moment. Until we do, we run the very real risk of failure in Glasgow in November.

2.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is an absolute pleasure to see you in the Chair for this very important debate, Mr McCabe. I thank my hon. Friend the Member

[Rebecca Pow]

for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), and the hon. Members for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), for securing the debate. The fact that there have been so many speakers demonstrates the strength of feeling about this issue and the hope that we can use COP26, of which we are so proud to be co-president, to address the climate crisis. As has been pointed out by so many colleagues, we are just 100 days from COP26, where the global community will come together and, with one voice, demonstrate that we are living up to the expectations of the Paris agreement.

In response to the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), yes, focus has been sharpened, and I am pleased that he has noted that. On the point raised by the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), it will be a very inclusive COP26. We are championing inclusivity at COP26.

We have seen much more ambition this year, as countries have come forward with emissions reduction targets for 2030, including the US, Japan and Canada. We are now in a position whereby all the G7 countries, which are responsible for almost half of global GDP, have now committed to deeper cuts to their emissions over the next decade. Collectively, those commitments will bring us closer to the goal of keeping to an increase of 1.5°, which is so critical. However, it is obvious to us all that extreme weather events are made much more likely by climate change. We have had wildfires in North America and floods in China just this week, and we have a trail of devastation in so many places, reminding us how critical this issue is. It demonstrates that climate change is not a distant threat and that we need to take action right now in order to turn the tide on the climate crisis. That was stressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland in his opening speech, in which he spoke of the importance of using diplomatic pressure and targets. That is exactly what we will be doing through COP26.

I want to take this opportunity to update the House on progress across the four COP26 goals—mitigation, adaptation, finance and collaboration—and to highlight the role of parliamentarians. It is great to have hon. Members taking part in today's debate, to ensure that COP26 is an inclusive event and that we are all playing our role. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said we are better together, and I could not agree more.

On mitigation, we are making good progress, with 71 nationally determined contributions submitted. The number is going up by the day and has just increased from 68 in the last 24 hours. They cover more than 90 priorities, including the EU and its 27 member states, and over 70% of global GDP is covered by a net zero target, including all G7 nations, which now have net zero targets for 2050. That has increased from around 30% since the UK assumed the presidency, so we are making progress. Of course, that is not to say that there is not a great deal more to do.

On adaptation, we are championing a number of initiatives, including the Adaptation Action Coalition, which aims to share knowledge and good practices. We have secured \$175 million for the Risk-informed Early Action Partnership, which aims to improve early warnings.

Across Government, adaptation is integrated through our policies, with Departments working together and using the national adaptation plan. Adaptation has been raised by a number of hon. Members, and that is obviously a critical element. On finance, of the \$100 billion developed countries commitment, approximately \$80 billion was reached in 2018, which is the last year that we have data for.

We are then pushing to meet and exceed the \$100 billion target through to 2025, with the G7 leaders each committing to increase their overall international public climate finance contributions. There was criticism from a number of hon. Members, particularly the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), but we have committed to maintaining our five-year pledge to spend £11.6 billion on climate finance for developing countries. Between just 2011 and 2020, 66 million people were supported to cope with the effects of climate change.

On collaboration, the UK remains committed to facilitating agreement on an ambitious, comprehensive, and balanced set of negotiated outcomes at COP26. We are also planning for an in-person ministerial meeting in London at the end of July to build on our momentum. That will be a key step, bringing together more than 40 countries from the United Nations framework convention on climate change negotiating groups to delve into some of the key topics for negotiation at the actual conference. It will build those important relationships that we need to make progress.

Nature—a subject dear to my heart, due to my role as the Environment Minister in DEFRA—is a key theme of our COP presidency. If we are serious about mitigating climate change, adapting to its impacts and keeping to 1.5°, we must change the way we use and look after our land and water, and the ecosystems and biodiversity on which life depends. Agriculture, forest loss and land use contribute 23% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

Nature-based solutions, such as trees, peatlands and wetlands, can provide a third of the most cost-effective climate change solutions. They pay their way by more than sixfold, so investing in those schemes is very much worth it. A number of colleagues touched on nature-based solutions: the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who referenced the blue economy; my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), who is a great champion for this; and, indeed, the hon. Member for Strangford.

We have done some great work internationally on mangrove swamps, but here there is also huge mileage and potential in our salt marshes and our kelp beds. We are working with countries and communities to protect and restore forests and critical ecosystems, and to transition to sustainable agriculture, which was eloquently referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) when he referenced regenerative agriculture—something that I know is dear to his heart.

We want to ensure that nature is on a par with climate, recognising that nature, biodiversity and the climate crisis are inextricably interlinked. I am proud to say that DEFRA will be leading on the nature and land use day at COP, and there will be a number of events and receptions. I urge the Chairman of the Environmental Audit Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for

Ludlow (Philip Dunne), to register his interest in coming on that day. He will be very welcome, as will his knowledge and input.

At the US leaders summit, Governments and companies came together to announce a coalition for lowering emissions by accelerating forest finance, called the LEAF Coalition. That is an ambitious public-private initiative, which aims to mobilise \$1 billion in financing to accelerate climate action to protect tropical forests and support sustainable development. The forest, agriculture and commodity trade—FACT—dialogue, has also been established, bringing together 20 major producer and consumer countries to agree collective action for protecting forests while promoting trade and development.

Here, in the UK, as many colleagues will be aware, we are introducing a world-leading due diligence clause through the Environment Bill to tackle illegal deforestation in our supply chains. It is one of our much wider packages of measures to improve the sustainability of our supply chains. I hope that the EAC Chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow—and indeed, the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith—will be pleased to hear that the cross-Government net zero strategy will be published ahead of COP26. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has been leading on that, and has been commissioning work across Whitehall that will feed into it.

I take slight issue with the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion, who says that there is no ambition and no direction for this COP, or, indeed, from this Government on their entire agenda. I will therefore rattle through a few things where I feel that we are demonstrating extreme ambition.

The UK was the first major economy to adopt a net zero target. We have the highest levels in terms of the UK's nationally determined contributions. We are the fastest nation in the G7 to decarbonise cars, and we are doubling our investment on international climate finance. We have also set a target aiming to halt the decline in species abundance. I think that all that demonstrates that we really are leading by example, which is very important.

Mr McCabe, I know that you are wondering what will actually happen at COP26. We have now published our high-level programme. COP26 will open with a summit of world leaders, where each leader will set the direction for the following two weeks of negotiations. Then, there will be a lot of themed days, including on finance, energy use, public employment, gender, science, innovation and transport—a raft of different themes.

All Members will know that they should have received a letter just this week to invite them—both MPs and peers are invited—to register their interests in attending the summit and to specify which themed day they would like to attend. This will be for the blue zone and day passes will be issued. Allocations will be made per day, but obviously that will depend on the covid mitigation measures that are in place. Out of interest, 4,000 different organisations and bodies have applied to have a presence at the event and the team are trawling through those applications right now. We can see the interest in this tremendous opportunity to come and get involved.

I will also just flag up that a whole lot of resources are being made available to hon. Members and hon. Friends, which we hope everyone will engage with and

then use within their constituencies, to go out to schools, to hold events with businesses and all the rest of it. There is an engagement pack. There is also a “Together for our Planet” schools pack, which is actually really rather good. It also shows schools how they might want to hold a green assembly, in which an MP could take part.

I must also flag up our own DEFRA-launched initiative called “Plant For Our Planet”. This is a hands-on initiative whereby we can all get involved in planting something, whether it is just something in a window box or on a verge in a town, or doing something with the community, so that we can all do our bit to tackle emissions and also help to tackle the biodiversity crisis—it genuinely will help. There is great information on the gov.uk website.

Penultimately, I will just turn back to the international stage for a minute. As we all know, the UK hosted the G7 event in June and at that event leaders committed to end international coal power finance in 2021 and replace it with more funding for renewables. The summit also spawned a number of climate finance commitments, including from Canada, to double its private finance, from Japan, and from Germany, which announced that it will increase its climate financing from €4 billion to €6 billion. Leaders also committed—

Matthew Pennycook: Do the Government agree that the \$100 billion commitment needs to be met in full by the UN General Assembly in September, and that the \$17 billion shortfall needs to be made up and cannot wait any longer if COP26 is going to be a success?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Gentleman raised that crucial point in his speech. That is why we are using our diplomacy to get other countries to help to commit to get to this sum, and it will be a key focus of the meeting he mentions. I was about to flag it up, but I now do not need to, because he has done it for me. And that comes ahead of COP26.

In conclusion, we have a momentum building up with that G20 leaders summit. We even have events with a COP26 focus, such as the Chelsea Flower Show. People will understand much more about what COP26 is about when they see plants and other things that will help us in climate change and in tackling the crisis.

COP26 will be a pivotal moment in securing our path to global net zero emissions by 2050. Together with our Italian partners and with leaders from across the globe, we will work to prevent global temperatures from rising above 1.5° C. This is absolutely crucial. We have to act now; we cannot wait until we get to the end of the century, and we get to 3° C, and literally it will be a crisis. I think we all understand that. I believe that everyone in this room, whatever our views about whatever else, is all agreed on that, and that we must work together, using this COP26 opportunity and our influence on the global stage, so that we can literally save the planet.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): Mr Clarke, I think you have about 35 seconds to wind up.

2.59 pm

Mr Simon Clarke: I will just put on the record my thanks to everyone who participated in this afternoon's debate. The sheer volume of interest in a Westminster Hall debate on the last day of term testifies to the importance of its subject matter.

[Mr Simon Clarke]

I warmly welcome what the Minister said in her closing remarks about the intense efforts to get climate finance at the heart of the programme for resolution, either at or before COP26. It would be a major—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

3 pm

Sitting suspended.

Support for Carers

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

[*Relevant Documents: e-petition 579692, Increase Carers Allowance to equal 35hrs at National Minimum Wage, and e-petition 300032, Pay Carers an allowance equivalent to a fulltime job at the National Living wage.*]

3.15 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that social distancing is no longer in operation, and that Mr Speaker has encouraged us to wear masks. There have been some changes to normal practice to support the hybrid arrangements. Members participating physically and virtually must arrive for the start of the debate and are expected to remain for the whole debate. I must also remind Members participating virtually that they must leave their camera on for the duration of the debate and that they will be visible at all times, both to each other and those of us here in the Boothroyd Room. If Members attending virtually have any technical problems, they should email the Westminster Hall Clerks' email address, which is westminsterhallclerks@parliament.uk. Members attending physically should clean their spaces before they use them and as they leave the room.

3.16 pm

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for unpaid carers and Carers Week 2021.

We are a nation of carers. Millions of people every day look after one or more loved ones—a family member or a friend, or someone who is elderly, disabled or sick. I want to thank and celebrate carers and to speak up for them and the many challenges so many carers face. To be clear, when I use the word “carer”, I am not talking about professional, paid carers—amazing though they are—or child carers and the important work of parents and childminders. Instead, I am focused on the millions of people working as unpaid carers in homes across our country, many of whom would not even call themselves carers. Millions of vulnerable adults and children depend on the efforts of our country's carers, and yet the voice of these unpaid millions is rarely heard and listened to even less.

Covid has made the job of carers even more challenging. A recent survey by Carers UK found that 81% of carers are spending more time on their caring responsibilities during the pandemic, whether due to the needs of the person they are caring for increasing, or because the local care services they used to rely on have been reduced or closed. Despite all that, carers have too often been forgotten or ignored in so many ways. Take money. Right at the start of the pandemic, when the Chancellor put up universal credit by £20 a week, he refused to do the same for carer's allowance. He is still resisting calls by Carers UK, the Liberal Democrats and others to put that right, despite the evidence that so many carers are in real financial distress made worse thanks to covid.

Take vaccinations. When the Government initially published the list of priority groups for vaccination in December, they left unpaid carers completely off the list, even though the case for including them is obvious,

with so many caring for vulnerable people. Only after campaigning by carers organisations, the Liberal Democrats and carers themselves did Ministers finally U-turn. Even then, the effort to get the message out to carers and the vaccination services was, frankly, lamentable.

There are many more examples. The Government's 80-page health and social care White Paper left out unpaid carers altogether, as did the Queen's Speech in May. I am glad that the Health and Care Bill does at least include a requirement to involve carers in decisions about the people they care for, but the Bill does not go anywhere near far enough. There should be an explicit duty on the NHS to identify carers and promote their health and wellbeing, yet that is sadly missing.

Here is the nub of the problem: the Government do not seem to understand that improving care is fundamental to improving health. Yes, there is debate about reforming and investing in social care to support the NHS, but I note that even there we are still waiting for the Government to publish their social reform proposals two years after the Prime Minister told us he had them ready to go. However, the link between health and care goes far wider than the relationship between social care providers and the NHS. It is shocking that that is still not properly recognised.

The reality for every family with an elderly, sick or disabled relative is this: the health and wellbeing of their loved one are not determined primarily by the hospital or the GP. So much of improving the nation's health comes down to the quality of care that can be provided by family and friends. Yet millions of those unpaid carers do not even register in the core thinking and planning of the Department of Health and Social Care.

That is why this debate is so important. It is a chance for us to stand up for carers and say that they must not be forgotten and ignored any longer. That is carers like Gayna, who looks after her two daughters with complex disabilities. Before the pandemic, Gayna got support from social services and her local carers' centre, as well as a much-needed break when her girls were at college or with a youth worker. However, that all came to a halt when we entered lockdown, and Gayna's amount of time spent on caring more than doubled.

Elaine had a similar experience as she cared for her husband, Mark, who is suffering with dementia. Throughout lockdown, Elaine struggled to cope without regular visits from Mark's care workers. She deeply missed her respite time, and worried that Mark was not getting the mental stimulation he needed from the activities that he used to do with his care workers. She felt exhausted, stressed and like she had no one to turn to for advice or support. In Elaine's own words:

"When you're caring alone, you just have to keep going."

That is all taking a huge toll, especially on the mental health of carers. Back before the pandemic, the 2019 health survey for England showed that for those carers undertaking 20 hours or more of care a week, the rate of depressive symptoms was double that of the rest of the population. I shudder to think of the state of mental health of many carers now, nearly 18 months into the pandemic.

Let us not forget Britain's 800,000 young carers. The combination of lockdown, school closures and extra caring responsibilities has taken a toll on their academic progress and their mental health. Some have not been

able to return to school, because they are worried about bringing the virus home with them, and about leaving their loved ones without care.

What should be done for our nation of carers? I have already mentioned the need to raise carer's allowance by at least £20 a week, or £1,000 a year. So far, the Prime Minister has refused time and again to do that. He must do it now. One of the next most urgent things to do is to give carers a break. The survey by Carers UK found that 64% of carers have not been able to take any breaks from their caring role during the pandemic; 74% said they feel exhausted and worn out as a result of caring during covid; and 44% said they are reaching breaking point. Local authority budgets are already stretched way past breaking point, so the Government must give councils immediate emergency funding to offer every unpaid carer the support services that they need to take a weekly break.

Ministers must also provide more cash to councils to fund the voluntary sector's work for carers. In my constituency, we have an amazing organisation called Kingston Carers' Network, which is dedicated to improving the lives of carers in Kingston. From support groups to advice on benefits, from special projects for young carers and young adult carers to carers' assessments and mentoring, Kingston Carers' Network helps more than 4,000 carers in our borough. With a professional team of 21 and a volunteer group of 72, KCN provides extraordinary value for money. With a bit more help, it could do so much more, helping the thousands of carers locally it knows it has not yet reached.

KCN has risen to the challenge of covid, providing new services. One example is the telephone befriending service it set up in March last year. It recruited and trained 23 volunteers to provide one-to-one telephone support to carers. KCN believes that that simple, extremely cheap service has helped to reduce the anxiety and stress in many adult carers and prevented serious deterioration in carers' mental health. I hope other colleagues have similar groups in their areas and I hope that the Minister will work with local authorities so that this critical work for carers can receive far more investment.

There is much more I want to say, but I am keen to let colleagues contribute, so that the Government can hear the huge cross-party support for our carers and realise that they need to do far more. Before I finish, however, I want to declare an interest—perhaps I should have done so earlier.

I am a carer and I have been at many stages of my life. My first time was as a young carer, starting aged 12. My dad died when I was four, so when my mum became terminally ill, when I was 12, the daily care fell largely to my brother and me, and finished when she died when I was 15. Later, I cared for my wonderful Nanna, my mum's mum, organising her care and trying to make her last few years as comfortable as I could. And now as a father, my wife Emily and I care for our gorgeous disabled son John.

I think my experience as a carer is similar to that of millions of people. Caring for a close family member or friend can be rewarding and full of love, but it is far from glamorous and can be relentless and exhausting. That is why this debate is so important. Political debate in our country needs to reflect far better the experience and needs of our nation of carers. The Government need to do far more, especially because of covid, especially

[Ed Davey]

to support the nation's health and the mental health of carers, and especially because our nation depends on those carers.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 4.45 pm. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 12 minutes past 4. The guideline limits are 10 minutes for the SNP, 10 minutes for Her Majesty's Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. Ed Davey has three minutes at the end of the debate to sum up the proceedings. Until 12 minutes past 4, there are seven extremely distinguished Back Benchers seeking to contribute, and if we impose a limit of six minutes, everybody will be able to get in. I call Wera Hobhouse.

3.27 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hollobone, and a great pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey). I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate.

Tomorrow, schools will close for the summer holiday. For most children, that will mean a well-earned break after the most difficult of school years, spending more time with family and friends and taking a holiday. For up to 100,000 children in England alone, school holidays are particularly difficult. During the six-week break, some young carers will have to fit in up to 30 hours of caring responsibilities every week. Caring for a sibling or parent will come before any summer holiday plans.

The 2011 census identified nearly 200,000 young carers in England and Wales. One in eight were under eight years old. Recent research suggests that that figure represents only the tip of an iceberg. Young carers are a very big silent community. Some estimates suggest that one in five schoolchildren are young carers.

That is one in five schoolchildren watching over family members, carrying things for them, making sure that they do not fall. That is one in five schoolchildren cooking meals, collecting prescriptions or doing admin tasks for parents with learning disabilities. That is just the number we know about. The challenges that these children face can vary greatly. As in many areas, the challenges have been made much worse by the pandemic.

A recent Carers Trust survey found that 58% of young carers are caring for longer, spending an average of 10 hours a week more on their caring responsibilities. These children face these challenges for somebody they love. While they would not do anything differently, that does not make it any easier. Young carers carry with them a great deal of worry—worry that can often make those they care for feel guilty.

Being a young carer can have a massive impact on the things that many of us take for granted as an important part of growing up such as education. The Children's Society found that young carers were likely to have significantly lower educational attainment at GCSE level. Some 73% report having to take time off school. Carers aged 16 to 18 are twice as likely not to be in education, employment or training, and 45% of carers report mental health problems. That is not good enough. Like every child, young carers deserve an equal chance in life. They do a remarkable job, but they need more support. This Government owe them that.

The Government must bring forward plans to reform social care, so that we have a well-funded sustainable system that can deliver consistent high-quality care. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton rightly called for an immediate £1,000 per year increase to the carer's allowance. I urge the Government to go one step further and extend the eligibility criteria to those in full-time education.

I would also like to see the Government work to increase social awareness. Too many people are unaware that they can self-identify as carers and access the support they are entitled to. Caring is often poorly understood by peers, and teachers need to be better trained to identify young carers.

To finish, I pay tribute to one of the most exciting young carers' programmes in this country, which happens to be in my own constituency. Bath Philharmonia is the only UK orchestra that delivers a music-making programme for young carers. It has reached more than 1,000 young carers and helped them benefit from the power of music. It supports them to play, create and perform their own original music. The programme gives young carers a safe space to express themselves, make friends and build their confidence and self-esteem. One young carer said:

"Bath Phil has taught me how to take part in something with a team. It has shown me how to be confident in myself, even if it's just for a moment. It has given me something to look towards, which has helped me through some really tough times."

This positive environment not only reduces isolation but raises aspiration. Gaining skills in not only music but communication, teamwork and confidence helps many of these young carers find a way forward, and it has helped young carers and their families when they are struggling. I leave Members with a comment from Jason Thornton, BathPhil's music director, about the power of programmes that support and lift young carers:

"We've got children being children. And that's wonderful."

3.32 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab) [V]: It is a real pleasure to take part in the debate under your stewardship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) for enabling us to tease out the issues relating to unpaid carers. I concur with much of what he said.

I am disappointed to see only Labour and Liberal Democrat Back Benchers taking part in the debate. I genuinely would have liked to listen to Tory MPs' views on the matter, given that it affects so many people in our constituencies. It is worth reiterating a few figures. In 2019-20, around 7% of the UK population were providing unpaid care. That is just under 5 million people, or an average of more than 7,500 people in each constituency, providing unpaid care.

In my own local authority in Sefton, around 5,000 people aged over 65 have dementia. In my constituency alone, that is around 1,700 people. I expect that figure could be higher if we take into account non-diagnosed dementia and people who are below the radar. By 2030, that number is set to rise to almost 6,500 people and over 4,000 of them will have severe dementia, meaning they are most likely to need support and social care. As many as 700,000 informal carers support people with dementia in the UK. They are asking to be helped out—not to be given a free ride. Of course, a significant number of carers themselves will be older and have their own physical and/or mental health issues. The real human

impact on the lives of so many people and individuals can be clouded by the figures, but the figures cannot be ignored.

When I use the word “clouded”, it actually brings to mind the Alzheimer’s Society report, “The Fog of Support”, which I exhort Members to read. In short, it sets out the challenges faced by both informal and/or unpaid carers, and formal carers. Some of the examples are heartbreaking. One carer says:

“Because I’ve got to be back within a certain time...you’re clockwatching. You can’t relax.”

Another quotation reads:

“He doesn’t want to go and if he goes in for respite he packs his case every night, ready to come home.”

Covid has thrown a cloak over the needs of many, and those two examples are not just reflective of reality; they are reality. For those who have no family and are the only carer, the strain and pressure are intolerable. In the first wave of covid, family and friends spent an additional 92 million hours caring for people with dementia—unpaid care. Since the pandemic began, unpaid carers have provided £135 billion-worth of care. It has been a long 16 months, and many relationships are under strain.

Members will have seen the Alzheimer’s Society briefing for the debate, and I thank it for that information. I am afraid that the Government’s policy on support for carers is in complete disarray. The Commons Library report is, as ever, a measured assessment of the current state of affairs. It says:

“The Government has said that it intends to publish a final evaluation of the Carers Action Plan in 2021...When the Government decided not to proceed with the publication of a Carers Strategy it stated that carers would instead be included in a then expected Green Paper on the reform of adult social care. However, the expected Green Paper had not been published by the time of the 2019 general election and the current Government no longer specifically refers to plans for a Green Paper.”

There is delay after delay, with more delay for good measure in case there was insufficient delay in the first place. A meeting between the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the former Health Secretary—a so-called “do or die” meeting—was postponed in June. Asked about the postponement on Radio 4, the Business Secretary said he did not know that it was happening, and that it had been called off. If three senior members of the Government cannot even co-ordinate their diaries on one of the most important social issues affecting millions of people, what confidence can we have in their getting to grips with the substantive issue?

The Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Health Secretary and every single member of the Government and their supporters are letting down not just older people but younger people, children and working-age disabled people. The Disabled Children’s Partnership produced an excellent briefing for the debate. Time does not allow me to go into its findings in any detail, but I hope it will be a salutary and informative read for the Minister. How much more evidence do the Government need to prove that the care system in general is in disarray, as is the informal, or unpaid, care system?

The Prime Minister likes things to be oven ready. He claims to like to get things done. He has promised action on this time after time, so perhaps he could use his isolation in Chequers productively and get to grips with this issue. It is time to deliver. Actions speak louder than words.

3.38 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I thank the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) for securing this hugely important debate.

Last month, during Carers Week, I had the very great privilege of visiting Gateshead Carers, situated in the constituency of my friend and neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), but covering my constituency of Blaydon. Its chief executive, Steve Cowen, tells me that there are 25,000-plus unpaid carers across the borough of Gateshead, and that they save the council, the NHS and all of us over £500 million in care costs per year. That is an incredible figure. While I was there, I met some of the carers it works with and heard about their lives, the situations that they face, and what they need to make their lives and those of the people they care for better.

I met Ian, a carer who had been working on the association’s allotment, welcoming the chance to have some time away. Sadly, covid-19 restricted his ability to get away from home, but he is ready to get back to that now. I met Irene and Trisha, befriender and befriended, who have been talking together for over a year during lockdown, and met for the very first time on the day that I met them. Trisha had been an unpaid carer for her husband and, even after he went into residential care, was spending all her days with him in the residential home. Covid-19 meant that she was no longer able to do that. She was really missing it, and welcomed the chance to strike up that new friendship.

I met Lynne, who is a carer for her husband, an army veteran—but not so old—who told us that it had taken her some time to understand that his health meant that she was a carer. “I was just his wife”, she said, “it’s what you do.” She has realised that she is an unpaid carer, and like many unpaid carers, there comes a time when the caring takes over from what other paid work she has. She is making a huge contribution, and thankfully is now receiving support from Gateshead Carers Association. Stuart had become involved in Gateshead Carers Association as a carer, and now lends his skills to that association as a trustee while still being an unpaid carer.

I could mention so many other people: constituents who have found that they have become unpaid carers, whether for a child with disabilities, for someone who has developed dementia, or for someone who, because of illness or age, younger or older, needs that full-time caring support. Many of those carers—dare I say it—were the 1950s-born women who saw their retirement age changed as a result of legislation. They have looked after parents who need care and have given up work, only to find that when the person they care for dies they are not entitled to their pension, and have been left destitute. Covid-19 has made this worse. Less access to external support and company increases isolation, but let us be clear that, even before covid-19, things were not easy for carers, so we do not want to return to the situation pre-covid. We want to address those pre-existing conditions. Of course, for those caring for children with disabilities, the pressures have been even greater than they were before covid.

I want to say a word on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), who hoped to be here, but cannot be. She has told me

[Liz Twist]

what she would have said: “I want to talk about the impact that lifting coronavirus restrictions will have on carers for people who are clinically extremely vulnerable. I have heard from unpaid carers who say they are at a loss as to how they and the people they care for are ever going to be part of society as restrictions go and they follow the clinically extremely vulnerable guidance.”

Katy Styles is a campaigner for the We Care campaign. She cares for her husband, who has motor neurone disease. She says:

“I am worried that unpaid carers’ lives will be further pushed back into the shadows and we will essentially live a twilight existence, not engaging with others, trying to stay safe, not taking any risks and being not only unheard but unseen by the rest of society. There is no end to this. No road map for us, just the very edge of the map and no coming back from there. It’s particularly tough for those caring for people with dementia or Learning Disabilities. If you are Clinically Extremely Vulnerable we know the vaccine works differently than from the whole population. We will effectively be back to shielding, but with no support and whilst the rest of the country this time cracks on.”

In the time left, I will talk about some of the things we need. Unpaid carers need proper carers’ breaks and respite care. As we have heard from other Members, we need an increase in the carers’ allowance: £67 is just not enough for the people who devote all that time. Most of all, we need a proper care plan for adult social care, so that the people for whom they are caring are able to access the support they need, and the unpaid carers can also access support. I hope that the Minister will be able to talk to us today about what would be done for carers under the adult social care system—a system that needs to be properly funded, not just to be a cap on how much an individual spends.

3.43 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Hollobone, and I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) for securing this massively important debate. I should declare an interest, because I am a carer, and have been for the past 22 years; however, I do not want to talk about that today.

Although I thought I knew everything there was to know about caring as an individual, I was taken by surprise at a clinic I held when I was a Member of the Scottish Parliament. I was at a clinic in Castletown in Caithness, and a gentleman in his early 60s came to see me. He was a bachelor; he was on a very low pension; and he told me how he was looking after his mother, who was bedridden and incontinent. He told me that he was not going to put her in a home; she had looked after him all his life, and he was now going to look after her. He then broke down in the middle of the clinic, which as a new Member of the Scottish Parliament I found rather disturbing, and told me his tale. The national health service had afforded him an allowance of four adult diapers—nappies—for his mother, per day. Each fortnight, or month—whatever the period was—the requisite number of diapers would be delivered to his household. He then told me that what was awful was that, at the flick of an unknown health mandarin’s pen, this allowance had been decreased to three diapers a day. He said that the reason he broke down was, “I’m not in

my first youth—I’m not as young as I was. It’s the bed linen. It’s nighties. I can’t cope with this. I can’t cope. I’m desperate.” I gritted my teeth and said that, “If I do nothing else as a Member of the Scottish Parliament, I’ll sort this for you.”

I was so angry the next day that I went to Heather Macmillan, who runs my constituency office, and said, “Take a letter! Words fail me. I cannot believe it.” She said, “Jamie, go for a walk. I’ll write the letter. I’ve got the gist of the problem.” We got it sorted and he got back up to four diapers a day. One little thing had been destroying his life, and that was an unexpected aspect of caring that I had not foreseen—it was a real curveball. I can only tell this anecdote now because the gentleman concerned is no longer with us—I have kept quiet all these years—and the point of it is that there are things that can impinge on caring that can be entirely unexpected. It is not always about money; it is about a clumsy and thoughtless decision that was, I fancy, taken far away from where this man lived in Caithness.

Another point, to echo what other Members have said, is about young carers. In my constituency, we are very fortunate to have an organisation called Tykes Young Carers, based in Golspie, Sutherland. I have waited a long time to go on the record and commend that organisation here in this place. I take my hat off to it. Having met its representatives over the years, I have learned certain things and I am sure that all Members will be familiar with similar examples. A young carer who returns home from school, perhaps to a remote croft in the highlands, might have to look after a single parent who is alcoholic and feed and look after younger siblings. Then, when they go back to school the next day, they get roasted by the teacher for not having done their homework. That is an oversight on the teacher’s part, but the teacher cannot be blamed for not knowing all the facts about that particular family. That, however, is another unintended occurrence for carers. Over 22 years of looking after my better half—as we say in the highlands—I thought I knew it all, but I did not.

My appeal to the Minister is, as the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) has just said, for the Government to take an overall look at this situation. Yes, it is about resources, but it is also about having the radar, being truly three-dimensional and working this way and that way to identify all the things that can go wrong with caring—they need not necessarily be related to money—and make a care giver’s life truly miserable. I go back to my first anecdote: what was the cost of one adult diaper? It was probably a fraction of a penny—it was not so difficult to provide. However, because of the bureaucracy, and because the unknown mandarin’s pen ticked what it did, that gentleman’s life had been destroyed. I often wonder whether I did any good as a Member of the Scottish Parliament; I like to think that, if I did nothing else, at least I sorted that chap’s life out.

3.49 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone). I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) on securing this very important debate; reflecting on his own family experiences, he has been championing carers for some time.

Our unpaid carers ought to be supported for the vital work that they do for their loved ones, not left to struggle and, as in far too many cases, left to rely on services such as food banks. Other Members have outlined the importance of unpaid carers and the many difficulties that they face. As my party's Department for Work and Pensions spokesperson, I will take a moment to outline what we are talking about when it comes to the carer's allowance. To be entitled to carer's allowance, a person must be at least 16 years old, which obviously leaves out some of the young carers whom Members have already mentioned. They must spend at least 35 hours a week caring for someone in receipt of a qualifying disability benefit. They must earn less than £128 a week and not be in full-time education or studying for 21 hours or more a week—we can see more exclusions there—and not be subject to the no recourse to public funds immigration rule. Carer's allowance is non-contributory. It is not dependent on someone's national insurance record, and it is not means-tested, but it is taxable. As other Members have mentioned, the weekly rate is currently £67.25.

I want to highlight the overlapping benefits rule. There are 1 million claimants who meet the requirements for entitlement to carer's allowance, and the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) referred to the likely number of carers in the UK who do not receive benefits. Just over 900,000 receive the payments, and that is mainly because of the overlapping benefits rule. If someone receives another overlapping income replacement benefit worth at least £67.25 a week, they do not receive carer's allowance. If the overlapping benefit is worth less than £67.25 a week, their carer's allowance payments are reduced so that the total is £67.25. What does that mean? In his anecdote about his constituent, my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross mentioned that the gentleman was on a low pension income. The reality is that the overlapping benefits rule impacts most on people receiving a state pension. Some 79% of claimants who are entitled to carer's allowance but who are not receiving it are aged 66 or over. To put it another way, 92% of eligible claimants aged 65 or under receive carer's allowance, but 97% of eligible claimants aged 66 or over do not do so.

Simply put, £67.25 is not enough of an income and does not reflect the value that we as a society put on the work of carers. It is less than £2 an hour for 35 hours each week, and we know that full-time caring is not limited to 9 am to 5 pm on Monday to Friday. Of course, people who care for others do not do so for payment; they do it out of love. However, that is not a reason to leave so many people in poverty, from which they have no means of extracting themselves.

Many of my constituents have written to me, asking for a fairer system that recognises the contribution of carers and that does not penalise them if they manage to balance unpaid caring and work—a system that truly understands the needs of those it serves and that recognises circumstances whereby carers may be delivering care to more than one person, such as an elderly relative and a disabled child. I have constituents who have stopped receiving carer's allowance but have continued having sums deducted from their universal credit. Like other Members, I have constituents who are simply in dire need of a break, but who cannot afford respite because of the limits on personal budgets. I also have constituents who are pushed on to the breadline because of payment deductions, clawbacks and inflexible assessment periods.

Unpaid carers, almost three quarters of whom are women, have simply been forgotten by the Government, who increased universal credit and working tax credit basic elements by £20 a week during the pandemic but who failed to offer such support to those on legacy benefits—predominantly disabled people and their unpaid carers. It is true that my constituents in North East Fife are able to claim a supplement of £8.83 each week from the Scottish Government. Although that helps, and I recognise the Scottish Government's more compassionate approach, it is still simply a fraction of what is needed. That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for an immediate increase to carer's allowance of £1,000 a year, with a £20 increase to the universal credit carer's element, in order to prevent this from being a deduction that is immediately offset by other reductions, as I have referred to.

Our unpaid carers are all too often our unsung heroes, and I want to recognise groups in North East Fife that provide support to carers and those for whom they care—specifically, the Fife Carers Centre, its North East Fife wellbeing group, and Families First in St Andrews, which I have had the privilege of visiting. This debate gives us the opportunity to sing their praises, and we must keep fighting for a just system of benefits payments to support the most vulnerable in our society.

3.54 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I thank the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) for securing this important debate. I agree with everything he said about the plight of unpaid carers. We must increase and expand the carer's allowance, properly fund respite breaks and recognise unpaid carers in legislation.

The situation for paid carers is equally dire. The Resolution Foundation found that between 2017 and 2019 more than half of care workers were paid well under the real living wage. Despite this, after a decade of cuts and Government underfunding of care, Salford has done its best to try to lift wages to a standard that carers can actually live on. Salford City Council and Salford clinical commissioning group, following a campaign by Salford City Unison, set aside funds to give care workers a significant wage increase and covid sick pay when isolating. This so-called Salford offer was offered to private care providers, but staggeringly, even when public money is made available, some companies have actually refused to take it if it means improving pay or terms and conditions for workers. What can the Minister suggest to address this?

Sadly, that is only one symptom of the structural problems that exist in care. As the Women's Budget Group states,

“the structural problems with the sector... have arisen from allowing uncontrolled consolidation by private providers, including private equity.”

Salford City Unison further told me:

“We also see every day that even where we are able to secure contractual guarantees for workers, companies invest so little in back-office services that workers are regularly paid the wrong amount, get rotas at the last minute and find that the days they booked for leave are not recorded in the system and are therefore cancelled at short notice.”

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

I will read the Minister two quotes from care workers in Salford. Paul says:

"Private companies—and even so-called charities—only care about how much money they make. Not us workers or the people who need our care and support. We want more Government money for social care, but we've seen in Salford that loads of private companies would rather turn down public money offered by the council and the NHS, than use it to improve our wages or pay us when we're off because of COVID."

Diane, another care worker, says:

"I work in Homecare, often working 7am until 2pm, then back on at 4pm until 10:30pm and then back on at 7am the next day to do it all again. Bear in mind that means I have to get to my first call at 6:30am and don't get home until 11pm. I am not the same carer when I work that many hours and that breaks my heart. When I ask for holidays, the company asks 'Are they important? Do you need to be off that long?' They tell you your days off have changed so that you have to cancel your appointments made in your own time. I am always being given extra calls. Once I actually covered 32 calls in one day. You cannot be a good carer when you are forced to work like that."

That is not how we should treat those people we charge to look after the most precious people in our lives, is it? It is no way to run a care system. I hope that the Minister agrees that care workers must receive the pay and security they deserve; that unpaid carers must receive the allowances and respite they deserve; and ultimately that the Government must recognise care as a form of public social infrastructure and fund it as such.

3.58 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) on securing the debate and on his powerful introduction, which included his personal experience.

Like other Members, I will contribute specifically on the issue of young carers. A couple of years ago, when I led a Westminster Hall debate on young carers, I was struck by the number of colleagues from this snapshot of 650 people who came along and shared their personal experience as young carers, including the right hon. Member. It was striking that so many had that experience. I cannot offer that. I simply became involved in the issue after meeting Sheffield Young Carers and being blown away by these extraordinary young people as they juggled all the huge challenges for everybody of their age with responsibilities for caring that would daunt many of us. They include young people such as Holly, who started caring when she was just nine or 10 for her mum and her sister. Her mum had an underactive thyroid and her sister had reflux in her right kidney. Holly said of her life:

"I don't get much time to be a child or to spend time with friends. I don't mind but it sometimes gets really frustrating if I can't sit down for 5 minutes on my own. My life is different to young people who aren't carers because I struggle a lot with life and have people to care for. They get to be kids and live their life. I still get to live my life but I have to be an adult and be very careful. The highs are that I get to spend lots of time with my mum and sister. The lows are that I have no other family around so it's just us 3. It's very painful for me and very emotional to have to watch my sister screaming in agony."

Holly's experience is reflected in that of too many young people across the country. Young carers' average age is just 12 and their family income is at least £5,000 lower than others'; 68% are bullied at school, 26% are bullied and about their caring role, and 45%, unsurprisingly,

report mental health problems. They achieve on average nine grades lower at GCSE than their peers, and they are four times more likely to drop out of further and higher education.

With all those challenges, the right support is vital. Clearly, we owe them nothing less. Reaching out to those we know is only one part of the challenge, because so many young carers are hidden from view and are not recognised in the places they can be best supported. As the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) said, the 2001 census identified 166,000 or so young carers, but research suggests that there are as many as 800,000 in England alone. The truth is that we do not know how many we are talking about, so the first step in supporting them is to identify them.

Just over three years ago, I secured a Prime Minister's question and described the experience of some of the inspiring young people I have worked with through Sheffield Young Carers. I asked the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), whether she would meet them. To my surprise, and to her credit, she agreed, so I took eight young people down from Sheffield.

In advance of the meeting, I said to them, "Look, you need to sit down and work out what your priorities are." What was impressive was that they did not choose issues relating to their immediate circumstances; they landed on the issue of support for others in their position who were not recognised. They put three main points to the Prime Minister: that schools should be required to have a young carers lead, just as for children with special educational needs and looked-after children, with a responsibility to identify and support young carers; that Ofsted should inspect schools on what they are doing to support young carers; and that GPs should be required to play a role in identifying young carers, and the Care Quality Commission should check that they hold a register of young carers in their practices.

We had a great discussion with the Prime Minister. In a press release after the meeting, No. 10 said that

"the Government will be undertaking a review to identify opportunities for improvement in these spaces."

Arising from that, the Carers Trust published a useful toolkit on identification practice for young carers in England, but we need to go further. I appreciate that there is a responsibility on local authorities under the Children and Families Act 2014 to proactively identify young carers, but it is hard to see how they can comply with that duty without working in partnership with schools and GPs.

It is not just about identification. A designated lead in schools can tell children about the types of support that are available, be somebody to talk to, address the issues of flexibility with homework and lateness, get young carers to talk about shared experiences and ensure school staff can provide a support plan. GPs are also well placed to identify support. I hope the Minister will be able to tell us what progress has been made in giving schools and GPs that role in identifying and supporting young carers in the two years since the Government gave that commitment.

4.4 pm

Anum Qaisar-Javed (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate the right hon. Member

for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) on securing this incredibly important debate. His contribution was very powerful.

I begin by noting two things. First, the story of the young girl named Holly recalled by the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) is a stark reminder that many carers are young people. I am sure many Members in the room felt emotional listening to that story. The right support is vital, and that can be given only when young carers are correctly identified. Secondly, I am disappointed to see that there are no Tory Back Benchers speaking in the debate.

As the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton stated, Carers Week is an annual campaign to raise awareness of caring, highlighting the challenges faced by unpaid carers and recognising their contribution. As many Members have noted, Carers Week also helps people who do not think of themselves as having caring responsibilities to identify as carers and access the appropriate support. I reiterate an important matter raised by the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd): many carers will not be accounted for. It is important that we work cross-party to ensure that we continually highlight the wide-ranging issues that constitute caring responsibilities and to consider how we can advertise that aspect further. The SNP is happy to give that support where possible.

The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) made an incredibly valid point that I had not thought about too much—the gendered impact of caring responsibilities. Many young carers, unpaid carers and carers in general are women, and it is important that any Government intervention reflects that. The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) recalled stories from carers, and we need continually to humanise debates and put names to stories so that we remember we are discussing real people.

This year's Carers Week ran in June around a theme of making caring visible and valued. In Scotland, Carers Week is co-ordinated by Carers Scotland, which is funded by the Scottish Government. A Carers Scotland survey of around 230 current and former carers found that 36% felt unable to manage their caring role due to reduced support from health and care services, as well as limited help from family and friends; 71% have not had any breaks from caring during the pandemic; 77% felt exhausted as a result of caring during the pandemic; and only 23% felt confident that the support they receive with caring will continue following the pandemic. Our carers have been at the heart of the pandemic, and it is a priority for the SNP in Government to ensure that caring is visible and valued—prior to, during and after the pandemic.

The Scottish Government fund the co-ordination of Carers Week in Scotland to highlight carers' immense contribution to our society and the extra pressures they may have faced during the pandemic. The Scottish Government also passed the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 to deliver real change for carers, enshrining in law each carer's right to support and a

"personalised plan to identify what is important to them", such as a short break or their wish to return to work. An additional £28.5 million has been invested for local carer support in this year's budget, bringing investment under the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 to £68 million per year.

Over the past 16 months, the covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on carers, as many Members have said, which has further exposed and underlined the challenges that many carers face. Significant numbers of carers have been on call all day every day over the past year—on duty, not getting a night's sleep, no time to themselves or proper time with family or close friends.

Unsurprisingly, many carers are now exhausted and worried about how they will continue to care without increased support, especially financial. That is why during the pandemic the Scottish Government invested an extra £1.1 million in the short breaks fund, plus an extra £300,000 in benefits and leisure opportunities for young carers via the Young Scot card. The Scottish Government also launched their national wellbeing hub in May last year to empower carers who had never done so before to address their physical and mental health. It signposts unpaid carers to relevant services and provides a range of self-care and wellbeing resources.

During the pandemic, in April 2020, the Scottish Government established a £500,000 remote working fund to help local carer organisations to transition to remote working, so they could continue to provide advice and emotional support to carers, such as telephone counselling and online sessions. As the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) explained, the pandemic has highlighted some real concerns with regard to carers around isolation and creating friendships. I hope the Minister is taking note of the constituents' stories that Members have been recalling.

To ensure that carers are supported, the SNP has made a number of changes while in government, including the fact that Scotland is the first UK nation to extend the provision of personal protective equipment to unpaid carers. The Scottish Government also prioritised unpaid carers for vaccination, proactively scheduling many via GP and social security records and ensuring others were encouraged to register for a priority vaccination in March and in April.

The financial implications of being a carer can be challenging for many. That is why the Scottish Government have delivered improved support for carers as a priority through Scotland's social security powers. The carer's allowance supplement is the first payment made by Social Security Scotland and it increases the carer's allowance by 13%, with eligible carers receiving £231.40 every six months. Since the launch of the carer's allowance supplement in 2018, the Scottish Government have paid out £129 million to more than 100,000 carers.

In 2020-21, the Scottish Government invested £358 million in carer's allowance and carer's allowance supplements combined, and they paid a coronavirus carer's allowance supplement of £230.10 in June 2020 to support carers with the impact of the pandemic. They will bring forward legislation to make another extra payment with the December supplement this year.

I have recited what the Scottish Government have done and what the SNP has championed in Scotland. The SNP is proud of its record as the Scottish Government in supporting unpaid carers. We will continue to advocate for unpaid carers, but we are happy to work across parties to ensure that unpaid carers across these islands are supported.

4.13 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab) [V]: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) on securing the debate. His speaking about his personal experiences over many years was powerful; the House is often at its best when people share such experiences. I am sure many carers across the country will have heard what he said and been grateful to him for raising those points.

My main argument is that transforming support for families who care for elderly and disabled relatives must be at the heart of any plan for social care reform. This will be a critical test of whether the Prime Minister finally delivers on his promise to

“fix the crisis in social care”,

which he made two years ago on the steps of No. 10 Downing Street. That is vital for the 11.5 million unpaid family carers in England, who provide the vast majority of care and support in this country, but who are all too often relegated to the bottom of the list when it comes to attention, investment or reform.

This is vital, too, for the taxpayer, because if unpaid carers’ own physical and mental health suffers, or they can no longer provide support for the people they love, which means more people end up using more expensive NHS services, the cost to the public purse will be far greater. It is vital for our wider economy. If millions of people struggle to balance their work and caring responsibilities and end up having to give work up or reduce their hours because they cannot get the support they need, they will lose their income, employers will lose those people’s skills and the Treasury will lose taxes. We have never been able to afford that, let alone now, as we begin to emerge from the horrors of covid-19.

In this century of ageing, we cannot build a better future for our country without transforming social care, and unpaid family carers must be at the heart of our plans. Even before covid-19 struck, millions of family carers were struggling to look after the people they love most following a decade of cuts to local authority budgets. I will talk briefly about what I think are the two most important issues that have been raised with me in talking to carers across the country. I also want to thank Carers UK for organising so many events both before and during the pandemic, as well as in my constituency of Leicester West.

The first thing that many families say is what a battle it is to try to find your way around the system of the NHS and social care. My constituent David Towers is a self-employed carpenter. When his parents fell ill, he rang me to say, “Am I going wrong here, Liz? I don’t understand. I have to organise everything and tell my story time and again. I don’t know what my rights are. I don’t know any information. Is this how it is supposed to be?” I answered, no, that is not how it is supposed to be, but we do not have the changes in the system to pull things together.

The second issue is that of breaks. Even before the pandemic struck, almost half of family carers had not had a proper break from their caring for five years. The stress and the strain that that puts on people are huge. I vividly remember speaking to an unpaid family carer called Della during an event organised by Carers UK. Della was looking after her husband who had been very

poorly. She told me she used to go for a half-hour swim in the mornings. That was all she wanted. It was her dream to have just half an hour. She was not asking for much—just that space and time for herself. Surely, in the 21st century, in one of the richest countries in the world, that is something we can deliver.

We know that the situation has got worse since the pandemic struck. People who were already family carers are doing even more hours, and an extra 4.5 million people have taken on new caring responsibilities. At one of my recent surgeries, an unpaid family carer said, “Liz, I am done. You cannot pour from an empty cup. I have nothing left to give.” She was looking after her mum, so she had no choice. For new carers, the pandemic has been hugely stressful. People have been very frightened of infecting the person they care about, and they have not known what support is out there. They get even fewer breaks, money is running out and they were almost completely absent from all the focus during the pandemic.

In Leicester, we have been working hard to address the problem. Over the past nine months, I have brought together our local hospital, ambulance service, primary care, the city council, mental health community services, voluntary groups such as CLASP—the Carers Centre and Age UK, and unpaid family carers. We have talked about how to improve the system. We are working together better to identify family carers, because most people do not consider themselves carers. They are a son, a daughter, a husband or a wife trying to look after the person they love. We want to make simple information more widely available and to have much better co-ordination of services.

We have a long way to go to make the system work, but I am very pleased that services such as East Midlands Ambulance Service have agreed to involve families in training paramedics so that paramedics can better identify carers, and that the city council has completely changed its language so that it does not talk about “carers”, because most people do not think they are a carer. However, services, voluntary organisations and families need a Government who back their efforts.

This Saturday, it will be two years since the Prime Minister stood on the steps of No. 10 Downing Street promising to

“fix the crisis in social care once and for all with a clear plan we have prepared to give every older person the dignity and security they deserve.”

Yet the plan is still nowhere to be seen. The papers are full of briefings that an announcement is imminent, but in reality—and as with so much else with the Government—all we get is chaos, confusion and broken promises.

First, we see that there will be a levy to fix the crisis in social care, then the levy is for the NHS backlog and to fix the crisis in social care. Now it is for the NHS backlog, social care and the NHS pay rise, and we hear from the papers that it is to be funded through an increase in national insurance contributions, which the former Chancellor, who is now Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, explicitly promised not to raise under a majority Conservative Government. The people who use care, the staff who deliver it and the unpaid family carers who rely on it deserve better, especially following the horrors of covid-19.

Will the Minister say when we are finally to see the Government's plan? Are the Government considering raising NICs, in direct contradiction of the explicit promise they made before the last general election? Is the rise in NICs how they plan to pay for the NHS backlog and the NHS pay rise, leaving virtually nothing for social care? Does the Minister understand that while a cap on care costs is vital, that alone will not fix the crisis in social care? That is because it will do nothing for the third of social care users and half the social care budget represented by working-age adults with disabilities. It will do nothing for the 1.5 million elderly people who need help with getting up, getting washed and getting fed who cannot get that help. It will do nothing for the paid care workforce, and it will do nothing for unpaid family carers, who are the subject of today's debate.

After a decade failing to transform social care, nothing less than a full plan will do. That is the test the Government will face when they finally come up with their plan, and that is the test of whether the Prime Minister fulfils the promise he made on the steps of No. 10 Downing Street. I look forward to the Minister's response.

4.22 pm

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I start by thanking the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) and the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this debate on such an important topic. The right hon. Member spoke powerfully of his own first-hand experience of care, first as a child and now as an adult caring for his disabled child. As others have said, sharing such personal experiences adds so much to the conversations we have in this House. I am also truly grateful for all the work he does to champion the voice of carers.

Other Members have also spoken powerfully. For instance, the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) talked about Holly, and what he said really brought to life the experiences of a young carer. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) described some things a Member of Parliament can do for their constituents. Sometimes, they seem to be small things, but they make such a big difference to an individual's life. The things we can do as constituency MPs to unlock something that has been locked away because of a decision made somewhere up there makes all the difference. The hon. Gentleman really brought that issue to life.

I pay tribute to all the carers and young carers across the country. Caring for a relative, a friend or a neighbour is something that many people do. In fact, around one adult in 10 provides care, and about 23% of carers have high-intensity caring responsibilities, providing more than 50 hours of care a week. Carers do an amazing thing. The compassion and fortitude they demonstrate, often in difficult circumstances, are truly inspiring to all of us, but their task is hard. It can leave people with so little time and energy for themselves.

I come back to the numbers. There are at least 6.5 million unpaid carers in the UK, and about 5.4 million in England. That is based on the 2011 census, which is now around 10 years out of date, so we know that the figure is now significantly higher, and may have increased due to the pandemic.

The last 16 months have clearly been incredibly challenging—especially in the early weeks and months of the outbreak, when we all found ourselves facing the steepest of learning curves. For carers, as for frontline health and care workers, the complex and demanding routines that they follow became even more complex and intense due to the restrictions. Many carers were also looking after somebody who was likely to be vulnerable to covid, so had the added worry of what would happen if that person was to catch the virus. However, just like our dedicated NHS and social care colleagues, carers of all ages kept going throughout the pandemic: they kept caring and doing what was needed for the person close to them.

I want to briefly mention the support the Government have provided to carers during the pandemic. We have focused on supporting them—a focus that continues to this day, even as the remaining restrictions lift and we try to move towards a new kind of normality. That is why we included exemptions from some regulations and added flexibility to help carers, including allowing emotional support to count towards the 35 hours of care provided by carers, and relaxing the rules for breaks in care. We listened to carers' concerns about access to testing, and made them a priority group alongside other essential workers.

There is one vital achievement that I want to mention: the fact that hundreds of thousands of unpaid carers have now received their vaccine—an important step in protecting them and the people they care for from coronavirus. I would beg to differ from the portrayal presented by the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton. Ministers have worked hard—and I can say this for myself, personally—to ensure that carers were prioritised to receive the vaccination after recognising their concerns, often, for the individuals who they cared for.

A huge collective effort went into identifying carers during the vaccination programme—identifying those already known to GPs, the DWP and local authorities, and working with local carers' organisations to identify carers eligible to be prioritised for the vaccine. That work has also brought other benefits; it has fostered new local connections and dialogues, and has helped to raise awareness across primary care services about the critical role that carers play and the significant contribution that they make.

I will pick up on a point made, I think, by the hon. Member for Sheffield Central, on the importance of identifying carers. There has been ongoing work to better identify who carers are. We know that carers do not necessarily even think of themselves as carers, and that young carers can often be overlooked. There is a particular line of work in working with schools to identify young carers and provide them with more support.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the Minister for giving way, for her response and for her clear understanding. Will she listen to our demand to look at the eligibility criteria so that all in education can be included in the carer's allowance?

Helen Whately: Yes, I have heard that. I have also received correspondence about the situation of somebody who may be in full-time education and seeking eligibility for the carer's allowance. Yes, I am absolutely listening

[*Helen Whately*]

to that. I truly recognise the pressures that carers experience, whether it is juggling caring with work or with education. I have spoken myself to younger carers in that situation as well.

I want to go further on identifying carers—overcoming some potential data protection issues—and on trying to bring together our data sources, so that we have a clearer sense of who carers are and so that we will be able to contact them to offer support. During the pandemic, I found that it was not possible to write to all the carers in the country and say, “This is what is available to you.” I want us to go further on having the best data that we can.

Ed Davey: What the Minister is saying about identifying carers is absolutely critical for future Government policy on carers. It is why we talked about putting an explicit duty on the NHS in the Health and Care Bill, which is before Parliament. That would be a real step forward. Is the Minister willing to meet me and carers’ organisations to discuss the critical issue of how we can work together with the health service and local authorities, so that we can identify the carers in our communities?

Helen Whately: I am very happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman to talk about that. It is about the technicalities of data, data sitting in different places, and how we can overcome that so that we have a better and common information source. Yes, I am absolutely happy to meet him.

I will come back to some of the things that we did during the pandemic, because I want to cover the topics that have been raised in the debate. We published guidance specifically for carers to try to support them through the pandemic, including on maintaining their own health and wellbeing. We provided PPE for unpaid carers who live separately from those for whom they care, in line with the clinical advice on when it is appropriate for a carer to use PPE. Crucial to all that was drawing on the experiences and insights of carers, including young carers, during the pandemic. We held a series of roundtable discussions in order to do that. Young carers frequently fly under the radar of services and community networks that would otherwise help them.

We provided extra funding to charities, including £500,000 to the Carers Trust in order to provide support to those who experienced loneliness during the pandemic, and over £150,000 to Carers UK so that it could extend its helpline opening hours in order to provide information and support to unpaid carers. We have supported initiatives for young carers, including providing over £11 million to the See, Hear, Respond programme, which ran from June 2020 until March 2021, in order to support more vulnerable children and young people.

We have also worked to give extra support to young carers in education. During the national lockdown, schools and colleges remained open for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children, including young carers. I recognise that if a young carer looks after somebody who is more vulnerable to covid, they will be more worried about going to school, so I am determined to ensure that, as part of our catch-up programme for children, some of the £3 billion education recovery package can be used to support young carers who have missed out on school.

I want to talk about day services, which provide essential respite for carers. It is so important that carers, particularly those who do high-intensity care, have time to see a dentist or doctor, to go shopping or to do something for themselves. Such respite is so important, and the day service or respite care is of great value to the individual who attends it. I was truly disappointed to read Carers UK’s new research report, “Breaks or breakdown”, which was published during Carers Week. It said that

“72% of carers have not had any breaks from their caring”

during the pandemic. However, many respite services and day services have not been fully operational for much of the last 16 months. I want to see the reopening of such services. That is one reason why, as part of the infection control fund, we have given nearly £1.5 billion to social care during the pandemic. One use of that fund has been to support the reopening of day services.

I know we can go further. Just last week, I spoke to local authority leaders and emphasised to them the importance of reopening day services and respite services, and I urged them to take advantage of the support that is on offer. I personally commissioned two surveys of day service provision—one last October and one in spring this year. During that period, that provision has increased; the situation in the recent report was better than last year’s, but it is not yet back to the pre-pandemic level. I will continue to work with adult directors of social services, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and local authorities to fully understand the challenges in getting day services back to the level that they were at before.

Liz Twist: I very much welcome the efforts made to reopen day services. However, will the Minister accept that many local authorities already find their social care funding stretched incredibly hard and so find it difficult to maintain some of those services? Does the Minister accept that there is a funding issue here?

Helen Whately: Of course, there are financial pressures across public services, and more widely across our economy we face an extremely challenging time, but we have given significant extra funding to local authorities to support them through the pandemic. That is why I urge them to prioritise this issue. I emphasise the importance of the carer’s needs assessment that local authorities carry out, because that is such a crucial way of identifying what support a carer may need for themselves and their wellbeing, including the need for respite and taking a break from caring, and then making sure that that happens.

Jamie Stone: Further to what the Minister just said, Migdale Hospital in my constituency has in recent times lost a lot of beds. That is a combination of the NHS, and—because healthy policy is devolved—the Scottish Government. Does the Minister agree that that is a real problem? This is not joined-up government. Whatever influence she can bring to bear on the Scottish Government to reverse those decisions, which fly in the face of good government, would be helpful.

Helen Whately: The hon. Gentleman has made his point very clearly. He knows that that is a devolved matter, but SNP Members are listening, and I hope that they take up his concern.

Effective support for carers can never be created or offered in isolation, and it is critical to me that the views of carers are central to how my Department develops policy. Just a few weeks ago, Carers Week provided an opportunity to highlight the invaluable contribution of carers and for others to commit to improving their quality of life. I personally made a pledge to work nationally and locally in my constituency to promote caring communities, and I wrote to all MPs urging them to do the same.

I will continue to play my part and will listen to and champion the needs of all carers as our country continues its recovery to a new kind of normality. I have and will continue to meet a wide range of carers' organisations and to speak to Ministers from across Government to ensure that our regulations, policies and services are fit for purpose and consider the needs of carers. That engagement has included roundtable discussions and regular calls with individual carers charities, including Carers UK, Carers Trust and the Children's Society, and I will continue to work with colleagues across Government, MPs and local authorities to increase our support for carers.

The Government do not have all the answers. Several hon. Members have spoken today about local organisations and initiatives that support carers. Local carers' groups play such an important role—by putting carers in touch with others in similar situations, for instance, so that they discover that they are certainly not alone; and by providing practical support, advice and respite. That is from Carers UK and the Carers Trust to any number of local groups; during the debate, I have heard mention of Kingston Carers' Network, Gateshead Carers, a young carers organisation in Bath, Tykes Young Carers in Sutherland and Sheffield Young Carers. I should mention Crossroads Care Kent, who I met the other day in my capacity as the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent. I heard about the excellent work that it does. Across the country, these voluntary groups, charities and charitable organisations do such an important thing in supporting carers, and I recognise that.

Several hon. Members mentioned social care reform, and they know well that we are committed to bringing forward proposals this year for reform of the adult social care system. As part of those proposals, we are absolutely considering unpaid carers. We want to build a system in which unpaid carers are truly supported and those who receive care have more choice and control over their lives. We are working closely with local and national organisations so that our approach to reform is informed by diverse perspectives, including those with lived experience of the care sector.

On the Health and Care Bill, I want to ensure that the voices of unpaid carers, as well as care home residents and others who receive care and support, are truly heard in integrated care systems. That is why the Bill places new duties on integrated care boards and NHS England to involve carers.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions on this important topic. I know that all those who have spoken share my deep commitment to supporting our unpaid carers and young carers, who have sacrificed and given so much, especially in the past 16 months, and continue to do so. As Minister for Care, I have seen at close hand how challenging and unwelcome the pandemic has been for people caring, as well as those being cared for.

We should all be humbled, inspired and strengthened by everyone who has endured this most stressful of times. I hope that the House will join me in a heartfelt thank you to each and every carer and young carer across the country for all that they are doing to support, protect and care for their loved ones.

4.41 pm

Ed Davey: I thank every Member who has contributed. Members have made some really powerful speeches, and I think that carers in their constituencies are very grateful for the work that they do as parliamentarians.

I will single out, rather unfairly perhaps, two colleagues who have spoken, for different reasons—first, my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone). The story about his constituent needing an extra diaper a day for his mother brought home to us all what we are talking about when we are talking about carers: the stresses, the fact that they are providing very basic care—whether it is dealing with toileting, doing washing, dressing, eating or drinking—to ensure that a loved one can have a quality of life, and how the emotional impact of that can affect people. I am grateful for his contribution, which I think brought us down to earth on what we are talking about.

I also thank the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for talking about the need to identify young carers. The Minister picked that up, agreeing that we need to talk about that more generally. There is an issue about helping people to identify themselves, because many people do not understand that they are carers. They see it as just looking after their wife or husband, son or daughter, or mother or father, but we need to identify them to ensure that they are getting the support that they need, whether for their own mental health, respite care or whatever it might be.

We also need to ensure, as we plan health services, social services, or whatever it may be, that we have proper information. The census, when it comes out, may refresh the figures of 2011. Many colleagues were involved in the efforts to encourage people, when they took the census, to identify themselves as carers. I would probably multiply whatever figures come from the census because I am not sure that all carers will identify themselves as such. However, if we can do that more effectively I think we can bring home to policymakers how significant the issue is. It has been massively underplayed by Government after Government, so I am grateful to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central. He mentioned young carers. I cannot see, for example, why that cannot be central to the annual school census. That is a pretty easy thing to do. I am very happy to work with him and others to try to work with the Government to bring that about.

If we value carers for the work that they do and properly identify them, I think we can come together and really improve the support that we give them, which is so essential. In so doing, we can dramatically improve the health and wellbeing of the people we are elected to serve, which is utterly crucial. May I end, Mr Hollobone, by thanking everybody—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I am afraid not. The sitting stands adjourned.

4.45 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Thursday 22 July 2021

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Innovation and R&D Strategies, Post Office Horizon and Framework for Better Regulation

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): Today the Government are publishing the UK innovation strategy, “Leading the future by creating it”.

Innovation is central to tackling the largest challenges the world faces, from climate change to global pandemics. The UK must be in the vanguard of the response to these challenges. That is why the Government have placed innovation at the heart of our plan for growth and so much else we want to achieve, from fighting coronavirus to achieving net zero and building global Britain.

The UK has a long and illustrious history of world-leading innovation, from the industrial revolution to the vaccine development of the past year. Now we have left the EU, we can move even more quickly to respond to emerging challenges and global opportunities, and cement the UK’s position as a world leader in science, research and innovation.

To this end, the UK innovation strategy sets out the Government’s vision to make the UK a global hub for innovation by 2035, placing innovation at the centre of everything this nation does. Through this we seek to generate disruptive inventions, the most tech-centric industry and Government in the world, more tech “unicorns”, and a nation of firms and people that all aspire to innovate.

To achieve these objectives, we want to unlock business investment in innovation. This is a core objective of the innovation strategy, and my officials have consulted with over 400 businesses and organisations to determine the factors that could lead to an increase in business innovation.

In the innovation strategy we set out our plans against four key pillars, which will support the achievement of our vision:

Pillar 1: Unleashing Business—we will fuel businesses who want to innovate.

Pillar 2: People—we will make the UK the most exciting place for innovation talent.

Pillar 3: Institutions & Places—we will ensure our research, development and innovation institutions serve the needs of businesses and places across the UK.

Pillar 4: Missions & Technologies—we will stimulate innovation to tackle major challenges faced by the UK and the world and drive capability in key technologies.

Through these pillars, the innovation strategy aims to both establish the right underlying policy environment and clearly signal those areas where the Government will take the lead.

This innovation strategy is only the first step. In the coming months and years, we will maintain a laser-like focus on realising our ambitions for innovation. We will track a range of quantitative metrics to measure our progress in delivering our commitments, alongside in-depth

intelligence from businesses and other innovation stakeholders. Innovation will also be a crucial element of our efforts to level up the UK economy. A detailed strategy for levelling up through research and innovation will be set out as a part of the Government’s forthcoming levelling up White Paper.

I will place a copy of the innovation strategy in the Libraries of both Houses.

R&D People and Culture Strategy

I am also delighted to announce that the Government have today published their “R&D People and Culture Strategy”, delivering on the commitment we made in the R&D road map last summer. The road map recognised that people are at the heart of research and development, and that we need talented, diverse people, with the right skills, working in an environment that allows them to do their best work and deliver positive outcomes for our society and the economy.

The R&D people and culture strategy sets out, for the first time, a whole sector vision that is backed by clear Government commitments. It is a call to action to create a more inclusive, dynamic and sustainable UK R&D sector, in which a diversity of people and ideas can thrive.

Through this strategy, we will set out actions that will bring the best out of people and enable talent and ideas to flow freely between academia, business, and other sectors. We will ensure that everyone’s contribution is valued, and the UK has an outstanding research culture that truly supports discovery, diversity, and innovation, and offers varied and diverse careers that bring excitement and recognition.

The strategy identifies three priority areas across which action is needed:

People: redefining what it means to work in R&D in the 21st century—valuing all the roles that make it a success and ensuring the UK has the capability and capacity it needs.

Culture: co-creating a vision of the culture we want to see within the sector—working together to make lasting change happen so that researchers and innovators with diverse backgrounds and ways of thinking can thrive and do their best work here.

Talent: renewing the UK’s position as a global leader in R&D in attracting, retaining and developing talented people, making sure careers in UK R&D are attractive to talented individuals and teams both domestically and internationally.

A talented and thriving R&D workforce will be key for realising our science superpower ambitions, and the R&D people and culture strategy will play an important role in supporting the vision I am setting out in the innovation strategy to make the UK a global hub for innovation by 2035.

We have engaged widely with the sector to date on the issues identified in this strategy, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Science, Research and Innovation and I are very grateful to the hundreds of individuals and organisations who have contributed to their respective development. The Government will continue working closely with the sector to ensure the successful implementation.

I will place a copy of the R&D people and culture strategy in the Libraries of both Houses.

Post Office Horizon Update

This House is aware of the distressing impact that problems with the Post Office’s Horizon IT system have had on the lives and livelihoods of many postmasters.

Over the years, the Horizon accounting system recorded shortfalls in cash in branches. These shortfalls were treated by the Post Office as caused by postmasters, and this led to dismissals, recovery of losses by Post Office Ltd and, in some cases, criminal prosecutions. We now know this data was unreliable.

The Court of Appeal handed down a landmark judgment on 23 April 2021, which quashed the convictions of 39 postmasters. A further 12 were quashed in the Court of Appeal earlier this week. Further convictions have been quashed in the Crown court. The Government have been clear that we want to see compensation delivered fairly and as quickly as possible. We have also been clear that it is for the Post Office to engage with the individuals in the first instance regarding how compensation can be paid. I am pleased to provide an update on the steps to begin providing compensation to postmasters whose criminal convictions were based on Horizon data and have been quashed.

We have listened to affected postmasters and want to see them receive compensation quickly. The Government have therefore decided to support the Post Office so that it can make interim payments of up to £100,000 promptly to individual postmasters whose criminal convictions relied on Horizon data and have been quashed, ahead of final compensation settlements being agreed with them. I am providing this support in my capacity as sole shareholder in the Post Office.

While we recognise that these interim payments may not represent the full compensation that postmasters may ultimately receive, and which will need to be determined between the Post Office and the individuals concerned, it is a means of providing monies to individuals at an early stage in the claims process. The process for finally determining the compensation to be paid will take time and will involve POL obtaining a full quantification of all claims. These claims need to be carefully examined so that postmasters ultimately receive fair compensation and the payments that they deserve.

In the meantime, the Government thank the postmasters for their patience, recognising the impact that being wrongfully prosecuted has had on individuals, and believe that an interim payment is a way to begin to address the hardships they have faced ahead of when the final sum can be determined and paid.

The Post Office is contacting the legal representatives of postmasters whose convictions have been quashed with further information about interim payments. We expect the Post Office to issue offer letters for interim payments within 28 days of receiving a claim from eligible postmasters.

The Government are committed to supporting and maintaining the post office network, which, along with the postmasters, provides essential services to our urban and rural communities. This decision supports the Government's priorities to support postmasters and to see the longstanding Horizon issues resolved. This support is in addition to the financial support BEIS has provided for the historical shortfall scheme to proceed, which was opened to recompense postmasters who repaid shortfalls and did not have a criminal conviction. In addition, BEIS launched the Post Office Horizon IT inquiry, which recently converted to a statutory footing, following the Court of Appeal judgment.

We understand that the Post Office has already begun work to deliver the full compensation sum to postmasters and we will work with them towards this. With my status as sole shareholder in the Post Office, my Department continues to engage actively with Post Office Ltd on this and will maintain strong oversight of this process.

Reforming the framework for better regulation

Our exit from the EU provides us with the opportunity to think boldly about how we regulate and for the first time in a generation, we have the freedom to conceive and implement rules that put the UK first. The UK will use its newfound freedoms as an independent trading nation to boost growth, increase competition and create jobs by revamping the way rules and regulations for businesses are set. We will use this freedom to unlock cutting-edge technologies, unleash innovation, and propel start-up growth, levelling up every corner of the UK. This will be a crucial part of boosting our productivity and helping us bring the benefits of growth to the whole of our country.

In seizing this opportunity, we are launching a consultation to seek feedback from interested parties on how we can reform the UK framework for better regulation.

The consultation sets out five principles that will underpin the Government's approach to regulation to ensure it benefits the British people:

A sovereign approach: the UK will use its freedoms to take a tailored approach to setting rules in a way that boosts growth and benefits the British people.

Leading from the front: we will act nimbly to support the development of new technologies.

Proportionality: we will use non-regulatory options where we can, while acting decisively to put in place strong rules where they are needed.

Recognising what works: regulations will be thoroughly analysed to ensure they work in the real world.

Setting high standards at home and globally: we will set high standards at home and engage in robust regulatory diplomacy across the world, leading in multilateral settings, influencing the decisions of others and helping to solve problems that require a global approach.

Proposals explored in the consultation

The consultation follows a report from the taskforce on innovation, growth and regulatory reform, which the Prime Minister convened earlier this year, and examines a number of the taskforce's proposals for reforming regulation, including the adoption of a less-codified, common law approach to regulation. There is also a focus on the process for measuring and reporting impacts under the better regulation framework. Areas examined in the consultation include:

the adoption of a less codified, common law approach to regulation;

a review of the role of regulators, especially around competition and innovation;

delegation of more discretion to regulators to achieve regulatory objectives in a more agile and flexible way counterbalanced by increased accountability and scrutiny;

streamlining the process of assessment of impacts;

moving to earlier scrutiny of impact assessments and evaluation of existing regulation;

consideration of options on measuring the impact of regulation; reintroduction of regulatory offsetting; and

baselining the UK's regulatory burden.

CABINET OFFICE

Supply Chain Finance in Government: Boardman Review

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): On 12 April, the Government announced that the Prime Minister had asked Nigel Boardman to investigate the development and use of supply chain finance in Government, especially the role of Lex Greensill and Greensill Capital (including associated companies or companies in its group) and any related issues that Mr Boardman considered were in scope.

In accordance with the terms of reference, Mr Boardman has provided the Prime Minister with a report which sets out Mr Boardman's findings of fact. This was provided to the Prime Minister yesterday and is being made available to the House today.

In producing this report, Mr Boardman interviewed 45 individuals, for a total of over 100 hours. Mr Boardman had access to all the papers he requested, totalling several thousand pages of written evidence. This is a non-statutory review, but in line with long-standing convention, the Prime Minister made clear at the outset his expectation that all Ministers, special advisers and civil servants, whether current or former, should co-operate fully. Those individuals who participated, or their personal representative where applicable, were provided with relevant documents to assist their evidence. They were then offered the opportunity to discuss the relevant documents and provide any comment during an interview with Mr Boardman. These comments were considered, in good faith, as part of the review.

The purpose of the review was to establish the facts and any lessons to be learnt. As set out in the terms of reference, the review does not form part of a disciplinary process, nor is it intended to apportion blame or criticism to individuals. In establishing and setting out the facts, however, Mr Boardman attributes actions to named individuals, some of which could be read as critical of individuals. Where this is the case, the individuals concerned, or their personal representative where applicable, were given the opportunity ahead of the report being finalised to make representations on those sections of the report that could be perceived as criticisms to correct factual inaccuracies.

The Government thank Mr Boardman for all of his work in examining the evidence and setting out his judgement on the facts of what occurred. Mr Boardman will be providing the second part of his report, including any specific recommendations, shortly. The Government will respond to Mr Boardman's findings, and any recommendations, in due course.

I am depositing a copy of the report in the Libraries of both Houses, and publishing it on gov.uk.

[HCWS237]

Cross-Government Functions and Digital Delivery

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The covid-19 pandemic has strained our country's resilience like nothing we have seen out of wartime, and the public have endured huge sacrifices. Our mission now is to respond

by transforming the country for the better, levelling up, and making opportunity more equal. To achieve these changes, Government must be reformed.

The recently published "Declaration on Government Reform", set out a plan for the renewal and rewiring of Government, as a means to deliver the better Britain that the public demands and deserves. As part of its focus on improving performance, the declaration committed to improving the cross-Government functions and strengthening standards and spending controls, to ensure the Government are delivering both excellence and value for money.

The Government are today publishing two independent and separate reports which each contain recommendations on how to improve the cross-Government functions and digital delivery. These two reports are:

1. A review of the cross-cutting functions and the operation of spend controls, by the right hon. Lord Maude of Horsham; and
2. Organising for digital delivery report presented to the Digital Economy Council.

Lord Maude's advice and the "Organising for Digital Delivery" report presented to the Digital Economy Council are critical to driving reform activity within the cross-Government functions, and the reports were invaluable input in finalising the commitments and actions in the declaration.

Lord Maude's recommendations are centred around a strong functional model with three essential elements of leadership, capability and mandate. Strong progress is being made on the functional reform activity, overseen by myself and Lord Agnew, and a board chaired by Alex Chisholm, the chief operating officer for the civil service. Some examples of progress so far include:

New leadership put in place for the digital data and technology function, as announced in January this year. This included the establishment of the central digital and data office to work with the Government digital service and lead the digital, data and technology function for Government, also taking on responsibility for the Government automation taskforce.

The Infrastructure and Projects Authority's publication of its mandate in January, which sets out clearly its own responsibilities and those of departmental accounting officers for major Government projects and programmes. This is critical to making sure they are set up for success from the outset, supporting the Government to meet their ambitions.

Steps have been taken to strengthen spending controls, and increase their reach and effectiveness. More organisations are now in scope and the controls are being applied more consistently within Departments.

Lord Maude's report advises on the need to set in train (or complete, where already underway) assessment and accreditation programmes; multiple functions are actively exploring how this should be achieved. Investment in professional expertise, recognising its importance, will be an integral part of Government functions. For example, the training and accreditation of contract managers across Government is being led by the Government commercial function, which is critical to driving excellent value for money for taxpayers.

We are implementing a programme of modernisation to strengthen and unify the communications profession across Government, to provide more efficient, responsive and effective communication which delivers Government priorities with one voice. This will build fulfilling careers for people and allow us to attract and develop the best talent.

The shared services strategy for Government was published in March 2021. Following Lord Maude's advice, and working across Government, a core element of the strategy is the plan to consolidate

all back office services into a maximum of five centres. This will achieve better quality services for staff, better people data and reduced cost, encouraging greater collaboration and improving interoperability across Government.

Copies of both reports have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS247]

TREASURY

Covid-19: Contingencies Fund Advance

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs will incur new expenditure in connection with the Government's response to the covid-19 pandemic in 2021-22.

Parliamentary approval for resources of £4,206,110,000 for this new expenditure will be sought in a Supplementary Estimate for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £4,206,110,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

Further requests to the Contingencies Fund may be made as necessary to fund covid-19 activity delivered by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

[HCWS239]

DEFENCE

Dealing with Rape and Serious Sexual Offences: Defence's Strategy

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): Today I am pleased to announce the Ministry of Defence's intent to publish a defence-wide strategy for dealing with rape and serious sexual offences in the service justice system (SJS).

As set out in the cross-Government violence against women and girls strategy published yesterday, crimes against women and girls is an unacceptable, preventable issue. To echo the Lord Chancellor in his statement on the end-to-end rape review on 21 June, rape and serious sexual offences are some of the most horrific crimes dealt with in both the civilian criminal justice system and the service justice system. They have devastating and lasting effects on victims, and it is only right that action is taken to improve public confidence, make the system fairer and more effective and encourage victims to come forward.

The SJS deals with significantly fewer cases of rape and serious sexual offending compared to the civilian criminal justice system. However, service personnel must have confidence that they will receive the same high-quality care, support and justice in either system. Viewed as a proportion of allegations reported rather than just the cases which reach court, in 2020 the conviction rate in the service justice system was around 8%¹ compared to around 2% in the civilian criminal justice system². While we are confident the SJS is capable of dealing with the most serious offences, it is still not good enough.

Both systems must do better, which is why we will be producing a strategy that will pull together ongoing work across the whole of the SJS.

The Ministry of Defence has already been working with the agencies and bodies within the SJS to introduce improvements by implementing the majority of recommendations made in the service justice system review (2019) by HH Shaun Lyons. This includes measures such as the creation of a defence serious crime unit; changes to how the court martial operates; and better support for victims and witnesses.

In addition, the Defence Secretary has asked Sir Richard Henriques to conduct an independent review of policing, and prosecutorial and other processes for addressing allegations emanating from overseas operations. The review, which is due to report shortly, will set out recommendations on improving the investigative processes within the SJS.

Furthermore, the Defence Select Committee inquiry into women in the armed forces is due to publish its report shortly. The Committee has been looking at the experience of our female service personnel from recruitment to transition and considering whether there are unique challenges that are not adequately addressed by the current policies and services. The Committee received evidence from current and former female service personnel in their thousands, for which serving personnel were given special permission to contribute. We expect this report to make a number of recommendations in relation to the handling of rape and serious sexual offence cases, and we will review its evidence and recommendations with the full seriousness and sensitivity they deserve.

To build on these developments, and the recent publication of the violence against women and girls strategy, the Defence Secretary and I have commissioned a defence-wide strategy for how rape and serious sexual offences are dealt with in the SJS. The strategy will aim to reduce the prevalence and impact of rape and other serious sexual offending in the armed forces and improve the handling of those cases in the SJS. It will learn from the Government's recent response to the review of the end-to-end handling of rape cases in the civilian criminal justice system and provide reassurance that the SJS is also determined to do better and hold component parts of the system to account for delivering improvements.

The strategy will recognise the importance to our people and to the wider service community of the damage caused by sexual offending. With that in mind, we will ensure that support is provided to those who want it, and reassurance that it will remain in place for as long as it is needed. In addition, we will be open and transparent about what victims can expect from the SJS at all stages of their case.

The strategy will bring together in one place all the provisions which the service justice system already has for dealing with cases of rape and serious sexual assault and ensure they are coherent across the whole system and that the interests of the victim are prioritised.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/sexual-offences-in-the-service-justice-system-2020>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/end-to-end-rape-review-report-on-findings-and-actions>

[HCWS241]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Packaging Extended Producer Responsibility Scheme: Contingencies Fund Advance

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): DEFRA has sought a repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund of £275,000.

The requirement has arisen because there is an urgent requirement to proceed with the procurement of scheme administrators for the packaging extended producer responsibility scheme and the deposit return scheme in advance of Royal Assent of the Environment Bill.

Under managing public money rules, expenditure to make preparation for the delivery of a new service prior to Royal Assent requires an advance from the Contingencies Fund. The cash advance will pay for essential expenditure related to procurement activities. The need to spend now in advance of Royal Assent is driven by the necessary timelines associated with procurement.

Parliamentary approval for expenditure of £275,000 for this new service will be sought in a supplementary estimate for DEFRA. Pending that approval, urgent resourcing estimated at £275,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS236]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Global Anti-corruption Sanctions

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): Today, the UK has imposed asset freezes and travel bans on five individuals under the Global Anti-Corruption Sanctions Regulations 2021.

This is the second set of designations under this regime since the regulations were laid in April 2021. The regime can be used to impose sanctions for serious corruption around the world. As set out in the regulations, the activities covered are bribery and misappropriation, plus a range of different kinds of involvement in such bribery or misappropriation.

These designations address cases of serious corruption which have deprived citizens of vital resources in Equatorial Guinea, Iraq, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

In Equatorial Guinea, the sanctions target the Vice-President, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, for his involvement in the misappropriation of state funds, corrupt contracting arrangements and soliciting bribes to fund a lavish lifestyle in various countries abroad. We have designated Nawfal Hammadi Al-Sultan, a former Iraqi governor, who misappropriated public funds intended for reconstruction efforts and to provide support for civilians, and improperly awarded contracts and other state property. We have designated Alex Nain Saab Moran and Alvaro Enrique Pulido Vargas, businessmen with links to the Maduro regime, for exploiting two of Venezuela's public programmes which were set up to supply poor Venezuelans with affordable foodstuffs and housing. They benefited from improperly awarded contracts, where promised goods were delivered at highly inflated prices. Finally, we have designated Kudakwashe Regimond

Tagwirei, a Zimbabwean businessperson whose involvement in misappropriation was at the expense of the country's macroeconomic stability.

These latest designations show the UK's ongoing commitment to the fight against corruption. They send a powerful message to deter those involved in serious corruption around the world: you and your dirty money are not welcome in our country. We will continue to keep future designations under close review, guided by the purposes of the sanctions regime and the evidence.

[HCWS244]

British Council: Sale of IELTS in India

The Minister for Asia (Nigel Adams): I can today inform Parliament that the British Council, a non-departmental public body of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, will sell its IELTS English language test business in India to IDP Education, for £130 million. The business will be sold on a debt free, cash free basis.

Rationale

Like many organisations, covid-19 has had a significant financial impact on the British Council's operations. The proceeds from the sale will strengthen the British Council's financial position and support its modernisation process.

Format and timing

Due to the nature of the agreement between the British Council and its IELTS partners, there is only one possible buyer of the British Council's India IELTS business. Ernst & Young provided an independent valuation, which concluded that the offer for the business was fair and reasonable.

UK Government Investments has worked closely with the FCDO providing valuable advice on commercial aspects of the British Council's outline and full business cases for the transaction.

Fiscal impacts

I can confirm that the net sale proceeds of £120 million were above the Government's retention value range.

<i>Metric</i>	<i>Impact (over a five-year horizon)</i>
Net sale proceeds	£120 million
Retention value range	Above
Public sector net borrowing	No immediate impact
Public sector net debt	Improved by a total of £120 million
Public sector net financial liabilities	Improved by a total of £120 million
Public sector net liabilities	Improved by a total of £118 million

[HCWS240]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Integrated Care Systems

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): Earlier this year, Ministers asked NHS England to set out options for boundary alignment in integrated care systems in specific geographies where upper-tier local authorities currently have to work across more than one ICS footprint and to assess the impact of changes to deliver alignment in each case. Over the last six months NHS England has worked with stakeholders to develop advice and analysis for each of the affected areas to inform the final decision.

This work has now concluded, with advice provided to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. This statement sets out the final decision that has been taken for the areas in scope of the review:

East of England
Frimley
Bassetlaw
Glossop
West Birmingham
North Northamptonshire

This work has been underpinned by the principle that coterminous boundaries deliver clear benefits in integration between local authorities and NHS organisations. As approaches to integrated care develop it is crucial that we have a system that helps support closer working both across NHS organisations and between the NHS and local government.

On the ground, coterminous boundaries can also improve joined-up decision making on delivery of services for patients. Improved alignment can allow areas to build joint care models around a wide variety of services including children's and adult social care services, public health, as well as community and mental health services which are often also aligned along local authority footprints.

There has therefore been a strong presumption of moving towards coterminosity, save for in exceptional circumstances where there were strong reasons for not doing so.

NHS England regional teams have conducted robust engagement activity with local stakeholder organisations to develop analysis of the risks, mitigations and benefits for any options for coterminous boundaries in the affected areas. This engagement has included roundtables with local NHS organisations, including the ICS's themselves as well as providers, commissioners and local authorities.

The Department of Health and Social Care has engaged at ministerial level with parliamentarians as well as national organisations such as NHS Providers and the Local Government Association to ensure their views were reflected in the final advice to the Secretary of State and they had an opportunity to feed into the development of this work.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care's decision process has involved careful consideration of a wide range of issues, perspectives and interests and a careful weighing up of risks and benefits, outlined in the analysis provided by NHS England for each area as well as having regard to his legal duties.

These have been considered on a case-by-case basis for each area and where NHS England has made a recommendation based on broad (not universal) local consensus, including a recommendation to retain the status quo, the Secretary of State has listened and has accepted these recommendations. There was not a broad local consensus for three of the areas within this review and as such no recommendations were made by NHS England. In these areas a balanced judgement was taken, weighing up the risks and benefits of a change in boundaries and having regard to his legal duties by the Secretary of State.

Following this review, the Secretary of State has concluded:

East of England—this area is considered an appropriate exemption to the principle of coterminosity. No changes will be made to the existing boundaries.

Frimley—this area is considered an appropriate exemption from the principle of coterminosity. No changes will be made to existing boundaries.

Glossop—The decision has been taken to move the area of Glossop from Greater Manchester ICS into Derbyshire ICS.

Bassetlaw—The decision has been taken to move the area of Bassetlaw from South Yorkshire and Bassetlaw ICS into Nottingham and Nottinghamshire ICS thus delivering coterminous boundaries for the area.

West Birmingham—The decision has been taken to move west Birmingham from the Black Country and West Birmingham ICS into Birmingham and Solihull ICS thus delivering coterminous boundaries for the area.

North Northamptonshire—The decision has been taken to move the Lakeside Healthcare GP practice into Northamptonshire ICS and retain the Wansford and Kings Cliffe GP practice in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough ICS. This moves the region much closer to coterminous boundaries and reflects specific local considerations.

Local areas may still wish to keep under review how their boundaries are working in the light of any new legislative framework. Therefore, this decision does not preclude the important work many systems undertake naturally to ensure they have a system and boundaries that best suit local needs. We have already heard such requests from local stakeholders around Cheshire and Merseyside ICS, as such the Secretary of State has also announced his intention to review this system. The Secretary of State also intends to review the areas of Cumbria and North Yorkshire, as we are now aware, they will remain non-coterminous following the conclusion of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's unitarisation process. These reviews will take place in two years, following the implementation, subject to parliamentary passage, of the Health and Care Bill.

Full details of these decisions and the decision process will be published on the Department of Health and Social Care section on the gov.uk website shortly.

[HCWS248]

HOME DEPARTMENT

New Plan for Immigration

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): On 6 July, the Government introduced the Nationality and Borders Bill in Parliament. This is part of the Government's new plan for immigration, delivering the most comprehensive reform in decades to deliver a fair but firm immigration system.

The Bill—and the wider plan—has three key objectives:

To make the system fairer and more effective so that we can better protect and support those in genuine need of asylum

To deter illegal entry into the UK breaking the business model of criminal trafficking networks and saving lives

To remove from the UK those with no right to be here

The introduction of the Bill was preceded by a consultation that was launched in March. The Government have carefully considered that consultation, and I am today laying before the House a Command Paper (CP 493) setting out their response.

This has also been published on gov.uk.

[HCWS245]

Proceeds of Crime Act 2002: Appointed Person Reports

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): The Proceeds of Crime Act 2002—POCA—appointed person reports covering England and Wales for the period 2017-18 to 2020-21 are today being laid before Parliament.

The appointed person is independent of Government and scrutinises the circumstances and manner in which the search and seizure powers conferred by the Act are exercised in instances where prior approval is not gained from a justice of the peace and either no seizures are made or any cash or property seized is not detained for more than 48 hours.

I am pleased that we are now able to publish Mr McCourt's reports covering the period from 2017-18 to 2020-21.

The House will note that there has been a delay in publishing the appointed person reports since the 2016-17 report, when the previous office holder's tenure ended. Greg McCourt was subsequently appointed to the role for each of the three jurisdictions—England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland—with effect from 1 August 2019. Despite the pressures and challenges of covid, since his appointment he has been working across the jurisdictions and with POCA stakeholders to receive and assess reports on the use of the relevant powers of search and seizure.

Importantly, Mr McCourt is satisfied with the operation of the powers in the period. There is nothing to suggest that the procedures are not being followed in accordance with the Act. While the figures for 2019-20 and 2020-21 show a small increase in the number of reported cases, that reflects more regular use of the powers in a broader range of live police operations, supporting the recovery of the proceeds of crime whenever they are encountered.

Mr McCourt has made two recommendations: first, that a template should be developed to standardise the information that law enforcement officers provide; and secondly, that law enforcement agencies be regularly reminded of their reporting requirements under the Act. I support Mr McCourt's recommendations and my officials will work with him and our stakeholders to implement both.

These powers are a valuable tool in the fight against crime. As the reports show, these powers have been used appropriately to combat crime. We will continue to monitor closely the way the powers have been used. Copies of the reports will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS249]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Abortion Services Directions 2021

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Brandon Lewis): Today I am issuing a direction to the Department of Health, the Minister of Health, the Health and Social Care Board, and to the First and Deputy First Minister, to commission and make abortion services available in Northern Ireland as soon as possible, and no later than 31 March 2022. I am also directing that there should be immediate support for interim services of early medical abortion, which are at risk of collapse.

I have a statutory duty to protect the rights of women and girls in Northern Ireland, imposed by section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019. This duty requires me to ensure that the recommendations in paragraphs 85 and 86 of the 2018 Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) report are implemented in full. I therefore have a duty to “provide women with access to high-quality abortion and post-abortion care in all public health facilities”. I acknowledge and respect the deeply held views that individuals hold on this issue. However, it is the clear will of Parliament that the rights of women and girls in Northern Ireland are properly upheld.

The Government laid the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020 and they came into force on 31 March 2020. Those regulations delivered a framework for abortion services which struck the appropriate balance between delivering a CEDAW compliant legal framework that ensures the health and safety of women and girls, and gives clarity and certainty to the healthcare profession, but is also sensitive to the circumstances in Northern Ireland.

In March 2021, we took a further step and made the Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2021. We took this important step because a year after the 2020 regulations were made, women and girls in Northern Ireland are still unable to access high-quality abortion and post-abortion care in Northern Ireland in all the circumstances allowed by the regulations we made on 31 March 2020. This remains the case today.

The Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2021 gave me a power to direct a Northern Ireland Minister, a Northern Ireland department and the Health and Social Care Board of the Public Health Agency to take action necessary to implement all the recommendations in paragraphs 85 and 86 of the CEDAW report. The regulations were debated on 26 and 28 April 2021 in the House of Commons and House of Lords respectively and both Houses supported the regulations overwhelmingly, with a majority of 431 to 89 on a free vote in the Commons.

For over a year, the Northern Ireland Office has continued to work closely with the Department of Health, and other relevant Northern Ireland Departments, trying to progress this work. Some service provision commenced on the ground from last April and I put on record my thanks to the medical professionals and Informing Choices Northern Ireland who have ensured that women and girls have had some local access to abortion services in Northern Ireland, and the organisations that have supported this work.

Though I recognise the huge strain that covid-19 has placed on healthcare in Northern Ireland, I remain extremely disappointed that full commissioning proposals have not yet been brought forward by the Department of Health and that the Executive has not an opportunity to discuss them. This ongoing stalemate leaves me no choice but to issue a direction. I have a legal and moral obligation to ensure the women and girls in Northern Ireland are afforded their rights and can access the healthcare as set out in the 2020 regulations.

I am now directing the Department of Health to secure the commissioning and availability of the relevant healthcare services. The direction also includes an immediate requirement for the Department of Health to continue to support the central access point provided by Informing

Choices NI (ICNI) who are key to providing early medical abortion services. I have chosen to impose a deadline for the availability of commissioned services of 31 March 2022 to account for the Department of Health's estimate that it would take 8-12 months to make fully commissioned CEDAW compliant services available.

I am also directing the Department of Health and the regional Health and Social Care Board. The direction includes a requirement to commission, provide and fund abortion services so that they are available in all of the circumstances in which abortions are lawful. This includes access to services in cases of fatal foetal abnormality and severe foetal impairment in line with the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No 2) Regulations 2020 in any service commissioned. It is for the Northern Ireland Executive to allocate all necessary funding for abortion services from its Barnett-based block grant or its own resources.

I am also directing the First Minister and Deputy First Minister that once proposals are brought forward by the Department of Health, they must be included on the agenda at the next meeting of the Executive Committee.

At the heart of this matter are the women and girls in Northern Ireland, who have been, and continue to be, denied the same reproductive rights as women in the rest of the UK. Parliament determined that this should be corrected and by exercising the power to direct, we will ensure that it is.

[HCWS238]

PRIME MINISTER

Machinery of Government Change: Vaccine Taskforce

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I am making this statement to bring to the House's attention the following machinery of Government change.

With effect from 1 August 2021, the vaccine taskforce will become a joint unit of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department of Health and Social Care.

To support this, responsibility for the taskforce's work on vaccine and antibody procurement and supply and clinical development will transfer, on the same date, from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to the Department of Health and Social Care. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will remain responsible for vaccine and antibody manufacturing.

[HCWS242]

Intelligence and Security Committee's GCHQ Procurement Report: Government Response

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): On 19 November 2020, the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (ISC) published its report entitled "GCHQ Accommodation Procurement: A Case Study".

The procurement of Nova South as the headquarters of the National Cyber Security Centre was a unique challenge, undertaken within a demanding timeframe and as a result, the Government acknowledge there are lessons that can be learned from the procurement process.

Today, the Government are publishing their response to this report.

I remain grateful to the Intelligence and Security Committee for its continued independent oversight and scrutiny. I would like to thank the former Committee for its work in the last Parliament, and I look forward to working with the appointed Committee in the future.

Copies of the Government response have been laid before both Houses.

[HCWS243]

TRANSPORT

National Policy Statement for National Networks: Review

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):

In 2019, our roads handled 88% of all passenger travel by distance, the vast majority of it by car or van. Even doubling rail use across the country would only reduce this proportion to 75%, assuming that overall demand did not rise. The roads also carry more than three quarters of freight traffic, and of course nearly all pedestrian, cycling, bus and coach journeys.

Continued high investment in our roads is therefore, and will remain, as necessary as ever to ensure the functioning of the nation and to reduce the congestion which is a major source of carbon. Almost half of our £27 billion programme for England's strategic roads, though often described as being for road building or capacity expansion, is in fact for renewing, maintaining and operating the existing network, or for funds to improve safety and biodiversity, deliver active travel schemes and tackle noise or pollution.

In the coming years, our ambitious and accelerating plans to decarbonise all road traffic will transform roads' impact on greenhouse gas emissions. We have always said, however, that we must ensure the road network meets today's demands, not those of the past. In the last 18 months, fundamental changes have occurred in commuting, shopping and business travel, which before the pandemic made up 30% of all road journeys by distance, and a much higher proportion at the times and places of greatest pressure.

Trends already under way in home working, online shopping and videoconferencing, all of which had reduced trip rates even before the pandemic, have dramatically increased, and seem unlikely to be fully reversed. Against that, though, must be set the effects on road demand of the hopefully temporary move away from public transport during the crisis; of increases in delivery traffic; and potentially of increases in driving when electric and autonomous vehicles become common.

The current national policy statement (NPS) on national networks, the Government statement of strategic planning policy for major road and rail schemes, was written in 2014, before the Government legal commitment to net zero, the 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution, the new sixth carbon budget and most directly the new, more ambitious policies outlined in the transport decarbonisation plan.

While the NPS continues to remain in force, it is right that we review it in the light of these developments, and update forecasts on which it is based to reflect more recent, post-pandemic conditions, once they are known.

The aim is to begin the review later this year, and for it to be completed no later than spring 2023. This review will include a thorough examination of the modelling and forecasts that support the statement of need for development, and the environmental, safety, resilience, and local community considerations that planning decisions must take into account. Reviewing the NPS will ensure that it remains fit for purpose in supporting the Government commitments for appropriate development of infrastructure for road, rail, and strategic rail freight interchanges.

While the review is undertaken, the NPS remains relevant Government policy and has effect for the purposes of the Planning Act 2008. The NPS will, therefore, continue to provide a proper basis on which the planning inspectorate can examine, and the Secretary of State can make decisions on, applications for development consent.

[HCWS235]

Petition

Thursday 22 July 2021

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Dog attacks

The petition of Emma Gambrell,

Declares that current legislation in the form of the Dogs Act 1871 and Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 does not account for dog-on-dog attacks where the dogs behave dangerously and are clearly out of control of irresponsible owners; further that this means that owners of dangerous dogs do not face robust action when their dogs attack other dogs; further that this problem was recently horribly highlighted in the case of Enfield North constituent Emma Gambrell's dog, where her beautiful border collie, Blue, was attacked and mauled to death by two Cane Corso dogs that escaped from their garden, and where the owners who were present in their garden and were witness to the event were unable to control their dogs; and further that attacks such as this leave owners and families distraught and traumatised.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to review the Dogs Act 1871 and Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, to set out whether this problem could be addressed by making dog-on-dog attacks a criminal offence, and to ensure that irresponsible owners of dangerous dogs face more robust action.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Feryal Clark, *Official Report*, 27 April 2021; Vol. 693, c. 330.]

[P002661]

Observations from The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice):

I was very sorry to hear about the incident involving Emma Gambrell's dog. I would like to thank the petitioners for raising the issue of dog on dog attacks.

Under section 3 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 ("the 1991 Act"), it is an offence to allow a dog to be dangerously out of control. For the purposes of the 1991 Act, this includes any occasion on which there are grounds for reasonable apprehension that the dog in question will injure someone, whether or not it actually does so. The maximum penalty for such an offence is

14 years' imprisonment if it results in the death of a person; five years in the case of injury; three years if it is an attack on an assistance dog; and six months where no injury is caused to a person.

The law does not specifically exclude an attack by a dog on another animal from the offence of allowing a dog to be dangerously out of control. In March 2018 the Government wrote to all police forces and local authorities about the range of powers and measures available in relation to dangerous dogs. The note included a specific reference to section 3 of the 1991 Act and reminded all parties that it applied to attacks on animals as well as people.

The Government also amended the 1991 Act to tackle irresponsible dog owners, so that from May 2016 it became an offence to allow a dog to be dangerously out of control in any place, including in the home. Section 2 of the Dogs Act 1871 also allows for a complaint to be made to a magistrates court by any individual or authority that a dog is

"dangerous and not kept under proper control".

The court may make any order it considers appropriate to require the owner to ensure that the dog is kept under proper control. If considered appropriate, the dog can be destroyed.

Additionally, the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 ("the 2014 Act") includes specific measures to enable the police and local authorities to tackle irresponsible dog ownership before a dog attack occurs. Practitioners can intervene at a much earlier stage and help prevent situations involving irresponsible owners of dogs becoming more serious. The 2014 Act includes streamlined measures to tackle antisocial behaviour, including where such behaviour involves a dog.

The main tool to tackle this form of irresponsible dog ownership is the community protection notice (CPN). These notices can be issued by local authority officers or the police on dog owners, or anyone temporarily in charge of the dog at the time, whose dogs are behaving in an unruly way—for example, where a dog threatens or is allowed to attack another dog. These measures allow the authorities to intervene in situations before a dog becomes dangerously out of control. The CPN could require the dog's owner, or the person in charge of it, to take appropriate action to prevent a reoccurrence of the offending behaviour. To breach a CPN is a criminal offence and could lead to a significant penalty.

The Government are determined to crack down on irresponsible dog ownership and to that end we are encouraging police forces across the country to use these tools.

Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 22 July 2021

HOME DEPARTMENT

Nationality and Borders Bill

The following are extracts from the Second Reading debate of the Nationality and Borders Bill on 19 July 2021.

Priti Patel: From today, I will be granting indefinite leave to remain to refugees resettled under our world-leading resettlement schemes, giving them the vital freedom to succeed from the moment that they arrive in our country and, importantly, offering certainty and stability to help them rebuild their lives from day one.

[Official Report, 19 July 2021, Vol. 699, c. 712.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for the Home Department, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel):

An error has been identified in my speech.

The correct wording should have been:

Priti Patel: From **October**, I will be granting indefinite leave to remain to refugees resettled under our world-leading resettlement schemes, giving them the vital freedom to succeed from the moment that they arrive in our country and, importantly, offering certainty and stability to help them rebuild their lives from day one.

Priti Patel: The Bill raises the minimum sentence for any foreign criminal who returns to the UK in breach of a deportation order from six months to five years.

[Official Report, 19 July 2021, Vol. 699, c. 715.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for the Home Department, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel):

An error has been identified in my speech.

The correct wording should have been:

Priti Patel: The Bill raises the **maximum** sentence for any foreign criminal who returns to the UK in breach of a deportation order from six months to five years.

Priti Patel: Anyone who arrives in the UK via a safe third country may have their claim declined and be returned to a country they arrived from or a third safe country.

[Official Report, 19 July 2021, Vol. 699, c. 717.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for the Home Department, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel):

An error has been identified in my speech.

The correct wording should have been:

Priti Patel: Anyone who arrives in the UK via a safe third country may have **consideration of** their claim declined and be returned to a country they arrived from or a third safe country.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Nationality and Borders Bill

The following is an extract from the Second Reading debate on the Nationality and Borders Bill on 20 July 2021.

Chris Philp: Opposition Members should study article 31 of the refugee convention, which makes it clear that it is permitted to impose penalties where someone has not come “directly” from a place of danger and where they did not have a reasonable opportunity to claim asylum somewhere else.

[Official Report, 20 July 2021, Vol. 699, c. 915.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp):

An error has been identified in my speech.

The correct wording should have been:

Chris Philp: Opposition Members should study article 31 of the refugee convention, which makes it clear that it is permitted to impose penalties where someone has not come “directly” from a place of danger and where they **had** a reasonable opportunity to claim asylum somewhere else.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Future Trade Deals: Human Rights

The following ministerial correction was published on 19 July 2021.

Mr Jayawardena: On the point the hon. Gentleman made towards the end of his question, there has been much talk about global Britain this week and trade is the route to prosperity, for Britain and her friends around the world. Although others may be content with offering only handouts, we are determined to give our friends a hand up. So having taken back control of our trade policy, I can confirm that we will be looking to go further than the EU and we will be setting out our plans and launching a consultation on the generalised system of preference very soon.

[Official Report, 19 July 2021, Vol. 699, c. 4MC.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena):

The ministerial correction should have been:

Mr Jayawardena: On the point the hon. Gentleman made towards the end of his question, there has been much talk about global Britain this week and trade is the route to prosperity, for Britain and her friends around the world. Although others may be content with offering only handouts, we are determined to give our friends a hand up. So having taken back control of our trade policy, I can confirm that we will be looking to go further than the **EU's generalised scheme of preferences** and we will be setting out our plans and launching a consultation on this very soon.

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