

Vol. 803
No. 52



Wednesday
29 April 2020

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
(HANSARD)

HOUSE OF LORDS

OFFICIAL REPORT

ORDER OF BUSINESS

Death of a Former Member: Lord May of Oxford	235
Questions	
Passenger Train Services	236
Social Media: Fake News	239
Tax Avoidance	242
Garden Centres	245
Domestic Abuse	
<i>Private Notice Question</i>	249
Public Services: Update	
<i>Statement</i>	253

Lords wishing to be supplied with these Daily Reports should give notice to this effect to the Printed Paper Office.

No proofs of Daily Reports are provided. Corrections for the bound volume which Lords wish to suggest to the report of their speeches should be clearly indicated in a copy of the Daily Report, which, with the column numbers concerned shown on the front cover, should be sent to the Editor of Debates, House of Lords, within 14 days of the date of the Daily Report.

*This issue of the Official Report is also available on the Internet at
<https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2020-04-29>*

The first time a Member speaks to a new piece of parliamentary business, the following abbreviations are used to show their party affiliation:

Abbreviation	Party/Group
CB	Cross Bench
Con	Conservative
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
GP	Green Party
Ind Lab	Independent Labour
Ind LD	Independent Liberal Democrat
Ind SD	Independent Social Democrat
Ind UU	Independent Ulster Unionist
Lab	Labour
Lab Co-op	Labour and Co-operative Party
LD	Liberal Democrat
LD Ind	Liberal Democrat Independent
Non-afl	Non-affiliated
PC	Plaid Cymru
UKIP	UK Independence Party
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party

No party affiliation is given for Members serving the House in a formal capacity, the Lords spiritual, Members on leave of absence or Members who are otherwise disqualified from sitting in the House.

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Lords 2020,
*this publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament licence,
which is published at www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright/.*

House of Lords

Wednesday 29 April 2020

11 am

Prayers—read by the Lord Bishop of St Albans in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.

Arrangement of Business

Announcement

11.07 am

The announcement was made in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.

The Lord Speaker (Lord Fowler): My Lords, regrettably, we will be unable to live stream Virtual Proceedings on today's Oral Questions. This is due to an unforeseen technical issue with our video conferencing platform, which may result in a breach of our legal data compliance obligation. Obviously, we are working hard with those in the Parliamentary Digital Service and our external supplier to resolve this issue. I am confident that live streaming of our proceedings will resume very soon. We will make video and audio files available as soon as possible after today's proceedings have concluded.

Virtual Proceedings of the House will now begin. I remind Members that these proceedings are subject to parliamentary privilege and that what we say is available to the public both in *Hansard* and to those listening. I remind participating Members that their microphones will be set to mute and that they should unmute them shortly before we reach their place in the speakers' list. Members are asked not to use the group chat function.

Death of a Former Member: Lord May of Oxford

Announcement

The announcement was made in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.

11.08 am

The Lord Speaker (Lord Fowler): My Lords, I regret to inform the House of the death of the noble Lord, Lord May of Oxford, on 28 April. On behalf of the House, I extend our condolences to the noble Lord's family and friends.

Arrangement of Business

Announcement

11.08 am

The announcement was made in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.

The Lord Speaker (Lord Fowler): My Lords, the Virtual Proceedings on Oral Questions will now commence. I will call each Oral Question in the normal way. I will then call the Minister to make the initial

response, and then the noble Lord who asked the original Question to ask their supplementary question in the usual way. The Minister will again respond, and I will then call in turn those noble Lords asking supplementary questions as listed on the speakers' list. Please ensure that questions and answers are short, because that will enable us to get in as many people as possible. I apologise in advance if it is not possible for everyone to be called. Noble Lords should ensure that their microphone is unmuted prior to asking their supplementary question. Microphones will be returned to mute when they have finished speaking. In accordance with guidance agreed by the Procedure Committee, if a noble Lord's name is not listed, it will not be possible for them to ask a supplementary question or to take part in these proceedings.

Passenger Train Services

Question

11.10 am

Asked by Lord Foulkes of Cumnock

To ask Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to review the arrangements for the operation of passenger train services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Question was considered in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Transport (Baroness Vere of Norbiton) (Con): My Lords, the rail industry implemented amended timetables on 23 March in response to a decrease in passenger demand and reduced staffing across train operators and Network Rail. Train services have since been amended to ensure that they are meeting the needs of those who cannot work from home, and they are being kept under regular review.

Lord Foulkes of Cumnock (Lab Co-op): Should not the Department for Transport be thinking now about when we exit from lockdown and looking at increasing rail services, limiting the numbers on each train to allow for social distancing, staggering working hours and protecting workers? Surely it would be wise to talk with Network Rail and Public Health England about such arrangements.

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: I thank the noble Lord for his Question; he is completely and utterly right, and that is precisely what we are doing.

Lord Blencathra (Con): My Lords, I agree that getting train services back to near full operation is absolutely essential. We have all seen reports recently of plans for physical distancing on platforms and seating on the trains, but can my noble friend the Minister explain how to distance oneself from other passengers on a train when using the narrow aisles or going to the toilet? Would compulsory face masks for everyone on a train be a potential solution?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: I thank my noble friend for raising this important issue. Of course, we are being guided by the science and, in looking at how we will re-establish train services, we must look to and work with PHE on implementing the social distancing requirements that will still be in place, and whether face masks will be recommended and will have implications for social distancing. We are completely alive to this issue and it is worth recognising that, if social distancing continues as now, the maximum capacity on all public transport will be significantly reduced.

Lord Hope of Craighead (CB): My Lords, my interest is in the service that LNER east coast provides to Scotland, particularly the north of Scotland. It is maintaining a good service between Kings Cross and Edinburgh, but the services to Inverness and Aberdeen have been discontinued. These measures are understandable for the time being, but it should be understood that having to change trains from the ScotRail services further north to the LNER in Edinburgh is time-consuming and particularly awkward for people who are disabled. Can that be kept carefully under review, and these services be renewed as soon as possible?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: The noble and learned Lord is completely right: it is regrettable that some services have to be significantly scaled back, and these are being kept under review. I reassure him that station staff are available to help disabled passengers transfer between trains as necessary.

Lord Adonis (Lab): Can we thank all the staff who are working on the railways through this crisis and putting special arrangements in place? Given that the business model of the franchise is of course bust now and is likely to remain so after the crisis, what is the Government's thinking: to try to reconstitute franchises on a new basis afterwards, or to move further in the direction of nationalisation?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: I join the noble Lord in paying tribute to all transport workers; they have done an astounding job during this crisis. At the moment, we do not know what the long-term implications for rail and indeed other public transport modes will be. However, we believe that there remains an urgent case for modernisation and reform, so we will be looking at the recommendations in the White Paper that will come out of the Williams Rail Review. They will be at the heart of any changes that we make to put the passenger at the heart of our rail system.

Baroness Randerson (LD): Since the Government now have much more control over the rail system, will they take the opportunity to simplify the rail ticketing system and to streamline and improve the procedure for claiming refunds? It is ironic that there are different processes for claiming refunds, given that the Government control the whole thing. In particular, will they ensure that refunds are given to people who hold railcards but are unable to travel at this time?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: If the noble Baroness, Lady Randerson, is referring to refunds to season tickets at the moment, we have spoken to all train

operators and made sure that the process is as simple as possible. We have made sure that claims can be made remotely; we have extended the refund period—the time during which refunds can be made—from 28 days to 56 days; and we have backdated refunds for season tickets to 17 March. To date, £120 million has been paid out on season ticket refunds.

Baroness Jones of Moulsecoomb (GP): As the Minister has sort of said, this is a once-in-two-generations opportunity to change things and actually reform the railway, so how far is the thinking going? Are the Government thinking about changing the very inefficient and illogical pricing structures? What about accommodating the amount of remote working that might continue after the crisis—plus, of course, opening local lines for residents who are asking for them?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: The noble Baroness makes a very important point, which is that there is an opportunity to look in more detail at what changes might be needed. We will have to wait until the Williams Rail Review is published and the recommendations made, but one commitment that the Government have already made is to look at so-called Beeching closures. The Restoring Your Railway Fund has £500 million pledged to it. I reassure the noble Baroness that work on that fund continues and that bids put in for the March round of funding are being assessed. Details of a second round of funding for June were published on GOV.UK recently, so work is going on apace in that area.

Lord Naseby (Con): My question is about Great Northern/Thameslink, which currently terminates at King's Cross. The Minister will remember the chaos of the introduction of the new timetable, with a lack of drivers, et cetera. Can she ensure that drivers will be available for this really important link once it reopens all the way to Brighton, and that there will be no excuses about new drivers not knowing the route, about there being insufficient drivers because they are on furlough, or something else?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: I reassure my noble friend that we are doing absolutely everything we can to put in place the plans we need to restart the railways. They are operating a significantly reduced service at the moment. The challenges are fairly significant, but we are working very hard to make sure that drivers are available on Thameslink, and indeed on all lines, to make sure that when we can restore services, they can be restored fully.

Lord Rosser (Lab): First, can the Government confirm when the Williams Rail Review will be published? Is the publication date being put back by Covid-19? Secondly, do the Government share the view that the present divided responsibilities, for track and signalling on one hand and train operation on the other, cannot continue and that these divided responsibilities should now be brought together, or at the very least be brought together under an overarching holding company or authority?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: On the latter part of the noble Lord's question, I would not want to pre-empt the Williams Rail Review by giving any indication as

to what is in it—mostly because I do not actually know, not being the Rail Minister. On the publication date, I will take that back to the department to see if I can get an updated date for him, and I will write to him.

Baroness Scott of Needham Market (LD): To what extent will demand for rail services be taken into account when deciding which sectors will be unlocked? How will this be managed given the significant regional variations in the use of rail for commuting?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: That is an incredibly important question. I am sure the noble Baroness will understand that we are considering all these issues at the moment. There will be regional variations according to which services are more likely to be used. There will also be variations with long-distance services and short-distance commuter routes. All these considerations are being put in. Also, when restarting public transport, one of the key things that we will have to do is look at local impacts—working with metro mayors, for example, and local transport authorities to make sure that they feed into the system and help us plan for their local economies, to get people back to work.

Lord Polak (Con): Decisions and actions have serious consequences in these days. While accepting that there were many factors and issues to consider, will my noble friend the Minister comment on whether her department was satisfied with the decision taken by the Mayor of London and Transport for London to reduce capacity on London Underground passenger trains at peak times, causing dangerous overcrowding?

Baroness Vere of Norbiton: The department was in close contact with TfL. Certainly, the reductions that it made had some consequences for overcrowding. Since then, we know that TfL has made significant changes to the morning service. It has applied station control measures and is working much more closely with the British Transport Police to make sure that overcrowding does not occur. We remain in close contact with TfL and, as importantly, as we restart the system, these issues will once again come to the fore.

The Lord Speaker (Lord Fowler): My Lords, I regret that the time allowed for this Question has now elapsed. I apologise that the noble Earl, Lord Clancarty, could not ask his supplementary question. We move now to the second Oral Question.

Social Media: Fake News Question

11.22 am

Asked by **Baroness Kennedy of Cradley**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what action they are taking to address fake news about COVID-19 on social media.

The Question was considered in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Baroness Barran)

(Con): I thank the noble Baroness for her very timely and important Question. Accurate information is more important than ever and misleading information about coronavirus, whether maliciously intended or not, could cost lives. The Government are working around the clock to build a comprehensive picture of false stories and posts about the virus. We are responding directly to false narratives, working closely with social media platforms to help them remove dangerous, incorrect claims about the virus, and are promoting the steps that everyone can take to reduce the spread of misinformation.

Baroness Kennedy of Cradley (Lab): I thank the Minister for her response. I completely agree with her. Disinformation and conspiracy theories flooding the internet seriously undermine the efforts of those working hard to keep us safe. The Government set up the Rapid Response Unit to work with social media companies to take action and combat fake news, yet we have heard very little about its work and received no detail on what its achievements or actions are. When will the Government make a statement on the work of the Rapid Response Unit? What assessment have they made of the effectiveness of the actions of the social media platforms so far?

Baroness Barran: The noble Baroness is right that we set up the counter-disinformation unit at the beginning of March, bringing in expertise from across Whitehall. When asked a similar question the other day, my right honourable friend the Secretary of the State assured colleagues that, when time allows, there will be a Written Ministerial Statement to reflect on a number of issues, including this one. However, our real focus at the moment is to act as expeditiously as possible when any misinformation or disinformation content gains traction.

Baroness Kidron (CB): My Lords, I refer the House to my interests in the register. Children and young people are the demographic most likely to access their news online and least likely to have the funds to get behind a paywall, and they have little life experience from which to identify misinformation. A recent Pew report shows that those who believe in conspiracy theories are the least likely to observe social distancing rules. At a time when children are entirely dependent on online communication—we have increasing evidence that they are experiencing a range of harms, including misinformation—what justification do the Government have for the recent reports of a delay to the long-promised online harms Bill? In answering, can the Minister say when we can expect this Bill in the House?

Baroness Barran: The noble Baroness is right to raise the issues of risks posed to children and young people online. My honourable friend the Minister for Digital and Culture recently met a number of child safety organisations in this regard. We are continuing work in partnership with the Home Office to agree our final position on the regulatory framework as quickly as possible. Obviously, a media literacy strategy will form part of that.

Lord Holmes of Richmond (Con): My Lords, Covid-19 exposes the pernicious power of fake news; it can be a matter of life and death. Will my noble friend the Minister commit to looking at all elements of fake news, not least getting the harms White Paper in this House, looking at its impact on our democracy and ensuring that a message goes out from the Government to all sections of society that we should always go the extra click to ensure the veracity of information?

Baroness Barran: I am happy to agree with the points raised by my noble friend. There is an irony at the moment, when our thirst for quick news feels so urgent, that the time we need to take to get accurate news is even more important. I commend those journalists who are playing such an important part in achieving that.

Baroness Greder (LD): Does the Minister agree that, if anything, there should be an acceleration to pass laws to make social media companies more accountable, with a duty of care and the use of criminal sanctions? Unfortunately, last week the Secretary of State appeared to be slamming on the brakes, asking them instead to beef up their systems and, in his words, “drive reliance on reliable narratives”.

Any delay to online harms laws lets social media companies off the hook at this critical moment. Will the Minister agree to an urgent meeting with Peers to provide detail on the progress of this legislation?

Baroness Barran: I will be delighted to meet noble Lords to discuss this. I stress that the Government have been absolutely clear that we want the social media companies, which have unparalleled engineering capacity, to be even more proactive in addressing this very urgent threat.

Lord Faulkner of Worcester (Lab): My Lords, does the Minister agree that there is a particular responsibility on role models to ensure that fake news is not propagated? Will she single out in particular, as I do, the broadcaster and television presenter Eamonn Holmes, who—perhaps unwittingly, but none the less effectively—cast doubt on the causes of Covid-19 and the link between 5G masts and the spreading of the disease? Is that not something that needs to be condemned? Also, should not the activities of the anti-vaxxers, who are also propagating fake news—I am thinking here of Novak Djokovic, who is giving credence to the anti-vaxxer movement—be criticised and rebutted whenever they make these misleading and dangerous statements?

Baroness Barran: The noble Lord is right that when celebrities intentionally or inadvertently spread misinformation, this can fan the flames and increase risks around coronavirus. I reiterate the work the Government are doing: our “Don’t feed the beast” campaign, the SHARE checklist we have created and the very clear advice that we should follow public health guidance.

Lord Pickles (Con): Does my noble friend agree that it is very different when people seek to deliberately spread misinformation, blaming particular minority groups—maybe Jewish people or Muslims—using pernicious false information, graphs and other forms

of information? What discussions has she had with the various police authorities in this country and internationally for a co-ordinated attack on this attempt to undermine society from within and to have us start to hate our fellow citizens?

Baroness Barran: My noble friend makes a very important point. Unfortunately, there have been a number of examples of these pernicious attacks. We are working in a co-ordinated way with Governments around the world, because clearly we need the most collective response possible.

Lord Mann (Non-Aff): While Rachel Riley is running a brilliant one-woman campaign against fake news, Impress, the regulator of online publications, has an unlimited ability to fine. Does the Minister agree that those powers should now be extended to allow Impress to enforce these fines?

Baroness Barran: My Lords, I found it slightly difficult to hear the noble Lord. If I may, I will listen again and respond in writing.

The Lord Speaker (Lord Fowler): Lord Griffiths of Burry Port. No? I call Lord Clement-Jones.

Lord Clement-Jones (LD): My Lords, in the light of the Avaaz report and Ofcom’s latest figures showing the massive extent of Covid disinformation, is not the Government’s approach to social media platforms far too flabby? Should they not be obliging social media platforms to not only provide correct information, but issue warnings and then terminate the accounts of those disseminating misinformation about Covid-19?

Baroness Barran: We would rebut the allegation that our response has been flabby. This is clearly an incredibly fast-moving situation. My right honourable friend the Secretary of State meets regularly with the social media companies. As I said earlier, we think that there is more that they can do, but they have made some important moves in recent weeks.

The Lord Speaker: My Lords, I am afraid to tell you that the time allowed for this Question has elapsed. My apologies to the noble Baronesses, Lady Lane-Fox and Lady Healy of Primrose Hill. We can now come to the third Oral Question.

Tax Avoidance Question

11.32 am

Asked by **Lord Berkeley**

To ask Her Majesty’s Government what plans they have to make it a condition for any company in receipt of state support as a result of COVID-19 to agree to not participate in any artificial tax avoidance arrangements.

The Question was considered in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office and the Treasury (Lord Agnew of Oulton) (Con): My Lords, the initiatives introduced by the Government to address the economic impact of Covid-19 are designed to support businesses that contribute to the UK economy. Since 2010, we have introduced over 100 new measures to tackle avoidance and evasion, securing and protecting over £200 billion that would otherwise have gone unpaid. The Government remain committed to continuing their strong track record on clamping down on those who seek to avoid or evade paying their fair share.

Lord Berkeley (Lab): My Lords, I am grateful to the Minister for his response. The OBR is suggesting a 35% fall in GDP. As the Minister said, the Government obviously need as much tax revenue as they can get, but it needs to be fair. In the *Times*, there are reports of examples from Arcadia, The Range, and Starbucks, which is in line for rate relief alone of £28 million. Virgin Active, which is on a turnover of £168 million and paid virtually no tax, could gain £16 million in rate relief. There are similar examples of many other companies, but will the Minister confirm that it is wrong for companies making large profits in the UK not to pay their fair share of tax? Will the Government refuse to give such companies rate relief?

Lord Agnew of Oulton: My Lords, all the support that we have offered has been aimed at keeping businesses going and securing employment, mostly through the furlough scheme. While I take on board the noble Lord's concerns, I believe that the rapid action that we have taken, which has to be general by the definition of the time period that we have had to operate in, has helped to secure businesses' long-term future, which is our priority.

Lord Livermore (Lab): My Lords, many other countries have set out strict requirements to prevent state support enabling not only tax avoidance but excessive executive pay and high dividend payments. Do the Government support a moratorium on dividend payments and share buybacks for companies that receive state support, and will they introduce specific rules to prevent tax-avoiding companies benefiting from government schemes?

Lord Agnew of Oulton: I assure the noble Lord that all these things are continuously under review. As I mentioned briefly in the previous Question, we have introduced in days things that could often take years, so by definition we are keeping a very careful eye on them. To give the noble Lord some reassurance, with most of these loan schemes, businesses have to show that they are viable, and if they are going to continue to pay dividends the banks will take a view on that and decide whether it is appropriate. These are not automatic entitlements; they have to be justified.

Baroness Falkner of Margravine (Non-Aff): My Lords, I declare my interest related to the Bank of England, as set out in the register. The Minister referred to the plethora of regulation and law that came in in the period after 2008-09, but he will recall that the bankers who were bailed out paid themselves excessive bonuses and therefore suffered in the court of public opinion. Will the Government go a little further and at least publish the list of companies that are benefiting from

all kinds of taxpayer support on offer this time, so that we can see who is benefiting from it in a transparent manner? Where the Government give support to those companies, will they at least require an equity holding as collateral and preferably give only loans, not grants?

Lord Agnew of Oulton: The noble Baroness makes very good points, and I will certainly take her ideas back to the Treasury. We also ought to acknowledge that a number of senior managers have announced pay cuts during this difficult time. Our overall macro concern at the moment is to protect businesses and employment and to make sure that we can bounce back as quickly as possible from this crisis, but I take on board her helpful comments.

The Lord Speaker (Lord Fowler): The noble Lord, Lord Leigh of Hurley, does not appear to be there. I call the noble Baroness, Lady Kramer.

Baroness Kramer (LD): My Lords, quite a number of companies will make extraordinary profits as a consequence of Covid-19. At this point in time it is hard to identify which they are, but we can see that it is happening with some traders and private equity players, and it may well be happening in the digital industry, which is becoming more and more dominant and, as others have said, pays almost no tax in the UK despite the size of its presence. Following our exit from lockdown and the pandemic, will the Government look at a windfall tax so that those who have sacrificed during the pandemic understand that the burden is being spread over everyone's shoulders?

Lord Agnew of Oulton: The noble Baroness makes a sound point. It is just too early to make those sorts of assessments. I want to pick up on the point about digital companies. We have introduced the digital services tax, which came into play on 1 April this year; it is a 2% tax on the revenues which search engines and social media platforms derive if they generate more than £2 billion over the next five years. We have made a start on this but, as the noble Baroness will probably know, these things need international collaboration. If there are excessive profits over the next few months, we will of course review things.

Lord Harries of Pentregarth (CB): I am sure the Minister is aware that 80% of the population believes that registering a company abroad in a tax haven to avoid paying full UK tax is wrong. At a time of unprecedented social solidarity, would it not help to cement that solidarity if the Government made it clear that they will offer bailouts only to companies that do not follow this practice? After all, France, Poland and Denmark have done that. It would be sad if we stayed a long way behind those countries. If I may, I will send the Minister a list of five criteria drawn up by the fair tax alliance to help the Government to make fair decisions in this area.

Lord Agnew of Oulton: I take on board the noble and right reverend Lord's points, and I would be interested to see the five criteria that he mentioned. I reiterate that the thrust of our approach has been to support businesses that are active in this country with

[LORD AGNEW OF OULTON]

premises and people. In a way, our approach is quite similar to that of Poland, because we require that foreign businesses have a permanent establishment here. I reassure the noble and right reverend Lord that we have taken a huge amount of action over the past 10 years to clamp down on poor tax practice.

Baroness Altmann (Con): I support the Government's broad, sector-wide approach to helping to preserve jobs as an emergency measure, but the companies based offshore that have avoided paying taxes in the UK have in many cases made windfall profits from those at home in isolation. Echoing the remarks of the noble Baroness, Lady Kramer, should we not look at ways of introducing windfall taxes so that these companies contribute fairly to the taxpayer's support for other firms that have suffered Covid-related losses as a consequence?

Lord Agnew of Oulton: I think that most of us share the noble Baroness's views on abusive tax measures by companies. Apart from all the measures that we have introduced over the past seven or eight years, we announced that we will legislate this year in a Finance Bill for 2021 to strengthen HMRC's existing anti-avoidance powers to make it more difficult for promoters, in this case, to sidestep their obligations. We will continue to bear down wherever we can.

Lord Purvis of Tweed (LD): One measure highlighted by the Minister was the new tax evasion offence for corporations and partnerships that do not act properly in their operations. Will the Minister consider expanding that offence to include enterprises that aggressively pursue individuals—mainly those who are potentially vulnerable or re-entering the workforce, such as NHS workers. Tax evasion is an act that morally subverts the law, especially for self-employed people who will have to pay extra tax at the end of this crisis.

Lord Agnew of Oulton: I am sure that the noble Lord will contribute to the legislation when it comes through. I support his ideas. I assure noble Lords that we have closed the tax gap quite dramatically over the past 10 years. In 2005-06, it was £4.9 billion; in 2017-18, it was £1.8 billion. HMRC has won 90% of the avoidance cases that it has litigated on since 2018.

The Lord Speaker: My Lords, I regret to say that the time allowed for this Question has elapsed. I apologise to noble Peers who were excluded; I think there were two or three of them.

Garden Centres Question

11.45 am

Asked by Lord Cormack

Lord Cormack to ask Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to compensate garden centres closed due to restrictions addressing COVID-19; and when they will allow those centres to reopen for the sale of plants.

The Question was considered in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Lord Gardiner of Kimble) (Con): My Lords, the Government are acutely aware of the challenges facing garden centres and the horticultural industry. In addition to the financial package of government support, we are working closely with the Horticultural Trades Association to analyse how effectively the Government's package is meeting its members' needs. The timing of any reopening is subject to medical and scientific advice on when it will be appropriate to change the current arrangements.

Lord Cormack (Con): My Lords, I thank my noble friend that Answer, but I am very disappointed by it. The future of many growers and garden centres hangs in the balance. More than one-third could be gone by the autumn. We are talking about an industry that employs close to 500,000 people and is worth £24 billion a year. It is deeply disturbing to see plants destroyed at a time when people need the therapeutic calm of their gardens as never before. Is it right that supermarkets are allowed to sell plants while garden centres are not allowed to make outdoor sales? I make a plea to my noble friend to take action soon. Other countries have done so.

Lord Gardiner of Kimble: My Lords, with a name like mine, of course I understand the importance of garden centres and horticulture. As I said, we are working very closely with James Barnes, the chairman of the Horticultural Trades Association, and we have had some very productive discussions. The HTA has drafted a traders' protocol on social distancing. I am working very closely with the HTA and I am very conscious of what my noble friend said.

Lord Hain (Lab): My Lords, I echo strongly everything that the noble Lord, Lord Cormack, said. The situation is really confusing and clarity and logic are needed. We have a local business that has a pet shop where you can go in and get bird feed, for example—socially distancing and safely—and alongside it you can collect pre-ordered compost but you cannot buy plants. This does not make any sense. There is an urgent need, especially since most garden suppliers and nurseries actually make all their money in these spring weeks in order to sustain them over the year, and they are not able to sell their plants. It really does not add up and the Government must act with real urgency.

Lord Gardiner of Kimble: I understand what the noble Lord says. That is why I am working very closely with the Horticultural Trades Association. I am particularly conscious of the bedding plant issue at this time. We are obviously dealing with a health crisis and social distancing is going to be essential. That is why I am very pleased that the traders' protocol on this has been presented to Public Health England. We are waiting for its feedback, but I do understand the urgency of this.

The Lord Speaker (Lord Fowler): I call the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly. She is not there, so I call the noble Baroness, Lady Fookes.

Baroness Foakes (Con): My Lords, I first declare my interest as co-chairman of the gardening and horticulture group. I urge my noble friend to impress on his Government colleagues the serious implications if garden centres and the growers behind them were to collapse. What will happen, for example, to our wish to lessen imports of plants that may carry very serious pests and diseases and for the Government's major policy on planting trees?

Lord Gardiner of Kimble: My Lords, as Minister for biosecurity, I am very conscious of the importance of home-grown plants and trees. We need to plant the right trees in the right places. That is why I am looking forward when the time is right to the reopening of garden centres and nurseries. We are conscious of the medical and scientific situation, but clearly we are working with the HTA to ensure that when it is the right time it is ready to react with social distancing.

The Lord Speaker: Did I hear the noble Baroness, Lady Jolly, trying to get in?

Baroness Jolly (LD): Yes, thank you. I would like to thank those garden centres that continue to serve customers by delivering both plants and seeds, either by post or carrier. Rumours that garden centres—

Lord Leigh of Hurley (Con): My Lords—

The Lord Speaker: Lord Leigh, can you stay off the phone, please?

Baroness Jolly: There are rumours that garden centres are to reopen soon, which would be good for customers wanting to choose their plants—good for garden centres and customers. It is an easy place to keep social distance and it is good for our mental health. Will the Minister tell the House what is holding back the decision?

Lord Gardiner of Kimble: As I said, this is subject to the five tests that the Government have set in terms of dealing with the health crisis. I have been working on ensuring with the HTA that, when it is deemed correct, we are in a position to open and for garden centres and nurseries to fulfil what I agree is a great function to help with our well-being.

The Lord Speaker: The Earl of Sandwich. Is he there? No. I call the noble Baroness, Lady Jones of Whitchurch.

Baroness Jones of Whitchurch (Lab): My Lords, I agree with previous noble Lords who have spoken that there is no real logic to the Government's current position on this. Hardware stores can be open but garden centres cannot. On behalf of the 300,000 or so allotment holders in the UK, perhaps I may remind the Minister that, in this time of crisis, we are making a great contribution to feeding friends, neighbours and the local community, and indeed are giving surplus produce to local food charities. So there is an urgent need to free that up. We rely on garden centres to replenish our stocks. I hope that the Minister can give

us some guarantee that we will be put at the top of the list in the next stage of the lockdown so that people can have access again.

Lord Gardiner of Kimble: I thank the noble Baroness. Obviously, we want to keep this under particular review. I am very sympathetic to all the points that noble Lords have made, which is why I am working closely with the HTA so that, when it is deemed appropriate, we can reopen garden centres as soon as possible.

Baroness Barker (LD): My Lords, garden centres play a great part in the supply of fruit and vegetable plants for the whole of this year; that is why it is important that they are open now. Local authorities and the police have powers under the emergency legislation to shut down any business that does not comply with Covid health protections. Why, then, cannot the garden centres open and be treated just the same as all the other important businesses?

Lord Gardiner of Kimble: I understand what the noble Baroness is saying. That is why, as I said, I have been very keen to address this, and why we have presented the traders' protocol on social distancing to Public Health England, so that when there is a review, I can feel confident in saying that the HTA has a very strong protocol.

The Lord Speaker: I call the noble Lord, Lord Brabazon of Tara. He is not here, so I call the noble Duke, the Duke of Wellington.

The Duke of Wellington (Non-Affl): My Lords, I declare, as always, my rural interests as detailed in the register. The question of garden centres is clearly important, and I agree with so many opinions already expressed on this subject. However, does the Minister agree with me that there are other activities and outlets, particularly in rural areas, which Ministers could also consider reopening, such as equestrian centres, angling clubs and golf courses?

Lord Gardiner of Kimble: My Lords, I am most grateful to the noble Duke. As Minister for Rural Affairs, I will take that back as part of our discussion. In dealing with the health crisis, we will see what matters can come forward at the review times.

Baroness Watkins of Tavistock (CB): My Lords, we are in danger of losing public confidence in our approach to social distancing. I can buy plants from the Netherlands in my nearest supermarket, which is five miles away, but my local rural garden centre, where I have always bought them, to which I can walk in 20 minutes, is having to lay staff off, throw plants away and deny people like me perfectly easy access using social distancing. Please can the Minister urge Public Health England to understand how inappropriate the current guidance is?

Lord Gardiner of Kimble: I say to the noble Baroness that that will be part of the review process, and it has been helpful for me to have the contributions of noble Lords.

The Lord Speaker: The Earl of Shrewsbury. He is not there, but in any event that concludes Oral Questions. I thank everyone concerned. If I may say so, that was a better session than the one we had yesterday. Virtual Proceedings will resume at 12.15 pm for a Private Notice Question. Proceedings are now adjourned until then, with many thanks.

11.54 am

Virtual Proceeding suspended.

Arrangement of Business

Announcement

12.16 pm

The announcement was made in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.

The Senior Deputy Speaker (Lord McFall of Alcluith): My Lords, Virtual Proceedings of the House of Lords will now begin. I remind Members that these proceedings are subject to parliamentary privilege and that what we say is available to the public both in *Hansard* and to those listening. I remind participating Members that their microphones will be set to mute and that they should unmute their microphones shortly before we reach their place in the speakers' list. Members are asked not to use the group chat function.

The Virtual Proceedings on the Private Notice Question will now commence. I will call the Private Notice Question in the normal way. I will then call on the Minister to make the initial response, and then call the noble Baroness who asked the original Question to ask her supplementary question in the usual way. The Minister will again respond, and I will then call in turn those noble Lords asking supplementary questions as listed on the speakers' list. Please ensure that questions and answers are short. I apologise in advance if it is not possible for everyone to be called. I ask each speaker to ensure that their microphone is unmuted prior to asking a supplementary question. Each speaker's microphone will be returned to mute once their supplementary question has finished. In accordance with guidance agreed by the Procedure Committee, if Members are not listed, it is not possible to ask a supplementary question or to take part in proceedings.

Domestic Abuse

Private Notice Question

12.18 pm

Asked by Baroness Burt of Solihull

To ask Her Majesty's Government what practical measures they are taking to address domestic abuse as part of their strategy on the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Question was considered in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Baroness Williams of Trafford) (Con): My Lords, the Home Office has provided an additional £2 million in funding to bolster specialist domestic abuse helplines and websites. This will ensure that all victims can access vital support

safely and securely; it is in addition to the £750 million announced by the Treasury for charities. Alongside this, the Home Office has published specific guidance on GOV.UK and launched a new awareness campaign to signpost support services for victims.

Baroness Burt of Solihull (LD): The shocking increase in domestic violence, with a doubling of deaths and a 50% increase in calls to helplines, shows that there is more than one kind of epidemic happening in this country today. More than 60% of the women were turned away from refuges before the coronavirus epidemic. However, some good can come of this. This week, the Home Affairs Committee recommended a cross-government approach to tackling this scourge on our nation. For example, we could loosen the rules and speed up the availability of housing benefit to help refuges move families into social and other accommodation, thus unblocking the places in refuges. Will the Minister use her considerable powers of persuasion to knock departmental heads together and make tackling domestic abuse a central pillar of our Covid-19 response? Will she meet me, Women's Aid and other charities virtually to ensure that we leave this crisis in a better position to protect victims than before we knew that the coronavirus existed?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: I think the noble Baroness will agree that we have always had a cross-government approach on domestic violence. Certainly, some of the round tables that we had before coronavirus, in the lead-up to the Domestic Abuse Bill, were very consensual and collaborative. It is certainly something that I will continue to promote. We have been meeting and engaging virtually with charities right from the start of the outbreak of this pandemic.

Lord Kennedy of Southwark (Lab Co-op): We are also concerned about children trapped in dangerous domestic situations. What measures are the Government taking to protect those children? More widely, can the Minister say what they are doing to protect children at risk of sexual and other abuse?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: I recognise the noble Lord's point about children—they are at the brunt of abuse, or are witnesses to abuse. As I meant to say to the noble Baroness, Lady Burt, I am on a call every day with the Home Secretary and her operational partners, who are very alive to what might be going on behind closed doors. In the last four weeks, the NCA has developed and disseminated 1,060 child sexual abuse packages for police forces to investigate. Those figures are horrific, but it is testament to the good work of our police forces.

Baroness Sanderson of Welton (Con): We have heard about the surge in calls to the domestic abuse helpline but we have not seen a corresponding rise in calls to the police. What are the Government doing to understand this discrepancy so that we can make sure that victims also feel able to contact the police should they need to do so?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: The noble Baroness is absolutely right. There is a mismatch between inquiries to the helpline and what police are reporting. But even

among police forces there is quite a disparity; the Met are seeing far higher incidences than are other police forces. Again, on those operational calls, police are really vigilant on spotting the signs of domestic abuse. It is a priority activity for the Home Office at this time.

Baroness Hussein-Ece (LD): There is clearly a lack of capacity in refuges for women fleeing abuse. Will the Government take a serious look at what the French Government announced in March—that they would fund hotel rooms, sitting empty, for victims of domestic violence, and consider opening pop-up counselling centres in supermarkets for easy access to advise and support victims of domestic violence? Will the Minister take this back and give a response to these proposals?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: I found it very difficult to hear the question of the noble Baroness, but I think it was split into two parts, the first being on lack of capacity in refuges. I am not saying that this is a positive outcome but refuges are reporting vacancies, which is both a good and a bad thing. She said something about how in France people can report in through supermarkets—

Baroness Hussein-Ece: There are two things: the French Government paying for hotel rooms so that they become available, and the pop-up counselling centres in supermarkets.

Baroness Williams of Trafford: Again, I did not hear the noble Baroness very well, but I heard her better than the first time—

The Senior Deputy Speaker (Lord McFall of Alcluith): If the Minister would promise to write on that question, we will move on, to get everybody in.

Baroness Finlay of Llandaff (CB): My Lords, I declare that I am chairing an inquiry into alcohol harms. When will the data on alcohol-fuelled domestic violence during lockdown be made available and collated with sales, given that over half of intimate partner and almost all family homicides in 2014-15 involved alcohol and that the latest research shows that alcohol-fuelled violence is disproportionately clustered in the lowest socioeconomic groups—the people living in particularly difficult situations?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: One positive thing to come out of the current pandemic, if there is anything positive to report at all, is the decline in drink-related crimes after hours. However, the noble Baroness is absolutely right that data on the harms of alcohol behind closed doors is yet to be released. I think we will know it retrospectively, and the House will of course be interested in this and all other aspects of domestic violence as time goes on. We will report back to the House on the outcomes of that. So one of the positive things is the lack of violence on our streets, but the downside of that is what is happening inside the home.

The Lord Bishop of Gloucester: My Lords, continuing the theme of children, given that lockdown has removed children's usual contacts with schools, community groups

and services, what are the Government doing to increase public awareness and provide advice and support for children at this time?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: The Government are doing several things. In terms of adults, the #YouAreNotAlone campaign that the Home Secretary released is certainly up and running; I do not know whether the right reverend Prelate has seen it. Adults can access that and there have been a number of online support services for children, so that they have a line into help and support. Going back to the point of the noble Lord, Lord Kennedy, there is also support for children who are victims of sexual abuse online during lockdown.

The Senior Deputy Speaker: Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top? No? We will move on to the noble Lord, Lord Blencathra.

Lord Blencathra (Con): My Lords, I thank my noble friend for all the excellent work she has been doing to tackle this long-standing and difficult problem, which has been greatly exacerbated by the current quarantine situation. Just how prepared were the Government and police in identifying and dealing with domestic abuse and violence during this pandemic, and what measures did they put in place in preparation for it?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: It was at the forefront of our minds that, as we entered lockdown, some people would be affected not necessarily by Covid-19 but by violence within the home. It is very gratifying to hear that noble Lords are so concerned about it. One of the first things I did was to get in touch with the domestic abuse commissioner, Nicole Jacobs; everything that she requested from the sector has now been put in place, including the #YouAreNotAlone campaign and other funding packages. There is also IT support, which is incredibly important; if you cannot get out of the house, you need to get that support somehow.

Baroness Hamwee (LD): The current pressure-cooker situation does not have a retirement age—quite the opposite. Older people can be particularly vulnerable, not just to alcohol-fuelled abuse but particularly to financial abuse. The specialist charity which supports older people is also taking referrals from large organisations, carers and care homes. Will the Government ensure that both awareness and financial support extend to what is a less well-known problem?

Baroness Williams of Trafford: The Government, particularly the Home Office, are getting more and more evidence of financial abuse, particularly among older people. Economic abuse is now seen as a form of domestic abuse, so the noble Baroness is absolutely right. There is not only economic abuse of the elderly; as was raised with me in a Question last week, older people are more subject to scams.

The Senior Deputy Speaker: I have added a few minutes as a result of the connectivity and audio issues. We will go back to the noble Baroness, Lady Armstrong of Hill Top, if she is still here. No?

[LORD MCFALL OF ALCLUITH]

The time allowed for this Question has elapsed. The Virtual Proceedings will now adjourn until 1 pm for a Statement.

12.31 pm

Virtual Proceeding suspended.

Arrangement of Business

Announcement

1.02 pm

The announcement was made in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.

The Deputy Speaker (The Earl of Kinnoull) (Non-Aff): My Lords, Virtual Proceedings of the House of Lords will now begin. I remind Members that these proceedings are subject to parliamentary privilege and that what we say is available to the public both in *Hansard* and to those listening. I remind participating Members that their microphones will be set to mute, and that they should unmute their microphones shortly before we reach their place in the speakers' list. Members are asked not to use the group chat function.

The Virtual Proceedings on the Statement will now commence. I will call the Statement and the Minister will repeat the Statement in the usual way. I will then call the Front-Benchers and the Minister to respond. After that, we will begin the period of Back-Bench questions, which has been extended to 30 minutes. I will call each Back-Bench Member on the speakers' list to ask a supplementary question and the Minister to answer. I ask each speaker to ensure that their microphone is unmuted prior to asking a supplementary question. Each speaker's microphone will be returned to mute once their supplementary question has finished. In accordance with guidance agreed by the Procedure Committee, if Members are not listed it is not possible to ask a supplementary question, nor to take part in proceedings.

Public Services: Update

Statement

1.03 pm

The Statement was made in a Virtual Proceeding via video call.

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Lord True) (Con): My Lords, with the leave of the House, I will now repeat a Statement made yesterday in the other place by my right honourable friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster:

“With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a Statement on the work this Government have undertaken over recent weeks to support and steer our critical public services through the coronavirus pandemic. I would like, first, to thank all those on the front line of our public services for the spirit of selflessness and commitment to others that they have demonstrated in dealing with this pandemic—nurses, doctors, porters, cleaners, paramedics, pharmacists, care home staff, prison and police officers, teachers, social workers,

those preparing and delivering food, collecting our refuse and administering the welfare system. They deserve our gratitude, they need our support and they are in all our minds. They are the very best of us.

I am sure that everyone in this House observed that one-minute silence at 11 o'clock, as we reflected on sacrifices being made by so many on our behalf. This pandemic has claimed more than 20,000 lives and left every community across the country grieving. Our thoughts, and prayers, are with all those who have suffered loss in the humble knowledge that every life is precious.

As the Prime Minister said on his welcome return to work yesterday, we are dealing with

“the biggest single challenge this country has faced since the war”.

Like him, I want to thank the British people for their forbearance and solidarity as we have all had to abide by the guidance on social distancing, which restricts cherished liberties but protects precious lives.

The challenges that the pandemic is presenting us with require an unprecedented response from the Government. For this reason, as the House will know, on 17 March we established four ministerial implementation groups to lead the Government's response to the pandemic. The Health Secretary chairs one group, co-ordinating work on the NHS and social care. The Chancellor chairs the group considering how to support business and the economy, and the Foreign Secretary chairs the group co-ordinating our international response. I chair the general public sector group which looks at how we support the delivery of public services beyond the NHS and social care, working with Ministers from across the UK Government and Ministers from the Scottish Executive, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. I am very grateful to colleagues from the devolved Administrations for their participation and their constructive contributions to all our discussions. These have helped us to understand how the virus has affected every part of our United Kingdom, enabling us to take action that meets the needs of people across all our nations.

The ministerial implementation group has now met 30 times, and we have considered the impact of the pandemic on schools and children's services, the police and the Prison and Probation Service, the courts, the food supply chain, the welfare system, charities and support for the most vulnerable. With my colleague the Environment Secretary, we have been working to address the shortfall in the agricultural workforce to protect our domestic food supply, working closely with industry to launch the “Pick for Britain” campaign. Working with the Education Secretary, we have established the free school meal voucher scheme to make sure that children who need it can continue to access food despite school closures. The scheme has seen 15,500 schools place orders for those vouchers, of which £29 million have been redeemed. We were able to ensure that more than 60% of schools were open every day over the Easter holidays to provide places for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children. In addition, we have launched the Oak National Academy, providing 180 video lessons each week. We have committed £100 million to ensure that remote education is accessible for all, including by providing laptops, tablets and

routers to disadvantaged children. Since the end of March, 90% of rough sleepers known to councils have been made an offer of accommodation, ensuring that some of the most vulnerable people in our society can stay safe during this pandemic.

Of course, we recognise that this is not just a national crisis; it is also a local one in communities across the country. We have deployed dedicated military planning support to every local resilience forum. Some 156 military planners are embedded across the country, helping the resilience fora to co-ordinate and protect local services and supplies, with additional support from senior Whitehall officials and named resilience advisers in regional knowledge hubs. Of course, this crisis has put our existing services under huge strain. To bolster this, we have worked with the MoD to mobilise a Covid support force of over 19,060 strong, of whom 2,948 personnel are now committed, supporting a total of 79 military assistances to civil authority tasks nationwide.

Our police have been working hard to keep people safe while enforcing the new measures the Prime Minister put in place just over a month ago. Between 27 March and 13 April, they issued 3,203 fines to those flouting the social distancing rules, and that number will have increased considerably since then—this is all dedicated to helping to save lives and to protect the NHS. We have tested over 150,000 key workers and their families for coronavirus, allowing those who do not have it to go back to work and protecting those who do. We have also made sure the Civil Service and wider public sector are resourced to operate under the considerable new pressures imposed by this virus. We have worked to fill around 1,300 Covid-19 roles through Civil Service redeployments, with over 400 civil servants now moving to the Department of Health and Social Care.

We also recognise that there are people who have developed new needs as a result of coronavirus, as well as individuals whose pre-existing needs are now more acute or more complex. The Government are undertaking a programme of work to support those who have not been identified as shielded but are still vulnerable. We know that many local community organisations have stepped forward to help their friends and neighbours at this time. The Government want to support this activity and we welcome the important role that volunteers, charities and local authorities are playing throughout this crisis. Over 750,000 people have signed up to the NHS volunteer responders programme, and over 600,000 have had their ID verified to start helping with tasks such as collecting shopping, providing telephone support, transporting patients and helping with supplies for the NHS.

To support this effort, and to make sure people know where to turn, we have been working to signpost people to existing and available support—whether local, national or voluntary—through the website address www.gov.uk/find-coronavirus-support. This service has supported over 35,000 people since its launch on 10 April. We are working with supermarkets as well to ensure that a greater number of online delivery slots are made available explicitly to those most in need. We have also been working to understand and identify where there are gaps in provision and what government, working with local and voluntary partners, can do to address this.

A notable example of that is the Home Office's announcement of an additional £2 million of funding to immediately bolster domestic abuse helplines and online support for those at risk.

There will, of course, be further challenges ahead. I do not shirk from acknowledging that, as a Government, we will not have got every judgment right. Indeed, I know that many people, including the honourable Member for Leeds West, have asked fair questions about the Government's response in a constructive spirit. I and my colleagues will do our best at all times to respond to these questions and challenges, because we owe it to our public sector workers to work collaboratively and harness all available resources in the fight against this virus. And in this fight, it is important that all of us recognise just how much we owe to the stoicism and steadfastness, the hard work and heroism, the compassion and commitment of those working on the front line of public service. We owe them so much, and we in the Government will do everything we can to support them. It is in that spirit that I commend this Statement to the House."

My Lords, that concludes the Statement.

1.13 pm

Baroness Hayter of Kentish Town (Lab): My Lords, I thank the Minister for repeating yesterday's Statement. He will know that we share the Government's aim to save lives and rebuild our economy and well-being. In this context, there is much in the Statement that we applaud, particularly its acknowledgment of the role of volunteers, the health service, food growers and retailers, pharmacists, care workers, educators, charities, the police and the military. I would also add the BBC and indeed Ministers and civil servants, who have had to respond to previously unimaginable demands.

Unlike anything we have ever seen, this crisis has literally involved every single one of us. It is a national challenge like no other. We therefore have a population who are part and parcel of the country's response and, in return, we owe it to them to be honest and transparent about the risks, the difficult trade-offs, the certainties and uncertainties, the data, and what the Government are actually doing, and planning to do. The Prime Minister, on his return to Downing Street from Chequers, pledged to act with "maximum possible transparency". We therefore hope that we will soon have reliable data on the rate of BAME infections and deaths—an issue of major concern to our Caribbean and Asian communities.

We very much welcome that, from today, the statistics will include deaths in care homes and in the community, as well as those in hospitals. This is right in itself, but it is particularly important because of the numbers involved—perhaps 19,000 Covid-related deaths; a near tripling of the number of deaths in care homes over three weeks—and because of the failure to ensure that these people in society's care, and the staff who look after them, were properly protected with equipment and testing. This is no time to look backwards and consider why that was, but it is time to look forward and ensure that the situation is remedied. This is especially true as it looks as if the UK's overall coronavirus death rate could outstrip that of Italy, France and Spain, and may even be the highest in Europe.

[BARONESS HAYTER OF KENTISH TOWN]

We need the Government to take all necessary steps, and that includes heeding the very wise words “to underpromise and overdeliver, rather than overpromise and underdeliver”—as we saw, I am afraid, with PPE and testing. The Cabinet Office has a key role in this, not just on procurement, as mentioned quite rightly by the Minister, but on cross-departmental working and liaison, ensuring that lessons are learned as speedily as they are in the medical world, where advances in treatment of the virus in one week are disseminated around the health service profession by the following Monday. The Cabinet Office has a similar role in ensuring that everyone knows the lessons being learned elsewhere.

The Cabinet Office also has a role to ensure that all our citizens are fully informed about what is happening and what is being discussed. In that context, could the Minister explain why, if the Welsh, Scottish and indeed other Governments can ensure that signers are available and on-screen in daily press conferences, somehow No. 10 cannot quite arrange this? It can easily be done at a distance and so not break social distancing rules. Our deaf communities feel very strongly that they are being excluded from daily updates.

Going forward, plans to test and trace will affect all sectors of society, including those with a disability, and we will need every agency to help inform, encourage, test, safeguard and trace. That is a real cross-government task, involving local government, devolved authorities, charities—especially those working with the vulnerable—service providers, civic society, businesses and trade unions.

Until now, there have been some forgotten groups in all this, such as those who receive care in their own homes and domiciliary care staff. All these people must get the PPE that they need, and social care must be properly funded to deal with the extra costs of the pandemic.

These are some of the “here and now” issues, but we also need a viable and sustainable national recovery plan, which I assume will be Cabinet Office-led. For these next decisions, involvement across the piece is needed, not simply to help craft those plans, but to ensure that businesses, schools and other organisations have time to prepare, such that the infection rates do not increase again. Transparency and consultation will be vital, so will the Government publish their next-steps framework?

We stand ready to help—it is in the national interest—to ensure that the NHS, public services, businesses, workers, families and communities recover and become more resilient. But we need to understand, and contribute to, the Government’s thinking, so we ask that there is that involvement. Will the Government agree to hold talks with teachers, trade unions, businesses, charities and local authorities on how their forward strategy can be developed and implemented to rebuild the economy and jobs?

Lord Wallace of Saltaire (LD): I, too, welcome this Statement and the remarkable change of tone it contains about public sector workers used by Conservative Ministers and advisers until a few weeks ago. Last December’s Conservative manifesto, and even more the writings of Conservative advisers such as Dominic Cummings and Rachel Wolf, condemned the Civil Service

as “incompetent” and wasteful, as ignorant about science and looking after their own interests rather than the public as a whole.

Happily, Ministers have now realised that civil servants and others across the public sector believe in the concept of public service, which right-wing libertarians and public choice economists have rubbished for so long. Across our entire public service, from the NHS to the police and military to Whitehall and local authorities, we have seen people rising to the challenge, moving jobs to help others, and working all hours. Many of them, we should also recognise, are far more modestly paid than their equivalents in the private sector, but they have shown their commitment and their loyalty to the communities they serve.

I am glad to see the reference to local resilience forums, and the recognition that this is a series of local crises across the country as well as a national crisis. I hope that this will persuade the Government to reverse their marginalisation of local authorities and to recognise the vital contribution that effective local government makes to a thriving democracy. I was struck when I read the section on democracy and political reform in last December’s Conservative manifesto that it contained no reference at all to local democracy. I hope that the Minister will argue for its inclusion in the agenda for the constitution, democracy and human rights commission which the Government have promised to set up this year.

The Statement expresses gratitude to

“to colleagues from the devolved Administrations for their participation and their constructive contributions to all our discussions. Those discussions have helped us to understand how the virus has affected every part of our United Kingdom.”

Can the Minister tell the House how the Government have ensured that they have understood the impact on every part of the UK, given that the large majority of the UK’s population lives in England and that there appears to have been no visible mechanism for consultation with the English regions or even with the city mayors from outside London?

The Minister mentioned that the military has now been brought in to help out with logistics but also with expanding testing for the virus. The Statement does not explain why the initial programme of testing was contracted out to a large private consultancy firm: a contract which, the *Daily Telegraph* has reported, was awarded without the normal tendering process. Was that because of an instinctive Conservative assumption that the private sector is always better than the public sector? The underutilisation of the first testing centres, reported and repeated difficulties with the booking system, and the apparent assumption that all care and health workers had access to their own cars and had time to drive up to 50 miles to be tested all show this to have been one of the weakest aspects of the response to the epidemic. I am glad that the military have now been brought in to expand testing. Why were they not brought in at the outset? My own experience in government, dealing with the digitisation of Whitehall, suggested that outside consultancies often charge more and deliver less.

The Statement refers also to the redeployment of a large number of civil servants across Whitehall to cope with the crisis. What other tasks of government have had to be put on hold as a result? I understand,

for example, that the Government's promised White Paper on data strategy, for which the Minister is responsible to the Lords, is now several months behind schedule, since officials had been transferred; first, to help with preparation for Brexit and now to respond to the epidemic. I understand that officials working on the Brexit negotiations have also been redeployed in response to the epidemic. Will the Minister commit to informing the House in the near future whether the team negotiating Brexit is still sufficiently staffed to handle the complex negotiations that we are engaged in or whether the demands of this emergency will enforce a change of pace if we are to avoid confusion or failure?

Finally, I welcome very warmly the Government's tribute to

"the stoicism and steadfastness, the hard work and heroism, the compassion and commitment of those working at the front line of public service."

We all make that tribute, and long may the Government's change of tone continue.

Lord True: My Lords, perhaps I may begin by congratulating the Prime Minister and Carrie Symonds on the birth of their son. It is a story of movement from near death to new life in a few weeks. I am sure that that is what we all avidly pray for for this economy and this nation as we look ahead to a way out of this crisis and to new hope.

I thank the noble Lord and the noble Baroness for their responses to the Statement and the constructive way in which they put forward their points of view, many of which I share. I endorse their admiration for all that is being done in the NHS, social care, the public services and the private sector in the face of this crisis. Naturally, I add my own respect and prayers for those people and their families who have given, literally, all they had to give. None of us, as the nation showed at 11 o'clock yesterday, will forget them.

Everyone across the land, which includes central government and, yes, local government, is doing the best they can, as fast as they can, and the most they can in these difficult times. As the noble Baroness said, there has been an extraordinary response from the public in the coming-together across the land, and long may it last.

We must not forget that some remarkable things have been achieved. I acknowledge to both the noble Baroness and the noble Lord that there have also been things that have not gone as well in every detail as all would hope. I think that it was General Moltke who said that no plan extends with certainty beyond first contact with the main force of the enemy, and Covid is a new, hidden, mutable and invisible enemy with characteristics not met before. However, I assure the House that the Government and all their agencies are working night and day to ensure that our front-line health and social care staff have the equipment they need to tackle this virus, and we have delivered more than 1,000 million items of PPE since the outbreak began, including 36 million to care homes.

I agree with the noble Baroness that transparency is important. As she acknowledged, we are moving today to bring together the different strands of statistics in relation to care homes, which will give full and proper

transparency on that. Her point on BAME is very important. Work on that is under way, as the scientists have said at the daily briefings. I cannot give her a date for an outcome to the work.

Care homes are obviously a sector of enormous importance, and they have been of concern to the Government all the way through. As I have said, 36 million items of PPE have already been delivered to care homes, but it is a vulnerable section of the community where I acknowledge the need always to strive to do better.

On communications, I will take up the noble Baroness's point; I understand it very well. I acknowledge her point on the need for the broadest co-operation if and when we move into test and trace. On publishing frameworks, I think that the noble Baroness and the House know that the Government's position is that we have first to keep on with the effort that that public are making to contain this virus and to meet the five tests before we move forward to any release from the current lockdown provisions. As the Prime Minister acknowledged when he came back to work, over the next few days, the Government will continue to examine carefully all these issues.

On the points made by the noble Lord, Lord Wallace of Saltaire, I do not need any reminder of the need to commend the Civil Service. I have always had the highest respect for it and have worked with it through my life. The ideal of public service is one that I personally consider to be of the highest importance, and it is something to which I have always aspired. I assure the noble Lord that that is shared widely, if not universally, across the Government. On the importance of local authorities, I referred to the local resilience fora. Local authorities are making a great contribution. We will continue to work to improve and maintain communications with them and with agencies right across England, as the noble Lord rightly said.

I welcome what the noble Lord said about the military. Its role has been extraordinary. The Armed Forces have made a great difference and perhaps have not had as much attention in the media as they might have done, but I was grateful for what he said on that score.

So far as the redeployment of civil servants and the delay of business is concerned, there has been an impact on some aspects of government business, of course. It is right that full priority should be given to confronting this crisis, but on the noble Lord's concerns about the negotiations towards the transition on 31 December, I assure him that a very effective team with a large number of civil servants is at work there, as was said in the recent Statement. Indeed, if he read Monsieur Barnier's statement, he will have seen how Monsieur Barnier himself commented on the professionalism of David Frost and his team in carrying forward those negotiations. I believe that we can have confidence in that.

I hope that I have answered most of the points made. If not, I will write to noble Lords.

1.33 pm

Lord Caine (Con): My Lords, I welcome my noble friend's Statement. I join in the expressions of deep gratitude to all those who have kept public services running. We owe them a huge debt.

[LORD CAINE]

Does my noble friend agree that, while we understand the entirely fair and legitimate questions and concerns about, for example, the delivery of some equipment to the front line—notwithstanding the burning desire of some in the media to produce a so-called gotcha moment—one of the most important features of this pandemic is that, unlike in some other countries, our National Health Service has not been overwhelmed and has coped brilliantly with the extra demands placed on it? For this, both our fantastic health service workers and those in government deserve credit.

Lord True: My Lords, I thank my noble friend. Of course, I wholly endorse what he said about the great achievement of the National Health Service, with all the support that it has received from others, in providing its services and in maintaining a safe distance between being overwhelmed and offering the outstanding-quality service that it does. I agree that a little more attention might sometimes be given to some of the remarkable and unprecedented things that have been achieved over the past few weeks.

It is right that there should be scrutiny. It is right that questions should be asked, above all in Parliament but also by the media. The country has demonstrated that it has the will to go forward and triumph over this virus. To win, one has to travel with hope and encouragement, as well as with humility and honesty. It behoves us all, both those who report and those who perform, to keep that spirit of hope and encouragement alive.

Lord Laming (CB): My Lords, the Minister brings a vast range of experience to this subject, so he will recall that after the banking crisis of 2008 there followed 10 years of austerity and during those years, local authorities experienced an increase in demand for services and major cuts in their budgets. As a result, as we look back, in relative terms the most vulnerable sometimes paid the highest price because they had no margins and the services they needed were restricted or removed. We are now told that borrowing is at an unprecedented level, so I hope the Minister will agree that it would be timely, among all the other things that have to be done, for a robust plan of action to be put in place to ensure that as we go forward, the most vulnerable and the services they need are properly protected.

Lord True: My Lords, I am not going to follow the noble Lord into considering history; otherwise, one could go back further and further into how we got into the 2008 crisis and so on. The thing we must do now is to go forward and look forward. I cannot at this virtual Dispatch Box anticipate what the Chancellor will do in managing the economy as and when we come out of this crisis, but it is this Government's firm resolve to level up, as the Prime Minister has repeatedly stated. Indeed, in this crisis, as we know, additional resources have been given to local authorities and the social care sector. Of course, I understand, accept and share the spirit of the noble Lord's remarks, if not following him in every detail.

The Deputy Speaker (The Earl of Kinnoull) (Non-Aff): Baroness Pinnock? Baroness Pinnock is not responding. Baroness Watkins of Tavistock.

Baroness Watkins of Tavistock (CB): My Lords, I, too, welcome the Statement and join in the expression of appreciation of everyone who is working so hard during this unprecedented public health challenge. However, I want to raise a question about the future of the acquisition and delivery of PPE. We are very aware that in the past few weeks, this has not been conducted as efficiently and effectively as everybody would like, including Ministers. However, we know that with the Spanish flu there were two further peaks. Can the Government assure us that by this autumn, we will have sufficient and robust supplies of PPE that meet the right standards from the HSE's perspective? Looking at the Statement and the four teams that are working together, many people, including me, do not quite understand where the noble Lord, Lord Deighton, who is co-ordinating the manufacture and distribution of PPE locally, will link in with those four teams. We could, of course, become completely self-reliant as a country on PPE, which may be something we want to think about in the longer term. I would be very happy to have a virtual meeting to discuss this further if it is appropriate.

Lord True: PPE is of course of fundamental importance. If anybody in the country did not realise it at the start of this crisis, it is fully understood now. Ministers have always understood it. We had a large stockpile. Great efforts will continue to be made to ensure that our front line has sufficient equipment. I note the points that the noble Baroness made about the experience of Spanish flu, and I would certainly be interested in talking to her about it on another occasion, but I must reiterate that the Government are 100% committed to securing a stable and safe supply of PPE now and in the future.

The Deputy Speaker: I again call the noble Baroness, Lady Pinnock.

Baroness Pinnock (LD): Following on from the noble Lord, Lord Laming, I want to explore the needs of local authorities a bit further. Councils of all political persuasions are very concerned about the considerable shortfall in the funding they need—for example, to prevent the failure of private sector social care provision. Will the Minister join me in urging the Government to meet this large and urgent need for additional funding—over and above, I have to say, what has already been provided to local government during this crisis?

Lord True: My Lords, I might be new in the game, but I am afraid that I cannot urge the Government because I am no longer on the Back Benches. I can say that the Government understand the critical importance of local authorities in confronting this problem. I will certainly make sure that the noble Baroness's points are heard and understood by the Chancellor. As I said, I cannot anticipate what financial provision he will make for the future.

Lord Farmer (Con): My Lords, given the latest Public Health England advice that quarantining of new and at-risk prisoners should be in place for the rest of this year, can my noble friend advise us of the

Government's planning for the resumption of prisoners' family visits and the progress on making virtual visits widely available?

Lord True: My Lords, my noble friend raises a very important point. Prisoners are a vulnerable part of the community and mental health is important for everyone, not least prisoners. I assure him that although this is at an initial stage, action has already been taken to ensure that locked mobile telephones can be given to prisoners in settings where there is no access to call boxes. Provision is being made to bring in the kinds of virtual conferences and meetings that he describes. I cannot give him an exact figure on the number of settings, or the timing, but I assure him that the Government are aware of the issue and addressing it.

Baroness Brinton (LD): My Lords, I thank the Government for agreeing the £60,000 award for health and social care workers who have died, but I ask them to extend this to other workers who have died on the coronavirus front line. Will the Government please ensure that bereaved families of those who have died on the front line but who are not in the NHS Pension Scheme get the same benefits, including a monthly allowance for dependants?

Lord True: My Lords, my honourable friend the Minister for Health has said that he will consider the details of the scheme further. I am glad that it was welcomed by the noble Baroness and I will ensure that he is aware of the important points she raised.

Lord Mackay of Clashfern (Con): I would like to say first how impressed I am by the work of the Department for Work and Pensions, which has the responsibility for meeting the needs of the most needy people in our country. Also, can the Minister tell me the effects of the present restrictions on the criminal and civil courts in our country?

Lord True: My Lords, I am grateful for what my noble and learned friend said about the Department for Work and Pensions. It is an important area when it comes to confronting this crisis. Helping the most vulnerable is absolutely key, as well as those whose jobs are suddenly insecure. On the courts, there has been an impact, particularly in the case of the county courts. Virtual proceedings are continuing where it is possible to do so. I believe that court proceedings are continuing in 159 settings—I cannot remember the exact figure off the top of my head but if it is wrong, I will write to my noble and learned friend. That has also obviously had an impact on magistrates' courts, where the throughput of cases is considerably down from the normal level. This matter receives the constant attention of the Ministry of Justice, which is monitoring the situation closely.

Baroness Finlay of Llandaff (CB): As the Government have recognised clearly and appropriately in the Statement, front-line workers from overseas have been essential to managing the Covid-19 epidemic, and have done so at risk to themselves and their families. Will the Government give credit for this in applications for UK residency and citizenship and urgently revise the criteria, and in the process, are the costs of their visas being waived?

Lord True: My Lords, I cannot answer the detail on the last point; I will advise the noble Baroness on that point. Obviously she will know that the NHS visa scheme will be ongoing as an important part of the Government's plans. On the other aspects of her question, I agree that the significance and importance of workers in the NHS who come from overseas is hugely recognised and valued; that has been made publicly clear several times by my right honourable friend the Minister for Health, and I endorse that. I will pass on to him all the remarks the noble Baroness made, and I am grateful for what she said.

Lord Blencathra (Con): My Lords, I thank my noble friend for his comments, particularly on schools. Reopening schools as soon as possible must be a top priority. Since most pupils and teachers will have had a very long Easter break—unexpected and unwelcome—and since it will not be possible for anyone to go away on holiday this August, will the Government therefore consider and instruct all schools to stay open throughout the usual summer holiday period, apart from a couple of weeks' break, in order for pupils to catch up?

Lord True: My Lords, obviously, education is of critical importance. As my noble friend will know, some schools have stayed open to provide support for the children of key workers—I express our gratitude to them. It is right that we should congratulate and commend the professionals who have done that in the circumstances. I understand the aspiration to return to school, whether it comes from children or from parents and grandparents. I remind the House of the five tests—so far I have not—which are vital if we are to sustain the fight against Covid. Those have not all been met, but obviously, as the Prime Minister said when he came out of hospital, consideration is being given to the future. The key task currently is to protect the NHS, save lives and protect lives, and, as the Prime Minister put it, this is a moment of maximum risk, as well as of maximum opportunity. I understand what my noble friend said and I assure him that the Government are well aware of many people's aspirations. However, for the moment we must keep on with social distancing.

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick (Non-Aff): My Lords, I have strong solidarity with all public sector workers. What are the plans for the post-Covid economic strategy, and when will we have sight of them? Perhaps the Minister could ask his colleague the Chancellor about them.

Lord True: I thank the noble Baroness. It is of course in the hands of the Chancellor. I am sure the noble Baroness would agree that his massive response to this crisis, helping businesses and families, and supporting those in need, has been unprecedented and striking. We are obviously still in the middle of these circumstances and do not know how long this is going to continue. The noble Baroness will understand if I cannot anticipate what will happen in the weeks and months ahead, but I assure her that the Chancellor is vividly aware of the impact of the present crisis on the economy, and what it means for real people who go out to work to make the resources that the country needs.

Lord Balfe (Con): Our National Health Service may be wonderful, but it has a very sclerotic decision-making process, rather like the former Soviet Union. I live in Cambridge, where our local hospital has almost 400 empty beds. Cancer radiotherapy and cancer operations have stopped. The cardiology department has almost stopped and there are no face-to-face appointments available. When the hospital is questioned, it says that it is waiting for guidance; when the Minister is questioned, we are told that it is up to the hospitals. Will someone try to shake this up, because although we have to combat Covid-19 we must also remember that many very ill people in the community are not being looked after?

Lord True: My Lords, the fact that my noble friend points to—the indirect impact on people and their health in the Covid crisis—has been repeatedly stressed by the Chief Medical Officer in the press conferences over recent weeks. That is understood. I take the point that he makes about spare capacity, which is obviously a result of what was a necessary response to the crisis. Yesterday in the press conference, my right honourable friend the Minister for Health spoke—I cannot remember the exact phrase—about reopening the NHS to normal business. That is probably not the phrase but it was something of that sort. I assure my noble friend that consideration is being given to this.

Baroness Randerson (LD): My Lords, I listened in vain for reference in the Statement to public transport or to the freight transport industries. Our economy sits on the shoulders on those industries, so while the Government have announced assistance for transport in its various forms, does the Minister agree that we owe a debt of gratitude to all public transport workers during this crisis? Sadly, many of them have died, particularly bus drivers, because they come into close and regular contact with the public. What are the Government doing to ensure that those workers, and other rail and bus workers, are given much better protection from the virus?

Lord True: My Lords, I totally agree with the noble Baroness about those who work in public transport. I am a public transport user myself; I do not drive a car in normal times. I know every day how important it is, as is the work which public service workers on transport have done. Albeit that it is less used, the Government recognise—as I think the whole nation recognises—the risk that they run. As the testing provision extends, more and more key workers will have access to this kind of provision. I fully take on board the points that she makes; these are vital and much valued members of the public services.

Lord Truscott (Ind Lab): My Lords, following the question from the noble Lord, Lord Blencathra, does the Minister accept the urgent need to prevent a blighted generation of young people, with all the issues that will present, including mental health issues? Many students and pupils will want to know when they can fully resume their education. What will the Minister say to them?

Lord True: My Lords, I share that aspiration and I know that the Government do, but the need to protect the safety of the public and to save lives is still paramount;

the five tests have not yet been met. But I repeat what I said in an earlier answer: that aspiration is clearly understood, and the Government have invested heavily in trying to support distance learning. That is a great thing, as I am sure a virtual Parliament is, but a virtual Parliament is no substitute for the real thing, and I hope that in due time virtual learning will be taken over by a return to a more normal life. But I am afraid that the time is not now.

Lord Berkeley (Lab): My Lords, I am grateful for the Minister's comments about the support from the voluntary sector—it is terribly important—but I do not know whether he is aware that the hospitality sector is failing quite dramatically. An awful lot of employees are on zero-hours contracts, and there are reports of them having to sleep rough in London and many other places because they cannot afford their rent. The problem is that there are no hotels, shops, restaurants or cafés open that might give them some food, there is nowhere for them to stay because they cannot afford the rent, and of course the public toilets are shut—so it is very different. Of course, these people do not always know the normal way in which local rough sleepers go about things. Could the Minister talk to local authorities and try to instruct them to open public toilets, encourage the voluntary sector and get the day centres open so that these people can at least survive until there is a better chance of getting a new job?

Lord True: My Lords, I certainly take into consideration what the noble Lord says. As I said earlier, through the help of local authorities and the truly outstanding agencies that work in the area of assisting homeless people, the Government believe that we have reached some 90% of those we wish to. But I hear what the noble Lord says and will pass on his remarks to colleagues.

Baroness McIntosh of Pickering (Con): I congratulate my noble friend and his department on the work they are doing on domestic food supply. Now that we have left the European Union, can my noble friend the Minister explain what steps are being taken to encourage schools, hospitals, prisons and councils to source their meat from domestic production at this time? Will he be mindful of the overnight loss of a huge part of the dairy production market, leaving 2,000 farmers possibly destitute and potentially leading to a mass slaughter of their cows?

Lord True: My Lords, I regret that the sound was not very good for my noble friend's question. I certainly caught her concern for farmers, and I take that point; my right honourable friend George Eustice has been addressing that matter. I am sorry that could not catch the other parts of her question, but I will ensure that she gets a written reply.

The Deputy Speaker: My Lords, that concludes Back-Bench questions on the Statement. The day's Virtual Proceedings are now complete and are adjourned.

Virtual Proceeding adjourned at 1.58 pm.

