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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Monday 16 March 2020

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts and Measures:

Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2020

NHS Funding Act 2020

Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 2020.

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I would like to make a short statement about the arrangements within Parliament in the light of the current circumstances due to coronavirus. All of us recognise the importance of Parliament continuing at such a difficult time because of the need to ensure proper scrutiny and address our constituents' concerns. However, to reduce the risk to those who work on the parliamentary estate and those who visit, we have taken some proportionate and reasonable measures to reduce the risk of exposure to the virus.

The following are some of the measures that are in place: no banqueting or commercial tour bookings will be accepted, and existing bookings have been cancelled and refunds will be issued; no mass lobbies will be allowed; all-party parliamentary groups are asked not to invite non-passholding guests on to the estate; and all passholders should refrain from bringing non-passholders on to the estate unless they are here for parliamentary business. I will be reviewing all other access arrangements constantly.

In addition, I can announce that, to alleviate the pressure on our security staff, the Portcullis House public entrance will be closed to non-passholders with effect from this Wednesday. This is a fast-moving situation, and I expect to make further announcements later today or tomorrow morning. I will not be taking points of order on this statement.

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Veterans

1. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support veterans and their families. [901524]

3. **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support veterans and their families. [901526]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

I would like to start by paying tribute to Lance Corporal Brodie Gillon, a reservist combat medic with the Scottish and North Irish Yeomanry, who was deployed to Iraq with the Irish Guards and was tragically killed when a coalition base was struck by indirect fire. It was a cowardly and retrograde attack on forces that are there to help Iraq. Lance Corporal Gillon's death serves as a stark reminder of the dangers that our armed forces face on a daily basis, and of their extraordinary commitment and bravery as they continue to protect our interests and others overseas. My thoughts—and, I know, those of the whole House—will be with her family and loved ones at this difficult time.

Peter Aldous: I join the Secretary of State and the whole House in those words.

The Government's additional funding to eliminate rough sleeping is welcome. I would be grateful if the Secretary of State could outline what is being done to support veterans who find themselves without a roof over their heads.

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend asks an important question about many people who have served our country. I welcome the Government's recent announcement of £112 million of additional funding to tackle rough sleeping. The Ministry of Defence works closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which leads on this issue. As well as the work that takes place across Whitehall, there are broad and deep networks of forces charities, regimental advisers and forces champions in local authority offices to offer support.

Scott Mann: There were some excellent measures in the Budget for veterans and veterans care. Will the Secretary of State elaborate on national insurance contributions for employers, and on how and when those plans might be rolled out?

Mr Wallace: The Government will introduce a national insurance holiday for employers of veterans in their first year of civilian employment. A full digital service will be available to employers from April 2022. However, transitional arrangements will be in place in the 2021-22 tax year that will effectively enable employers of veterans to claim this holiday from April 2021. The holiday will exempt employers from any national insurance contribution liability on the veteran's salary up to the upper earnings limit.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): May I start by joining the Secretary of State in paying tribute to Lance Corporal Brodie Gillon, who was tragically killed in Iraq last week? The Opposition pay tribute to her service, and send our thoughts and prayers to her family and friends.

A report by the charity Forward Assist found that over half of the women veterans that it interviewed had experienced sexual assault while serving, with one in four having been physically assaulted. Will the Secretary of State agree to the charity's recommendations by establishing an independent reporting system for women

veterans who wish to report historical abuse and creating a women's veterans department in the Office for Veterans' Affairs?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Member raises a really important point about how we treat allegations of sexual assault or misconduct in the armed forces. He will be aware of the Wigston report. We will look to do an independent review of that one year on, which I think will satisfy some of the recommendations of the charity he mentioned.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): May I echo the Secretary of State's remarks about Lance Corporal Gillon, and go a bit further and thank all the uniformed and non-uniformed staff serving in his Department? We lean on them quite a bit, but we will be leaning on them even more over the coming time. In that vein, when it comes to coronavirus, I am happy to set aside the political sparring that we would normally have. Given that many veterans will fall into the category of those most vulnerable and at risk of contracting coronavirus, can he update the House on his Department's strategy for supporting them?

Mr Wallace: Veterans, like the rest of the wider population, will of course come under the current central Government plans for dealing with coronavirus via the NHS. However, my Department—not only people working in the Department, but the serving personnel—will have its own measures in place to ensure that we perform our duty of care towards that workforce. As the hon. Member says, many in that workforce are the very people we will be relying on in future to deal with the coronavirus outbreak. Therefore, it is particularly important that our Ministers keep a close eye on their health.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I welcome what the Minister has to say on that. Can he give the House an assurance that he will move every mountain in government to work in particular with the charitable sector that supports veterans and their families as coronavirus becomes a bigger issue? More broadly, as we approach the integrated defence review, will he assure us that this pandemic will lead to a broader, more total defence concept of thinking, so that, unlike with the 2015 strategic defence and security review, pandemics are seen not to be low-risk but higher-risk, and we should have better preparedness for them?

Mr Wallace: As to the hon. Member's point about the veterans community and keeping an eye on them, my hon. Friend the Minister for Defence People and Veterans is engaged with a whole range of those stakeholders on a daily basis. I cannot recommend enough the work he does in that area. Like him, I am a president of a Scots Guards association and, through that, keep an eye on some of the veterans in Lancashire who we have to cover that area. On the hon. Member's broader point about coronavirus, we have lots of work to do. We will assess what we can deliver on the ground as we go, and I assure the House that we will leave no stone unturned in making sure we mitigate the impact on society, using all defence assets.

Vexatious Claims

4. **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): What steps his Department plans to take to tackle vexatious claims against armed forces personnel. [901527]

17. **James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): What steps his Department plans to take to tackle vexatious claims against armed forces personnel. [901546]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): We are unstinting in our gratitude to the armed forces, who perform exceptional feats to protect this country. We rightly hold our service personnel to the highest standards of behaviour, but we also owe them justice and fairness. The Government will shortly introduce a legislative package to tackle vexatious claims and end the cycle of reinvestigations against our armed forces personnel and veterans.

Scott Benton: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer and welcome the introduction of the Bill to this place next week. The tabling of that legislation within 100 days of this new Parliament really does show the Government's resolve to crack on and do the right thing. Will my right hon. Friend join me in asking the Opposition to put party politics to one side, support our troops and back this Bill?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the importance of protecting our troops from vexatious investigations that go round and round in a circle. To put this in context, there were more than 300,000 veterans who served in Northern Ireland, 147,000 in Iraq and 148,000 in Afghanistan. Of those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, 0.03% were convicted of any offence while serving. That shows that our armed forces around the world observe the highest standards when doing their job and upholding the rule of law.

James Daly: Bury, being the home town of the Lancashire Fusiliers, welcomes my right hon. Friend's commitment to tackle vexatious prosecution of veterans. What guidance has been or will be given to the police and Crown Prosecution Service to ensure that our armed forces personnel are protected?

Mr Wallace: As a fellow Lancashire MP, I know the pride that Lancashire takes in its armed forces, and also the first-class men and women that the county contributes to our armed forces. Guidance to the police and Crown Prosecution Service is not a matter for the Ministry of Defence. However, I can reassure my hon. Friend that the Government are doing everything they can to provide our service personnel and veterans with the protections they deserve, and we will set out further details on Wednesday.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I look forward to the announcement on Wednesday, but will the Secretary of State confirm that his announcement will cover operations and issues that arise both internationally and domestically?

Mr Wallace: On Wednesday, we will introduce the Bill that deals with overseas operations. We will, however, accompany it with a statement from the Northern Ireland Office setting out what we will do to deal with the Northern Ireland veterans. They will be equal and similar to the protections we are going to look at for overseas.

Recruitment and Retention

5. **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to (a) recruit and (b) retain armed forces personnel. [901529]

13. **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to (a) recruit and (b) retain armed forces personnel. [901539]

16. **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to (a) recruit and (b) retain armed forces personnel. [901544]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heapey): I fear that to list all the steps we are taking to recruit and retain armed forces personnel might take longer than you will allow, Mr Speaker. Suffice it to say, however, that I can assure the House that this country will continue to have the world-class armed forces that it needs. There are a range of measures under way to improve recruitment and, crucially, retention, and those are kept constantly under review.

Elliot Colburn: Carshalton and Wallington is home to 350 RAF Air Training Corps, and the cadets at the 350 Squadron are incredibly passionate about pushing themselves out of their comfort zone and achieving things that they did not think were possible. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that young people like those in the 350 Squadron see the value of the confidence, skills and experience that a role in the armed forces would provide?

James Heapey: I thank my hon. Friend for being such a champion of the air cadets, particularly in his constituency. All cadets learn many skills, but the cadet forces are not conduits into the armed forces. However, many cadets do go on to enjoy successful careers in the services, and long may that continue. As part of the cadets syllabus, we provide them with an awareness of the various career opportunities in the military and in other industries around defence.

Antony Higginbotham: Burnley has a long and proud tradition when it comes to service and recruitment into the armed forces. With that in mind, will the Minister agree to look at the viability of reopening the Burnley recruitment office, which was closed in 2013? That would make a valuable contribution to keeping Burnley's tradition alive.

James Heapey: Armed forces career offices were reduced to increase efficiency and to reflect the modern society from which we are recruiting. Most recruiting activity occurs online, through chat facilities or through call centres, and it is vital that we maintain strong presences on social media and elsewhere on the internet, but we of course continually review the lay-down of our recruiting offices, and we will look again at the one in Burnley.

Andrew Jones: The Army Foundation College is located in my constituency. It provides a high-quality route into the Army for younger people, as it focuses on personal development and has a very well-respected education

service. Does the Minister agree that the college plays an important role in Army recruitment and will continue to do so?

James Heapey: My hon. Friend is a champion for that fantastic college, and the Army is rightly very proud of it. The college provides an outstanding choice of qualifications and apprenticeships, as well as developing confidence, leadership skills and self-esteem. Whatever their background, young recruits become the Army's future leaders, on average serving longer and providing more than half of our senior soldiers.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): There have been problems with Capita in Army recruitment, so may I ask the Minister whether there are any plans for outsourcing recruitment for the RAF and the Navy?

James Heapey: No.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Local authorities, the Ministry of Justice, the police and the Department of Health and Social Care all have the military mentioned in their contingency plans for tackling covid-19. Is the Minister satisfied that we have sufficient personnel to respond to the plans to tackle the virus here in the UK? If he is not, what plans does he have in place to bring military back from all non-essential operations overseas?

James Heapey: The Ministry of Defence plans for all things, whether it be for flooding or, indeed, for pandemic. We are planning for all eventualities in response to covid-19, and we are content that we have what we need within our resources to meet the likely requirements of the Government.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The proportion of all personnel reporting satisfaction with service life in general was 60% in 2010, but that has fallen to a mere 46% in 2019. Will the Minister set out what plans he has to rectify that, as we simply cannot afford to have more servicemen and women choosing to leave the forces because of a decline in satisfaction?

James Heapey: The hon. Gentleman raises a really important point. No matter what the successes in recruiting might be, without good retention performance, they are more than offset. To that end, we have been looking extensively at what we can do to improve retention, including through the excellent report recently written by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois).

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): As a long-term critic in this House of Capita—sorry, Capita—I very much welcome the Minister's emphatic answer that there are no plans to outsource royal naval or RAF recruitment. That is a wise decision. Will he bear in mind that, if we are to recruit and retain people in the armed forces, they must know that the Government will have their back if they ever get into trouble? Will the recently announced Bill on veterans protection fully reflect that principle?

James Heapey: Yes.

Army Equipment

6. **Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of Army equipment. [901530]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): The Army conducts annual assessments to ensure that it has the right equipment for the future. It is undergoing an ambitious capability transformation programme, including investing in new, fully digitised Ajax and Boxer vehicles.

Mr Perkins: If the range and capability of our battle tanks and armoured vehicles are inferior to that of our potential adversaries, it is difficult for our world-class armed forces to continue to operate in that sphere. Will the Minister assure the House that the Challenger 2 and Warrior programmes will be brought forward at the earliest possible opportunity, to ensure that our world-class troops have world-class equipment?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman is right: we need the very best equipment for our armed forces. As he is probably aware, the Army has no fewer than nine key projects for equipment modernisation, totalling some £17 billion over the next 10 years, and around 130 smaller projects. He mentions two in particular. On Challenger 2, we are well advanced through the assessment phase and will take decisions on that at a future date. On Warrior, we are on to the demonstration phase, which is going well, and we will be taking decisions in the future.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): The recent National Audit Office report on the Government's defence equipment plan showed that there is a potential funding shortfall of £13 billion, which will no doubt affect Army equipment as well as Navy and RAF equipment. Given that this is now the third time that the NAO has deemed the plan unaffordable, when will the Minister get to grips with this funding crisis?

Jeremy Quin: We are getting to grips with it right now. We are grateful to the NAO for its work. I gently point out to the hon. Lady that the Department hit budget this year, last year and the year before. We constantly review budgets to make certain that the equipment plan is affordable. We have shrunk the gap significantly, and we had additional assistance from the Treasury last year. We will make certain that we are meeting the needs of the armed forces.

Nia Griffith: I thank the Minister for his answer, but we know that the Army has cancelled various anti-armour projects and reduced the number of tanks it will upgrade. There have also been recent reports suggesting that the Army is to face further cuts in the integrated review. Can the Minister guarantee that the review will not be yet another cost-cutting exercise, leaving our armed forces short of the equipment that we need to defend the country?

Jeremy Quin: The integrated review is under way; it is nowhere near to bringing itself to any conclusions yet. The review looks at the totality of our place in the world, as the hon. Lady recognises, and how we operate as a country across the broadest spectrum. It is not a

review designed to cut costs. It is a review designed to ensure that we know what we are doing in the world and that that is effected through really effective equipment—that is the purpose of the integrated review, and we look forward to its response.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): May I ask Ministers to extend the gratitude of the Defence Committee for our visit to Army HQ in Andover on Thursday? It was an illuminating visit, and the issue of Warrior and Challenger—now two decades old—came up. The Minister mentioned the integrated review. Given what we learned and the fantastic efforts that are being made to support the nation in tackling the coronavirus, may I invite the Secretary of State and the Minister to delay the integrated review until the new year, to ensure that we do it properly, rather than rush it when the focus is elsewhere at the moment?

Jeremy Quin: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and to his Defence Committee for their work. The integrated review is important: it is important that we get on to it and move on with it at pace. We need to take firm decisions, and the swifter the better. However, as ever, we are mindful of events, and such things will obviously be taken into consideration if they need to be.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I thank the Minister of State for his recent visit to Rheinmetall BAE Systems Land at BAE Systems in my constituency, following the award of part of the Boxer contract to that consortium. On the issue of Challenger 2 and the life extension project, does the Minister of State think that Shropshire defence manufacturing will feature in his decision making, and will the decision-making maingate still be this autumn?

Jeremy Quin: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It was a great pleasure to visit his constituency and see at first hand the extraordinary skills in that constituency, and it was a great pleasure to meet many apprentices. As I said earlier about Challenger 2, we are in the assessment phase, and a decision on any next steps will be taken at a later date. I thank my hon. Friend for the question and the interest he always shows in the defence manufacturers in his constituency.

Service Families

7. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support the families of armed forces personnel. [901531]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Johnny Mercer): Service families are an integral part of the armed forces community. Our support for them includes children's education, mental wellbeing, partner employment assistance and improved accommodation. Following the independent review by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), we will refresh the UK armed forces families strategy for 2020. The aim is to raise the profile of service families and the issues they face resulting from service life.

Jessica Morden: Some 48% of those responding to a survey from the Army Families Foundation said they had received no information about the MOD's future

accommodation model. Will the Minister commit to doing much more to make sure that personnel and their families are aware of changes to their accommodation?

Johnny Mercer: The hon. Member is right to raise the challenge of the future accommodation model, or FAM. This is the future for military accommodation in this country, but we have a job of work to do to make sure people understand exactly what it is and, crucially, what it is not. That piece of work is ongoing in the Department at this time.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): Recent reports have again demonstrated the difficulties that our Commonwealth personnel have had in dealing with the Home Office, particularly with respect to bringing their families to the UK. Will Ministers now make the case to their colleagues in the Home Office to exempt Commonwealth personnel—as I am sure the Minister would agree, they serve our country with duty and distinction—from the minimum income requirements that prevent them from bringing their spouses or partners and children here.

Johnny Mercer: The Department is not going to start doing so, because this work started two years ago. This work is to alleviate the stresses, particularly the financial implications, for some of our Commonwealth individuals. I pay tribute to them: they add to our organisation in spades. We need to do more to make sure that they feel we treasure them, as we do. Conversations are ongoing with the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) who is responsible for immigration; I met him again only last week. We are absolutely determined to meet this challenge—whether about the minimum income requirement or about visas—and I will have further details in due course.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Many families of Northern Ireland veterans are rightly concerned about the treatment of their loved ones, with the ongoing witch hunt against our former service people. Will the Minister confirm to the House that, in the forthcoming legislation, Northern Ireland veterans will take the highest priority because of their age and the imminence of any potential prosecutions?

Johnny Mercer: Let me be absolutely clear with my hon. Friend: in line with our commitment, we are bringing in legislation within 100 days to start ending the process of vexatious claims and the cycle of investigations against our troops. As the Secretary of State has laid out, that will be accompanied by a written statement on Wednesday, giving equivalent protections to those who served in Northern Ireland. As my hon. Friend well knows, Northern Ireland issues are for Stormont House, but in this Government we are clear that lawfare is coming to an end, and that extends to those who have served in Northern Ireland.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): One great support for armed forces families is the accommodation they live in. In Carterton, we have some REEMA housing that requires renovation and some MOD brownfield sites that need developing, which some Ministers at least

have seen. Will the Department work with me to see how we can get this renovation and reworking carried out?

Johnny Mercer: Absolutely. Service housing is a real challenge, especially after taking over an antiquated estate, and the serious challenges in the budgets associated with that over many years. The future accommodation model will provide an answer for some, but the No.1 reason why people leave the military, and an area where retention is difficult, is still the impact of service life on their family. We are determined to tackle that, and I would be more than happy to go and visit with my hon. Friend.

19. [901548] **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): SSAFA found that 70% of all former forces personnel with whom it works feel unprepared for civilian life, and that is having a significant impact on their families. What more can the Minister do to help veterans prepare for civilian life once they have left the armed forces?

Johnny Mercer: The Government are doing more than any before to ensure that that difficult transition from service to civilian life is as seamless as possible. We must remember that 92% of service personnel who leave go into education, employment or training, but there are those who find that challenge particularly difficult. I met the chief executive of SSAFA last week, and I currently meet other chief executives and charity leaders on an almost weekly basis. The Government are shifting the bar in our offer to veterans in this country, and I pay tribute to SSAFA, which is at the front of that.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will my hon. Friend meet me, and others, to discuss a badge to be worn by members of the immediate family of those killed in action?

Johnny Mercer: My right hon. Friend will know that the immediate next of kin of those killed in action receive the Elizabeth Cross, which was introduced by the previous Administration. I am always willing to have conversations about medallion recognition, and to consider what more we can do, so that people in this country recognise that we match our actions with the words we say from the Dispatch Box, regarding the feelings of a service family who have been through that process, and often sacrificed the greatest on the altar of this nation's continuing freedom.

Army Personnel

9. **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of Army personnel. [901533]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heapey): Two weeks from the end of this recruiting year we are close to achieving 100% of the basic training starts that the Army set out to achieve. That reflects the much needed efforts made to drive improvements in the recruitment process.

Dame Diana Johnson: When Labour left office in 2010 there were 102,000 regulars in the British Army. In the subsequent decade of cuts and outsourcing, those

numbers have fallen every year, down to 73,000 last October. Is the Minister confident that a full-time, regular British Army that could not fit into Wembley stadium a decade ago, but can now fit into the Old Trafford stadium, is sufficient to meet this country's security needs?

James Heapey: Army recruitment this year is up 68.6% on last year, which demonstrates what a fantastic career our young men and women can still have in the Army. I am confident that the Army is more than capable of meeting the nation's needs, and I am excited to see what comes out of the integrated review, regarding what our Army will look like in future.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): Will the Minister join me in congratulating Yasmin Williams from Bangor on being the first female in the Welsh Guards Infantry? Will he suggest ways that the Army can meet its female recruitment target, and encourage other women, like me in my younger days, to take up that amazing career?

James Heapey: My hon. Friend is a fantastic advocate for women in the armed forces, and I was pleased—as I am sure she was—to see so many fantastic female role models being put forward by the Army, Navy and Air Force, as part of our defence celebrations on International Women's day. There have been some fantastic successes for women in our armed forces recently. My hon. Friend mentioned the first female soldier in the Welsh Guards, and recently we had the first female to pass the incredibly tough—far tougher than I could have done—P-company test for the Parachute Regiment.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), is the Royal Army Medical Corps—both regular and reserves—and other parts of the armed forces, fully recruited to deal with the coronavirus outbreak? Will the Minister be calling into full-time reserve service all those who are not NHS workers, for example, in their civilian careers?

James Heapey: The hon. Gentleman asked me two questions. He asked whether we are recruited sufficiently in defence to meet the needs of coronavirus, and the answer to that is yes. I will write to him about what exactly will be the manning of the Royal Army Medical Corps.

Mental Health Support

10. **Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking with Cabinet colleagues to improve mental health support for armed forces personnel. [901534]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Johnny Mercer): The Ministry of Defence and the Office for Veterans' Affairs recognise that maintaining good mental health and providing treatment when required is fundamental to maintaining a fit, healthy and effective military force.

Robbie Moore: Mental health problems can place a great strain on family relationships. There are fantastic organisations across the country, such as the Keighley

armed forces and veterans breakfast club, that provide service personnel, veterans and their families with the opportunity to meet and talk on a regular basis. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that mental health support—particularly support to keep military families together—extends to service personnel families?

Johnny Mercer: There is a range of help available, particularly for our service families. I am aware that a lot of the debate at the moment is about veterans, but our service families absolutely are on that level; indeed, the armed forces covenant talks about this nation's debt to her armed forces and their families. The armed forces breakfast clubs are a fantastic idea. I went to the one in Plymouth a week ago, and I commend them for their work. There are lots of organisations out there in different parts of the country; the Office for Veterans' Affairs brings them all together so veterans know where they and their families can turn at a time of need.

Young Offenders and Vulnerable People: Rehabilitation

11. **Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con):** What recent assessment he has made of the role of the armed forces in helping to rehabilitate (a) young offenders and (b) other vulnerable young people. [901535]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heapey): The armed forces offer an exciting and fulfilling career, including to people from disadvantaged backgrounds and to young offenders who have completed their sentences. Outreach and engagement programmes include initiatives with young offender institutions to develop confidence and aspiration; the expansion of the combined cadet force, focusing on state schools; and enabling service personnel to volunteer with the Prince's Trust to work with the most disadvantaged in our society.

Adam Afriyie: The Army's youth rehabilitation programme does good work in the Windsor constituency and across the country. Sadly, however, it is sometimes unable to help recently released offenders due to the lengthy rehabilitation periods imposed. It would be great to see many more young people who would benefit the most from military youth engagement take part, so may I ask the Minister gently whether he will look again at reviewing the current policy?

James Heapey: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this excellent programme that the Army offers. While on licence, offenders remain subject to automatic custody recall for failing to meet licence conditions or committing any arrestable offence and therefore cannot be recruited, as I am sure he appreciates. However, he asks me about a fantastic thing. The Army, Navy and Air Force are brilliant vehicles for social mobility, and I am sure we would be keen to expand that programme in any way we can.

Integrated Review

14. **Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking to prepare for the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy. [901541]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): The Ministry of Defence is fully committed to its part in supporting the successful delivery of the Government's ambition for the integrated review. The review is working on four main workstreams: the Euro-Atlantic alliance, great power competition, global issues and homeland security. Work in the MOD to support those workstreams has been ongoing since the election and is closely linked to this year's comprehensive spending review.

Dan Jarvis: I am sure the Secretary of State agrees that current events reflect the need for the integrated review, to ensure that Britain plays its part on the global stage with our partners and in the spirit of international co-operation, but does he think it is feasible to conduct a review that is expected to result in the biggest reform of our armed forces since the cold war in the present climate and over the current timescale?

Mr Wallace: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. The review's stakeholders are the Foreign Office, No. 10, the Cabinet Office and ourselves. We will regularly review that decision. There is no ideological block or determination to carry on come what may. With this coronavirus growing, if it is the right thing to do, we will absolutely pause the review if necessary; if not, we shall move forward.

Mr Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): With cyber-security recognised as a tier 1 threat, it is important to ensure that all contracts outsourced by the MOD, whether defence procurement or service contracts, fully meet the necessary cyber-security provisions. Given reports suggesting that the cyber-security standards of some defence supply chains are low, what steps are Ministers taking to improve the situation as part of the integrated review?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman highlights a critical part of our cyber infrastructure. That is why nearly two years ago we founded the National Cyber Security Centre to work alongside the MOD, business and other parts of Government to focus, exactly as he recommends, on the weak points that are often exploited by hostile states and cyber-criminals. We are one of the few countries with such an organisation and I am confident that we are on the right track. We work tirelessly to ensure that those vulnerabilities are patched and stopped, and indeed that prime contractors, who own the supply chain, take their fair share of responsibility too.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If the integrated review comes to the conclusion, which it certainly should, that the defence part of the review requires more than 2% of GDP to be spent on conventional and related armed forces, will the Secretary of State and his team fight like tigers to ensure we get the extra money?

Mr Wallace: I could not agree more. I will absolutely fight for the right share, which is why we achieved 2.6% in the short spending review only last year, one of the highest departmental growth figures. The review is not cost neutral. Like my right hon. Friend, I have seen review after review, some of which are wonderfully authored but seldom funded, including one of the best reviews of my lifetime, the 1998 review by the then

Member for Hamilton, Lord Robertson. He did an extremely good review and even that, according to the House of Commons Library, was not properly funded in the end. That is one of the big problems we are determined to try to put right.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): In light of travel bans across the world, with increasing numbers of British citizens stranded and reports of limited support from the Foreign Office, will the military be deployed to help people to return home?

Mr Wallace: We have deployed military personnel on a number of return flights, for example from Wuhan. We have always made our assets available where possible, subject to medical advice and where the destination country is willing to engage. We always stand ready to help our citizens, wherever they are around the world. It is really important, however, that in this outbreak we ensure that we balance medical advice with an individual's desire to come home. It may be that they are best suited to being treated where they are.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the strategic defence and security review will be aligned to a defence industrial strategy that places British manufacturing at the heart of defence?

Mr Wallace: It will certainly place prosperity and manufacturing at its heart. It will also place at its heart our very real obligation to give the men and women of the armed forces the best equipment we can, so they can fight with the best chance of success. There is always a natural tension where we are not providing that. The industrial strategy will hopefully indicate to industry where it should invest to ensure it competes with a competitive edge, so that the Ministry of Defence can buy from it for our men and women.

Social Mobility

15. **Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of social mobility in the armed forces. [901542]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Johnny Mercer): We aim to attract talent from the widest possible base across the UK, regardless of socio-economic background, educational status or ethnicity. The skills, education, training and experience provided enable recruits to progress as far as their aptitude will take them, and benefit from promotion based on merit.

Siobhain McDonagh: New data reveals that there are nearly as many cadet forces in fee-paying schools as in the entire state system, despite just 7% of the UK population being privately educated. To ensure greater social mobility in our forces, will the Minister tell the House what his Department is doing to increase the number of combined cadet forces in state schools?

Johnny Mercer: The Government are committed to establishing 500 new cadet forces across the country, with a big focus on state schools. We are absolutely clear that people's socioeconomic background has absolutely zero to do with their opportunity to serve. The opportunities of service are there for everybody.

Armed Forces Capability

18. **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that the capabilities of the armed forces are adequate to address future threats. [901547]

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): The Ministry of Defence has rigorous processes to assure, test and develop our capabilities to keep our country safe. This will be looked at again as part of a thorough wide-ranging analysis through the integrated review.

Steve Double: There is no doubt that space will play an increasingly important role in defence. In Cornwall, we are excited about that opportunity, because we will soon be launching satellites from Spaceport Cornwall. Will my hon. Friend confirm that the space domain will fully be a part of the integrated review?

Jeremy Quin: We have established a space directorate, which is tasked with how to advance opportunities for the UK commercial space sector. I absolutely assure my hon. Friend that space and its potential will form a part of the integrated review.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Over the past decade, £430 million has been spent on the Army's Warrior programme upgrade. Despite that, it is still only at the demonstration phase. Can the Minister indicate when a contract will be let? And will that contract be let only when the battlefield assessment phase is complete?

Jeremy Quin: The right hon. Gentleman is right that there has been a long period—nine years—of assessment and demonstration of the Warrior programme. It is important that it is looked at and that we have the right kit to take the Warrior through to 2040 and perhaps beyond. I confirm that we are at the demonstration phase. Any future steps will be taken at the conclusion of that phase.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): Can the Minister reassure hon. Members and tell us what steps he will take to ensure that the continuous at-sea deterrent continues to function during the covid-19 outbreak?

Jeremy Quin: That is a perfectly reasonable question, but it will become familiar to my hon. Friend that we do not comment on CASD in this place. I thank him for his interest.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Ciaran Martin, head of the UK's National Cyber Security Centre, confirmed recently that Russian hackers attacked British media, telecoms and energy companies. The Royal United Services Institute has confirmed that the UK will not be able to replicate many of the security benefits of EU membership. Will the Minister give the House an assessment of the capacity we are losing by leaving the EU and outline the Government's costed proposals for how the UK can unilaterally develop that capacity?

Jeremy Quin: We have world-leading capabilities in cyber. I am comfortable and confident that, as part of the integrated review, we will put in place strong plans to further strengthen that work. In my contact with my European Union defence counterparts across the EU to date, they have been extremely keen to continue to work closely with the United Kingdom as sovereign equals. After all, we are the biggest spender on defence in western Europe, as the hon. Lady is aware.

Topical Questions

T1. [901549] **Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): The UK Government are working with the devolved Administrations, the World Health Organisation and international partners to keep the UK safe against the outbreak of covid-19. The men and women of our armed forces are deeply professional and always work to tackle threats to our security wherever they may be. This situation is no different. We stand ready to work with other Government Departments, secure in the knowledge that our armed forces bring calmness and resilience to any task. Meanwhile, the delivery of key operations and outputs will continue to be maintained.

Mr Perkins: Members across the House take huge pride in the people in their constituency who join our armed forces, but would it not give greater focus to our pride if figures were published regularly to show how many from each constituency join each year? Will the Secretary of State see if such statistics can be provided, so that the people of Chesterfield can take pride in the number of people from there who join our armed forces each year?

Mr Wallace: I would be delighted to try to get that important data to hon. Members. I would also like to try to get the data on how many people are leaving our armed forces and going back into our constituencies. As president of an association, I know how hard it is to get in touch with soldiers from my regiment to make sure that they get the assistance they deserve. I take the hon. Gentleman's suggestion, which I worked on for years but which was always blocked by data protection. Now I am the Secretary of State for Defence, I would be delighted to try to deliver it for him.

T2. [901550] **Joy Morrissey** (Beaconsfield) (Con): Does the Minister agree that British businesses, such as Martin-Baker aircraft company, based in Denham, are at the heart of our defence industry? Can I tempt him to join me for the opening of our new facility in the coming months?

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): My hon. Friend is right. Martin-Baker produces the ejector seats for our F-35s that fly off HMS Queen Elizabeth. Diary permitting, I would be delighted to join her.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): This weekend there has been widespread concern about the Government's communication strategy on the coronavirus pandemic,

including a number of anonymous briefings to the media, such as one on the role of the Army. As well as providing more detail about Operation Broadshare, can the Secretary of State explain reports that the Government are working on the assumption that at least 20% of personnel will contract the virus? What arrangements are in place to mitigate any impact that that may have on operations?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Lady raises an important point about media stories, some of which are entirely fictional. There is no Operation Hades, contrary to one report. There are absolutely no plans to send military personnel to guard supermarkets. However, despite our trying to clarify that with the media, there is still an intention in some parts of the media to continue to write these stories; indeed, there is some suspicion about where some of these stories are developed.

Of course we have made all sorts of assumptions that reflect, first, infection rates in the general population and, secondly, the unique aspects of the armed forces' working life. We will make sure that we look after our armed forces and continue operationally.

T4. [901552] **Ian Levy** (Blyth Valley) (Con): I am proud to support the Royal British Legion in Blyth and Cramlington, which supports ex-servicemen and women all year round. Will the Minister please inform me what action is being taken to support personnel, and will he assure the House that the Government will do their utmost to deliver mental health support without delay to those who need it?

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Johnny Mercer): This Government are doing more than any before in this area. We have set up the UK's first Office for Veterans' Affairs; we were the last Five Eyes nation to do so. I am clear that in the nation's offering to her veterans, good mental health provision is absolutely critical. Next month we will launch, jointly with the NHS, a through-life mental healthcare plan, which I am sure my hon. Friend will be interested in.

T3. [901551] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I welcome the strong commitment from the Minister for Defence People and Veterans to supporting the mental health of personnel and veterans. He is probably aware of the interesting international research on the use of MDMA to treat post-traumatic stress disorder. Will he meet me and others to discuss how we can make it easier to carry out that research in the UK?

Johnny Mercer: I am very clear on two points. One is that we will stop at nothing to understand what is the best mental healthcare treatment that we can provide to our veterans in this country; the other is that obviously the classification of substances remains with the Home Office, and there are no plans to change that at the moment.

T5. [901554] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): I very much welcome the Ministry of Defence submarine sonar contract being awarded to Crawley-based Thales. Can my hon. Friend say a little more about the employment possibilities that the contract brings?

Jeremy Quin: This £330 million sonar and mast contract is indeed good news. It will secure or create highly skilled jobs in Thales in Scotland, Greater Manchester and Somerset—and 30, I am delighted to say, in the constituency of my hon. Friend and neighbour in Crawley.

T6. [901555] **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact of Covid-19 on plans to commemorate Victory over Japan Day in August with surviving veterans, and in association with the Royal British Legion and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heapey): I thank the hon. Lady for her very important question. Clearly, we are watching Government advice closely, and it will be taken into account when considering how to proceed with those commemorations.

T7. [901557] **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): David Brown Santasalo engineering in my constituency has been manufacturing engineering parts for the Ministry of Defence for many years, including propulsion gears for our Dreadnought submarines and our Type 26 frigates. It has shown a real commitment to quality apprenticeships. Will the ministerial team continue to show such commitment to great companies like it in the MOD supply chain? In fact, will the Minister visit David Brown Santasalo, and see at first hand its excellence in engineering?

Jeremy Quin: My hon. Friend has in the past raised this company, its work and particularly its apprenticeships with me. Diary permitting, I would be very pleased to visit it with him.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): If companies such as David Brown are to be sustained, they need orders, as does the shipbuilding industry. Once again I ask whether we can start behaving like every other country. Will the Minister tell us from the Dispatch Box when he will start the fleet solid support vessels programme again, and tell us that these ships will be built in British yards?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Member is a proper champion for British shipbuilding. After we ceased the competition, because it was delinquent the first time round, I have re-examined many of the terms and conditions of the contract, so he should watch this space.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): On the subject of social mobility, you and I know, Mr Speaker, that the Royal Marines ensures that training includes not only officers but enlisted men, together. I think it is the only organisation in NATO which does that. Is there a lesson to be learned, and should other branches of the armed forces also engage in combined training?

Johnny Mercer: I thank my hon. Friend for his interest in this important matter. Every service establishment where we conduct training is a mixture of enlisted men and women and commissioned ranks. We are always seeking to do more, although the division between the two is not a struggle that we persistently see.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Like the Minister, I attend our local armed forces breakfast clubs. One veteran there told me recently that he barely survives on benefit of £5 per week. Is the Minister not ashamed that those who have sacrificed so much are afforded so little by the Government?

Johnny Mercer: I shall be more than happy to meet the hon. Member and speak to her about this case. I find it hard to understand why an individual would be receiving £5 a week, but if that is indeed so, I am of course prepared to look into it. We are determined that this should be the best country on earth in which to be a veteran.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in praising the world-class military training at RAF Valley in my constituency, which prepares our fighter pilots for mountain and maritime operations throughout the world?

Mr Wallace: As my hon. Friend knows, she and I share a love of Anglesey and, indeed, RAF Valley, which is at the forefront of the training of our next generation of pilots. The priority that I have given the Chief of the Air Staff is to ensure that that operation is delivering on time and on target. As we know from the National Audit Office, it has a bad track record, having left a glut of some 250 pilots stuck in the system. However, I am pleased to report that that is improving, and I hope to have some better news in the future.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): What additional support can be given to vulnerable veterans who are forced to self-isolate?

Johnny Mercer: The Government are very clear about the fact that all possible help will be given to those who are self-isolating. A number of measures were released in the Budget last week, and there will be more in due course. We all have a duty to the most vulnerable in this country. However, I do not accept that that constitutes a large proportion of veterans, the vast majority of whom are greatly enhanced by their service.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): The coronavirus will test the nation in ways that we have not seen since the war. I think that it is about when, not if, the armed forces will be mobilised. We know that they will rise to the occasion to help other Departments, but the threats that are there today will continue to exist. Will the Minister ensure that we do not drop our guard so that those who mean us harm do not take advantage while we are distracted by the coronavirus?

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the main task of Defence, which is defending the nation. Only this morning I held meetings with senior officials and military personnel to ensure that both our routine and our units were in place to deliver, first and foremost, the priority of defending the nation. When we see changes, they will be in areas such as exercising and non-essential travel, so that we can ensure that the personnel concerned are there to support the rest of the country when it comes to the coronavirus.

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): In my constituency we have a number of veterans with mental health issues who find it very difficult to gain access to

GPs who are equipped to deal with veterans' mental health. What measures does the Minister suggest should be taken to ensure that GPs are equipped to do that?

Johnny Mercer: I pay tribute to the work done by Dr Jonathan Leach with the Department. He has doggedly gone around making sure that our GP surgeries are veteran-friendly, and I plan to audit them to ensure that when a veteran does engage with those services, he is treated as I would want him to be. However, there is still work to be done. I shall be launching a veterans' mental health programme in April, which will highlight clearly where veterans can gain access to state mental health care.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What future is envisaged for Team Tempest and the combat air strategy in the defence and security review?

Jeremy Quin: As my hon. Friend knows, the future of air combat, on which we have published a review, is an incredibly important aspect of our future defence, but I will not speculate on individual aspects of the integrated review, because it would be inappropriate to do so. We should be looking at the whole process of defence, and all the capabilities that we need to keep ourselves and our allies safe in the future.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Her Majesty's armed forces owe a huge debt of gratitude to Commonwealth citizens. On the issue of right to remain, can I ask the Minister what new protocols will be put in place between the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office?

Johnny Mercer: Last week I met the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who is the immigration Minister, and I am absolutely determined to make sure that there are specialist teams—for example, there was an NHS cell in the Home Office that dealt with UK Visas and Immigration, and I am looking at measures to try to replicate that. We have made it clear that if those who have served their nation are entitled to remain we will facilitate that process.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): May I ask my hon. Friend, in relation to social mobility and the British Army, how many serving officers went to a state school, and what we are doing to increase that proportion?

Johnny Mercer: I recognise the question, but this simply is not the issue that it perhaps was 20 or 30 years ago. We have far more people from state schools going to Sandhurst and other military establishments. I am cognisant of the fact that we can always do more, but we have some extraordinary social mobility stories that I am more than happy to share with my hon. Friend. We are absolutely committed, regardless of someone's socioeconomic background, ethnicity or anything like that, and the armed forces are perhaps the greatest exponent of social mobility in this country.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given that the Government are on track to deal with the hounding of our veterans within 100 days of taking office, how

many days will it take to produce an ex gratia plan for the compensation of the estimated 265 war widows who lost their pension on remarriage or cohabitation?

Johnny Mercer: I have met my right hon. Friend a number of times to discuss this issue. Indeed, I have met the war widows groups. The Secretary of State made a

statement to the House, and we continue to look at schemes on how we can help those who have lost their husband or wife in the service of this nation. We have made it clear that we owe them a debt of gratitude, and we will look to set up some sort of fund or payment that will rightly recognise their sacrifice for the nation.

Assaults on Retail Workers (Offences)

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

3.32 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make certain offences, including malicious wounding, grievous or actual bodily harm and common assault, aggravated when perpetrated against a retail worker in the course of their employment; to make provision about the sentencing of persons convicted of such aggravated offences; and for connected purposes.

I bring in this Bill at a time of significant national importance. It is a change from the main subject for this week and coming weeks, but pertinent in the light of the significance that retail workers have in our lives and will continue to have in that period.

I would like to start by giving voice to Phillip, a Co-op staff member who had this to say about his experience of violence at work:

“I was hospitalised for over a week with broken ribs and a collapsed lung after being kicked to near death by three shoplifters who stole a £10 bottle of spirits, on another occasion a shoplifter clearly high on drugs had a medieval mace on a chain and was swinging it around attacking myself and a colleague, it struck my colleague’s face and ripped apart her cheek, tore off her nose and damaged her eye so much she lost sight in that eye, she never returned to work.”

There are people like Phillip and his colleague in frontline retail work the length and breadth of the country. That is what today’s Bill is about: the 3 million people who serve us day in, day out. It is about those shopworkers because they are quite literally under attack every single day.

Experience of abuse, threats and violence can have long-term effects on the physical and mental wellbeing of shop workers. That worry is exacerbated by the increasing use of weapons, especially knives, to threaten staff. If those were isolated, random acts of violence, they would rightly command our attention, but they are not: shopworkers and those across the retail sector face a daily barrage of threats, attacks and peril in all our constituencies, every single day. One such attack took place in a Co-op store in my constituency in January, in which Matt was subject to a terrifying and horrific attack. It is a massive relief that no one was permanently injured and that the perpetrator has now been jailed for three years.

The British Retail Consortium’s most recent annual crime survey, published at the start of the month, shines a light on the staggering scale of the situation, which is growing rather than diminishing. The survey shows over 400 incidents of violence or abuse against retail staff every day—a 9% increase on last year, despite a record £1.2 billion being spent by the industry on preventive measures. In Co-op stores alone across the UK, there has been a 420% increase in violent incidents and an astonishing 3,000% rise in abuse since 2017. We all know the retail industry plays an invaluable role in our country’s economy, contributing £96 billion annually and employing more than 3 million people. Retailers and their staff are a cornerstone of our local communities, yet every day hundreds of retail workers are suffering shocking abuse at work.

Despite the exponential rise in violence, we are seeing an ever-decreasing response from our police forces, so stretched by 10 years of cuts, especially to neighbourhood policing teams. The National Federation of Retail Newsagents highlighted that, drawing on the answer given to the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) by the Ministry of Justice that showed that the percentage of shop thefts being dealt with by the justice system stands at 13%—barely one in eight incidents—down from 36% a decade ago. That is why for the second time in 18 months, I am putting before the House legislation to ensure that shop workers across the UK are afforded the protection they need and deserve.

As I do so, I feel well supported. Dozens of hon. Members offered to sponsor my Bill, and I have no doubt that I will lose friends in various parties by only being able to pick 11. A Member representing every single party in this place offered to be part of it. Special mention should go to my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) and for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) for their efforts already in this Session, as well as to David Hanson, who led our parliamentary charge in the previous Session. I follow him on this issue and, hopefully, in his style. David always focuses on critical issues, builds a broad base of support for his campaigns, and handles everything with class and grace—a model for us all.

What we need is legislation tailored to protect our shop workers and robust enough to deter those who would threaten them in their place of work. The Bill would introduce just that. Attacking a retail worker should be classified as an aggravated assault, and those convicted must face tougher penalties and increased sentences. That would send a clear message to perpetrators or would-be perpetrators that such acts will not be tolerated and that the punishment will fit the crime. The Bill would also send a clear message to retail workers that the Government and the law are on their side, providing them with better protections and ensuring justice for duty.

There are two key reasons why I am presenting this Bill. The first is the point of principle: I believe that when this House lays specific obligations to uphold or implement the law on a specific group of people, we should provide additional protection. We are familiar with the additional protection rightly given to our police officers, but hon. Members may be less aware that in 2005 additional protections, in the form of discrete offences, were extended to officials in Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs in section 31 of the Commissioners for Revenue and Customs Act 2005. I think the same should apply to shop workers, because we in this place ask them to restrict sales of dozens of potentially dangerous products, particularly on the ground of age.

Those of us who have worked in retail know how difficult it can be to challenge individuals. Perhaps we remember when we were about the age of majority, meeting people from our school trying to buy something from the shop. No doubt we have all heard from constituents about how that moment of challenge is causing violent incidents in our shops. If we continue to expect shop workers to implement the law, and if we continue to put more burdens on them—no doubt we will—we should, as a point of principle, afford them additional protection when carrying out what are, in that moment, public duties. We ask that they do certain things; we should show them that we have their back when we do.

Secondly, often legislation can signal what the country believes is and is not acceptable and can reset our societal norms. A reset is clearly needed around violence and abuse in the retail sector, and we need to send a clear message that it is not part of any shop worker's job to suffer abuse and violence. We must ask ourselves as legislators whether the experience of this shop worker is one we can accept:

"I heard a commotion and lots of shouting at the front of the store. When I went to investigate, I found a male who I had previously excluded from the store for shoplifting. He had run in and started kicking all the stock off the shelves. He was screaming and shouting, "What are you going to do now you fat bastard!"

The account continues:

"he then tried to grab me by the throat. I tried to block his arm and with the help of a customer he was removed from the store. He was threatening to come back and see me at the end of my shift at 10 pm."

That shop worker has carried that experience of physical and mental abuse with them ever since.

I believe that putting in place new legislation to make certain offences aggravated offences can be the beginning of real change in the experience of shop workers, so that they feel properly cared for. As I say, we have a responsibility in this regard. Of course, new legislation would not function in isolation. Businesses have to continue to invest in protecting their employees because the primary responsibility for keeping shop workers safe when at work lies with those businesses. The work of the Association of Convenience Stores to support its members is worthy of great praise, but businesses, the likes of the Co-op or Boots, are making investments in their stores to keep their workers safe. That is welcome, but it must be continued. Equally, the resources need to be made available to the police and to the wider criminal justice system to implement new legislation such as this, and at the moment that is not happening.

In closing, what has struck me most powerfully while I have been working on this issue is that, whether it is businesses or unions, colleagues or management, big stores or local corner shops, everyone is united in their call for action. I have found exactly the same unity across party lines while gathering support from my colleagues. I was delighted when the Prime Minister committed in this Chamber to meet me and a number of affected shop workers, although I understand that that meeting will be delayed now. Next week, I am meeting the Minister for Crime and Policing, who I am glad to see in his place, to take the case further. I hope that today this House answers the call positively and that, in time, the Government will follow our lead.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Alex Norris, Chris Elmore, Grahame Morris, Gareth Thomas, Alison Thewliss, Louise Haigh, Jessica Morden, Jeff Smith, Preet Kaur Gill, Jim McMahan, Mr William Wragg and Philip Davies present the Bill.

Alex Norris accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 April, and to be printed (Bill 112).

Ways and Means

Budget Resolutions

INCOME TAX (CHARGE)

Debate resumed (Order, 12 March).

Question again proposed,

That income tax is charged for the tax year 2020-21.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before we welcome Ed Argar back to the Dispatch Box, I would just like to point out that when the three Front-Bench speeches have finished, we will be immediately instituting a seven-minute limit on speeches.

3.42 pm

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is currently at a Cobra meeting, determining the next stage of the Government response to the coronavirus. He therefore apologises for the fact that he is unable to open this debate. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, he will be making a statement to the House a little later this afternoon. That will provide right hon. and hon. Members with the opportunity to question him on the latest position, so I urge colleagues to pause any specific questions related to coronavirus until that statement, when they will have the latest information.

May I also say that it is a pleasure to be back after last week's precautionary self-isolation, following contact with a confirmed case and on Public Health England advice? It has subsequently advised me that, as I am symptom-free, I can return. Let me put on the record my thanks to PHE for the work it is doing for everyone at the moment, and to hon. Members and constituents for their kind words last week.

Coronavirus is the most serious public health challenge that our country has faced in a generation. Our goal is to protect life and to protect our NHS. Last week's Budget showed that we will rise to that challenge. Under the plans laid out by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, workers will have a strong safety net to fall back on if they fall sick, businesses will get financial help to stay in business, and the NHS will get whatever resources it needs. All in all, the Chancellor announced last week a total of £30 billion of investment in the financial health of the nation.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Many of those measures are extremely welcome, but is it not becoming clear that the economic impact of coronavirus is perhaps even greater than was anticipated, even last week? Perhaps now is the time to consider a temporary universal basic income for people who work as freelancers or who are self-employed, for the duration of the crisis.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I believe that the package announced last week is the right package, at this time, to meet the challenges posed by this situation. Without necessarily

[Edward Argar]

referring to the hon. Gentleman's particular proposal, I note that the Chancellor continues to keep all interventions under review as the situation develops. At the moment, what was proposed last week remains the right approach.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I underline my support for the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan). The Minister asked us to wait to question the Secretary of State later, but I have a specific question about personal protective equipment. I am hearing a lot of concerns—shared throughout the country—about care homes, and particularly those involved in domiciliary care, as well as about some of the differentials between what is going on in private care homes and in public sector care homes. How is the Minister going to make sure that, working with the devolved Administrations, people throughout the whole UK get the PPE that they need, particularly in the care sector?

Edward Argar: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that, first, we are working across the four nations, because the situation needs an entire-United Kingdom response, and secondly, we are working extremely hard to ensure that all those who are on the frontline looking after people and keeping them safe get the protective equipment that they need. I suspect the Secretary of State will say a little more about that later this afternoon.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Government look again at the issue of the hospitality, travel and leisure industries? Some of those businesses are losing not just 10% or 20%, as they might in a normal recession, but the bulk of their revenue. Do they not need some revenue-sharing with the Government? Could we have a scheme like the German one to keep workers in work for a bit when they have a major loss of demand? I have declared my interests in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—they are not in this particular sector.

Edward Argar: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the challenges for particular sectors that are posed by what is currently happening, and he is right to mention the hotel and hospitality trade. Alongside the measures set out by the Chancellor last week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport continues to have discussions, not only within his Department and across Government but with the sector, about what can be done to ensure that it gets the appropriate support that it needs as a sector.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Just to follow up on that point, I have several cases of businesses coming to me and saying that their business-interruption cover is not being recognised by their insurance companies because coronavirus was not a notifiable disease at the time. If the insurance industry takes that attitude nationwide, many businesses—not only in tourism and hospitality—are going to go to the wall, and my constituents on the Isle of Wight will be especially badly hit.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Treasury, my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury and others are in conversations with the industry more broadly—I believe that more

conversations are set to occur tomorrow—to ensure that businesses get the support that they need and are treated in a fair way.

Our investment in the financial health of the nation includes £40 million for literal vaccines, research and testing, because we base our decisions on the bedrock of the science. This national response is made possible because of our careful stewardship of the British economy over the past 10 years—because record numbers of businesses are making, selling and hiring; because millions more people are in work, earning and paying taxes; and because we have backed the NHS with a record long-term funding settlement.

This is a national effort and we will get through this together, as the Prime Minister has said. In Government, we will do the right thing at the right time, working through each stage of our coronavirus action plan guided by the science and the advice of our medical and scientific experts. We will stop at nothing to defeat the disease, but we will succeed only if everyone does their bit: washing their hands regularly; self-isolating for seven days if they have symptoms, such as a new, continuous, persistent cough or a high temperature; and looking out for their neighbours. In that spirit, may I thank the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), my constituency neighbour, and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for the constructive approach that they have taken since the start of the outbreak? They are doing their bit. They are good and decent people and public servants, and their approach is a prime example of how we can work together during this crisis.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): One question I am getting from constituents who already have medical conditions is to do with their worry over any interruption to their supply of medicine and their treatment. What reassurances can the Government give to people with epilepsy, for example, that they are still going to get the medication that they need?

Edward Argar: The NHS has robust procedures in place to ensure the continuity of medical supplies. In respect of supplies bought over the counter, I urge people not to stockpile, to behave responsibly and to buy what they need. In respect of prescription medicines, I can reassure the hon. Lady that we have very strong and robust processes in place to ensure that those medicines continue to be available.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I wonder whether we could consider the language that we are using around the at-risk groups of people. Very few people will self-define as vulnerable or elderly, and, in fact, people with underlying health conditions might not even realise that they are particularly at risk of infection. Can we think about the language that we are using and specifically issue guidance to those groups of people?

Edward Argar: As ever, the hon. Lady makes a sensitive and sensible point. She is right that clarity in definitions and the language that is used is important. I do not want to pre-empt what my right hon. Friend may say in the House in a little while, but I think that she will see

in the coming hours and days a greater degree of clarity for people and more information and guidance on that matter.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Edward Argar: I will take one more intervention before I move on.

Jim McMahon: I thank the Minister for giving way. Clearly, we are very early into this, and we do not quite know what the business continuity impact will be or the financial impact on business. Do the Government have a framework by which they will operate and have discussions? For instance, when Virgin Atlantic comes forward and says that it needs financial support, what will be the framework of that support and what might the Government want in return for that investment?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, which, almost to a degree, goes back to the point made by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) about giving people greater clarity and understanding of how things will work and in what way. Because the matters are fast evolving, as he says, they continue to be under review, but we will ensure that we work with industry—including both the example that he gives and others—to give the support that people need and that is most appropriate. Again, I hesitate to say this, but I caution slightly, as I did at the beginning, and say that if he waits until the Secretary of State's statement, which I think is at half-past five, he may well get more details on that.

Coronavirus is the biggest challenge facing the NHS today. With clean hands and calm heads, we can help tackle it together, but, equally, we will not allow it to divert us from the long-term improvements that patients and staff rightly want to see. As the founders of the NHS knew better than anyone, we can fight the war while also planning for the peace.

Let me now turn to the measures in the Budget that will secure those long-term improvements. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor committed £6 billion of extra spending to support the NHS over the lifetime of this Parliament. That comes on top of our record long-term NHS funding settlement—£33.9 billion more over five years—which we have now enshrined in law. Most of the extra £6 billion will go towards delivering our flagship manifesto commitments. They include starting work on 40 new hospitals, 50,000 more nurses, and 50 million more appointments in primary care—more buildings, more people and more services. Let me take each in turn.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I thank the Minister for giving way. I can say quite honestly that it is an impressive list of capital spending commitments that he is giving us today. He will be aware that the Office for Budget Responsibility has based its longer term debt forecasts on the assumption that 20% of those capital promises will never actually happen. Does he accept that view from the Office for Budget Responsibility?

Edward Argar: The Office for Budget Responsibility is independent of the Government and sets out its opinions as it sees fit. We are committed to the hospital building programme. If the hon. Gentleman waits a moment, I will come to the detail of that capital spending.

The Budget increases my Department's capital budget by £1 billion in 2020-21. That will allow trusts to continue investing in vital refurbishment and maintenance. Of course, we are funding the start of work on 40 new hospitals and the 20 hospital upgrades that are already under way. The work to plan and design those 40 new hospitals has already begun.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Halton General Hospital campus—which, as the Minister knows, is part of Warrington and Halton Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust—has been turned down twice for capital funding for much needed refurbishment work. I plead once again for the Minister to ensure that it is prioritised; I am still waiting for a meeting with him.

Edward Argar: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. As ever, he is a vocal champion for his constituents and his hospital. I say very gently that recent events have slightly impacted on my ability to schedule as many meetings as I might wish, but I remain committed to meeting him and talking to him about that particular project.

We want the new hospitals to be fully equipped with the very best modern technology, with touch screens, not clipboards, and systems that talk to each other. We also want them to be fully integrated with other local NHS organisations. But this is just the start, and we will follow this work up with multi-year capital funding through the spending review to be announced later this year.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister looking to divide up hospitals—new ones and, indeed, the existing ones—into coronavirus and non-coronavirus, with people wearing protective suits in coronavirus sections? China has been building a number of hospitals within weeks specifically to deal with this problem, so will the Minister refocus the programme he is outlining and bring it forward to address the coronavirus crisis?

Edward Argar: I suspect that Chinese building regulations and similar are possibly a little different from the processes in this country when it comes to speed, but the hon. Gentleman makes a good point. These hospitals, though, will be built for the future of our country—for the next 10, 20 and 30 years. He alludes to an important point and one that I was touching on in my speech, which is that we should ensure that our new buildings are adaptable and can be adapted to the changing needs of medical emergencies and the long-term demographic trends in this country. On that front, yes, we are building hospitals that are fit for the future, whatever that future may throw at us. But the issue he is raising is perhaps a little more short term than the length of time it will take us to build some of these hospitals.

Let me turn to people—the 1.4 million-strong team who make up the most dedicated workforce in the world. What is the one thing most NHS staff would change if they could change one thing? What is the best present we could give our nation's nurses? [*Interruption.*] I will not be led astray by the Opposition. The answer is more nurses—more nurses to share the burden of rising demand, and more nurses bringing their compassion and determination to their work in the NHS. Over the next five years, we will deliver 50,000 more nurses for

[*Edward Argar*]

our NHS. We will do so by retaining and returning existing NHS staff, and by recruiting more nurses from abroad, but crucially by attracting more young people into the profession in the first place. The Budget delivers that by providing new non-repayable maintenance grants for nursing students of at least £5,000 a year for every undergraduate and postgraduate nursing student on a pre-registration course at an English university, with more for students with childcare costs or in disciplines such as mental health where the need is greatest. More than 35,000 students are expected to benefit.

In the coming months, the British people will have even more reason than usual to give thanks to our nation's nurses, and we will work to repay them by making the NHS the country's best employer—more supportive, more inclusive and more concerned with the wellbeing of staff as well as patients, an NHS that cares for its carers. We will set out how in our landmark NHS people plan.

We will also tackle the taper problem in doctors' pensions, which has caused too many senior doctors to turn down work that the NHS needs them to do. Thanks to action in the Budget and the work of the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, from April the taxable pay threshold will rise from £110,000 to £200,000. That will take up to 96% of GPs and up to 98% of NHS consultants out of the scope of the taper based on their NHS income. I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend for his work on delivering that.

Turning to staff in primary care, the Budget funds 6,000 more doctors and 6,000 more primary care professionals in general practice, on top of the 20,000 primary care professionals already announced. Why? It is because we want every NHS professional working at the very top of their skills register; because there are brilliant physios, pharmacists and healthcare assistants who can offer great treatment and advice for people seeking primary care; and because we can improve patient access to the NHS while freeing up GPs for those who need them most.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): While we welcome the numbers of professionals in the range of clinical areas that the Minister has outlined, can he tell me the numbers in each of those clinical specialisms and say when they will be ready to start work? When will they be fully trained and where will they come from?

Edward Argar: I set out in my remarks just now exactly where they would come from—from a variety of different sources. We have already seen, from the latest numbers for nurse recruitment, for example, many thousands more recruited in the last year. We are succeeding in delivering on our pledge, and we set out very clearly in our manifesto the timescales within which we would deliver.

That brings me to my third point—NHS services. I have said that I want the NHS to pursue two long-term policy goals to which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is committed. They are five extra years of healthy life and increased public confidence in the service. The coronavirus outbreak demonstrates that we have to target both. It is an explicit goal of our policy not just

to tackle the disease, but to maintain public confidence. We take the same approach more broadly in healthcare. We want people to live healthier for longer, and we want people to be confident that the NHS will always be there for them, that it will treat them with dignity and respect, and that it will feel like a service, not an impersonal system. We want people to know, for instance, that they can always see a primary care professional whenever they need to. The Budget funds our manifesto commitment to create an extra 50 million appointments a year in general practice.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for meeting me last week and very glad that I did not have to follow him into isolation. We had a good discussion last week and talked very much about those health inequalities and the necessity for more people to have more healthy years. I was grateful to him for being kind towards North Tees and Hartlepool and talking about a new hospital for Stockton. If there is a bit of capital to get that under way, I hope he will come up with it soon.

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman and, indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) are both strong advocates for Stockton and for the hospital there. I very much enjoyed our discussion. I am glad that the self-isolation rules are such that the hon. Gentleman did not have to follow me into it, but I am very happy, as I said when we met, to pick up on that discussion further in the future.

We also want people to know that the NHS will treat them fairly in their hour of need. That is why we care about hospital parking. Thanks to this Budget, from next month we will start the roll-out of free hospital parking more broadly across our hospital estate for disabled people, frequent out-patient attenders, parents with sick children staying overnight and staff working night shifts, delivering on our manifesto commitment.

Emma Hardy *rose*—

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady tempts me a second time. How can I say no?

Emma Hardy: I thank the Minister; it is a very quick one. Can that list of those eligible for free parking also include any students on a placement at the hospital—for example, nursing students or occupational therapists?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady will know that the four categories I have just referred to are the four categories we explicitly referred to in the manifesto on which we were elected. As she knows, if she wants to write to me, I am always happy to receive and respond to letters from her on that issue.

The last measure I want to point to may have escaped notice last week, but it is an incredibly important part of putting the “service” into national health service. Too many people with autism or a learning disability are being treated as in-patients in mental health hospitals instead of being helped to live in their communities. In our manifesto, we committed to making it easier for them to be discharged from hospital. This Budget makes good on that commitment. It creates a new learning disability and autism community discharge grant that

will be available to local authorities in England. That is new money and all local areas will receive a share of that funding.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. On that point concerning people with autism and learning disabilities in assessment and treatment units, can he advise on the arrangements that are being made during the coronavirus pandemic to ensure that those people currently in in-patient provision will not suffer additional isolation and further breaches of their human rights as a consequence of restrictions that might be put in place?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady makes an important point, which is that throughout this challenge that we face as a country, we must ensure that everyone is treated with dignity and receives the care and support that they deserve. I was about to say that I know my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will have heard what she said, but given he is in Cobra, he might not. I will ensure that he does. I will mention the matter to him, and in the context of the future tranches of guidance that will be coming forward in future days, the hon. Lady may want to raise the issue with him specifically later.

Modern buildings, more staff, an NHS that continues to truly serve its patients and a national response to coronavirus—that is what the Budget delivers. We can tackle this emergency while putting in place the long-term improvements that NHS clinicians are asking us for. We can fight the war against coronavirus as a united country, but we can also build the peace. We will stop at nothing to protect life and to protect and invest in our NHS. I commend the Budget to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I point out that the statement on coronavirus will now be coming at 6 pm.

4.7 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): First, I welcome the Minister back to his place after his period of self-isolation. I am sure that all parts of the House will agree that the current coronavirus crisis has demonstrated beyond all doubt just how important our public services are. We all know that this is a very serious time and that our constituents will be concerned. I know many are frightened by the way the crisis has escalated over the past week or so, so I start by sending our condolences to all those who have already lost a loved one including, sadly, one gentleman in my constituency. I also send our gratitude to those who are already working flat out to do their best to limit the impact of coronavirus, whether they are in the NHS, the rest of the public sector or the private and voluntary sectors, which are making a vital contribution as well.

As the Minister will know, we are supportive of the national effort to contain and delay the spread of the virus, and it would be irresponsible of us as an Opposition to make any attempt to exploit the pandemic for party political gain. I thank the Minister for his kind words in that respect. Equally, it would be irresponsible of us to ignore the concerns being raised by the public, the scientific community and the sector more widely. It is critical that we ask important questions on their behalf, especially when the limits of public service will be tested like they have never been tested before.

We know that many aspects of life will have to change or stop altogether, albeit temporarily, but it is hoped that accountability, transparency and the ability of Opposition parties to scrutinise Government decisions will continue. We are under no illusions that, at this time, our ability to do that comes with a particular responsibility, so I hope the House will understand that I will focus mainly on the challenges of the immediate crisis facing us and ask some of the many important questions that have been raised. I appreciate that there will be a statement later, and I will understand if the Minister refers some responses to that, but we will have slightly more time in this debate to discuss important concerns that have been raised with us by many in the country.

Let me turn to the Budget, as this is a financial debate. We have previously acknowledged the extra funding announced in the Budget for the NHS and social care as part of the covid-19 response. That is something we have long called for, but there remain unanswered questions about how that funding will be precisely allocated. Can the Minister tell us exactly how the extra funding will be allocated and what will happen once the money is depleted? The NHS said last week that it needs to scale up intensive care beds sevenfold. That new pot of money is going to run out at some point, and it will need topping up. Will another Budget be necessary then, and what will the process be for determining resources at that point?

While we welcome the extra funding, we are aware that it is in the context of the NHS already facing extreme pressure, as usually happens over a busy winter period. We know from the last NHS winter report two weeks ago that 80% of critical care beds were occupied and that 93% of general and acute beds were also occupied. We know that the proportion of people being seen within four hours at A&E is the lowest on record, and the target has not been met since July 2015—the best part of five years. We know that the number of people on waiting lists in England is the highest it has ever been—nearly 4.5 million people are on a waiting list for treatment—and the waiting list target has not been met for nearly four years. Sadly, some cancer targets have not been met for over six years.

Those figures should tell us that the NHS is already stretched to capacity and that we are not starting from the optimum position. But it also tells us why the Government's strategy of delay is one that has to be supported. Even if we take at face value the Government's insistence that they have provided enough NHS resources to deliver the commitments in the long-term plan, we must surely all accept that the covid-19 outbreak will lead to an increased demand on trusts, meaning that resources in the system will have to be reallocated. Should trusts be expending time and resources on working on control totals and end-of-year accounts at this precise moment?

Will beds from the private sector be made available to covid-19 patients, and at what cost? What will the process be for trusts that have particularly large outbreaks and increased demand? Is any audit being undertaken of disused hospitals or other public sector facilities that may be required at some point? For example, is there any way that the brand new Royal Liverpool Hospital building could be brought on stream more quickly? Are the Government sourcing more ventilators, and when

[Justin Madders]

can we expect to see those available? Many manufacturers export all around the world. Will steps be taken to ensure that the NHS is at the front of the queue when those goods are produced?

I want to say a few words about the workforce. We know that, before we entered the crisis, the NHS was already short of over 100,000 staff, including 43,000 nurses and 10,000 doctors. The impact of staffing shortfalls manifests itself across the whole spectrum of NHS performance, as I have just outlined. It is therefore more critical than ever that those people who work in the NHS and whose good will we rely on already get adequate protection. It is evident that, in order for patients to have the best care possible, the NHS must support its staff to ensure that they stay well and can provide that vital care. That means a continuous supply of the right equipment and facilities. Personal protective equipment is vital in that respect. I hope we will hear, either in the Minister's response or the statement later today, about what is being done to secure supplies of equipment and whether there is enough capacity in the system to ensure continued supply.

We would also be grateful for more information on the plans mooted to get retired staff back into the health service. Will some of the money announced in the Budget be used to deal with the anticipated increase in the wage bill that that would mean? Can we have an explanation as to how those people would be protected given that, by definition, the majority of them are likely to be over 70? What oversight will be put in place to ensure that they are delivering safe care if the revalidation process is to be suspended for retired returnees? Those on the frontline who I have spoken to are concerned about identifying the point at which an individual has been away from practice so long that it becomes impractical to reintegrate them in a safe and effective way. Will guidance be issued on what that point might be? What consideration has been given to those in the existing workforce who might be in a more vulnerable category because of their age or an underlying health condition?

A major concern is the lack of clarity about when people should be tested. We are hearing of many frontline NHS staff displaying symptoms but not being tested. What does that do for morale, if nothing else? The World Health Organisation has said that we should be continuing to test and contact-trace those suspected of having the virus. As a matter of importance, we should have a full explanation of exactly why we are currently diverging from WHO advice. It has been reported that labs are overwhelmed and tests are now taking several days to come back with results. Is the current ambiguity on testing policy a question of capacity rather than anything else? Will the Government be putting more resources into those labs, and if so, when will this materialise? It seems to us that continued testing is vital not only to stop the spread of the disease, but to understand when its peak has been reached. It may also be that efficient and accurate testing means fewer people having to self-isolate unnecessarily, which of course has an unnecessary economic knock-on effect.

Mike Amesbury: A GP has been in touch with me today to say that they were in close proximity to a patient who is likely to have coronavirus and have been

sent home to self-isolate, but they have not been tested. How on earth will they know, when they do return to work, that they are not a risk to others? Surely testing should be extended to such vital GPs.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend makes very well the point that I was making. It is evident that if that particular GP does not have the virus, it would be better for us all if they know that sooner rather than later, so they can get back in and treat patients. It is also worth restating at this point that people who have suspected symptoms should not be turning up at their GP practice because that is one of the ways, unfortunately, that we will spread the virus.

Jim McMahon: The case that has been outlined is very important, but we also need to remember that social care workers, who will be visiting all the people in their care in their homes, are also placing their patients at high risk, but at the moment there are no plans I have heard about to test those social care workers. I should say, by the way, that many of them are paid just over the minimum wage, and there is a real question here. We say that we value the NHS and that we value these community workers, but I am not sure a lot of them feel that way at the moment.

Justin Madders: I will be dealing with the concerns about the social care sector in a little while, but the points my hon. Friend makes are absolutely valid and they certainly require a Government response.

We should think about protecting NHS staff not just in terms of the doctors, nurses and other frontline staff, but in terms of the cleaners, porters and all the other essential staff who are needed to keep a hospital running and who also play a vital part in infection control. We often hear about the importance of data, and it seems to me that this is a particularly clear example of where data have a huge role to play. If the data are not collected on a regular and consistent basis, surely we will not be in the best position to take the right action.

Yesterday, it was announced that UK medical schools have been urged to fast-track final year students to help fight coronavirus. Can we have an explanation of how this will work, and how will we ensure that graduates still face rigorous testing to make sure they provide the best quality care for patients? There is certainly a role for them to play, but trusts need clarity about its limits so that they can plan ahead. Are staff on maternity and paternity leave being encouraged to return to work early, and would they be able to do so without losing any untaken leave?

Stephen Doughty: Does my hon. Friend agree with me—I asked Defence Ministers this question—that we should be calling up full-time reserve service members of the Royal Army Medical Corps and the medical corps of the other armed services, if they are not already NHS workers in their civilian lives? There are people with excellent training and excellent skills, and they and their facilities should be brought into use as soon as possible.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I think it shows the spirit of this place at the moment that we are all coming up with very important suggestions. No stone should be left unturned in using all the resources at our disposal to tackle this virus.

As we move to the later stages of the Government's plan, do we expect to see the cancellation of elective surgery, which will only make those record waiting lists grow further? It is fair to say that that would not be a surprise, but a reduction in elective surgery will have a knock-on impact on trust finances in the longer term. I would be grateful for some clarity about what contingencies will be put in place to help trusts financially in these difficult times, especially when they are collectively in deficit to the tune of almost £1 billion already. Is there also a case to defer loan repayments that are currently made by trusts back to the Department for a period of time?

There was a great deal of surprise and disappointment at seeing no mention of public health in the Budget. Public health directors are currently preparing local responses to covid-19. They need to expend significant sums of money on that, yet they do not know what the public health allocation will be for the next financial year, which starts in just over two weeks. I am sure the Government understand what an invidious position that puts them in, and we urgently need those allocations to be published. Will the Minister say when that will happen? Will he assure the House that the funds will be sufficient to help local authorities deal with these issues?

Has any assessment been made of the extra demands placed on public health budgets regarding preparatory work? It is likely that the knock-on economic effect will severely impact on council finances. Fewer people will use services that they currently pay for, such as leisure facilities, and it is likely that council tax collection rates will drop. There will almost certainly be unanticipated expenditure from covering staff sickness, and that is before we get to social care.

Geraint Davies: Is my hon. Friend aware of whether the Government are continuing to pursue the idea of herd immunity—namely letting the virus transmit almost unchecked through the population, which would put overwhelming strain on beds, social services, and so on, or are they trying to minimise transmission by asking people to move and assemble less, and then get resources and testing in place? I am worried that they are still attached to the social services model, rather than to evidence-based experience from China, and elsewhere, regarding ways to control this virus.

Justin Madders: That is a perfect question to put to the Secretary of State—he will be here shortly—and my hon. Friend raises an important point about the messages being put out. All sorts of stories are coming out in the press, not all of which are necessarily accurate, and it is important that we do our utmost to ensure a clear and consistent message across the board. I am not sure whether or not herd immunity is a Government policy, but I am sure the Secretary of State will take the opportunity, if he is so minded, to put that matter straight once and for all.

Emma Hardy: On confusing messages coming from Government, will my hon. Friend help me seek clarity on advice for people who self-isolate? Can they still go for walks outside? Can they go outside to walk family pets if they go on their own, or are they to be contained within their property? There seems to be a mixed message about what constitutes self-isolation.

Justin Madders: Again, we need a definitive answer on that from the Secretary of State. I appreciate that things are evolving rapidly, and sometimes what was considered best practice a few weeks ago might have changed in light of the evidence. It is incumbent on us to hear the advice directly from the Secretary of State, and then we can send the same message to our constituents, so that there is no more confusion and ambiguity.

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend was excellently covering council income, but one area I am concerned about, and have heard nothing about, is council rents. Many council tenants are at risk of losing work or being forced into self-isolation, and they might not get paid. I appreciate the Government's work on statutory sick pay, but that will not be enough to pay council or housing association rents. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that many people could be at risk of arrears unless the Government support councils in addressing that issue?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is right: a whole raft of issues will have an effect over the coming months, and although housing revenue accounts are separate to main council budgets, we still need to have that balance. Over the past decade, as a consequence of welfare reform, we have seen how councils and housing associations have adopted policies to deal with that loss of income from a number of changes to the welfare and benefits system, and we must keep that dialogue open over the next few months. We certainly could not expect full collection rates at this time, and we must work with people to understand the limitations of that. We will talk to the Government regarding any legislation that comes forward in due course.

Jim McMahon: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; he is being extremely generous. Does he share my concern that, beyond rent, many households are just a payday away from poverty, so people will be sent into debt that they may never get out of in their adult lives? Surely, the Government need to do far more to help households that are really on the edge.

Justin Madders: That is a very fair point. We are only beginning to understand just how precarious a lot of people's household incomes are in this economy. It is going to take concerted Government effort to support people, but it is also going to take everyone in the private sector who has a debt with an individual holding off enforcing that debt while this crisis comes through. Again, that is something we need to work on. I am afraid I will not be able to take any more interventions.

Social care has been mentioned a couple of times already. Unfortunately, once again, we have a Budget in which social care is not addressed. Local authorities have had £8 billion cut from their adult social care budgets over the past decade, leaving people struggling without any care at all. Our social care system is already at breaking point, and it is likely that the spread of coronavirus will test it even further. Without proper measures to protect people in care homes and those who receive care in their own home, there could be tragic consequences. It is crucial that social care receives the same attention from the Department as the NHS. We expect to see a plan to advise people in social care along the lines we have discussed.

[Justin Madders]

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) mentioned, those in the social care sector have raised particular concerns about the availability of personal protective equipment. That equipment, which is crucial to protect staff and patients, is just as necessary in social care settings as in the NHS. I have heard from local care companies about difficulties sourcing hand sanitiser, to name but one example. As equipment runs low, how will care staff, including those who are self-employed, have the equipment they need to continue to keep patients safe?

However, the biggest concern for the social care sector is whether it will have the staff it needs to deal with this crisis. As we know, there are already 122,000 vacancies across the sector, leaving staff feeling under immense pressure. We know they already feel pressure, due to staff shortages, to come into work when they feel unwell, but in this case it is vital that they stay at home if they feel unwell. How will the Government ensure that there are enough staff to care for patients when we have far more people in the care sector who are unwell and self-isolating?

A quarter of social care staff and almost half of all home carers are on zero-hours contracts. For some care staff, there is no guarantee that they will be entitled to sick pay, despite today's announcement. That is particularly true of those who work for multiple agencies or work irregular hours. It is vital that those staff, as a key part of the workforce, feel fully supported if they become unwell. We need a guarantee that all social care staff will receive statutory sick pay. All workers need reassurance from the Government that they will receive sick pay if they are unable to work.

Over the past few days, a number of nursing homes and care homes have made the difficult decision to close their doors to visitors. They made that decision themselves, in the absence of clear guidance. Families are now unable to see their loved ones, and they will want reassurance from the Government that that is the safest call. Will there be guidance on that issue for the care sector?

Inevitably, social care providers will face difficult choices over the next few months. Many will face higher costs. Last year, more than half of social care providers handed contracts back to local authorities because of financial pressures. That causes immense pressure on councils and, of course, worries for the families of people receiving care. It seems inevitable that we will face that situation again soon. Will local authorities and care providers get the financial support they need if cost pressures become too much to deliver safe care? At this difficult time, we must ensure that care services continue to provide the vital support that people need.

What about those who provide care for a loved one outside the system? Inevitably, there will be people who are not able to provide care for a period. The state has no official role to play in that situation, but those people will still need help and support. How will that be addressed?

In conclusion, providing well-resourced and well-funded public services is vital to tackle the spread of this disease, but of course that is not the whole picture. Every member of society will have to play their part. We will all have to recognise that the impact could be felt

for many years to come, but we should take heart from the fact that we have a truly national health service and the capacity to rise to whatever challenges we face, so we are better positioned than many to take on this challenge. That will only be true, however, if we can be confident that the services people will rely on in the coming months are robust enough to deal with the storms ahead.

A decade of underfunding has not left us in as strong a position as we would like, but it seems that in the hour of need that may change. We will support the Government in any attempt to boost funding across the board, but we will not be afraid to point out when we believe measures are not enough. Beyond funding, we want messages from the Government about the action they are taking to be clear, consistent and quick. We all have a responsibility in this place to get that message across. Her Majesty's official Opposition stand ready to give that message as well.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The seven-minute limit will not come in until after Peter Grant, but I know the next Member will bear in mind the fact that this debate is oversubscribed.

4.30 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. Harold Wilson said that a week was a long time in politics. During Brexit we found out that a week was even longer, but the Budget, only last Wednesday, seems a lifetime ago. Even when listening to the Chancellor, I still harboured hopes of a long-planned personal visit to New York this weekend, but for all the reasons we see around us that is simply not able to happen. Three weeks ago, I was in Rome for the Scotland-Italy rugby match. At that point, the talk was of difficulties in the north. No one envisaged that instead of the crowds in St Peter's Square or outside the Colosseum there would be nobody.

As a Member of Parliament, I am often asked about the most difficult issue and time I have had to deal with. For me, the answer is very straightforward: the 2001 foot and mouth crisis, which affected my constituency deeply. I want to be very clear that I am not making any comparison between that disease and coronavirus. The comparison relates to the impact of an event of that scale on businesses and their continued prosperity, and on the wider community. There was also, as a report from Strathclyde University and others identified, the impact of isolation. During that period, very stringent measures were taken and many farmers had to be isolated on their own properties and could not leave. The report, two years later, made very clear the long-term consequences of isolation. We need to take those findings on board and think about them. We need to learn the lessons of such events, with measures that might come into place. I am sure those issues will be debated when we have more focused debates on coronavirus.

The businesses most affected by those circumstances were the self-employed and contractors, so we need to give those groups the maximum possible support. The hospitality industry was also very badly affected. One lesson from that experience is that small businesses need

grants not loans. I remember taking part in a demonstration—I know that that will surprise you, Mr Deputy Speaker—outside the offices of Scottish Enterprise Dumfries and Galloway with colleagues in small businesses to make just that point. Grants, not loans, were needed to see them through. Rates relief is to be welcomed and I welcome the package of measures the Scottish Government have announced, but it is capped and we need to look again at whether that is appropriate.

The other big players are the banks. From my perspective, the situation that we face will be easier to deal with because it affects the whole United Kingdom, so the banks that are based outwith the south of Scotland and that are being asked to support businesses understand what is happening on the ground. We need that unity of purpose from the banks. Hon. Members who have dealt with the banks know that they always say the right thing, but doing it is something else, especially when the computer says no. We need to make sure that they follow through on their commitments, and on the positive tone that the Chancellor set in the Budget.

We need a uniformity of approach from the Government at all levels—the UK Government, the Scottish Government and local government. The underlying philosophy of all those institutions must be that we want to keep our businesses going and that we are not jobsworths who want the returns in on the exact date. That is why I welcome what the Chancellor said about VAT holidays and flexibility with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. I am sure, however, that hon. Members on both sides of the House have experience of HMRC not being particularly flexible, so we need that to be followed through. That unity of purpose from government will be vital.

As has already been said in an intervention, the hospitality and tourism industry is the most vulnerable in a constituency such as mine. Often, as I found out during the foot and mouth crisis, businesses that have done well and are planning for the future are the worst hit. For example, the Gretna Green Famous Blacksmiths shop in my constituency, one of the most visited tourist attractions in Scotland, has won numerous awards for its attempts to attract Chinese visitors. A large number of Chinese visitors go to that location, but not any more—there are none. Its business model has already been seriously disrupted by these events. It is a bigger business, not a small business, but it needs help and support too, if that sector of the economy is to survive after these events.

Hotels in my constituency were already in difficulty; many, such as the Moffat House hotel, have closed. One local hotelier told me that they were facing a perfect storm of events, of which, at that stage, coronavirus was not one. I appeal directly to the Scottish Government on that issue, because the way that our business rates system in Scotland works for the hospitality industry, and particularly hotels, is still not right.

As I indicated, there are lots of lessons to learn. I hope that there is still the institutional knowledge in the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government to learn lessons from 2001, and that the Government can take some of those lessons on board, particularly in relation to isolation, as I said.

I welcome the Budget as a whole for Scotland, in particular the £640 million of additional funding for Scotland, which was £172 million more than the Scottish Government had anticipated. By any analysis, the Scottish

Government got extra money. In my experience, they have not always welcomed, or even acknowledged, extra money—indeed, sometimes it was the wrong kind of money, even if they did acknowledge it. I hope that on this occasion, and in these circumstances, they will acknowledge the extra money.

As I said, I am pleased with what the Scottish Government have had to say about spending on business support in relation to coronavirus, but I would also like the money that is coming forward to be spent on infrastructure. Back in the '90s, before the Scottish National party was in power, and when it held the constituency of Galloway and Upper Nithsdale, as it then was, the A75 and A76 were described as the most important forgotten roads in Scotland that needed to be substantially upgraded. Of course, since 2007 there has been an SNP, or SNP minority, Scottish Government, but that investment has not been forthcoming. I use this occasion to plead for the needs of the A75 and A76. I am sure that there is somebody in the SNP who remembers those previous commitments.

Obviously coronavirus is significantly affecting today's debate, and rightly so, because it is the issue that most affects our constituents at the moment, but I want to highlight one other issue on which I wrote to the Chancellor ahead of the Budget, together with 15 Conservative colleagues, the Association of Convenience Stores and the British Retail Consortium: access to cash. It is a big issue; in a crisis, many people like to have some cash available, so that they have flexibility in how they approach difficult circumstances. There is a crisis in access to cash, and it affects large rural constituencies such as mine in particular, but also many other communities.

Some of the most deprived communities in our country bear the hardest impact. I had not realised until relatively recently that the average withdrawal from a cash machine is around £10 or £20. A fee of up to £3 to take £10 out of a cash machine is a very significant mark-up. A report has indicated that about 8 million people in our country are not ready to cope with a cashless society. A cashless society may come; indeed, when I travel from my constituency to central London, I feel that central London is, in many ways, a cashless society—in which there are, ironically, hundreds of cash machines. We need to do something about this issue. I welcome the Chancellor's promise in his statement to legislate to secure the long-term future of cash, but it is very important that the steps that he takes are the right ones.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen)
indicated assent.

David Mundell: I am pleased to see the Minister nodding; I hope that he will nod when I say that those steps should include reversing the arbitrary cuts to the LINK interchange rates paid by banks to fund the network; exempting free-to-use ATMs from business rates; and recognising that ATMs are the only infrastructure through which we can guarantee national access to cash. Of course, cashback at convenience stores and other places has a role to play, but it is very important that we have a sustainably funded network of cash machines throughout the whole country, given the many branch closures we have seen in our constituencies—particularly Royal Bank of Scotland branch closures in Scotland.

[David Mundell]

I agree with the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). The consequences of these events—such as the foot and mouth crisis that afflicted much of the south of Scotland 20 years ago—go on for years. They do not just end when someone declares that the crisis is over. They go on for a long, long time for the businesses, individuals and communities that have been affected. We do not just pledge support to those individuals and communities today; we pledge it to see them all the way through the consequences. I think that that will mean revisiting some of what was announced in the Budget and some of what was announced by the Scottish Government, and if that is necessary, so be it.

4.45 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I commend the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) for his comments, and thank him for the measured tone in which he delivered them. It has been noticeable over the last few days that things have been a bit more calm and sensible here even when we have disagreed politically; perhaps we could keep that going after the public health crisis has passed.

I noted that the right hon. Gentleman could not resist having a wee dig at the Scottish National party Government for not having done up his bit of trunk road yet. Obviously I cannot speak for the Scottish Government, whose spending decisions are made in the Scottish Parliament, but I have had a quick look at the Scottish Parliament's website, and I have the contact details of the MSP for Dumfriesshire, which I can pass on to the right hon. Gentleman later. He is some chap by the name of Oliver Mundell. [Laughter.] I do not know whether he is still holding surgeries, but I can probably find his phone number for the right hon. Gentleman.

I am pleased to be able to speak on behalf of the SNP today. Our position is a bit different from those of many other parties, in that we will be keeping out of many of the detailed discussions about which health trusts and local authorities receive funding, because we have a devolved national Parliament to make those decisions on our behalf. As the previous three speakers made clear, although today's debate is about the funding of public services, we cannot ignore the rapidly changing public health challenge that faces all four nations in the United Kingdom—and, now, the majority of nations in the world.

The statement that will be made later by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will be the right occasion for detailed questioning about the Government's approach to those health challenges, but I want to consider some of the significant, and even potentially fundamental, changes that the economy will undergo as a result of them. The right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale—the former Secretary of State for Scotland—commented on the permanent change that the foot and mouth outbreak made to the economy of rural Scotland 20 years ago. This is much bigger, and its impact on the economy throughout these islands will be much bigger, and will probably be permanent.

My hon. Friends who spoke in last week's debates will have specified which of the Government's emergency actions we fully support—and there are a great many of

them—as well as some instances in which we would like to see more being done, and a few in which we think that the action is simply going in the wrong direction. I hope that, at all times, the discussion of those matters can be kept as civilised and as temperate as it has been over the last few days. The situation has changed significantly since my colleagues made those comments on Wednesday and Thursday last week, and it has changed significantly since the Chancellor's Budget speech. It is vital for the Government's response to those changes to be not only sufficiently robust, but sufficiently flexible.

I am encouraged by the degree of co-operation on the part of the UK Government—through Cobra, for example—in agreeing on our combined and shared response to the public health issues, and I hope that we can see a similar degree of proper engagement when it comes to how to deal with the economic challenges. It must be said that, on those matters, the UK Government have not always engaged positively and constructively with the devolved nations in the past.

Let me give just one apparently small example of the way in which the coronavirus outbreak is already affecting my constituency. Like many other constituencies—perhaps most—we are blessed with a huge number of brilliant, independently owned cafés and restaurants. “Restaurants” sounds quite grand, but I am talking about places that can hold, at the most, 20 or 30 people who come in for a plate of soup and a bacon roll for their lunch. Their collective contribution to my communities and to all our communities, not just economically but socially, is impossible to measure. Several of them have changed hands recently or have been established for less than a year, while others have been on the go for decades. Obviously, I am not privy to any of their individual financial affairs, but I doubt that any of them would survive for two, three or four months without any customers—if that is how some people are interpreting Government advice, that is what those businesses would have to put up with. Clearly, it is not as bad as that, but it is an indication of the fact that those small businesses will need some severe Government intervention, and some of them will need it very soon indeed. I am happy to support them as much as I can.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): There are various examples of that happening. The Hug and Pint, a fantastic little venue on Great Western Road in Glasgow North, has had to announce that it is going to close tomorrow. It has set up a crowdfunding campaign, as have various enterprises on the folk music scene in Scotland. Will my hon. Friend commend those initiatives to try to encourage business? People would have been going there in other circumstances for a pint anyway, so perhaps they can spare that money to help some of those small businesses through the most difficult period.

Peter Grant: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. That is sometimes an indication of how important many of these businesses are in their local communities. Neighbours do not just see them as a business and they will support them. The difficulty is that, if neighbours, customers and clients lose their jobs and suddenly find that they have to get by on a wholly inadequate social security system, they will not be able to afford to put £4 or £5 over the bar in the local community-owned pub, whether or not they get a couple of pints in return.

I support many of these businesses as best I can—some of them are very co-operative, allowing me to hold advice surgeries on their premises—but if I do what a lot of colleagues are doing and begin to cancel surgeries, and if I do not go to the local coffee shop and sit for an hour or so talking to people, no one else will do that. By making that decision—I understand why people want me to make it—I might well be hastening the time when many of these valuable businesses can no longer continue. If they close temporarily now, some of them will not reopen.

It is not just cafés, catering and hospitality businesses—the same goes for locally owned hairdressers, bakers, craft shops, one or two-person printers and many other businesses. Independent retail businesses may be small individually, but cumulatively, they represent the financial wellbeing of a vast number of people on these islands, many of whom stand to lose not just their job and livelihood but the very home in which they live. For many of these establishments—I am thinking especially of small bed-and-breakfast businesses and guesthouses—their business is their house. Many others have mortgaged their house to finance the business. They stand to lose everything apart from the clothes they stand up in if things go wrong, and they will need help quickly.

I welcome the emergency measures that the Chancellor announced last week, but I do not think that they go far enough. I fear that a great many small and valued businesses in my constituency, and in all our constituencies, will close and never reopen. At the other end of the scale, we have heard severe warnings from some of the biggest and most iconic transport operators in the UK and elsewhere. British Airways, for example, has warned that its survival is not guaranteed if it gets it wrong.

This morning, my journey to Edinburgh airport was the quietest that I can remember in five years as an MP; I do not come down on the train all the time. The car park where I usually struggle to find a space was deserted—you could have played five-a-side football without bumping into a car. The flight on which I often struggle to get a seat was 30% full. That is not sustainable. What I prefer to do when it is realistic is come down on the train. If I had done that, I would have seen another drop in business, although I do not know whether it is as big. Train operators are struggling as well.

Hotel bookings in London and many other places have crashed. Comparing prices on hotel websites with what they were three or four weeks ago, I see they are a half or a quarter the price, or even less. Those businesses cannot survive that, and there are tens of thousands—perhaps hundreds of thousands—of jobs at stake. It is not about bailing out the billionaires who own those high-profile businesses. It is about protecting the rights of tens of thousands of workers whose livelihoods are on the line.

Despite the torrent of platitudes from the Government, and despite the welcome measures announced last week, many of those hundreds of thousands of people face being thrown on to the mercy of a social security system that was utterly unfit for purpose before this crisis, and will be even more unfit to deal with the challenges that it will face. While the changes that have been announced are welcome, we need a lot more, and we are going to need them an awful lot quicker.

Detailed spending plans for Government Departments are going to be published, but there are worrying indications that the Budget is stretching public finances to the absolute

limit. Page 5 of the report from the Office for Budget Responsibility says that public sector debt is likely to increase by £125 billion in four years' time. That is assuming 20% of the promised capital spend does not happen. We cannot rely on economic growth to make the debt less painful to repay in five or 10 years' time than it would be now, because Brexit is going to slow our economic growth by at least 4%, even if we get a good deal. The OBR commented that

“Public finances are more vulnerable to adverse inflation and interest rate surprises than they were”.

It strikes me that the fundamental problem of the Blair-Brown Government was that, in effect, we had a Chancellor of the Exchequer who by instinct was a Keynesian but who tried to do Thatcherite economics, and it failed. Now we have a Government packed full of Thatcherites and they are having a wee shot at Keynesianism, and I do not think that will work either.

As my hon. Friends have highlighted, the OBR also warns us that its

“forecast assumes an orderly move to a new trading arrangement”, first with the European Union and then with the rest of the world. Given that the minds of the UK Government and of all our current and potential trading partners are, quite understandably, fully occupied by covid-19 and will be until after the June 2020 deadline by which the Government say they need to have at least the basics of a trade agreement in place, surely the Government will now finally admit that enshrining the end of the transition period—December 2020—in law was an act of criminal recklessness. They might not have known what crisis was going to happen in the intervening period, but it did not take a genius to work out that something might go wrong.

Although the Government announcements on public spending have been welcomed in many quarters, and rightly so, if we look at the hard facts behind those announcements, we find that the long-term sustainability of our public services is, if anything, less secure after the Budget than it was before. That is not helped by an illogical and immoral approach to immigration, which will contribute to a 0.3% drop in GDP over four years. Ludicrously, that immigration, or rather anti-immigration, policy takes more money out of the public purse, because even the lower-paid migrant workers—the ones the current Secretary of State for Scotland was so shamefully contemptuous of last week, accusing them of coming here to work on low wages just to take advantage of our benefits and our services—pay three times as much in taxes as they take in benefits. So by deliberately stopping them coming here, by deliberately stopping them earning and paying their taxes, the UK Government are deliberately creating an additional black hole of £1 billion to £1.5 billion in our public finances.

Today, I heard the head of Scottish Care, who represents Scotland's private sector care providers—and yes, I have issues relating to some of the private care providers in Scotland—say how moved he was by so many workers in the sector offering to move away from their families and become residents in care homes or hospitals for several weeks, just to make sure that the people they care for do not lose out if several members of staff have to phone in sick. They are the very workers whom the Government regard as burdens on our public services. As for the idea that hard-working, low-paid NHS workers should have to pay an extra flat-rate tax of £624 a head

[Peter Grant]

just for the privilege of continuing to work in our NHS, I cannot describe it in language that you would allow, Mr Deputy Speaker, because there is no parliamentary language robust enough to properly describe the sheer immorality of that proposal.

The Government will want to make a big noise about the new capital spending they announced—as I said, we will see when it actually happens—but we need to remember the very low baseline they are starting from. The National Education Union has pointed out that, in England, 3,731 schools need immediate repair and a further 9,972 will need significant work within two years at most, but the Treasury figures in the Red Book show that the Department for Education's capital budget next year will be £100 million less than it is this year. How is that going to help? In contrast, the Scottish Government have replaced or substantially upgraded 928 schools since the Scottish National party came to power, and I am delighted that two thirds of all pupils attending secondary school in my constituency do so in schools that are less than seven years old. In Scotland, teacher numbers have increased for the fourth year in a row—[*Interruption.*] I hear muttering from the usual suspects on the Tory Benches. In Scotland, there are 7,485 teachers per 100,000 pupils; in England, the equivalent figure is 5,545.

I want to look at what the Government's priorities appear to be. Working-age benefits are going up by 1.7%. If that was 1.7% on top of a similar increase every year for the past five or six years, it would not be too bad, but it is 1.7% on top of nothing for far too long. How can we defend a 1.7% increase in working-age benefits when MPs are getting 3%? I will not defend that to my constituents and I defy anyone in here to try to defend it to theirs. Perhaps one emergency step the Government need to take is temporarily to put Parliament back in charge of MPs' pay rises and have this place unanimously agree that we are not taking a pay rise this year unless it is going to be at least matched by that for the lowest-paid workers in our society.

The new financial year starts in 16 days' time. The Scottish Government, if they are lucky perhaps, have only just had confirmation of the full Barnett consequential of this Budget—I am not convinced they have even got that yet. When we look at the potential impacts on the devolved finances of the covid-19 emergency, and we try to disentangle what additional funding is coming to the Scottish Government and what additional funding is not additional at all, as it has already been announced, it becomes quite difficult. I suggest to the Minister that this indicates that the current financial settlement—the fiscal settlement between the UK Government and the devolved Governments—needs to be completely revised, because it simply does not give the Scottish Government the flexibility they need to respond to this crisis in the same way as the UK Government need to be able to respond.

I saw a comment recently that pointed out that it is sad that it has taken a public emergency and a public crisis to force the Government to do some of the things they should have been doing previously. Even now, in responding to a public crisis, they have not acknowledged the tens of millions of private crises that have been going on in these islands in the past few years under this

Administration. Far too many people are still living in poverty and that number will increase significantly as a result of the coronavirus crisis. It is essential that the Government look at their spending and taxation plans, initially to make sure that as many as possible of those whose domestic finances are severely disrupted by this crisis are back on their feet financially as soon as possible. The Government then have to acknowledge that we are starting from a position where far too many people on these islands are living in poverty or close to it, and that for that to happen in the fifth, sixth or seventh biggest economy in the world, depending who you believe, is utterly shameful. For any Government to be presiding over those levels of poverty 10 years after coming into office is something they cannot be proud about.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We now have a seven-minute limit.

5.2 pm

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am glad to be called to speak in this Budget debate, and it is good to see the Minister for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), in good health on the Front Bench. In the brief time available, I wish to highlight three things in the Budget that we will need to follow in the weeks ahead: the science of the coronavirus; science and technology policy generally; and retaining skills and jobs at this time.

It is essential that our policy and practice throughout this crisis should be based on the science. We are fortunate in this country that in Professor Whitty, as chief medical officer, and Sir Patrick Vallance, as chief scientist, we have two people of learning, authority and integrity, with direct personal experience of the management of epidemics. It is crucial that their advice continues to be followed in the way that it has to date.

I wish to raise two particular issues. The first is that the foundation of our scientific excellence is constant and unimpeded challenge. The peer review system we have and the replicability of empirical research demand that. So it is important in the days and weeks ahead that we do not see it as disrespectful or distracting for the scientific community to question the basis of actions and advice. Such questioning is essential, it is how science moves forward and it is the foundation of the excellence we enjoy in this country, so we need to avoid, in this House and in external commentary, treating any difference of opinion or challenge as being in some way calamitous, as it is the way we get to the right answer. It would help if the Government would publish the membership of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, which has a particular duty to scrutinise and test the evidence. That will be important to know, but it would also be good to know when the Government intend to publish the evidence on which decisions have been taken. When will that be available? I know it is going to be published, so it would be helpful to know when.

The second challenge is that this is a dynamic situation, as all epidemics are. It is essential that advice and practice can and do adjust according to the real-time findings of research on the outbreak—according to what works and what does not. Such adjustments must

not be derided as U-turns, in the conventional political way, but should be seen as the normal progress of scientific inquiry. Given the intense and absolutely understandable public interest, we need constant explanations of changes when they take place.

Several Members have mentioned the policy on testing. For the past few weeks, the House has been told about the expansion of testing capability: it is important to understand the reason for the change in emphasis in the policy, and I hope that the Minister or his colleagues might be able to provide that to the House. Along with the Health and Social Care Committee, my Select Committee will play a responsible role in backing 100% the scientific approach, while playing its part in ensuring that Parliament understands the reasons for the steps being taken.

Were it not for the entirely appropriate attention paid to the coronavirus over the past week, more attention would no doubt have been drawn to what is an extraordinarily positive Budget for science and research. Just over two years ago, when I was the Secretary of State at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, we published the White Paper on industrial strategy. One of the key commitments made was that the UK should build on its strengths as—in an uncertain world—one of the key powerhouses around the world in innovation and science, which is one of our principal assets. Despite that world leadership, we were at that time devoting less than 1.7% of national income to research and development.

We made a commitment in the industrial strategy to raise the proportion that we spent on R&D to 2.4%—the OECD average—by 2027, and beyond that to 3% thereafter. The publicly funded research budget was increased by nearly a third, from £9.5 billion to £12.5 billion in 2021-22—the biggest such increase in UK history. I remember the battles with the Treasury—before the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) was there—and the struggle to achieve that commitment, so it is a momentous achievement to have not only reiterated that commitment to 2.4% but to have increased the funding available, and not to the £12.5 billion that I was able to secure but massively to £22 billion by 2024-25, including a commitment to private investment through an increase in the R&D tax credit. There is much to be welcomed in that commitment. My Committee will scrutinise the prospective use of the funds, but they are warmly to be welcomed.

It is important to emphasise that our excellence is not just confined to science and technology; we are renowned internationally for our creativity in the arts and humanities, and social sciences are an important source of innovation and growth. I commend in particular the work that Sir Peter Bazalgette led on boosting the contribution of culture in our regional towns and cities through the creative clusters programme, which I strongly back.

Finally, I wish to say a few words about jobs and the continuity of employment. We have, during the current crisis, heard of the challenges of the hospitality industry. I draw attention to the Earl Grey tearoom in Southborough in my constituency, which has faced a problem that has been described by Members from all parties: the coronavirus is not included among the conditions in the Earl Grey's business-continuity insurance. That issue must be addressed urgently by the Government, to provide reassurance to businesses right now. There is no time to be lost.

Skills that are crucial to the continued expansion and flourishing of the manufacturing industry could be lost if the disruption of supply chains means that, for example, components are not available. I hope the Government will look carefully at what is being done in other countries to finance, jointly with industry, part-time working so that skills can be retained in industries—including manufacturing and beyond—so that when the crisis passes, as I hope it will soon, businesses can continue to make progress, just as they have already, based on the excellent skills that have been acquired.

5.9 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): A dark cloud is descending on our world, threatening the lives and livelihoods of millions of people across the globe. We have only to see what is happening in Italy to recognise just what could be coming to our own country. The health service, the police service and social care, already stretched by 10 years of austerity, are stretched even further. None the less, now is not the time to panic, nor is it the time to engage in politics as usual. There needs to be a unity of purpose across the House, particularly on two key objectives. The first is to protect our people, especially the elderly and vulnerable. The second is to minimise the impact on our economy, ensuring that, nationally and internationally, a global recession does not happen, and does not become a global depression.

Last week, the Chancellor said that manufacturing was going through a tough period. That may prove to be an understatement. We were facing a tough period before the advent of the virus. According to the Office for National Statistics, we started 2020 with a flatlining economy, and

“yet another decline in manufacturing, particularly the drinks, car and machinery industries.”

That is why Make UK, the old Engineering Employers' Federation, rightly called on the Government yesterday to step in to limit coronavirus damage to prevent further drastic decline in manufacturing and large-scale job losses.

There were a series of positive messages in the Budget, which I welcomed—no doubt about it. Crucially, though, the Government need to do more during the next stages. It was welcome that the Budget included measures relating to the environmental transformation of the automotive industry, by which I mean the move to electric cars. For the next stage, it is important that we see further significant moves, of the kind that the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has called for, on tax-free electric vehicles—£5,000 off VAT on vehicles alone—which would greatly boost the production and sale of electric vehicles. It was my own experience that led me to that view. During the global crash in 2008, when I was deputy general secretary of the old Transport and General Workers' Union—we later became Unite—Tony Woodley and I were involved in negotiations with the then Labour Government on emergency measures, one of which was the scrappage scheme. As a consequence of that scheme, 400,000 cars were built. That avoided what could have been a catastrophe in the automotive industry. In the first six months of the scheme, notwithstanding what was happening in the global and domestic economy, we saw a 31% increase in the registration of new cars. Had it not been for that scrappage scheme, we would have seen the closure of those car plants.

[Jack Dromey]

With my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), I was also involved in the negotiation of the Kickstart programme, which saw 115,000 homes built, some 110,000 jobs safeguarded and the saving of thousands of small and medium-sized businesses that would otherwise have gone to the wall. Those big measures were critical at the time. This Government need to think big going forward. Crucially, they need to bring together the voice of the world of work. The employers and the trade unions need to discuss the key next stage objectives especially, as the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) said in his excellent speech, in relation to short-term working. That has been called for by the SMMT, the aerospace, defence, security and space industries, Unite, the TUC, and the GMB.

I am talking about employers' organisations and unions coming together to argue that such arrangements have the ability to protect the industrial capacity of British manufacturers. In particular, they pray in aid the German model, which was first used in 2008, significantly expanded and then followed by other countries such as Japan, Belgium, France, and Austria. That scheme created a fund to pay workers up to 60% of their foregone net wages if factory production were temporarily cut. The scheme allowed employers to cut production temporarily without cutting jobs, thereby maintaining vital capacity. It was credited by the OECD for saving 500,000 jobs in German industry. Back then, unemployment held at 7.5% in Germany—a rise of just 0.2%. The country therefore managed to preserve the capacity to undertake the rebuilding of the economy. Jobs were saved, pay continued, and experience and skills were retained.

That model is being used successfully in response to covid-19 in Denmark, where the Government have brought together unions and employers' associations, and agreed a deal for affected industries whereby the state pays 75% of workers' wages and employers pay 25%. Workers also give up five days of paid holiday, and in exchange there are no lay-offs. In the words of the Prime Minister of Denmark:

"If there's a big drop in activity, and production is halted, we understand the need to send home employees. But we ask you: Don't fire them".

Only this afternoon, a major employer in my constituency that has invested massively in increasing its capacity—I cannot name the company—has said that it desperately needs short-term measures to preserve that capacity, if it is to be able to rebuild after the immediate challenges posed to the economy.

Although there are welcome measures in the Budget, the Government need to be more ambitious at the next stages and to work with the world of work. There is no question but that the threat posed is enormous and real, not only to life and limb, but to our economy and ability to recover. What we do now will determine whether we have recession or depression. The role of the Government, working with the world of work, is key to that process. I urge the Government to rise to that challenge.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): There are three maiden speeches on the Government Benches, and the usual conventions apply. Although we can be flexible when the time limit hits zero, that limit is not elastic.

5.16 pm

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to deliver my maiden speech during this debate; it is good to see you in the Chair as I do so. There have been a number of eloquent and thoughtful contributions today, and I hope that I do not change that too much.

On 12 December I made history in Burnley by being the first Conservative to be elected since 1910—109 years since the last. I thank the people of Burnley, Padiham, Hapton, Worsthorpe and Cliviger for putting their trust in me and sending me down to this place. It is a huge honour.

I also pay tribute to my predecessor, Julie Cooper. Julie was a committed local politician, having served as leader of the council before taking up her seat here. She was committed to something else that I hope to carry on: ending hospital car parking charges. She campaigned vigorously on that issue, and I look forward to working with the Government to make that aim a reality, as we committed to doing in our manifesto and as the Minister mentioned earlier.

My constituency of Burnley has existed in various forms since 1868. It encompasses not only the urban centre of Burnley, which is the beating heart of the constituency—famous for a premier league football club and Burnley Miners social club, where, the House will be delighted to know, more Benedictine is consumed than anywhere else in Britain—but also the town Padiham, which has its own distinct feel and community spirit. That spirit has never been more important than in 2015, when the town suffered from severe flooding. Then there are the rolling green fields of the villages of Hapton, Worsthorpe and Cliviger, where we have a thriving rural economy.

I have heard many colleagues speak of how their constituency is the best in the country, but I am confident that once they have all visited this gem of east Lancashire, they will agree that it is Burnley that takes that glorious title. Burnley is not a place of what once was, but a place of what will be. It has some of the most entrepreneurial people in the country, with more than 425 businesses starting up just last year, a college with a centre of engineering excellence and an Oscar-winning sound company. Above all else, it has a community that works hard every day—not just for themselves, but for each other.

When it came to writing my maiden speech, I asked the House of Commons Library if it could provide me with copies of those given by my predecessor, which it duly did. The only problem was that they only went back to 1918, which is eight years after the last Conservative was elected in Burnley. But I was not deterred. I went on and did my own research.

Gerald Arbuthnot was elected to this place in January 1910, the second Conservative for the seat. Although I could not find his maiden speech, I did find many of his other contributions. The topics of those contributions may sound familiar to those of us here today—improvements to the railways, furthering trade with other countries and reducing crime. So while the world may have moved on significantly over the past 100 years, the issues remain the same. Gerald Arbuthnot did not serve for very long as an MP, losing his seat at the second general election of 1910, in December of that

year. It is a fate I am hoping to avoid—I say that as I look to our Front Bench. On leaving this place, Gerald Arbuthnot sadly lost his life in the battle of the Somme, but I was pleased to see that the Parliamentary war memorial was recently updated to include his name, which had been missing for too long.

Having looked back, I now want to look forward, at what I hope to achieve for the people of Burnley while I sit here representing them. I have already spoken about the entrepreneurial spirit we have in Burnley—the businesses that currently power our town, from Safran to Burnley football club, along with the new ones that are sprouting up all the time. In coming here, I want to do my bit to make their lives easier, encouraging even more to set up, drawing on the engineering prowess of the town, the digital skills that we are growing by the day and the fortitude of those who live there. The UK is consistently ranked as one of the best places in the world to start a business. My job is to ensure that Burnley is the best place in the UK to do so.

I also want to work with those who are already in Burnley, supporting them as they capitalise on the free trade agreements that this Government are negotiating, not just with our European allies, which is vitally important, but around the world. I am a member of the Select Committee on the Future Relationship with the European Union, and the Government should know that I plan on scrutinising their efforts to do exactly that—making sure that, in delivering a free trade agreement with the EU, we also deliver on our promises to the British public.

I am incredibly proud that this Budget, delivered by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor last Wednesday, shows that we are still the party of enterprise. It provides the support that businesses in Burnley need to invest in new technology, to undertake the research and development that will keep us cutting edge, and to employ the people who will power innovations of the future. That is because we on these Benches know that the way to improve life chances and reduce inequality is to get business booming. But that also relies on equipping our young people with the skills they need for the future. As I said on the campaign trail, one of my aims as the Member of Parliament for Burnley will be to ensure that when our young people leave school or college, they have the digital skills they need for the 21st century, not the 20th century. My right hon. Friend the Education Secretary can therefore look forward to me being a constant voice on this topic.

As I wrote in my weekly column in the local newspaper last week, sitting here as the Budget was announced, I felt incredibly proud to be the Member of Parliament for Burnley. It deals first and foremost with the significant challenge that we as a country and the world face as a result of covid-19. It is right that at this time we all commit to providing the NHS with whatever resources it needs to tackle the disease and protect life. The cross-party consensus on that shows that, when it is needed, this place can come together and do what is necessary. I hope that we will continue in the weeks and months ahead.

But the Budget also delivers for our other public services. The extra funding for our schools, increasing per pupil amounts, will make a real difference to the lives of children across Burnley, ensuring that people's life chances are not shaped by circumstance, but by ability. The extra police funding will result not only in

more officers on our streets, but in better equipment for those whose job is to protect us. Then there is the extra investment in our infrastructure, because it is that infrastructure that gets us to work or university, transports our goods across the country and gives us access to the digital world.

Mr Deputy Speaker, it has been a pleasure to speak in this debate, and in particular to give my maiden speech.

5.24 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What a great pleasure it is to follow the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham). I congratulate him on that. He touched on the historical context of his predecessors and the tragedy of one of his predecessors losing his life at the Somme, but he also gave us a sense of Burnley—not only the urban area, but the area that stretches out on to the hills and up on to Cliviger. That is not far, Mr Deputy Speaker, from your constituency, and it is a beautiful part of the Lancashire hills. I congratulate him on his maiden speech and welcome him to this place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) talked about his time prior to his service in this House as deputy general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union and then Unite. What he did not mention was that at that point, he was my boss, and I always try to follow what he suggests. He was urging us at this time of national and international crisis not to be too political in this House, so I will do as my former boss suggests and try to take some of the criticism out of the Budget.

In a sense, this was two Budgets. There was the Budget that would have been given in normal circumstances, but then there are the emergency resolutions and the emergency provisions that were brought in to tackle the coronavirus crisis. Opposition Members welcome those provisions, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) indicated earlier, and we will work with the Government on that. One concern that we have within this context is that after 10 years of cuts to public services that are already pared to the bone and running basically on the good will of public sector workers, public services will be under particular strain.

I want to mention a couple of areas in the short time available to me. The first is social care, and I was concerned that there was no provision in the Budget for additional social care money. Furthermore, there were no answers to the social care crisis that we are facing and have been facing for a good while. As the cost of social care rises, the chronic lack of central Government funding is pushing families to breaking point.

Unpaid carers are on the frontline of the social care crisis, taking care of family or friends who would not cope without their daily and sometimes hourly support. By cutting the amount of cash provided to councils, the Government are gambling on the good will of carers, friends and families to plug the numerous holes in our deficient and sometimes ineffective social care system. The situation is unsustainable, causing stress and in some cases mental health problems for carers due to the physical and emotional exhaustion of their caring role. Social care is getting more expensive. Children's needs are complex, with some costing £4,000 a week. Families cannot face those costs, nor can local authorities.

[*Christian Matheson*]

My second subject is particularly relevant to Chester and is the status of heritage cities. Chester prides itself on its rich Roman history. Walking along the Roman walls—when they have not collapsed—or through the historical city centre is an experience that attracts around 8 million visitors annually to my city and my constituency. When Cestrians come together to celebrate and protect our heritage, great things happen. The recent reopening of Chester castle after seven years of closure is a huge step forward. I am delighted that visitors will be able to visit the top of the Agricola tower and see the city skyline this summer, current crisis permitting. Assets such as the Roman walls, Dee house and the Old Dee bridge form a part of English history and must be preserved for future generations, yet the Government have taken the rug from underneath local authorities, causing great difficulty, particularly for heritage cities such as Chester and York.

Chester does not receive any special funding to maintain crucial heritage assets. For example, the only support the council gets to maintain the Roman walls is taken from the local transport budget or its own asset recovery. A limited amount is provided by Historic England, but not a penny is allocated directly from Government. That means that Cheshire West and Chester Council, our local authority, is being forced to choose between protecting our ancient city and providing basic services for the people who live within the walls.

Communities should have the opportunity to celebrate their culture and history, but funding has been so deeply eroded that historic sites will not be able to be maintained. We cannot run a modern society on the cheap. The cuts have consequences, and if I have a major broad-brush criticism of the Government, it is that money is taken away from local authorities, which then have to put up council tax to pay for the deficits. When those local authorities put up council tax, they are blamed for it and have to take the political hit for something that is not their fault. Ministers talk about an increase in spending power for local authorities, but that increase is almost entirely as a result of council tax going up, and the political criticism is then given to local authorities.

It is not just Labour councils that are suffering; Conservative Members know that the cuts are making the lives of their constituents worse too. With less cash, fewer services and limited support, every single council in the UK is struggling. I urge Ministers to address the question of social care, which is dragging councils down by millions, so that at least some equity in funding can be returned to the local authorities that deliver so many vital local services.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): It is a pleasure to call Nick Fletcher to make his maiden speech.

5.30 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): Thank you for letting me speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. A maiden speech and no interruptions—oh, I do wish I could have one at home! I would like to start by telling you a

story. It starts a little sombre, but stay with me, because it does brighten up. If you're sitting comfortably, I will begin.

I am going to tell you the story of a 10-year-old called Tommy. Tommy goes to school every day, like most other kids. He sits in his class with some other 10-year-olds. He doesn't like it too much, but it's okay. Tommy's handwriting is pretty good—it is better than mine—so a teacher somewhere in the last six years has done a good job. However, Tommy is in a special class now—not special good, but special because Tommy gets bored and messes about. He messes about more than most. Tommy knows he is in a special class, and although never directly told by the adults in his life, he pretty much knows he will get nowhere.

When asked, Tommy says he does not do much outside of school, so you press a little further and ask again, only to find out that Tommy smokes weed—not good for a 10-year-old, is it? He doesn't really want to, but it impresses some of the young men who stand outside his school gate and around the shops waiting for kids like Tommy to come along.

So what does Tommy's life look like at home? Well, let's just say it is dysfunctional—no good role models here. The man who gave Tommy some cannabis is 22 and drives a car. Tommy thinks he is pretty cool. Tommy spends more time with this man than he does with anybody else. This is Tommy's role model. After a year or two, Tommy starts running errands and carrying a bit of drugs. He likes to impress his role model. We all like to impress, don't we?

Fast-forward a few years and Tommy is now 16, doing quite a bit of dealing—he is quite the young man on the street. People know Tommy, and he likes the attention. He starts carrying a knife. His mum tells him off because she's seen it. He tells his mum to go away, but he doesn't say, "Go away"—he uses the words that the adults in his life use. The police are watching Tommy. Everybody is watching Tommy. Tommy has a girlfriend. His girlfriend—a sweet little 16-year-old—starts taking a bit of drugs because Tommy does. She likes to impress. We all like to impress, don't we?

I do not need to continue for you to know how this story ends—not much of a story, is it? It is not a good story, but guess what? This is what happens when we have the wrong role models and we try to impress the wrong people.

There is another story. There is another Tommy who is 10 and in a special class, and whose writing is better than mine, but when asked what he does after school, he tells you he plays football and he's good at it. He is no longer a special kid for the wrong reason; he is special for the right ones. His teacher tells him that he is going to do great things. He has a great role model at football, who tells Tommy to go to the gym when he is not playing football, where there is another great role model. Tommy's school organises a visit to the airport, to see a bomber called the Vulcan. Tommy enjoyed the trip to airport and wants to learn to take a plane apart and put it back together again. Now we have Boeing in Doncaster, and Tommy gets an apprenticeship. Tommy's life is looking great. Isn't that a better story?

It's not just about Tommy. It's about Rachel, Mia and Muhammad who work at Yorkshire Wildlife Park, Polypipe or the new hospital. It's about having great role models.

It's about everyone raising their game. It's about teaching kids that there is a right way and a wrong way, and that having dreams and goals are necessities in life, not luxuries.

It is about following what you believe in, like one of our many notable folk in Don Valley, William Bradford from Austerfield, who sailed on the *Mayflower* to follow his dream on a pilgrimage to the new world we now call America, some 400 years ago. It is about giving a town pride in itself. Can you imagine how the people of Don Valley felt when a castle was being built at Conisbrough in the 11th century? That was the last time we had some serious investment in Don Valley. It is around the same time that we last had a Conservative MP. Oh no—bear with me; we have never had a Conservative MP.

Can you imagine how the people of Doncaster will feel if and when a new hospital is built, when flood defences are put in place so their homes are not flooded every 10 years, and when a new rail link is built to Doncaster Sheffield airport, which will attract huge business and create thousands of jobs and homes? We need these big projects to raise the aspiration of our young, to raise the hopes of our families, and to let people know we care and that they are not the forgotten communities any more. But most of all we need to hold ourselves accountable, to take responsibility for our actions and become great role models—and that must start with me here. That costs nothing; well, I am from Yorkshire.

My predecessor and I differed on policy, but we did have one thing in common: she, too, cared for Don Valley. I know this as I heard many a kind word on the doorstep about Caroline Flint when I was campaigning, and that continued on my arrival here. “What seat are you?” you all asked. “Don Valley,” I replied. “Oh, that was Caroline’s. We liked her.” I said, “I know.” Caroline gave 22 years of her life to this place and the people of Don Valley, and on behalf of Don Valley I say thank you.

I know Caroline cared, and that is what I am going to do here: care by giving Tommy hope—hope of a better life—and this Budget will help do just that. With the doubling of flood defence spending, letting families keep more of their money, investing in infrastructure and new hospitals, and giving £8 million for football clubs, Tommy stands a chance. We are heading into some unknowns, and I appreciate that. However, as a businessman, I have read and listened to many gurus, but my favourite is the late Jim Rohn, who stated that in life, “it’s not the direction of the wind, it’s the set of the sail that counts”. So let us set our sail right, and let us get behind this Government and be positive about everything we say and do, and this includes dealing with the issue of the moment. By being the voice of reason, keeping calm, keeping to the facts and staying on course, we will come through this together.

Finally, I said in my acceptance speech that winning was nothing short of a miracle. I believe in miracles, and I believe in God. I know not everyone does and I know many see Christianity as a stumbling block to their way of life, but please remember it is my way of life. It is the reason I believe I am here—not to judge or condemn, but to listen, to help, to be kind, to forgive and forget. I therefore have two asks. First, will all the people here and back in my constituency forgive me

when I get it wrong—and I will? But, secondly, and much more importantly, however long we are here, let us keep room for God in this place. If we do keep space for him in the hearts and minds of the people who believe, I know this country will continue to be the greatest place and continue to be a place that you and I are proud to call home. After all, I believe Christ is the greatest role model anyone can have.

5.38 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher). He delivered an excellent maiden speech, and I look forward to listening to many more speeches by him.

This Budget has been dominated by the coronavirus crisis we are currently facing, and rightly so. Coronavirus represents an unprecedented challenge for the UK, and now more than ever, we need to strengthen the safety net available to the most vulnerable in our society. As a coronavirus pandemic unfolds, more and more people will be in need of this social safety net than ever before, especially those who are not eligible for sick pay or who have unstable jobs. For many of these people, the initial five-week wait for their first universal credit payment could cause real hardship. Indeed, it is well documented that that wait is already pushing vulnerable people to food banks, trapping many in years of debt, and making outstanding issues with housing, ill-health, disability and domestic abuse significantly worse.

Like many colleagues, I welcome the Government’s £500 million hardship fund to help local authorities deal with the coronavirus outbreak, but I remain concerned that thanks to a decade of austerity and cuts, local authorities lack the capacity or resources effectively to distribute that funding. The coronavirus outbreak exposes a deeper crisis faced by the UK—the crisis in our public services, which the Budget sadly failed to address. Over the past 10 years, consecutive Conservative Budgets have created and curated a social emergency. As a result, our social security system is punitive, complex and as mean as it has ever been.

In numerical terms, the emergency we face is truly shocking: today, 4.5 million children are growing up in poverty; this morning 281,000 people woke up without a roof over their head; and one in every 50 households is forced to use foodbanks in order to eat. Last week’s Budget was lauded as the most generous in decades, but in reality it does nothing to relieve the hardships inflicted on my community by 10 years of austerity, universal credit, the bedroom tax and the benefits freeze.

The Chancellor has let down my constituents by taking no significant action to tackle the inbuilt injustices that plague universal credit. Last week’s Budget said nothing about abolishing the two-child limit, the five-week delay to universal credit payments, or the benefit cap, even though each of these actions would have an immediate positive effect on my constituents, including the 52% of children living in poverty in Manchester, Gorton. Why will the Government not commit to any of those measures?

On a more positive note, the Budget took some important steps on the road to tackling the housing crisis we face in the UK, including in Manchester, Gorton. I welcome the Government’s announcement of more money to support rough sleepers, their commitment

[Afzal Khan]

to the affordable homes programme, and the lowering of borrowing rates for councils to build social homes. But this by no means goes far enough.

Local housing allowance rates are a scandal. Some 1.4 million households in the UK claim LHA to help meet some or all of their housing costs, but the impact of cuts and a four-year freeze means that in 97% of England that help does not cover even the cheapest third of rents. In Manchester, the average monthly rent has increased by 38% in the past five years alone. The skyrocketing cost of private rents, and the freeze on LHA, has made it near impossible for many people in my constituency to find an affordable home. On top of that, my constituency has seen a significant increase in the number of LHA claimants who are refused rented accommodation by private landlords or letting agents. That is blatantly discriminatory, and I hope the Government act to stop that practice before more vulnerable people are pushed into homelessness.

I was pleased back in January when the Government announced that LHA was to be unfrozen, but that will not even come close to covering the vast shortfalls that people face when paying their rent. The Budget was a missed opportunity to raise LHA rates in line with the private rental market, and prevent more people from falling into homelessness. Although I welcome the £12.2 billion funding allocated to the affordable homes programme, I am concerned about the Chancellor's definition of "affordable". My definition of affordable housing, and that of my constituents, seems to be at odds with the Government's. As they say, the devil will be in the detail. I look forward to gaining clarity about how much of that fund will be spent on delivering genuinely affordable social housing.

My constituency and communities up and down the country have experienced 10 years of immense suffering thanks to rampant austerity. With our economy now unstable and more vulnerable than ever, it has never been more important to invest in people and in the social safety net that protects them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): It is a pleasure to call Lia Nici to make her maiden speech.

5.45 pm

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is with great pride that I stand in this place and speak about the town of my birth, and now the town of my constituency, Great Grimsby. I am equally proud that I am the first woman from my party to represent the seat. Indeed, I am the first Conservative MP to serve the constituency since Sir Walter Womersley in 1945.

I would like to acknowledge the work of my immediate predecessor, Melanie Onn. Melanie served as MP for four years. Even in that short time, she progressed to shadow Front-Bench positions, first as shadow Deputy Leader of the House and then as shadow Housing Minister. Melanie was hard working and diligent in her service of Great Grimsby.

I must also mention the Labour politician who served Grimsby for longer than anybody else: Austin Mitchell. Austin was a Member of Parliament for 38 years and is a politician whom I admire greatly. He once said that if you pinned a red rosette on a donkey, the people of Great Grimsby would vote for it. Well, I did not wear a red rosette and nor am I a donkey, which proves that Austin Mitchell was not always right. Austin was a constant campaigner against the common fisheries policy and the damage it inflicted on the fishermen of Grimsby. It is that part of his work that I will be particularly proud to continue now that we have left the EU.

I would also like to say a sincere thank you to my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), who encouraged me to stand as a councillor and then as parliamentary candidate. He continues to be a valued adviser and a huge support.

Great Grimsby has a long and proud trading history. The town was well known as a trading port in the 800s and was particularly renowned even then for the quality of its fish and its fishing fleet. By the 1100s, the town had become one of the richest trading ports in the country. In 1201, the burgesses of the town bought it from King John, and it gained its first town charter in the same year. I am very proud to say that Great Grimsby was able to send two of its burgesses to start up the model Parliament in 1295. In recognition of that, our coat of arms and the name Great Grimsby are part of one of the stained glass windows in St Stephen's Hall.

The enrolled freemen of Grimsby, who were created at the signing of the first town charter, ran the town until 1831 and are still an important part of its functions today. They are the beating heart of Freeman Street and continue to work with the council and MPs to ensure the town's positive future. It is important to recall how the freemen encouraged economic success in the 1300s. They reduced or abolished taxes for local businesses. There was, for example, "No Keyage on loading or unloading ship," "No Stallage on erecting a stall in the market," and "No Anchorage on dropping anchor". I encourage the Chancellor to emulate our forebears and bring a free port to Grimsby.

For centuries, trawlermen from our town set off into the North sea to catch the fish to feed the nation, including through two world wars. Those trawlermen then had to suffer the cod wars with Iceland, together with crippling oil price rises in the 1970s. As a nation we joined the Common Market and then the EU, which gave rise to the common fisheries policy. EU trawlers had access to our waters, and our own fishermen became subject to smaller and smaller quotas. All of that resulted in the decimation of the fishing industry in towns such as Grimsby. But now we have left the EU. My constituents will be watching the Government, and me, very closely over the coming year to make sure we negotiate a deal that means we are able to build a UK fishing industry fit for the 21st century.

Great Grimsby is not merely a town that looks back to its history. Our key Lincolnshire location on the bank of the Humber estuary and facing the North sea means we are home to the largest centre for seafood processing and cold storage, and we have become the UK's largest centre for the maintenance and operations of our new offshore windfarms. Many of my constituents work at the Port of Immingham and Grimsby, the UK's

largest port by tonnage. We hope to be at the forefront of the new emerging technology in carbon capture and storage. I was particularly delighted to hear the Chancellor's announcement of a £800 million infrastructure fund for carbon capture and storage clusters. Where better to place a cluster that will capture and store 16 million tonnes of carbon dioxide than off the coast of Grimsby?

As my hon. Friends on the Conservative Benches know, small businesses are central to the life of our towns and our country. If we are to encourage the regeneration of our town centres, our local businesses are key. I therefore welcome the announcement to help small businesses cope with the potential extra costs of coronavirus by refunding statutory sick pay. The retail, leisure and hospitality businesses in my constituency will also welcome the extension of the 100% business rate relief in 2020-21. I am particularly pleased that the Chancellor has decided to freeze fuel duty for another year. My constituents, especially those who run logistics companies, will greatly appreciate that step.

To be elected to represent my hometown is the greatest honour of my professional life. It is an honour that has come to me because of how the people felt treated by politicians in the past. We know that they have lent us their vote and I am well aware that they voted for change. I will work tirelessly to see that that change happens.

5.53 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici). She conveyed her passion and commitment to her constituents and her constituency. We on the Labour Benches remember her predecessor, Melanie Onn, with great affection and we are grateful to the hon. Member for mentioning her. On behalf of the whole House, I wish her all the very best in her endeavours in this House. She has made a powerful maiden speech on this important occasion.

This is a Budget debate, yet, as the Chancellor and many other Members have acknowledged, the only issue at the front of people's minds at the moment is coronavirus. I know that families are concerned about their children and schools, I know that small businesses are worried about their survival, and I know that carers are very concerned about the elderly. We now have 20 confirmed cases of coronavirus in South Yorkshire. I take this opportunity to reassure my constituents in South Yorkshire that the best preparations are being made to keep them safe. For that reason I will not be able to attend the winding-up speeches later, Madam Deputy Speaker, for which I apologise. I need to be in regular contact with our public health directors and the local resilience forum to ensure that our public services have the support they need.

Last week, we convened a taskforce of the Sheffield city—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Can we have a bit less chattering please?

Dan Jarvis: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Last week, we convened a taskforce of the Sheffield city region's local authorities and chambers of commerce to ensure we can respond quickly to support our economy,

in particular our small businesses, through this challenging time. The Chancellor took welcome steps to support people and businesses financially, but I want, in the short time available to me today, to talk about something that we cannot put a price tag on, but which matters just as much as the measures being put in place to deal with this emergency.

Last week, we were promised millions for trains, roads and potholes, our transport infrastructure, yet in the face of a pandemic we are quickly realising we rely on something far more important: our social infrastructure. Our key workers and our carers on the frontline fighting the virus are the fabric that knit our social infrastructure, our society, together, helping to keep us safe and healthy. Underpaid, overworked and often little-thanked, they are helping our most vulnerable through this most challenging of times. They are the social fabric that makes Britain strong. They are the reason I am confident that we will pull together and get through this emergency. Our nurses and doctors have endured relentless workloads year after year. Now, they are on the frontline again, putting their lives in danger in our time of need. We rely on them more than ever before.

In these uncertain times, in addition to the demands that the Government spend where it is needed, I want us all to offer something which is free, which unites us all, and, critically, will support medical experts and frontline workers who are battling day and night to stem the flow of the virus. It is our national civic duty to keep our social infrastructure strong. That means looking out for each other. I urge everyone to look out for, and closely follow, the expert advice. I commend the chief medical officer, the chief scientific officer, public health directors and local resilience forums that have provided calm and clear guidance. We must look out for each other and show a common decency in all we do, checking on our neighbours, the elderly and the vulnerable who may not have family and friends to rely on. I saw this first hand in South Yorkshire during the flooding in November, when the worst weather brought out the best in people. Their selfless acts of generosity and kindness helped families to get back on their feet. We will need a similar effort this time around to keep us all safe.

We must also look after our doctors, nurses and carers by taking responsibility. Panic buying and stockpiling is not who we are as a country. It is not necessary. It makes it harder to protect the most vulnerable and, in turn, puts our people at greater risk of becoming ill. It adds unnecessary strain to our NHS and its wonderful staff. It may feel like Britain has been fraying at the edges over the past few days. Images of empty shelves have not helped matters. People are understandably tense and worried. As a country, we have been divided for too long, but through this crisis I am confident that we will rediscover our common decency and kindness.

Now is the time for leadership and expertise. Now is the time to look out for each other. Now is the time to pull together. I believe we are ready to do just that and to keep our social fabric stronger than ever. Coronavirus will be a tough challenge, but by following our British values of common decency, respect and kindness, we have the best remedy to keep our families and our country healthy and out of harm's way.

Debate interrupted.

Covid-19

5.59 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Thank you for allowing me to make a statement at this time, Mr Speaker. The coronavirus pandemic is the most serious public health emergency that our nation has faced for a generation. Our goal is to protect life. Our actions have meant that the spread of the virus has been slowed in the UK. I pay tribute to the officials of Public Health England and the NHS for their exemplary approach to contact tracing and their work so far. However, the disease is now accelerating, and 53 people have sadly now died. Our hearts, across the whole House, go out to their families.

Our policy is to fight this virus with everything we have. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor confirmed a £30 billion package of financial firepower, including a £5 billion contingency fund to ensure that the NHS and social care system have the resources they need. We will give the NHS whatever it needs, and we will do whatever it takes. We will get through this by working through our action plan to contain, delay, research and mitigate the virus. That plan has two overriding aims: to protect the NHS by building it up and flattening the curve, and to protect life by safeguarding those who are most vulnerable. We will do the right thing at the right time, based on the best scientific advice.

Earlier, I attended a Cobra meeting chaired by the Prime Minister to decide on the next steps in our plan. I can report to the House that we have agreed a very significant step in the actions that we are taking from within that plan to control the spread of the disease. Those actions will change the ordinary lives of everyone in this country. We appreciate that they are very significant, and I understand that people will be concerned, but we have come to the view that they are necessary to save lives and to stop this disease.

First, based on the updated scientific advice, we are today advising that if you or anyone in your home has a high temperature or a new and continuous cough, you should stay at home for 14 days. If at all possible, you should not go out even to buy food and essentials. Instead, you should ask others for assistance with your daily necessities. The exception to that is for exercise, but even then you should keep at a safe distance from others. If it is not possible to receive deliveries at home, you should do what you can to limit your social contact when you leave the house to get supplies.

Even if you or anyone in your household do not have symptoms, there is more that we have to ask of you. Today, we are advising people against all unnecessary social contact with others and all unnecessary travel. We need people to start working from home if they possibly can. We should steer clear of pubs, clubs, cinemas and restaurants. We should use the NHS only when we really need to. This advice is directed at everyone, but it is especially important for the over-70s, for pregnant women and for those with some health conditions. It is especially true of London, which the evidence suggests is several weeks ahead of the rest of the country.

These measures will be disruptive, but they will save lives. In a few days' time, by this coming weekend, we will need to go even further to ensure that those with the most serious health conditions are largely shielded from

social contact for around 12 weeks. We want to ensure that the period of maximum shielding coincides with the peak of maximum transmission. While the risks of transmission at mass gatherings, such as sporting events, are relatively low, from tomorrow, we will be withdrawing our support for mass gatherings. That will free up the critical workers we need to deal with the emergency and ensure a consistent approach to social contact.

Secondly, we are increasing our testing capabilities yet further. The UK has tested more people than almost any other major economy outside of China, South Korea and Italy. We have already increased the number of tests to 5,000 a day, and that is now on its way to 10,000, then radically further.

Thirdly, we are boosting the NHS. Ventilation is mission critical to treating the disease. We have been buying up ventilation equipment since the start of the crisis, but we need more. Today, the Prime Minister hosted a call with the nation's advanced manufacturers asking them to join a national effort to produce the ventilators we need. We have set up a dedicated team to do that, and we are hugely encouraged by the scale of the response so far. Later today, the NHS will set out the very significant steps it is taking to prepare.

Fourthly, on Thursday, we will introduce to the House the coronavirus emergency Bill, which will give us the powers to keep essential services running at a time when large parts of the workforce may be off sick. Some of those measures will be very significant and a departure from the way that we do things in peacetime. They are strictly temporary and proportionate to the threat we face, and I hope that many will not have to be used at all. They will be activated only on the basis of scientific advice and will be in place only for as long as clinically necessary. Finally, of course, we are ramping up our communications efforts, so that people know what steps they need to take to protect themselves, others and the NHS.

Tackling coronavirus is a national effort and everyone has their part to play. The more people follow the public health advice, the less need to bring in draconian actions that I am keen to avoid. Of course, we must not forget the simple things that we can all do—washing our hands, following the public health advice if we have symptoms, and looking out for the most vulnerable in the community.

The measures that I have outlined are unprecedented in peacetime. We will fight this virus with everything we have. We are in a war against an invisible killer and we have to do everything we can to stop it. I commend this statement to the House.

6.6 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for keeping me informed of developments. Our thoughts must be with the loved ones of those who have sadly died from the virus, including the family of the man who died at the Leicester Royal Infirmary in my constituency over the weekend.

I pay tribute to all our NHS staff, our social care staff and, indeed, all who work in public services. Never have we been more in their debt, and will be in the coming weeks. The public, as indeed all Members of the House, want the national effort to succeed. Every one of our constituents wants to do the right thing for their loved ones, for their neighbours and for themselves.

The virus spreads rapidly. It exploits ambivalence. It demands clarity of purpose. It demands Government effort as we have never seen before in peacetime. With that in mind, I put a number of questions to the Secretary of State, which I trust he accepts are raised in a constructive spirit. Specifically, on today's measures, which we endorse, if we are asking people to work from home if they can, what is the advice to those who are not able to work from home because of their occupation—millions who work in the retail sector, for example?

Today, the Government will ask the elderly and those with long-term conditions to shield themselves, starting at the weekend. Can the Secretary of State give us more details of how that will work in practice? Will they be able to exercise or go for a walk? What happens if someone refuses to follow the advice? How will those who need social care support get the care they need? What protections are in place for social care staff embarking on regular 15-minute visits? How will those with complex needs and disabilities be supported?

We know that those with co-morbidities and a compromised immune system are also vulnerable. What specific advice is there for those with conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, asthma and cardiovascular issues, who the emerging literature shows to be particularly vulnerable at the moment? How will those people access repeat prescriptions?

I understand the gravity of the situation. Could the Secretary of State update the House on how far away from the peak he thinks we are? While I understand the reasoning for the decisions the Government have made today, surely there will now come a moment when schools will close. Teachers are already anxious, and parents need to plan. Can he offer some advice to parents, who will be worried tonight?

Throughout the outbreak, we have been as one in agreeing that all decisions must be based on science and evidence, but the Secretary of State, of course, will know and understand that different scientists can reach different conclusions, even when presented with the same data and evidence, so does he agree that all the evidence informing the UK's strategy must be transparent, and that the modelling and the evidence base should be published, so that it can be peer-reviewed and stress-tested? This is about maintaining public confidence.

May I press the Secretary of State on the controversy, if I may put it like that, of recent days, in the debate about so-called herd immunity? He said yesterday that herd immunity is not the goal. The chief scientific adviser suggested something slightly different on Thursday. Could the Secretary of State clarify the Government's position?

May I put a point that is repeatedly raised by our constituents? I hope that the Secretary of State appreciates the way in which we are putting these points to him. Many of our constituents are asking us why the UK has hitherto seemed to have taken a different course from other nations. They have suggested that other nations have been deliberately trying to delay, and to buy time to prepare for, future outbreaks. Will he explain what ideas the Government have and have not rejected, and what lessons they have learned, from countries such as Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea, which have brought the virus under relative control through containment policies? What lessons can we learn from Germany and Scandinavia, which, in recent days, according to the

data, are reporting death rates of less than three per 1,000 covid-19 cases, whereas in the UK and France, the figure is much higher?

May I press the Secretary of State on the advice of the World Health Organisation? It has been clear that testing and contact tracing should continue. Many of our constituents are saying to us that surely we need community testing to continue, because we need to know the percentage of the population infected at any one time. Otherwise, the percentage of immunity will be unknown. People who are ill, those who work in the NHS or the care sector, and anyone caring for elderly relatives will surely want to know their covid-19 status, because it will have an impact on how they interact with other people in the community. NHS staff are being asked to care for covid-19 patients, not knowing whether they themselves are transmitting the virus. If they get ill, will they now be asked to stay at home for 14 days? Surely if we can test those NHS staff, and the test returns negative, we can get them back on the frontline sooner.

Is the issue around testing about capacity? If it is, has the Secretary of State considered demanding that UK-based pharmaceutical companies hand us their labs? Can we use the testing labs in higher education institutions and universities? Can diagnostic kit makers be urged to manufacture more testing kit urgently?

On a vaccine, we understand the timescales involved, but can the Secretary of State confirm that he will approve funding for scaling up manufacturing of the vaccine candidates that are being developed in the UK? On antivirals, clinical trials on repurposing drugs are under way across the globe; can he provide a written statement to the House on what capacity the UK has to assist in that process?

Turning quickly to the capacity of the national health service, our NHS and social care staff need support. They need quality personal protective equipment, whether in secondary care or primary care. Can the Secretary of State tell us how many additional intensive care unit beds have been opened? I think he has hinted that non-emergency elective treatment will now be suspended; could he confirm that? Members have long been asking him about ventilators. Can he outline the latest numbers, and say where he thinks we will be by this time next week? Can he update us on ECMO bed capacity, and say whether he is also increasing the availability of non-invasive ventilation, such as BPAP? If we need beds and equipment from private sector organisations, we should requisition that equipment, not pay for it.

Finally, we will co-operate with the Government on the proposed emergency legislation, and I am grateful for the discussions we have had, but the biggest challenge to the public health social distancing measures will not be boredom and fatigue; it will be finances and affordability. The poorest, who struggle to pay the rent, those who worry about putting food on the table, and those who have no savings to dip into, will be faced with impossible choices between hardship and health. From sick pay and lost earnings protection, to universal credit changes and rent and mortgage payment deferrals, we need a package of financial support, and we look forward to working with the Secretary of State on that front.

These are indeed serious times. Many of our constituents are anxious, and want as much certainty as possible. We have put these questions to the Secretary of State because the health and safety of the nation must always come first.

Matt Hancock: I commend the shadow Secretary of State for the tone he has taken throughout this crisis. He rightly asks questions; I will seek to address each and every one of them, but before I do, I repeat something that I have said to the House a few times. We welcome questioning of the approach, because we are constantly looking for the very best solution for this nation, and the very best way through this, in order to protect life. I would rather have questions from all around the House, asked in the tone in which he has asked them, so that we can ensure that we are constantly doing the best we possibly can. That goes for publishing the science and the modelling, which we absolutely will do, because the very best science is done in the open.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the NHS being prepared. I am thankful that we have the NHS all the time, but in a crisis like this, I am doubly thankful, because we are reliant on those who work in the NHS. Thanks to the NHS, we are as well prepared as any nation can be. We are, by some measures, the best prepared for this stage of the spread of the virus, but what matters is giving the NHS all the support that it needs, and especially having regard to the capacity of the NHS, so that it can address the symptoms and consequences of this particular virus. The issues are around ventilation and oxygen supply, as he says. We are increasing the number of ventilators. We have been buying ventilators for several weeks now, but we also need to manufacture more. As we have discussed in the House, there is no limit to our appetite to buy ventilators, and there should be no limit to the appetite of industry to make them, because around the world, everybody is trying to increase their ventilator capacity.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have ensured that we can use all hospital capability in this country, public or private, and bring it to the task. We are expanding the use and production of personal protective equipment. Making sure we get PPE to every single part of the NHS is absolutely vital. We will be cancelling or postponing non-time-sensitive elective surgery; the NHS will make a statement about that later today. We are increasing ICU bed capacity, but I want to make sure that the House understands that we do not need a generic type of intensive care capacity. Of course we need intensive care capacity, but we need very specific intensive care capacity with the ventilation that is needed in many of these cases.

I turn to the other questions asked by the hon. Gentleman. He asked, “What if you can’t work from home?”. The answer is that if you are healthy, and if you are not being asked to isolate because a member of your household or you have symptoms of the virus, then of course you should still go to work. It is important that this country keeps moving as much as we possibly can, within the limits of the advice that we have given.

The hon. Gentleman asked about shielding, and about the elderly. The policy of shielding is specifically about reducing contact for the most vulnerable. For those who have significant health conditions, the NHS will be in contact with you over the next week. We will publish a list of those conditions, and if you think you should have been contacted and you have not been by next week, get in contact with the NHS. The shielding policy starts later than the general household isolation policy and the general advice to reduce social contact, because the reduction in contact that we need to see among

those whom we are shielding is much more significant, and we need to see it last for a significant period of about 12 weeks.

The hon. Gentleman asked about those who refuse to follow advice. I do not think that many people will refuse to follow advice. Of course we have powers, and powers are proposed in the Bill, should we need to take further action, but I hope and expect that that will not be necessary.

The hon. Gentleman asked about schools. The scientific advice is not only that closing schools has a significant impact on people’s ability to work in, for instance, key areas such as the health service, but also that if we get it wrong, children may stay with elderly grandparents instead of going to school, and thus increase the risk. We keep this matter under review and we are in constant discussion about it, but we have not changed the advice on schools today.

The hon. Gentleman asked about other countries. Of course we are constantly looking to all other countries around the world—including South Korea and Singapore, which he mentioned—to see what we can learn about how we can do things better. We are taking these measures at a different time from other European countries because we are behind them in terms of the progress of the virus, which is a good thing. In fact, as the chief scientific adviser has said, we are taking these actions earlier in the curve than, for instance, France and Germany did, but behind in time, because the progress of the virus is further advanced in those countries.

The hon. Gentleman asked about testing. That is very important, because of course people want to know their covid-19 status, and we are expanding testing as fast as we possibly can. The test that the world is looking for is the test that can check whether people have the antibodies because they have had coronavirus, because then we can find that out not just by testing people while they have it but afterwards, if they have had it, and therefore have the antibodies with the immunity that comes from that. That test does not yet exist, but we are putting an enormous amount of effort into creating it. We also need testing that can be done at the bedside rather than in the lab, and a huge amount of work is under way to bring that about. The same goes for vaccines and antivirals, on which the hon. Gentleman asked for a written ministerial statement, and I will of course ensure that the House is provided with one.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about a package of financial support. We established a significant package in the Budget last week, and I had a meeting with the hon. Gentleman earlier today to discuss what further amounts might be needed.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): There are many young people in my constituency, but when I was first elected it had the highest proportion of people above retirement age in the country. Most of those people are economically active, and many of those who are not are volunteers. I pay tribute to those over 70 who are helping people even older than themselves.

I welcome all the points that the Secretary of State has made so far, but may I put three quick points to him? He does not need to answer them in detail now. First, senior general practitioners are worried that some medicines—controlled drugs, which are safe—are being

destroyed because the patient for whom they were first ordered may have died. If a shortage of morphine and the like happens, it will lead to distress and agony for people unnecessarily. Will the Secretary of State look into that, and see whether, whatever the requirements are, they might be lifted during this period?

Secondly, the advice to reduce social contact may be right and important, but if people are fit and healthy and are running a business, it is not necessarily right for that business to be closed down just because they have hit a certain age.

Thirdly, may I add to a sensible point made by the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth)? There is some help for people with mortgages, but many people who will lose their jobs are paying rent. Will the Secretary of State also ensure that no one is unnecessarily evicted or threatened during a short-term period of shortage of money?

Matt Hancock: The measures on shielding are specifically for those who have significant health conditions and will be contacted by the NHS. They are not for the generality of over-70s who are healthy, for whom the guidance is the same as that for people of working age, except that we strongly advise, as opposed to advising. That is for their own protection, because the over-70s, and especially the over-80s, are at significantly higher risk of mortality—of dying from this virus.

The other points made by my hon. Friend are welcome. He made a very important point about rent, which featured in the discussions that we had earlier today. I have been talking about it to those at the Treasury and to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Many banks have already taken action on mortgages.

My hon. Friend's point about the availability of drugs is, of course, critical. We have a very comprehensive drug supply chain system that we understand well, thanks to the planning that we have done over the last couple of years. Thus far we have not seen shortages beyond those that already existed before the virus, such as the one that we debated in the autumn in the context of HRT, but of course we keep the position under constant review.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State will be aware of the concern about why the UK Government's approach was such an outlier until now, including the talk about herd immunity, when it is not clear that any immunity from this virus is long-term. The UK is now facing an exponential rise, and I therefore welcome what the UK Government have said about decreasing all non-essential contact, as I think that it is critical to slow down and limit the spread of the virus.

The briefing from the Prime Minister talked about not providing emergency services for large gatherings, but can the Secretary of State clarify whether the Government are advising against or forbidding mass gatherings? I welcome the talk about increasing testing capability, but the briefing talked about only testing those in hospital and key workers. In Scotland, surveillance testing in practices that monitor disease in the community is continuing. Will that also be the case here in England?

Following the confusion over the weekend and, indeed, the comments that he has just made about healthy people over 70, will the Secretary of State clarify what exactly is the advice for people over 70 who live in their

own homes or in care homes? Are they meant to be staying at home, or are they simply meant to be decreasing contact? In particular, is the Secretary of State discussing with social care providers lengthening the time of each visit so that there is time for the careworker to take precautions? He says that the healthy should go to work, but what if they work in a club? What provision is being made for socially vulnerable people such as the homeless or those who have no recourse to public funds, such as refugees or asylum seekers? We on these Benches welcomed the measures in the Budget, but when will the devolved Governments know exactly how much funding they will have to mitigate the economic impact of this in the three devolved nations? Finally, what further changes will be carried out in the Houses of Parliament to ensure that core services continue without increasing the risk to, in particular, older Members of both Houses?

Matt Hancock: We do not support mass gatherings. We have advised against unnecessary social contact, so it goes without saying that we do not support mass gatherings.

The hon. Lady asked about surveillance testing. Across the UK, we have one of the biggest coronavirus surveillance operations in the world. Of course it happens in Scotland, but it happens throughout the UK. She also asked about Parliament. I understand, Mr Speaker, that you have been having discussions today about how Parliament will operate, but I think the whole House will be sure, in our collective decision, that although Parliament may have to operate differently, it must remain open.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): May I join the Secretary of State, and the shadow Secretary of State, in commending and paying tribute to all who work in our national health service, on whom we rely from day to day, but on whom we rely all the more under these conditions?

May I press the Secretary of State on two points that have been raised by others? The advice from the World Health Organisation was very clear: test, test, test. At an earlier stage the UK changed its testing requirements, and those who have symptoms and self-isolate are no longer tested. If the full information is to be available, surely the testing has to be very significantly increased. Who exactly is going to be tested?

One of the difficulties has been the way in which information has been presented. To pick up the point made by the SNP spokesman about the over-70s that was echoed elsewhere, the headlines are that over-70s, even now, are going to have to stay at home for 12 weeks. Can the Secretary of State be absolutely precise as to what the advice is for over-70s and those with other conditions, and what those conditions are? Finally, on the question of seven or 14 days' self-isolation, my understanding was that if someone had symptoms and were on their own they should self-isolate for seven days, but if they were in a family the whole family should self-isolate for 14 days. Perhaps my right hon. Friend could confirm.

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend is precisely correct on the third question. The difference between the advice for seven days and 14 is precisely as follows. If you have symptoms yourself, if you live on your own

[*Matt Hancock*]

you should self-isolate for seven days, but if you live in a household with others, the whole household now needs to stay at home for 14 days. The reason is that if you live in a household with someone who has coronavirus it is highly likely that you will catch it, so it is important, to protect against onward transmission, that everybody stays at home. That is the reason for the distinction between the seven days and the 14 days, and I hope that is clear—seven days for individuals, 14 for households.

On the point about the World Health Organisation saying that we should “test, test, test”, I wholeheartedly agree. We have continued the increase in testing in this country throughout this outbreak. The point that was made last week was that as the increase in the number of cases continues, so our testing capability must increase faster, and at this stage we have to make sure that the use of the tests we have are prioritised. As we expand testing capability, we will expand the number of people who can get hold of those tests. I understand the frustrations of those who want a test, but the whole House will agree that we have to make sure that we use those tests on the people who need them most, which means saving lives in hospitals.

On the point about the over-70s, to reiterate the answer that I gave a moment ago, the advice to everybody is to avoid unnecessary social contact. For the over-70s, for their own protection, that is strongly advised. The shielding, which is essentially reducing all contact as much as possible, is for those who have underlying health conditions and will be contacted by the NHS. The precise details of all these will be published on the gov.uk website so that everybody can see not only the answers I am giving to the questions, but the precise wording of what we expect everybody to do, as I have set out in the statement.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): Can I say to the Secretary of State that the House has always come together at times of national crisis as one, and that is the spirit across the House today? In that spirit, can I ask him to match the unprecedented public health measures that he has announced today with unprecedented economic measures to support all the businesses, large and small, their workers, and the self-employed, who will be affected by the measures announced today? We have seen across the world—for example, in Denmark—workers’ wages being guaranteed by a combination of Government and employers. It is no fault of the Chancellor of the Exchequer that his Budget last Wednesday is now out of date, but can I ask the Secretary of State to urge him to come back to the House with economic measures that match the gravity of the moment?

Matt Hancock: I absolutely understand the point that the right hon. Member is making, and he is right to make it. Of course, these are matters for the Chancellor of the Exchequer, rather than me. There was a G7 call today, in which the Prime Minister participated, during which economic considerations like this were considered. Finally, every single one of us in the House will have businesses in our constituencies that are already facing the brunt of this virus. We saw from the collapse of Flybe right at the start—that feels like weeks ago—the very significant economic consequences, and we have our eyes wide open to those.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I warmly welcome the measures announced today. People have debated when they were going to be introduced, but the Government have shown today that they have the courage to introduce very tough measures that will have profound economic consequences, which will reassure many people up and down the country. In the constructive spirit adopted by the shadow Health Secretary, I want to ask a couple of things about the measures that have been introduced.

First, the Secretary of State is advising people not to go to clubs, cinemas and restaurants. Will he also advise clubs, cinemas and restaurants to close their doors, so that there is absolute clarity that people should not, at this moment, engage in those activities? Secondly, if someone in a household is symptomatic, he is advising the whole household to self-isolate for 14 days. I understand the logic behind that, which was very clearly explained, but the World Health Organisation advice is to test and isolate every single suspected case of the virus, so would he explain why there is divergence?

Thirdly, to follow up the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister—[HON. MEMBERS: “Former”]—the former Prime Minister, is the advice to healthy over-70s who do not have an existing long-term condition that they should be part of a new shielding policy that is happening at the weekend, or is that shielding policies just for over-70s with an existing health condition?

Matt Hancock: On that last point, no—the shielding policy is only for those with existing health conditions. Those whom we are going to ask to participate in shielding, from next week, will receive a contact from the NHS, and we will publish the list of conditions that we consider necessary for shielding. On the point that my right hon. Friend makes about testing and isolating, I strongly agree with the World Health Organisation about the need for testing. I spoke at the weekend to Dr Tedros, head of the World Health Organisation, and we strongly agree on the need for testing. The question is how fast can we ramp up testing capability for the tests that we need—the blood tests to know who has had coronavirus and the bedside test or the home test, so that these tests can be expanded rapidly across the whole country? The first has yet to be invented, although we hope that it will be fairly soon, and the second has just been invented in the past few days, and we are in intense negotiations about rolling those out very rapidly.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Today I bring a message from my colleagues who are working hard on the NHS frontline. They say that they do not have the protective equipment that they need, nor do they have the capacity to manage the spread of infection in their own departments. There is clear concern among hospital staff and the wider public alike about the transparency of the plan to tackle the virus. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that our incredible staff must immediately have the protective equipment that they need to be safe; that they should be tested if they show symptoms of virus infection, as currently not all of them are being told that they can; and that more information must be transparent so that medical teams across the country can prepare their departments for the very worst?

Matt Hancock: The whole of our action plan is based on the science and on as much transparency as possible. We have exhibited unprecedented transparency in this crisis so far, and I pledge again to full transparency, publishing, for instance, the modelling that underpins the scientific advice, and also publishing the action plan two weeks ago. At the time, that felt as if we were looking at some things that were quite out of the ordinary, and I do not think that anybody then anticipated that we would have to bring them in in the way we have, and as many countries have now brought them in. I pledge once again to that transparency.

The hon. Lady is completely right about PPE, and we need to expand the amount of PPE. Again, we are buying it, as with ventilators, as fast as we possibly can, and part of our call for a national effort to manufacture includes PPE.

I want to end my answer to the hon. Lady by saying something about those who work in the NHS. The NHS will face an extraordinary period and many people will do extraordinary things, but it will be very, very difficult. I pay tribute in advance to the service that every single person who works in the NHS will give.

Dr Allin-Khan: Staff testing?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is right to remind me. Of course we want as much staff testing, as soon as possible. We are using the testing capacity we have to save lives, and that includes saving the lives of medics.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): In the past 24 hours or so, I have spoken to a great number of the headteachers in my constituency. I think it is a fair summary to say that there is support for the decision to keep schools open, and I agree with them. However, there is great concern that no matter what they or we might want, an increasing number of teaching staff becoming unwell and therefore unable to be in school might end up forcing the issue, leaving heads in an impossible position. I feel slightly guilty asking the Health Secretary these questions, but this is the statement we have today. What is the Government's view on relaxing the student-staff ratio and getting Ofsted off schools' back now, please. Also, if we were to run a skeleton service in schools to allow key workers to keep working, how are we to define key workers, given that we are in the middle of a national crisis?

Matt Hancock: We are looking at all those questions. The proposal to relax student-staff ratios is in the Bill. We will publish the content of the Bill tomorrow and the Bill itself on Thursday. The point about key workers is incredibly important. I am working hard with the Education Secretary to address precisely the concerns that my hon. Friend raises. Of course schools play an important part not just in educating our children but in allowing so many people to go to work, but we have to make sure that they are safe as well. One of the blessings of this virus is that it almost entirely spares children, which means that it is safe for children to go to school.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Can the Health Secretary give the public some reassurance about his plans for social care, which many vulnerable elderly and disabled people rely on? In particular, what plans does

he have to ensure that the care workforce can continue to be effective? We already have more than 120,000 vacancies in the sector, and half of all home care workers are on zero-hours contracts. Is he confident that the care workforce can do what elderly and disabled people and the NHS need?

Matt Hancock: Obviously, that is an incredibly important area. Earlier today, there was a call with local authority leaders, my right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary and the Care Minister. Enormous amounts of work are being done and we will do everything we can to support social care.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State on the tone both have adopted. It is inevitable that most people will be infected. Most people will recover. When can the people who recover return to work, and what will the impact be?

Matt Hancock: Yes, most people recover within seven days of first showing symptoms—most people, not all. Many become very ill, but for most people this is a mild to moderate illness, and the vast majority of the evidence is that once they have recovered, the illness does not come back for some time. Of course, all the evidence is kept constantly under review.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Will the Secretary of State clarify some details of his answer to the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) regarding testing of our frontline healthcare workers and, just as important, our frontline social care workers? Our services are stretched to the max already. We cannot afford to have those who do not need to self-isolate self-isolating, potentially multiple times if they do not know whether they have had the virus.

Matt Hancock: I entirely understand that point. I want to get testing to everyone who needs it as soon as possible.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I join the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State in extending sympathy to those who have died of the virus and admiration for NHS staff members and others who are coping with it. May I press my right hon. Friend on testing? First, if we are relying on scientific evidence, it is important that we are transparent about it. When will he publish the scientific evidence that he mentioned in his statement? Secondly, there has been a change in policy on testing. Up to the end of last week, people could be tested via drive-in or home visits; that is no longer the case. Is that because there is not the necessary quantity of test kits available? If so, will that type of test be restored when they are available, and when does he expect that to be?

Matt Hancock: At the start, when the number of cases was very small, we had enough tests to test everyone who had suspected symptoms. The number of cases has risen exponentially and the number of tests has been increased, but we need to make sure that the tests we have available are there for saving lives. We hope that the introduction of a home test or equipment for bedside testing, which my right hon. Friend and I have discussed

[*Matt Hancock*]

previously, will enable us to increase the number of tests radically, and get ahead of the epidemiological curve as soon as possible. We are in live negotiations about bringing that in.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will let this run for about one hour, so if we can speed up questions—[*Interruption.*] It might helpful if we try to help each other and not hold each other up.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Many of us have thousands of constituents who are either on zero-hours contracts or are self-employed. I have raised this question before, but unless the Government can offer those people some sort of minimum income guarantee, they will quickly be facing repossession and homelessness.

Matt Hancock: Of course I understand that, and it is part of the discussions I have been having with the Welfare Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and everyone in the House for their calm response. I have two brief questions. One has been raised several times, and although it may sound flippant, it is important. People are asking whether they can walk their pet if they are self-isolating. I ask because people want to know whether self-isolating means that they should be fully housebound, or that they can go to a park and walk their pet.

The second question—[*Interruption.*] I will be very quick. In Watford, we have a great volunteer network popping up. I am sure that is happening across the country. Will there be guidance for volunteers on how to ensure they do not spread the virus by doing the right thing?

Matt Hancock: The answer to the second question is yes. The answer to the first is yes, people should go outside. Walk your pets. People in household isolation should go out, but they should try to avoid other people. It is very important that we look out for others in our communities and that people get the exercise they need.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I realise that this is not in the Secretary of State's remit, but he announced that the Government will advise people not to go to pubs, clubs, restaurants and so on. Unless the Government mandatorily close them down, they cannot claim on their business insurance. Will he please get a diktat from the Government that formally closes such businesses down?

Matt Hancock: We have set out the advice today, and I will look at the point the hon. Gentleman raises.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State make sure that in the legal powers and guidance will be provision to ensure that all our councillors who are over 70 can participate fully in council and committee meetings from their home, using technology?

Matt Hancock: Indeed, technology has a huge role to play in helping people to get through this.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Everyone wants us all to pull together and support the same strategy, and the Health Secretary will be aware of the real unease about the differences between the UK's approach and other approaches taken internationally. Can he reassure us that the Government's objective is the same as the WHO's, which said today that we should be testing everyone who has symptoms, not waiting for a future test that might work in different circumstances? Is that the objective: to test everyone who has symptoms now? What is his target for how many new tests a day he wants to be able to do and by when? I have been contacted by GPs who are self-isolating because they cannot get tests.

Matt Hancock: The answer is, yes, we want, of course, all the tests that we need.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Does the test give evidence of no infection? That goes to the point that has been made about frontline health workers. Is the Secretary of State saying today that there is an immunity that builds up? Has that been medically confirmed for people who have had this once?

Matt Hancock: On the latter point, the chief medical officer has set out today that immunity is built up by having had this virus. That evidence is constantly being kept under review, but immunity does appear to be built up. On the testing point, as I said to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), of course we want tests to be available for everyone. Our goal is to beat this virus. We want to make sure that all our frontline medical staff can have the testing and that everyone in the community can have those tests, but where only a limited number of tests are available we have to use them to save life. I am working as fast as I can to increase the number.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that this was a national effort and he is right, but it is more than that; this is a global crisis that has seen different approaches taken in different countries. Does he not accept that we need stronger, co-ordinated, global leadership, both on the health front and on the economic front, to get the best possible response to this global crisis?

Matt Hancock: I half agree with the right hon. Gentleman, and that is because I think that international co-ordination is important—I have been participating in regular G7 calls, as have the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer—but different countries are also in different places on the curve. For instance, we have introduced measures such as these earlier on the curve than similar countries, such as France and Germany.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): May I repeat the point made by the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) about pubs and restaurants? I have been contacted by a number from the Moorlands today that are particularly concerned in the run-up to Mother's Day, which would normally be one of the busiest days

of the year. Can the Government give firm advice now as to whether pubs and restaurants should close or not, so they can claim on insurance?

Matt Hancock: We are advising against all unnecessary social contact. I appreciate that this has consequences and I regret having to take these measures, but we are having to fight this virus.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): When exactly did the Government start buying extra ventilators? How many more have they managed to get? How many more do they need?

Matt Hancock: We started weeks ago. I can get back to the right hon. Gentleman with the exact date of the first time I authorised the purchase of more ventilators, but I can say that it was very shortly after it became clear that ventilators are the thing needed to support people who have coronavirus. On the question of how many more we will need, I can say that we will buy however many will be produced.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): This morning, I was pleased to hear Nicola Sturgeon say that she supported the UK Government's approach, but of course the devolved health service, the police and the education service are different and different operational decisions will inevitably be made in Scotland. How can that be respected at the same time as ensuring that we have a common message across the UK?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend is right about the advantages of a common message across the UK, and we have worked hard to try to achieve that. I visited the three devolved nations on Friday to meet my counterparts to try to ensure that we have as co-ordinated a message as possible, but of course there are differences in the delivery of our local NHS.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): The Secretary of State made reference to the special measures announced by the Chancellor last week, yet the Northern Ireland Executive have yet to have been given a clear indication as to what the consequential are for our funding in Northern Ireland. That inhibits our ability to respond to this crisis, and to provide leadership and direction to people in Northern Ireland on the schemes we can implement.

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury tells me that undoubtedly the devolved nations will very rapidly get the information they need. After all, this is a UK-wide effort.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the thousands of local community groups that are already mobilising in order to deal with what may be a very serious situation in their communities, involving looking after vulnerable people and even nursing the sick? Will he, with the Prime Minister and others, make sure that we mobilise these people and empower them to take decisions without having to wait for instructions?

Matt Hancock: Yes, this is incredibly important. Communities have a huge role to play in this; it is truly a national effort. I want to empower people on the ground in communities and within the NHS to do the right thing by what is in front of them. We will support wherever possible, but people should not wait for the instruction—they should get on with it.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): The World Health Organisation has given the advice of, "Test, test, test". The Secretary of State has said that there is a limited capacity in terms of testing kits. When will those kits be made available? What is the timeframe? How many does he think we are going to need?

Matt Hancock: As many as possible, as soon as possible.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the sterling job that he, his ministerial team, his officials and everybody on the frontline of this crisis is doing. Does he share my concern about reports I have had in my constituency in the past few days of local pharmacies hiking up prices of products such as sanitiser and masks, given that we should all be working together and, rather than profiteering, acting responsibly?

Matt Hancock: Everybody has a responsibility: citizens have a responsibility to follow the public health advice; all of us have a responsibility to make sure we buy only that which we need; and of course businesses have a responsibility to look after the communities they serve.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm that it is now the Government's wish, subject to capacity being available, to test all those with symptoms who are at home? If so, as the capacity ramps up, how does he intend to prioritise tests of people living at home, potentially with the disease?

Matt Hancock: The right hon. Gentleman asks the question very precisely and correctly. The answer is: yes, that is our intention, and Public Health England will advise on the order of priority for the use of these tests.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): People want accurate information during this crisis. Are the Government considering creating an offence of the malicious spreading of disinformation about the coronavirus with the intent of harming public health? Are they considering requiring social media platforms to act against known sources of such disinformation, should it occur?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is an expert in this area. So far, the social media companies have acted with great responsibility in this area and have responded to all the asks we have had of them.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Government are trying to regulate behaviour, so to avoid some of the scenes we have seen at the weekend would he encourage supermarkets to allow the elderly to have one hour a day when only they can shop to get their essentials?

Matt Hancock: I have seen this call and how the Australians have done this, and I discussed it with the Environment Secretary today.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): May I ask my right hon. Friend about specific very vulnerable groups? A mother in my constituency is keeping her four children off school because her husband is a diabetic and she does not want to put him at unnecessary risk. Is she doing the right thing? More generally, what should pregnant teachers be doing? Should they be going into work now, or is that too risky?

Matt Hancock: Both cases are covered by the formal public health advice that will be published on the gov.uk website. For all specific questions such as that, which of course our constituents will have, I refer them to that advice, to make sure that we get the answers completely accurate.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): We are now rightly asking people, including the self-employed, to self-isolate for seven or 14 days if they show symptoms of coronavirus. The self-employed do not qualify for statutory sick pay and there is no one else to pay them, so will the Government revisit statutory sick pay for the self-employed, and pay it at a rate that enables them to put food on the table and pay their bills? Unless we do that, we are asking people to make impossible decisions.

Matt Hancock: I discussed this issue with the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth). The delivery of support to make sure that nobody is penalised for doing the right thing is incredibly important but, as the hon. Lady says, there is no employer for those who are self-employed, so it has to be delivered through the benefits system.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): With flight restrictions around the world, many of us have constituents who are stuck abroad. Will my right hon. Friend provide reassurance that consular assistance is available and that he is working closely with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office so that stranded constituents in countries that have imposed flight bans can get home?

Matt Hancock: Yes. That is an incredibly important point that I discuss regularly with the Foreign Secretary.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Food banks will be under unprecedented pressure in this period, so what measures will be put in place to provide volunteers with protective equipment? Will the Secretary of State consider requiring supermarkets to put aside stocks and provide donations to food banks in this crisis?

Matt Hancock: As we expand the amount of protective equipment available, we should look to and work with food banks, which have an incredibly important role to play. I certainly urge supermarkets to do what the hon. Lady asks.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): In welcoming this package of measures, I very much urge my right hon. Friend to encourage businesses to be as flexible as possible so that employees can work from home, and to step up testing for emergency and public sector workers. Will he particularly focus on the elderly

and the vulnerable who are living alone? There is a risk that in this sort of scenario they become inadvertently ignored by the system. What more can the Government do to reach out to these people—whether by looking at the voting register or whatever—to ensure that they are catered for? They are particularly vulnerable if they live alone.

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. One reason why we have held off from taking measures like this for as long as we have is because they have significant downsides, many of which have been discussed in the Chamber today. I of course urge people to follow the advice that my hon. Friend gave, and I urge communities to come together as much as possible to help each other through.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): We need a plan for scaling back schools. Teachers are saying to me that they are part of a mass collection of people every day and are concerned not only about being infected but about relatives who may have secondary illnesses and about colleagues who are pregnant. Schools are losing pupils and losing staff. They will close of their own volition unless we have a plan to scale them back and provide essential childcare for those workers who will still need to work and the children who will still need to go to school.

Matt Hancock: I understand why some parents are concerned, but the evidence is that children are not badly affected by this virus and it is important to take that into account. The hon. Gentleman makes the point about people who need to go to work not being able to because of childcare responsibilities, and that is very serious in terms of the impact that it could have and is therefore very important to take into account.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): In the past two hours, the Prime Minister has said that school closures will be kept “under review”. In the event of a school needing to close, who takes the final decision—is it the Government, the local education authority or the headteacher?

Matt Hancock: It is the headteacher, and there are discussions with regional schools commissioners in such cases in England. We are looking to address that issue in the Bill.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): I join other Members in placing on record my condolences to the families of those who have lost loved ones. I pay tribute to the workers in the NHS who are working around the clock and to those working in social care.

After a decade of austerity, our NHS and public health were already at breaking point, even before the coronavirus hit our communities. Public sector workers have borne the brunt of austerity over the past 10 years, and they are the very workers who are expected to continue to provide services to the most vulnerable people in our society.

Today, I have been contacted by Paul, a critical care nurse in my constituency who has had to self-isolate after developing a cough. He has been told that he will not be tested. His skills, along with those of his colleagues, are vital to care for patients. Frontline staff need to be—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are going to have stop the question there because we have to get everybody in.

Paula Barker: Can I just say this, Mr Speaker? When will local government be provided with the additional ring-fenced funding for public health? When will public health officials be provided with their allocations for the new financial year?

Matt Hancock: I have addressed the question on testing repeatedly. I am delighted that we go into this situation with a record number of people in our NHS, and I pay tribute to each and every one of them.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Covid-19 may put particular pressure on the dozen or so unavoidably small hospitals that serve isolated and island communities. We have one respiratory consultant on the Island, and we are ferry-dependent. I know that the Secretary of State is very busy, but will he assure me that isolated communities will not be forgotten about when it comes to mutual aid, clear advice and the supply of medicine and equipment?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. I discussed that issue with officials today.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Last week, I asked the Secretary of State why public advice about covid-19 had not been translated into any language other than English. Coronavirus has been present in the UK for more than a month, and it is five days since I raised the issue with the Government, yet there are still no translations available on the NHS England website. Will the Secretary of State provide an update on when exactly translations will be made available? Will he clarify which languages the Department is currently working on?

Matt Hancock: We are going to do that as soon as possible, but I am sure the hon. Member will understand that we have just published new guidance that we have been working on and it is a very rapidly evolving situation. We will translate it as soon as we possibly can.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I endorse the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) about having an hour in supermarkets—I believe Iceland is already doing this—when older people can purchase food before it is stockpiled and so on. Can mothers of very small children be included in that? I am afraid I have heard today of some scarcity in baby products, which is of course of great concern for us all.

Matt Hancock: Yes, that is a very good suggestion. It is one for the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the supermarkets, of course, but is an example of people pulling together to help the most vulnerable.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): In answer to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), the Secretary of State stated that people had to take it through the benefits system, unlike maternity allowance, just as an example. I wish to speak for a moment about the benefits system. My own brother, who is a universal credit claimant and

an agency worker, has likely lost his job because he had to self-isolate for a period and it will not be kept open for him. Given the lag of universal credit, he will not get anything until early May. The Secretary of State needs to tell us now when he will come before us with a package of financial benefits for business and people, because it is getting too late.

Matt Hancock: We changed the law on Friday to take into account the need to make sure that payments are made from day one, in some of the benefits. It is absolutely the case that statutory sick pay is paid by employers. For the self-employed, there is no employer. We cannot put in place, in the time that is necessary, a whole new system. We need to make sure that people use the benefits system that exists.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Will the Government consider giving the much needed funds to support businesses directly to regional mayors and combined authorities, so that businesses in Redcar and elsewhere that are affected by the coronavirus can get the help that they need without delay?

Matt Hancock: I am discussing with the Chancellor of the Exchequer a further package of support, because it is absolutely clear that the measures that we are having to take will have a very significant impact on business.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Professor Costello of University College London says that the virus is particularly contagious at the early stages before symptoms present. Given the prevalence of this virus in London in particular, is the current Government's strategy based too heavily on responding to observable symptoms and is there not a case now for going further faster, particularly in London?

Matt Hancock: The point behind household isolation is precisely to address the concerns that the hon. Gentleman has raised. Furthermore, by reducing all unnecessary social contact, we will help to reduce the sorts of transmissions that he talks about.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Will the Secretary of State explain how he and his team have been working to learn from the experience of other countries that are ahead of the curve, so that we can see the things that they have done well, and the things that they have not done so well?

Matt Hancock: Yes, we are constantly looking at what is happening around the world, what people are doing and the research in order to try to make sure that we calibrate the very best possible response.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents live in severely overcrowded accommodation or in single hostel rooms. There is a looming public health crisis in the short term and a looming long-term mental health crisis because of the conditions in which they will have to self-isolate. What will the Secretary of State do about those people and what advice will he give?

[Meg Hillier]

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course, we are incredibly concerned about that, and it is reflected in the guidance that we have specifically put out. It is one of the many reasons why we encourage people to get outside, even if they are in household isolation, so long as they do not come into contact with others. Of course, I understand the consequences of the advice that we have given for the hon. Lady's constituents.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Many of those whom the Secretary of State will want to shield at the weekend and who are self-isolating are in receipt of at-home social care. Can he be clear about the guidance that he is going to give about whether they should continue to be visited, or what else he will put in place to protect those individuals?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course, the further advice will go out for social care. We put updated advice out at the end of last week knowing that that was a likely step, and there will be further advice precisely to help people to address exactly that question.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Given the anxiety in schools, colleges and universities about exams, will the Minister reassure students and staff alike that there is provision in place for exams to take place within the cycle of this academic year? Will he also reassure the House that, in the event of school closures, there is provision in place to feed those children who are currently in receipt of free school meals?

Matt Hancock: Those are both very important points. Children who receive free school meals often receive their best or, in some cases, their only meal at lunch time at school, and it is an issue that I discussed with the Education Secretary over the weekend.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) talked about the importance of information consistency, but some constituents are seeing competing messages which look like they come from credible sources and are then passed on in good faith. In the worst cases, not only do they mislead, they can even be dangerous. May I encourage my right hon. Friend to continue his work with the platforms not only to ensure the primacy of the official information, but to actively work against that which disinform.

Matt Hancock: Yes, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Lab): The Spanish Government recently announced sweeping measures to take over private healthcare and to requisition products such as ventilators, testers and, indeed, facemasks. We have heard that, in the UK, the Prime Minister has ordered the NHS to acquire resources from the private health system to the tune of something like £2.4 million today. Will the Secretary of State outline measures that the Government will take to ensure that we put public health and public safety before private profit?

Matt Hancock: I am absolutely delighted at the response of the private hospitals which are rising to that challenge, and we are working very closely with them.

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend outline what discussions he has had with the First Minister of Wales to ensure that the plan is consistent and that constituents do not get mixed messages? Furthermore, will he appeal to certain sections of the media to realise the power of their platform and encourage them not to undermine the official advice?

Matt Hancock: Yes, that is very important. I was in Cardiff on Friday to discuss that with my opposite number who attended the Cobra meeting today. We are working very closely with the Welsh authorities, which, of course, run the NHS in Wales.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): What consideration have the Government made of the possibility that some people, especially those living in London, may, in light of today's announcement, decide to move from more urban areas to rural areas? Will the Secretary of State reassure us that additional resources will be made available to local health authorities should there prove to be a significant shift in population?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course, I will keep both of those under review.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Last Friday, the heads of all the NHS services in Gloucestershire held a conference call with the six MPs in the county, and very helpful it was indeed in answering all our questions and giving us information to share with our constituents. Does my right hon. Friend think that this is something that could be done in every NHS cluster around the country?

Matt Hancock: Yes, and I have asked Simon Stevens, the head of the NHS, to ensure that local trusts and clinical commissioning groups keep their local MPs informed of what is happening locally, what is having to happen and how they are responding. Of course, the NHS is incredibly busy at this time preparing for events to come, but that would be a good idea.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): What extra support will be available for pharmacists, and when will local authorities know what their public health funding allocation will be?

Matt Hancock: The public health budget is going up and pharmacists are an incredibly important part of the NHS family.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The people most seriously at risk are those with underlying conditions. Will the public health agenda being published promote how people can minimise those conditions—for example, by giving up smoking and leading a healthier life—so that we can minimise the number of serious cases that are seen by the NHS?

Matt Hancock: That is absolutely right. It is abundantly clear from the research into previous coronaviruses that smoking makes the impact of a coronavirus worse.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Every time the Prime Minister makes a statement on coronavirus and the advice changes, the 111 hotlines go mad. Our 111 call handlers are asking that the script changes in real time, because they are required to keep to the scripts, and on Thursday there was a three-hour delay before the scripts were updated. Please will the Secretary of State look into this and change it for next time?

Matt Hancock: Yes. First, let me pay tribute to the 111 call handlers and the clinicians who have done an amazing job over these past few weeks. I do not know what we would have done without them. Secondly, the three-hour turnaround of the script changes was an unbelievable task for those who implemented it. They did a magnificent job to turn it round so quickly, and I, of course, applaud them for doing so, and would wish them to be able to turn it round even quicker, but they did an amazing job doing it as fast as they did.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): The Secretary of State's announcement today will mean that large numbers of elderly and vulnerable people will be required to self-isolate. Will the Government therefore co-ordinate all the volunteering organisations because large numbers of people will be required to deliver necessities to those vulnerable groups?

Matt Hancock: Just as we have introduced a national effort for ventilators, so we are introducing a national effort for volunteers, and my right hon Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is leading that drive.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): In answering my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) earlier, the Secretary of State made it clear that he wanted everybody to be tested at home if they had the symptoms. What is the difference between the number of new cases currently and the number of tests that are currently available per day?

Matt Hancock: Our estimate of the total number of new cases is significantly higher than the available number of tests right now, which is why we need to increase testing capacity so quickly.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): Something that will unite us across this House is our utter admiration for the great British public. All parts of our society have responded to this crisis—our public health officials, families, communities and, today, businesses that have heeded the call for ventilator production. Can the Secretary of State confirm that, as well as the hotline, there is now also an email address for businesses to send their response to if they want to contribute to the national ventilator effort?

Matt Hancock: Yes, there is. We have been absolutely overwhelmed with the positive response to the national effort for building ventilators. That email address is up and running, and we are trying to engage with everybody who contacts us.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State assure the House that if schools are closed because of the coronavirus, money will be made available

so that lunches and hot food are provided to the children who are the most in need? Also, he said that he took advice from other countries—Ireland has closed its schools.

Matt Hancock: We are looking at the impact of all the decisions that different countries have taken. There will be lots of consequences should we take the decision to close schools, but we have not taken that decision today.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): May I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend, and to all the staff and officials at the Department of Health who are working around the clock in incredible situations to deal with coronavirus? Indeed, I also pay tribute to the Secretary of State's counterpart in the Scottish Government and to all her staff, who are working to do exactly the same north of the border; I know that my constituents in West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine appreciate it. Does the Secretary of State know whether the Transport Secretary will be coming to the House at some point soon to update us on any discussions he is having with the airline industry? The maintenance of routes is very important to the economy of the north-east of Scotland, and the survival of those airlines is vital.

Matt Hancock: It is of course a matter that I discuss with the Transport Secretary, who I am sure will be coming to the House sooner rather than later.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): May I encourage people across the country to have complete confidence in the Government's medical and scientific advice, and that is essential for the safety of the country? I also encourage the Secretary of State to ensure that the population as a whole have confidence in their own economic futures. We spent £500 billion bailing out the banks in 2008. We need to be prepared to go even further than that to ensure that people—for example, the 60,000 people working in tourism and hospitality in Cumbria—know that their economic future is not about to be burnt.

Matt Hancock: I understand the concerns raised by the hon. Gentleman, and it is important that they are addressed. Coming from a small business background myself, I understand the impact that a change like this can make, especially to the tourism industry, which is so important in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. We regret having to take the measures that we are taking today. As I said earlier to the former leader of the Labour party, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), this is something on which we are working at pace.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): The Secretary of State should be congratulated for the calm and responsible leadership that he has shown during this crisis, but may I draw his attention to the subject of a hugely vulnerable group—that is, children with immunosuppression with underlying health concerns? The advice to those children is still to go to school, but he will know that any virus can be devastating to them given their low immune systems. Will he issue specific guidance to parents with such children who have these concerns?

Matt Hancock: Yes.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I have talked to my local trust this afternoon, and it is doing everything it can to prepare for the potential surge in covid-19, but it told me that the big problem it has is knowing what to do if schools close, and what that will mean for the workforce and their ability to turn up to work. Can we please have an assurance that there will be a national childcare policy, particularly for key workers in the NHS?

Matt Hancock: This, allied with the fact that children are safe at school because they do not have significant symptoms from covid-19, is the reason that we are keeping schools open for now.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): Charities and third sector organisations are also going to be deeply affected. Will the Secretary of State inform the House what support will be available to them, especially when they are trying so hard to help in our communities?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise such an important point. We need communities and people to come together to help out those who are badly affected by the virus. Of course, that means supporting charities to ensure that they can keep providing the sort of support that we were going to need in the weeks and months to come.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): If schools are to close—I appreciate that that is not the Government's position currently—headteachers in my constituency have asked me to convey to the Government that a particular priority must be given to child safeguarding, and that this should also become the priority for Ofsted. Will the Secretary of State discuss that with the Schools Minister?

Matt Hancock: I will. The hon. Member makes a very good point.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): British businesses—large and small, including those in West Sussex—stand shoulder to shoulder with the Secretary of State on the excellent work that he is doing. May I commend the advanced manufacturing initiative for ventilators, but encourage him to go much further into other hard-pressed categories across our health and social care system?

Matt Hancock: Yes, the response to this crisis has been extraordinary. Things are happening in this country that nobody would have wished, and things are happening faster than so many people anticipated, but people's ability to respond—even to changes that nobody would have wanted to see—has so far been, in many cases, remarkable. Of course we talk about the NHS and social care, but so many businesses that are also under intense pressure and stress are looking to see what they can do to help.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Secretary of State has made it very clear that it is no longer business as usual, but for families and businesses up and down this kingdom, it is bills as usual. What measures can the

Government take to introduce rates relief for families and businesses and a VAT delay for the coming year, and, importantly, for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to ensure that it gives people time to pay the most critical bills for their businesses?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise all those issues, and we will address them all.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): We are all looking for clarity in these uncertain times. I have just been contacted by the owners of a café and a hairdressing business in my constituency, who have heard the strong advice for people not to frequent their businesses, putting them at great risk of not being viable. A lot has happened since the Budget last Wednesday. Does the Health Secretary agree that it would now be useful for the Chancellor to return to the House this week, and clearly to lay out the latest raft of measures available to support large and small businesses, employees, the self-employed and freelancers?

Matt Hancock: I will absolutely take that concern directly back to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The Government have talked of drafting in volunteers to provide care, but people with disabilities often have some of the most complex needs and it is highly unlikely that volunteers would be able to provide the care that is needed. How will the Government ensure that people with disabilities continue to receive the support to stay in their own homes?

Matt Hancock: Of course, volunteers have a huge role to play in doing jobs that work for their skillset, but an incredibly high set of skills are needed to support some people—for instance, the people with disabilities that the hon. Member mentions. Supporting those people to get the social care they need is a critical part of our response to this virus.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to increase the availability of high-quality masks and other protective equipment for NHS workers?

Matt Hancock: We are distributing personal protective equipment across the NHS from the stockpiles and supplies that we have in place for this purpose, but we are also seeking to enhance the production of these items because it is clear that we are going to need a lot.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Many pharmacies across the country refuse to take prescription requests over the phone. Will the Health Secretary explain what he is doing, with the other Health Ministers across the UK, to ensure that people can access prescriptions over the phone or electronically that are then transmitted directly to pharmacies, and to relax restrictions on the supply of medicines—for example, so that people can get a three-month prescription, rather than a month?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Member is quite right to raise this point. In England, where I am responsible for these matters, we are addressing all these points. I am sure that the devolved nations are looking at them too.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Given that the new advice today is that people should remain at home for up to 14 days if they have a high temperature or a continuous cough, I wonder if my right hon. Friend can clarify for constituents what actually constitutes a continuous cough—is it half an hour or half a day?

Matt Hancock: It is a cough that does not go away. It is not an irregular cough. I cannot give any more detail on the specific advice than that. It is a continuous cough; that is the best way to describe it.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): If pubs are unsafe, why is it being left to customers to decide whether they should go to them or not?

Matt Hancock: Because our advice to everybody is to reduce unnecessary social contact to protect themselves.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I commend the personal resilience of the Health Secretary during this crisis, and all the staff at Kettering General Hospital. Do we have any lessons to learn from the German experience, given that Germany has had five times as many confirmed cases, but only a quarter of the number of deaths?

Matt Hancock: I have discussed that point with my German counterpart, and I am afraid that I wish there was something we could learn because it is important. We think that the reason for the difference in ratio is that the early cases in Germany were largely people who had been skiing in northern Italy and therefore were more healthy, whereas the mortality of this disease is very strongly correlated with age.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I live with my 80-year-old mother, my wife who has a heart condition, my daughter and sons, who attend educational settings, and my three-year-old grandson. What advice can the Secretary of State give to multi-generational households such as mine, where self-isolation is not a viable option and alternatives are far from obvious?

Matt Hancock: That point is incredibly important and is directly addressed in the advice that will be on the gov.uk website.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I have been approached by many who are 70-plus years old who are still in full-time employment. They want to know, if they are still healthy and willing to go to work, that the Government are supportive of them doing so.

Matt Hancock: The shielding measures, where we insist on the lowest possible social contact, are for people who have existing conditions and will be contacted by the NHS. For those over 70 who are healthy and, for instance, in work, as my hon. Friend says, we strongly advise them to minimise their social contact.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): To prevent people from stockpiling and panic buying infant formula, will the Secretary of State speak to supermarkets and perhaps insist that they limit sales to two per family? In

the event that breastfeeding support groups are unable to meet, will he direct people to the national breastfeeding helpline, which runs from 9.30 am to 9.30 pm every day?

Matt Hancock: I will look into the second point. On the first point, those conversations are happening.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend for his openness and for the quality of the information he is giving us. Will he please offer some guidance to the large number of religious communities—churches, mosques, gurdwaras—on what actually constitutes a large gathering of people?

Matt Hancock: We address that in the advice, and this is a very important point. We have taken advice on how to respond to the crisis, including from our ethics committee, which includes representatives of the major religious faiths. It is true that we include religious groups in our advice about social contact. We have seen from elsewhere in the world how sometimes it is through religious gatherings that the virus can spread so, with the deepest regret and the heaviest of heart, we include faith groups and gatherings of faith within the advice.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State and the Chancellor at the very least write to all Members this week to set out the measures that they understand will be taken to support the self-employed and small businesses in our constituencies? That information is vital. May I also ask him about local authorities? They will be on the frontline of supporting families facing hardship, as well as ensuring that services reach those in need. It will be a mammoth effort, undertaken at the same time as employees will have to be encouraged to work at home. What financial support, including hardship funds, are the Government providing to cash-strapped local authorities and how, alongside the enormous effort provided by community organisations, will the Secretary of State ensure the safeguarding of older people?

Matt Hancock: These are all important considerations. The financial ones are of course a question for the Treasury, which is looking at how to address all these things.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): Hundreds of thousands of students are currently revising for their public examinations. Does the Secretary of State have a contingency plan for GCSEs and A-levels to be sat on time?

Matt Hancock: That is a matter that the Education Secretary is considering.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Seventy per cent. of people over the age of 70 are living with hearing loss, so it is welcome that most public health messaging on TV is subtitled. However, for those whose first language is British Sign Language, reading written English can be really difficult, and much of the public health messaging is inaccessible. Given the seriousness of this fast-moving situation, will the Secretary of State ensure that all press conferences featuring a Minister, the chief medical officer or the chief scientific adviser have a BSL interpreter present? Also, how is he ensuring that the communication needs of those with hearing problems are being met when they require health treatment?

Matt Hancock: That is an incredibly important point. Many of the statements on coronavirus from the Dispatch Box have been signed, and I understand that the press conference that the Prime Minister gave today with the chief scientific adviser and the chief medical officer was also signed on the BBC.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): May I put on record my thanks to our NHS and careworkers for their fantastic work and pay tribute to the immense public support out there from community organisations? Although we are no longer performing community testing, with consideration given to testing of NHS staff as a priority, will my right hon. Friend advise whether that will be extended to social care staff, the police and teachers, to ensure that our frontline services continue to operate?

Matt Hancock: That is an incredibly important point. Public Health England is addressing the order of prioritisation, and we are also trying to drive up the number of tests available, as we have discussed many times earlier.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Schools are closing. London Oratory School in Fulham, which had 1,300 pupils, closed today. One effect of that is that other schools in the vicinity then come under pressure to do likewise from the school community. That is no criticism of anyone, but can the Secretary of State review and clarify the policy on schools and what happens if they have to downsize or if the policy changes?

Matt Hancock: We are of course reviewing all those points, and there are some measures in the Bill tomorrow to enable them to be addressed directly.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The week before last it was “shortly”, last week it was “imminently”. Does the Secretary of State know when the public health budgets will be announced, and if he does, can he shed some light on that?

Matt Hancock: It is as soon as possible. There are so many things that we need to get on with, and this is one of them.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) referred earlier to reports that the private health industry is planning to charge the NHS £2.4 million a day for the rental of 8,000 beds. Does the Secretary of State really feel that that is the right way to go, given that this is a national effort and that we are all in this together? What steps will he be taking to ensure that private health providers are doing their bit?

Matt Hancock: I do think it is the right way to go, to make sure that private sector capacity is urgently available to address this crisis. It is a matter of all working together to deliver.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): My constituent cannot get mortgage payment support because she does not have a sick note to go with self-isolating. When will electronic online sick notes be available through the NHS 111 service?

Matt Hancock: We are fixing that, but we are also changing the law to ensure that people who are self-isolating are clearly deemed to be sick for these sorts of purposes.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Among those who cannot work from home and who feel vulnerable are GPs. Will the Secretary of State heed the advice of the locum who came to see me, and sort out the inconsistencies whereby 111 has been diverting people to surgeries? Can he also do away with the box-ticking target culture that makes GPs terrified to perform a number of consultations in a certain length of time, and also get rid of the quality and outcomes framework appraisals, which are just unnecessary, and let doctors be doctors?

Matt Hancock: My message to everybody in the NHS is that they should do what they need to do to keep people safe in front of them. We are reducing a whole load of the bureaucracy that gets in the way—for instance, with measures from the Care Quality Commission—to ensure that people just do what is right in front of them. As the hon. Lady says, GPs cannot work from home. Some GP appointments do need to be face to face, but increasingly they can be over the phone or over Skype, and so they should be.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Several Members have raised concerns about care staff. As we all know, many of them are on zero-hour contracts and work for multiple providers. That means that they struggle to prove that they are eligible for statutory sick pay, forcing them to choose between protecting their clients and paying their bills. What action will the Secretary of State take to help healthcare staff who are not eligible for statutory sick pay and cannot prove their eligibility?

Matt Hancock: This is an issue that I discussed with the hon. Member for Leicester South, the shadow Health Secretary, earlier today. The package of measures in the Budget addresses it as much as is possible, and we are prepared to go further if that is what is needed.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I have been contacted by constituents concerned by the lack of health and safety and testing at our borders. Do the Government have plans to implement stricter measures at our airports, ports and rail terminals?

Matt Hancock: Now that there is onward transmission in the UK, those sorts of measures are less efficacious. Of course, we have been doing that all along and strengthening it, but there are also those who said, “Go further and stop all the flights.” Of course, the Italians were the ones whose who initially stopped flights from China and ended up as the European epicentre of this anyway.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has indicated a willingness to revisit the statutory sick pay issue if, as many of us think, the current arrangements do not go far enough. When will he make that assessment?

Matt Hancock: We are making it constantly.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Coronavirus has already claimed the life of one of my constituents, and my thoughts are with his family. What action will the Secretary of State take to prevent the closure of the Mildmay Hospital in my constituency,

which is much needed to relieve some of the pressure on the Royal London Hospital? Will the Secretary of State explain what action the Government will take to put restrictions on the increasing price hikes on the supply side of goods and on panic buying? Panic buying is understandable, given that the guidance is changing, but we need to get a grip on it to protect vulnerable and poor people in our constituencies.

Matt Hancock: We are looking at all those points. With respect to the last one, that is a matter that the Environment Secretary, who is responsible for the food supply, is looking at very closely. We are confident in the food supply of this country, even in the grip of this crisis, but we have to make sure that people behave responsibly in buying only what they need.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): If the advice to customers is that it is safer not to go to bars, restaurants and theatres, presumably the same advice applies to members of staff in the hospitality sector. Why therefore are the Government not saying to all businesses in those sectors that they must close, which would then put them in a much better position to claim on their insurance?

Matt Hancock: We have taken a decision on health grounds to make the changes to the advice that are deemed necessary, according to the scientific advice and the medical advice, to keep people safe. I understand that there are huge consequences from that for businesses right across the country, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is leading the work to support those businesses.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): In Shetland we have 15 of the 171 confirmed cases in Scotland. That is almost 9%, from an island community of 22,000. In normal circumstances, anyone requiring intensive care in Shetland is taken by air ambulance to mainland Scotland. Because of the nature of coronavirus, we cannot do that. I understand that military assets will be engaged for that transportation, but clinicians tell me that there is no understanding of the protocols and there has not yet even been a dress rehearsal. Will the Secretary of State speak to his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence to ensure that all necessary communication happens to ensure that when the service is needed, it will work?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I will. We will make sure that we support people on all parts of these islands, including all islands that are part of these islands.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I have been contacted by a constituent of mine in Erith and Thamesmead. His elderly grandparents are stranded on the Fred Olsen liner. Will the Secretary of State please tell me what action he will be taking to provide support to those stranded with coronavirus?

Matt Hancock: That is an important point. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is leading on that response. We have already provided medical capability to try to support people who are on board. It is a difficult situation, as I am sure the hon. Lady will understand. We are doing the very best we can.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): In recent days, I have been speaking to health workers across the sector and also to the local council about our schools. I understand that there is a strong under-supply of hand sanitiser. Warwickshire County Council tried to order £19,000-worth and could only get half that for its schools. Will the Secretary of State update us on what he is doing in terms of generating production for that?

Matt Hancock: Yes. We are keen to see further production of hand sanitiser. There are not many hand sanitiser production plants in the UK, and I would add that soap is better than hand sanitiser. Nevertheless, it is something we are working on.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care please speak to his right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary about what more can be done to guarantee essential food supplies to those who are symptomatic and self-isolating? In the absence of the Health Secretary's national volunteering scheme, which is not yet in operation—at least, not in my part of south-east London—people were phoning me over the weekend to say that they cannot get essential home deliveries. They have been cancelled and they cannot get them for three weeks. They have no friends or family around and they are too sick to go out.

Matt Hancock: I talk to the Environment Secretary almost daily about this issue. It is obviously incredibly important, and it is important that within communities people help each other to be able to get essential supplies.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): This morning I visited Turney School in my constituency. It is a special educational needs school with an outstanding track record with the education it provides for its students. As well as education, the school also provides vital emotional and social support and respite for families, and the staff are very worried about what will happen, in the event that the school has to close, to the provision of social care for families who often live in overcrowded accommodation. Some 90% of them are eligible for free school meals. Will the Secretary of State say what measures he is taking to ensure that social care capacity for such families will be expanded in the event that schools are forced to close?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady makes an important point, which is that the consequences of closing schools are very complicated. It is something that my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary is addressing directly.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Lots of my constituents in Bradford West in the Muslim and Jewish communities have concerns about burials because they want to bury as soon as somebody dies. Given that we might sadly lose people to the virus, what conversations has the Secretary of State had with religious institutions across the country in that regard?

Matt Hancock: The Communities Secretary leads on that question, because ultimately local authorities have an incredibly important role to play in making sure that such things happen smoothly. There are further powers

[*Matt Hancock*]

in the Bill. The detail of those will be published tomorrow to try to make sure we have what we need to address that difficult situation.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): Over the past month, we have heard an awful lot about the Government's science-based strategy to deal with the crisis. Will the Secretary of State provide me and my constituents with an idea of the modelling he is using so that we can understand just how many fatalities we could see in this country under the herd immunity strategy that the Government seem to have been pursuing? Are they still pursuing that strategy, or have they instead changed strategy and gone in the direction of actually saving lives?

Matt Hancock: No. We are very clear that herd immunity is not part of our plan. It is a scientific concept; it is not a goal or a strategy. On the first part of the hon. Gentleman's question, yes, we will be publishing that modelling.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): In the interests of transparency and public confidence, will the Secretary of State clarify whether he will be publishing the advice that explains the rationale for how testing will be expanded, so that people understand what groups are going to be tested next and how those cohorts are to be prioritised?

Matt Hancock: I will look into that question and get back to the hon. Gentleman.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): People without a home of their own have particular challenges when seeking to self-isolate, which puts their health at risk, as well as that of the wider public. Can the Secretary of State assure me of two things? First, will everybody who is street homeless be guaranteed the opportunity to self-isolate if they start showing symptoms? People are being turned away from shelters at the moment. Secondly, given that tens of thousands of people are evicted every year, will he take action now to ensure that more people are not added to the homelessness total?

Matt Hancock: That is a very important point that is being addressed by my right hon Friend the Communities Secretary, along with the mayors and local authorities, who lead in many cases on the provision of those sorts of services.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Many local services in my constituency are supported by the third sector, including charities such as Luton Foodbank. They will be hit by a double whammy of many of the volunteers being 70 or over or living with people who may have long-term conditions, and equally having to cancel large fundraising events because they are large gatherings. What support can be provided for those organisations?

Matt Hancock: In answer to a previous question about charities, I made the point that we have a charitable sector that has a huge role to play, including with the increase in volunteering in response to this unprecedented crisis. We will support them in whatever way we can.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Thank you for your generosity in letting this statement run, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Health Secretary for dealing with all the questions. What advice does the Secretary of State have for my constituent Mr Emerson, who is in London today to collect a private script for medicinal cannabis for his daughter, who, at three years old, relies upon it? He can only cash the private script in London, and he has to travel to London every month. He has asked for three months' supply in case he cannot travel from Belfast to London in the months to come. Can the Health Secretary give any advice or guidance to him or to the chief pharmaceutical officer?

Matt Hancock: We are trying to address the precise point of the supply of medicinal cannabis products through a change to the Home Office regulations anyway. The advice is against unnecessary travel, and the sort of travel that the hon. Gentleman describes sounds very necessary to me.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Later, at the height of the crisis, the Secretary of State will be judged on the answers he gives today. At the beginning of the crisis, there were estimated to be only 5,000 ventilators in the NHS. Can he tell us exactly how many ventilators he has purchased, what the modelling says about how many ventilators will be needed at the height of the crisis, and whether we will be able to get everybody on a ventilator at that point?

Matt Hancock: As the hon. Gentleman knows from my previous answers, that is not the way we are addressing this question. The way we are addressing it is that we will buy as many ventilators as are made. It is not a question of putting a target on it. We are just going after as many as we possibly can.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): Gaps in NHS capacity, particularly in mental health services, have been filled in recent years by excellent local charities in my constituency such as Home-Start, which supports isolated, disabled and terminally ill parents in their own home. However, it has now almost completely run out of money. How does the Secretary of State suggest that I support such charities to continue, now that we need their services more than ever?

Matt Hancock: To the extent that the charity, to which I pay tribute, can support the local effort, the hon. Lady's local CCG will be best placed to make that judgment.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Following the Secretary of State's statement, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority has announced that its office will be closed, with staff who are able to do so working from home. Its phone lines will be closed, and all inquiries will be answered by email. Will that be the approach of other Government Departments in response to this crisis?

Matt Hancock: I have many heavy responsibilities, and I hope I have answered questions about the activities of almost every Department of Government, but I am not responsible for IPSA. It is not a Department of

Government—it is independent, as we well know. I am sure that Mr Speaker has heard the concern raised, and I am passing this one to you, Sir.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State ensure that former medical staff who are brought back in to deal with the virus are put on the correct registers and have the most up-to-date qualifications and training needed to deal with it?

Matt Hancock: Yes.

Mr Speaker: The last but certainly not the least, Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have the strongest legs in the Chamber.

What discussions has the Secretary of State had with banks and lenders regarding mortgage payments? In answering for every Department today, can he tell us whether there will be a three-month freeze on mortgage payments, which would be extremely helpful? After all, banks and building societies have a role to play.

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer is in constant dialogue with the Governor of the Bank of England and the banks themselves. There were active discussions over the weekend about what further measures can be brought forward. The hon. Gentleman is right to ask that question of a different Government Department of me. We are working incredibly hard right across Government to address that concern and, indeed, every concern that Members across the House have rightly raised this evening.

Mr Speaker, I am grateful to you for allowing me to make this statement at an unusual time, and I will commit to come before the House whenever necessary to answer each and every concern.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We all appreciate the work and the efforts of the Secretary of State for Health and his attempts to answer our questions this evening, but there were questions that he was not able to answer for several other Departments, such as the Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Transport. When will we get statements from other Secretaries of State, so that we can quiz them properly on the arrangements the Government are making on the very important issues we are raising on behalf of our constituents?

Mr Speaker: How the Government table their business is a matter for them. In fairness to the Government, they want to work with both sides of the House to ensure that we put the country first, and I am sure that that message will have been heard.

Budget Resolutions

Debate resumed.

7.54 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Following the statement that we just heard from my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary, I would like to start my remarks on the resumption of the Budget debate by expressing my gratitude to the Chancellor for making it clear last week that the Government will make available whatever resources are needed to meet the coronavirus threat to our country. It was mostly addressed in terms of making funds available for the health service to ensure that it has the staff and equipment that it needs.

In response to the statement, I am among a number of Members who are concerned about the impact on businesses in our constituencies. I represent a coastal constituency. As we move into the Easter and early summer season, the ability of a visitor economy to make money from hotel trade, hospitality and events—let alone bars, restaurants and cafés—is incredibly important. The Folkestone Harbour Arm is a major seasonal visitor attraction. If the official public health advice is that these centres of social interaction should be avoided for the foreseeable future, there is a legitimate question about how those businesses will be compensated for their loss of earnings, otherwise we may see a great number of those businesses close, with no option to remain open. I understand that the Secretary of State has just made an important statement, and there are many further questions to be asked, but I echo the questions raised by a number of Members.

Some Members referenced the airline industry. I would also reference other key industries. Saga is a major business in my constituency—I see the Minister for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), nodding; as an old boy of the Harvey Grammar School in Folkestone, he knows well the importance of Saga to the local economy. Saga has many strings to its bow as a business, but cruises and servicing the over-50s economy are a major part of its business. If areas of the economy such as this will effectively be closed down for an indefinite period, businesses need to ensure that they can communicate with their staff and make plans effectively. As the Chancellor set out in his statement last week, we want to ensure that viable businesses can ride through this extraordinary event; that is so important.

As I said in my question to the Secretary of State, we should look at the information that the public have access to. They need clear, accurate and reliable information, and people who seek to use social media to spread malicious disinformation with the particular purpose of undermining public health should be in a position where they have committed an offence. Under the emergency powers in the Bill that the Government will publish later this week, we should make it an offence to spread misinformation about coronavirus with the intention of undermining public health. In Australia, similar laws were introduced in response to the Christchurch terrorist attack last year. Spain has looked at a similar response to disinformation and misinformation about coronavirus, and we should do the same.

I want to briefly touch on a couple of other important aspects of the Budget that are not directly related to coronavirus. I particularly want to mention

[Damian Collins]

the Government's commitment to support affordable housing, both to rent and buy. In my constituency, we have a major new garden town scheme, which is being driven forward by Folkestone and Hythe District Council and supported by Homes England. The council owns much of the land that has been put into the scheme. This garden town proposal could deliver 8,000 new homes for my constituency over the next 30 years. Folkestone College is a centre of excellence for construction industry skills, so local people can be trained in the jobs that will be made available as a consequence of building those homes.

I welcome the money that the Government have pledged to support the construction and provision of more affordable homes through Homes England. I ask the Government to do all they can to work with local authorities that are supporting and taking forward garden town proposals. My district council tells me that the planning process is still very long, even when there is an early indication of support for the scheme from the local authority. There is an urgent need to get these homes built as quickly as possible and to support whatever infrastructure is needed to make these communities viable and attractive to developers, so that they get involved in the schemes. I appreciate that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government is not on the Treasury Bench, but I ask him to look at what extra housing infrastructure support and investment could be made available, in particular for the Otterpool Park scheme in Kent at junction 11 of the M20.

I welcome the additional money the Chancellor has made available to support rough sleeping initiatives. We have already seen some of that money on the frontline in Folkestone, supporting charities that work with homeless people. I would like to see more support for the Housing First scheme that is being piloted by various local authorities in Kent, which looks to get the most vulnerable people into accommodation first and then to identify and resolve the other needs they may have. That has proved a more effective strategy, but it does require more upfront investment. I hope the extra money the Government have brought forward can provide that.

I also welcome the additional money the Government have committed to creating 5G equivalent broadband for the UK. This is an essential technology for the future. When we look back at the support over the last decade for Broadband Delivery UK's roll-out of superfast broadband, we see that it was a good initiative and got more homes connected quickly, but it was also probably the wrong technology. Fibre-based technology will be future-proof. Few of us could have predicted in 2010 what would be the ordinary data requirements of people using information technology and the internet in their homes today and to run their businesses. Therefore, we should back a technology that is similarly future-proof, and fibre equivalent and fibre to homes is that. It gives us the opportunity to roll out at speed 5G equivalent broadband, particularly in rural areas. It is right that the Government prioritise areas of delivery that are the hardest to reach and where the market is least likely to deliver. As was discussed in the House last week, it is particularly important that we look at alternative providers to Huawei and at companies that are not considered to

be high-risk providers of future technology infrastructure, which is going to be so important for running all our economy.

8.1 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): This Budget is slightly different from others we have seen over the years. Suddenly, spending billions on industrial investment is not being mocked by the Conservatives, as it was when Labour pledged to do it just four months ago. So let me start with what is good about this Budget: hundreds of millions for carbon capture and storage and an indication that Teesside may well be one of the centres for a project. It would, however, be good for the Government to come forward with a statement confirming that Teesside will get a project. After all, it is better placed and more ready than anywhere else to help the Government to deliver the kind of project that can be world leading.

Members may know that I set up, and have been the chair of, the all-party group on carbon capture and storage for the past six years. I have met with Ministers. I think they were all convinced of the case, but nobody could get through to the Treasury. I have tabled questions, written letters, organised events, made interventions, given speeches and secured debates urging successive Governments to invest in carbon capture technology and sites. I have campaigned vigorously for carbon capture to be taken seriously by politicians. Like those in the industry, I was devastated when, in 2015, the then Chancellor, George Osborne—without warning—pulled more than £900 million of funding, halting at a stroke two major projects instantaneously. It was a bad day for the industry and there is some way to go to make up that lost time. I only hope the funding this time will see the cash actually spent before the Chancellor thinks it would be easy pickings for a future cut.

I am really grateful that we are now seeing progress and it appears that we may even be seeing some infrastructure benefits for the Tees valley too, but some of the announcements by the Tees Mayor seem a little wide of the mark. After the Budget, he claimed to have delivered a free port for the Tees, yet there is no mention of it in the Red Book and, as I understand it, there has been no announcement from the Government. Perhaps the Minister can confirm the Mayor's claim. The same Mayor has also claimed that he secured £80 million for Darlington station. Perhaps the Minister can tell me where I can find that cash in the Red Book or even in the rail network enhancement programme. It is simply not there, so will the Government confirm that the £80 million is actually ready to spend in Darlington?

After 10 years of austerity and a severe lack of ambition, the Budget comes nowhere near to making up for past cuts. The Chancellor was throwing money around like confetti, but, with no real tax increases and a downturn in the economy, it begs the question: where is the cash coming from? Perhaps he has not had time to cost it yet; we always cost our Budgets.

The Budget has done nothing for the chemical industries on Teesside, where companies are still nervous, as there is no provision for the increased costs these firms will face due to the uncertainty over the REACH regulations. I appreciate Ministers taking the time to meet me and organisations concerned about future regulations, but it

is now time for them to step up and take the action the chemical industries are asking them to take to secure the future of their businesses.

It is not just industry that is worried and under pressure; our public services are, too. I hope that this country pulls through this crisis and that the Government start to truly recognise the impact that health cuts can have because, by the time the crisis comes around, it is too late to restore what has been cut overnight. Perhaps the shortage of ventilators is one of the best examples of the resources in the NHS falling short, and it is in the lives of people that we will pay the price. It is in areas such as mine, where some wards are among those with the lowest life expectancy in the country, that people will be most vulnerable to the coronavirus. As I said in my intervention, I was grateful to the Minister for Health for listening to the case for a new hospital in Stockton—a 21st-century hospital—to address the huge health issues in my community. Since the new hospital was cancelled by the then Tory-Lib Dem coalition in 2010, I have spoken about the need for it in every single Budget debate since. I am pleased that at last we have taken even a tiny step forward, so I thank the Minister.

However, it is not just about hospitals; as others have said, this Budget has also failed to deliver on social care. In the context of our current situation, in which covid-19 is more dangerous for older people, this seems to be an even more severe mistake. What is happening when careworkers come down ill, are self-isolating, at best, and older people in need of those carers are left alone? How are the Government prepared for this particular part of the crisis? Simply put, what the Budget has done is to highlight the inadequacy of our welfare state. It has proven that our safety net is not fit for purpose. We should not simply do and be better now that we are facing a crisis. If we can make procedures and processes more quickly and streamline now, there is no reason why that could not have happened before.

I continue to be concerned about the lack of action this Government have taken for those on lower incomes. I agree with the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers when it says that the Budget does not address working family poverty. This was the year by which child poverty was due to have been eradicated, and the lack of mention of that in the Budget speech just proves that it is not on the Chancellor's radar. According to the North East Child Poverty Commission, almost 210,000 children in the north-east are growing up poor. The Budget did nothing for them. I also back the call from USDAW—I am not a member of the trade union—for the two-child limit to be scrapped and the five-week wait period for universal credit to be shortened. That has been echoed by Macmillan Cancer Support. Many people with cancer have to give up work directly because of their illness and it is unacceptable that they have to wait five weeks for their initial payment. It is inhumane and it should never have been part of Government policy.

Inequality in our country continues to grow, yet we see no real intent from the Government to close the gap and it is the people in areas such as mine that will lose out once again. That is why our new hospital is so important. I do not feel that the Budget is fit to address the problems we face as a society, and certainly not on Teesside.

8.7 pm

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): Inevitably, the debate tonight has been overshadowed by the statement we have heard. This should be a moment for us all to reflect on the huge challenge we face, and above all, on the health of our nation. I particularly pay tribute to the staff at Epsom Hospital in my constituency, who are already working hard and dealing with the most challenging of situations, but also with the tragic loss of two lives in the last few days. This team of people constantly work hard for our community and face enormous challenges, and I pay enormous tribute to them. Indeed, I pay tribute to all of the health service workers who serve my constituency in the primary care sector and in the community care sector. We are going to owe those people an awful lot in the weeks ahead.

I also pay tribute to the teams of volunteers coming forward in my constituency and adjoining areas to offer support in particular to the elderly, who are going to face a very difficult few weeks, as we heard from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care this afternoon. I pay tribute particularly to Paul Baker, a man from just down the road in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford). In the last four or five days, he has built a team of volunteers to help deliver support to the elderly as they need it in the coming weeks, and I fear a lot of support and help is going to be needed. We are going to owe an awful lot to the health service workers and to the volunteers who will be, and indeed are already, making a difference in the weeks ahead.

However, this is a Budget debate and it is a debate about our economy. The other group we must be very mindful of today are the self-employed and those who run small businesses. They were already facing a tough enough situation in the last few days, but for them today's announcement will have come as a bucket of the proverbial. Their lives will be immensely difficult. The Budget contained a number of important provisions that I strongly welcome, such as measures on business rates, or additional support to be channelled through local authorities. There has been a lot of debate about whether we should get rid of or continue the fuel duty freeze, but right now, keeping fuel prices as low as possible is enormously important to this country's self-employed, as they seek to keep their businesses afloat in the weeks ahead. It is inevitable that the Treasury and Chancellor will have to consider further measures to support those groups.

There are families tonight whose income comes entirely from self-employment, and they are asking how they will pay the bills in the weeks and months ahead. I echo those who say that we must consider every possible way to provide support for those people as we go forward. This is a critical moment for our nation and economy, and I welcome the fact that the Chancellor has chosen to make a large injection of cash into the economy, and to back that up with a huge investment programme for the years ahead. We will need all that to get through the challenges we now face, and we must take innovative steps to help those most affected. Above all, we must get this country, and our economy, through this. We must save lives, ensure that we rebuild prosperity for the future, and move on from what I fear will be a difficult time in our history.

[Chris Grayling]

Alongside that we must meet other challenges. I welcome measures in the Budget that encourage motorists to move away from conventional petrol and diesel vehicles, as well as incentives for the purchase of electric vehicles. I hope that we also build hydrogen into the mix for the future, as we will need it. Electric traction does not yet work for heavier vehicles, and hydrogen is an important part of that future. I also add a caveat. There is a lot of talk about going as fast as we possibly can to make the transition to a greener vehicle fleet, and I endorse that ambition. However, we can go only as fast as the technology will allow us, and if we seek to go faster, we will end up doing damage to our society and economy. We cannot transform technology any faster than it is available to be transformed, and particularly in the wake of the current situation, we must also protect the future jobs of those who work in the automotive sector.

It was right for the Budget to postpone the reduction in corporation tax and put that money into the health service, and today's statement has shown how important it is for the health service to receive that additional resource—and more—in the weeks ahead. We must also remember the benefits of being a low-tax economy. I was employment Minister in 2010 when unemployment was 2.6 million and rising. A decade later, unemployment is a fraction of what it was then, and all through those years I was convinced that one reason for that reduction was because we built a highly competitive tax regime for business, and for investors who sought to come to this country. When we have come through the current troubles and set our economy back on a path to the future, we should not forget that lesson. If we are a competitive place to do business, that means jobs and prosperity for our people, and we will keep unemployment low.

I regard the reduction in unemployment as one of this Government's great achievements of the past 10 years, and despite the turbulent times that lie ahead, I want to see that achievement solidified for the future. We will do that by ensuring that this country is a great place to do business in, and we must not lose track of that as we take what might be difficult decisions in the weeks and months ahead.

Above all else, this Budget was a stepping stone towards dealing with the challenges we face. I have no doubt that more measures will need to be taken—we have seen the central banks step forward to inject capital into the economy as support for businesses and the rest—and I suspect we will have to do more. Above all, we must do enough to protect the lives of our people, and put this country back on the path to prosperity after a difficult period economically. The Budget was a step in the right direction, but we have big challenges ahead, and we must all live up to them.

8.14 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Last week's Budget will double Government borrowing, and it is proof that the Government's austerity agenda, which brought unnecessary pain and suffering to millions, was a failure. Austerity has inflicted untold damages on our public services, and most obviously on our health service, which in 2010 had the highest patient satisfaction levels on record. It is painful to see what has been done to the police service, the fire service, the welfare state, the

probation service, courts, the health service, education, and libraries—I could go on. All those ideologically driven cuts to our social fabric were in response to a worldwide banking crash for which Joe Public paid the price, yet now the public are supposed to cheer when the Government try to repair some of the damage that they have done, by raising council tax precepts to replace some of the police officers we have lost. Should the public now be grateful that the NHS can have anything it wants, after nearly a decade of sustained and deliberate under-investment that has brought the service and its staff to their knees?

Every person in the UK is now counting on the NHS to be there for them when this Government were not there for it. Money cannot fill the 100,000 workforce vacancies, including 43,000 nurses and 10,000 doctors, who we need right now. Despite the big spending announcements, austerity is not over for most public services, and according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, day-to-day spending per person will remain almost a fifth lower than it was in 2010, through to the middle of the current decade.

The £76 billion rise in overall spending by 2023-24 will be paid for largely by borrowing, paving the way for soaring debt and probable tax rises, particularly if the economy takes a significant hit from coronavirus and a disorderly Brexit. The Budget revealed just how weak the UK economy was even before coronavirus. Brexit has already made the economy 2% smaller than it would otherwise have been, and we are still in the transition period, which for now is protecting us from the economic shock. After a decade of Tory-led Governments, the NHS and our social care sector are chronically under-funded, under-resourced and understaffed, just at the moment we need them most.

The substantial additional infrastructure investment that the Chancellor announced is welcome, but there are huge question marks over the Government's commitment to tackling climate change, and the long-promised plan to fix the crisis in social care has been ignored again. I hope that the Prime Minister's promise from the steps of Downing Street, to

“fix the crisis in social care once and for all, and with a clear plan we have prepared to give every older person the dignity and security they deserve”

has not been forgotten. It has now been six months, and the promised plan is nowhere to be seen. It is astonishing that social care has been ignored again in this Budget, and crushing for people with dementia. Every day we hear new stories of people with dementia who are trapped in unacceptable conditions, or of families who are struggling to cover the cost of dementia care. Cross-party talks must produce a long-term, sustainable solution for social care that delivers quality care, but that must also be backed by investment to keep the system afloat.

The spending measures, alongside last week's cuts to interest rates, may keep us out of recession for the immediate future, but it is difficult to feel reassured that our economy is strong enough to cope with the unknown impact of coronavirus, at the same time as our plans for leaving the EU are still so uncertain. Even if the economy escapes a sustained hit from coronavirus or Brexit, the Budget leaves day-to-day spending on public services other than health some 14% lower per person in 2024-25 than it was when the Conservatives kicked off their austerity programme in 2010.

The Budget continued the Tory power grab, moving control of funding from local government to central Government. It is time local government had more of a say in how funding is spent in communities, rather than locally run services such as the police, schools and transportation having to go cap in hand to central Government through a flawed bidding system. The public sector does not belong to Boris Johnson; it belongs to the public. The Government would do well to remember that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Obviously, we had a long statement and there are still a lot of people to get in, so after the next speaker I will reduce the time limit to five minutes. I call Martin Vickers.

8.20 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I begin my contribution, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) did his, by acknowledging that this debate takes place under the shadow of the crisis that we all face.

I particularly welcome the commitments in the Budget to delivering on our manifesto commitments, which, certainly in Lincolnshire, were overwhelmingly endorsed by the electorate. It was a pleasure earlier today to hear the maiden speech of my immediate neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici), who I am sure will make a considerable contribution to debate in the coming years.

As I said, the debate is overshadowed by the coronavirus crisis. On Friday, I visited my local hospital—Diana, Princess of Wales Hospital in Grimsby—for one of my regular updates from the senior management and medical professionals. I pay tribute to them for the work they do, not just in the current crisis but throughout the year. The hospital is approaching 40 years old, and it will need considerable capital investment in the medium term if it is to sustain its work at acceptable levels. Nevertheless, I pay tribute to the staff there for the work they are doing to respond to the present crisis.

Police funding, in particular, has been widely welcomed by my constituents. In recent years, Humberside police has managed to increase its numbers by more than 200, and there are a further 97 pending in the next phase. Like constituents up and down the country, my residents in Cleethorpes want to see visible policing. I was in discussion with the superintendent only last week, and I received assurances that that will be the case. I want in particular to mention the retail trade, which it is fair to say has been badly scarred by the £200 limit with respect to shoplifting. I am delighted that my local force does not take that as written in stone but uses some discretion in the way it meets that challenge. I hope that is taken on board.

I also met the principal of Franklin College on Friday. It is important that we have additional funding for that further education college in my area of northern Lincolnshire, and I am happy to say that the principal was well pleased with the way things are moving.

Of course, public services are not all provided by the public sector; we need private sector involvement to deliver some of our essential services. The area I represent

was designated by the Government as the first town deal area, and I hope investment in the Greater Grimsby town deal continues. Only 10 days ago, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government was in north-east Lincolnshire and announced another £3.5 million boost for the town deal, which is very welcome. I also welcome the renewed enthusiasm among councils throughout Lincolnshire to revisit the Lincolnshire devolution deal, which unfortunately did not materialise a couple of years ago. The area will be heavily dependent on the offshore renewables sector, and I am delighted that Government support for that continues.

Good transport connections are essential to all local economies. I have campaigned for many years for the restoration of the direct train service between Grimsby, Cleethorpes and London King's Cross. Only two or three weeks ago, along with neighbouring MPs, I met the London North Eastern Railway chief. I am pleased that LNER is prepared to operate a service if the Government tell it to. That needs no capital investment; it is one of those easy wins that can be achieved. I hope the Minister ensures that his colleague the Secretary of State hears my renewed plea.

The hit that the global economy will take over the next year or two as a result of the current crisis is going to reverberate throughout our country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby mentioned, it would help my area considerably if Immingham and Grimsby ports were given free port status. Carbon capture and storage, which was mentioned a few minutes ago by the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), will also play a vital part in the economy of northern Lincolnshire.

The resort of Cleethorpes is doing reasonably well, but of course it will take a significant hit—particularly to small businesses, such as bed and breakfasts, guest houses and small hotels, and the leisure sector—as a result of the current crisis. I echo colleagues' requests for Ministers to ensure that those small businesses are taken note of as we continue to react to the current circumstances. I welcome the Chancellor's announcement in respect of business rates, which certainly will help, but, inevitably, more measures will be needed. I will conclude at that point and give an extra 33 seconds to someone else.

8.26 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) for his generosity in giving me those 33 seconds.

It is becoming clear that this will be the first Budget of this financial year. I do not mean that as any criticism of those on the Treasury Bench, but it is clear that events are moving fast. The Government will want to introduce emergency legislation and may seek emergency powers, and it is clear that even the Budget announced last week has already been overtaken by events. However, let me make couple of remarks about it.

First, we will have a wider debate about the loan charge on Thursday, but I was disappointed that there were no more concessions for those caught up in that scandal. It amazes me that people who were caught up in it, rather than those directly responsible for it, are being chased for money. I hope the Government will also be a bit more specific about the measures they want

[Chris Stephens]

to introduce to tackle the promotion of tax avoidance. I am not the only Member who is concerned about the reduction in staff at Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs over the past 10 years.

Secondly, the Government committed during the election campaign to maintaining the free TV licence. Given that we are in a period where the main source of information for many people, particularly the elderly and those who live on their own, is television, the Government need to move quickly to take back control of that power from the BBC and give it back to the Department for Work and Pensions and maintain the free TV licence. Over the next few weeks and months, elderly people will need that box in the corner of their living room to get vital information on tackling coronavirus.

Peter Grant: The Conservatives have already changed their promise on that. In the 2017 manifesto, they promised to keep the free TV licence. Now they are promising to keep it as long as everybody else pays for it. Surely that is a bit like saying the Government will provide free bus fares for everybody, as long as the bus companies pay for them?

Chris Stephens: Yes, I agree. My hon. Friend's point is well made.

There are a number of challenges that the Government now face. I am not the only Member over the past few days who has had constituents contact them to say they have already seen their hours reduced and shifts cancelled. They are being advised by employers that there will be no work for them, as people are being discouraged from going into nightclubs, bars and restaurants. The work in this sector is traditionally low paid and precarious. I hope the Government will now look at the models introduced by Denmark and Norway to address those issues, and sit down with trade unions and business to come up with a financial model that ensures wages are maintained for those who are low paid and in precarious work, including those on zero-hour contracts. In particular, I hope the Government are considering, as Norway has done, issues relating to the self-employed and carers.

On statutory sick pay, I have been contacted by constituents who are alarmed that some employers, including some large multinational employers, do not pay company sick pay from day one. Some pay it on day four and some pay it on day seven, leaving the state to pick up the tab. Because of the different schemes by different employers, some individuals will find themselves receiving only statutory sick pay from day one, which is not topped up by employers and their particular sick schemes. That will lead to a situation where some people—I am sure I am not the only Member to hear this—feel they will have to make a choice between public health and poverty, and their wages. We really need to look at the rate of statutory sick pay. If there was a European league table, the UK would be either in the relegation zone or not too far away from it. The statutory sick pay of other European countries far outstrips what is on offer in the United Kingdom.

On universal credit, we need to move away from an arrears-based system. The five-week wait, which other hon. Members have mentioned, needs to go now. The first payment should be the first payment. The DWP

receives £50 million a month in advances returned from claimants. How much does that cost the Department to administrate and how much time are DWP staff taking on that when they could be processing online journals and other claims? I agree with hon. Members that there should be no evictions for rent arrears during this period and that there should be no sanctions.

I want to end by saying that the Treasury will now need to consider, over the next few days and weeks, whether there should be a people's bailout. The amount of money the state had to spend on the bankers' bailout will probably be similar to what it may have to spend to alleviate poverty and to get through the current crisis in the weeks ahead.

8.32 pm

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): This was undoubtedly a serious Budget for serious times and it was undoubtedly right that the top priority for the Chancellor was confronting coronavirus. Our public services are all crucial to that effort, but clearly it is the NHS that is at the forefront of our nation's battle to tackle covid-19. I wholeheartedly welcome the Chancellor's commitment to spend whatever is necessary on the health service for this critical moment.

In my constituency, Stoke Mandeville Hospital is caring for a number of patients with coronavirus. I pay tribute to the doctors, nurses and all the other health workers, there and around the country, who are working tirelessly to help those affected by this dreadful virus. Stoke Mandeville Hospital is best known for its world-renowned expertise in treating spinal injuries. I hope the increase in general funding for the NHS, which is being delivered by this Government, will enable the hospital to receive the resources necessary for both spinal units and care for all other patients.

Healthcare does not always come in a hospital or out of a medicine bottle. The village of Wendover in my constituency is home to the Lindengate charity, which uses horticulture as therapy for people who have had mental health crises or are suffering from dementia. As the NHS considers new ways to help patients, including social prescribing, I believe that Lindengate provides food for thought. It provides a means of achieving health benefits directly from our rural environment that can be considerably cheaper than other treatments. It is, therefore, hopefully appealing to colleagues in the Treasury. Public services are not successful purely because of the amount of money provided by central Government. Their success stems primarily from the dedicated public servants who work to deliver them. At their best, public services are a combination of central and local government working in tandem towards the same aims, as we see in the fight against covid-19.

That was particularly the case with what proved to be the highlight of the Budget for Aylesbury: confirmation that the town's bid for money from the housing infrastructure fund had been approved. The £170-million award was the result of a concerted effort by local and national politicians and officials. Staff and councillors from Aylesbury Vale District Council and Buckinghamshire County Council worked with my predecessor David Lidington and his team to prepare a thorough, comprehensive and, thankfully, compelling bid. I was pleased to pick up the ball and carry it over the line with support from Ministers at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Treasury.

The area of public service that holds particular interest for me is the criminal justice system. I declare an interest as the former magistrate member of the Sentencing Council and former non-executive director of Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. HMPPS will face particular challenges from covid-19 but, from experience, I know that its excellent staff will rise to the task, as they always do.

The perspective of the victim should be the starting point for every part of the criminal justice system. I was delighted by the Budget commitment of an additional £15 million for services to support victims of crime, but that is just the beginning of the reforms that we need to make. We must be braver in looking for new ways to tackle offending behaviour.

One of the highlights of my time at HMPPS was being part of the judging panel for innovation awards. There were some excellent ideas, but there is scope to do much more. Technology can undoubtedly play a significant role. Tags to monitor alcohol abstinence have just been introduced, and other tags use GPS to enforce exclusion zones, which strengthens supervision and better protects victims. It is excellent news that that sort of technology will benefit from the £68.5 million devoted to tougher community orders in the Budget. We must be bold and imaginative in finding other new ways to harness technology in the range of sentences we impose. Ultimately, with all the appropriate safeguards in place, we could avoid the need for conventional prisons for some offenders.

I hope that the Budget's financial commitments will herald greater funding in our prison and probation systems in subsequent fiscal events this year. They may not be glamorous, but crime costs the UK an estimated £60 billion a year, so success can bring savings. The Budget makes welcome investment in the criminal justice system, our infrastructure and our health service. It promises all the resources necessary to fight coronavirus. It is therefore a Budget that I am proud to support.

8.37 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): This is not the speech I expected to give when we heard the Budget, but events have overtaken us. Although I am sure that our country will survive, I am concerned that without more urgent action from the Government, the state that it is in when we have overcome the virus might make it a place where none of us wish to be.

The Government need to clearly understand that there will be a price. They will pay, but the choice is how they will pay. Will they pay upfront and enable people, including the self-employed, to have the statutory sick pay they need? Will they look at universal basic income? Will they ensure that everybody has enough money to live? Will they pay to support all local businesses adequately—small, medium and large—to stop our economy collapsing? Or, alternatively, will they pay at the end, when the economy has collapsed and our country is on its knees, so that when we recover from the virus we cannot get back on our feet? There will be a price and a payment to be made. The Government should consider making that payment now to support our economy and individuals, rather than paying the price at the end.

We need to think about the long term. If we are to adjust to life under coronavirus, we need to look at many different things, such as providing free internet for people in this country, especially the children who

are expected to do their school work at home—how can they do that if they do not have equipment to work on or access to free wi-fi? We need to look at feeding children through free school meals programmes. We need to look at giving mental health support to adults who are self-isolating for three or four months. The Government could run a national advertising campaign on TV and radio to signpost adults to the mental health support that is out there. A Facebook coronavirus support group that has gained nearly 5,000 members in just a few hours asks whether the Government could introduce restrictions on the number of items that people buy from supermarkets. We should stop bulk-buying, introduce fairness for everybody and make things equal. We should give the vulnerable and elderly time to shop on their own at the beginning of the day.

There are many people who want to support the community, and that is to be championed; it is something that each and every one of us can feel proud of. However, I sound a slight note of caution. It would be very useful if the Government looked at introducing urgent Disclosure and Barring Service checks on volunteers, so that we can safeguard our most vulnerable people. There could be a way of co-ordinating national volunteers and introducing a very light check on some of these people—for example, those offering to collect money from the elderly and do their shopping.

The Government could also look at supporting and propping up charities such as Samaritans, to make sure that people have the support that they need. We could use Government resources to advertise those charities to everybody in the community through a national campaign.

There should be emergency food supplies for food banks. The food banks have run out of money. Where do people go when they have no food? The food bank. Where do they go when the food bank has no food? Nowhere. The Government could look at providing emergency food parcels to the food banks, so that the homeless on our streets are not just left there to die with nothing. At the moment, the cupboards are well and truly empty.

The self-employed need a lot more support. A taxi driver said to me, "Where am I going to get my business from if everybody's at home, and no one is going to the pubs or restaurants? What happens to me?" A driving instructor also contacted me. No one will be leaving the house; they will not be looking to him for lessons. Where is the support for those people? They have worked all their life, and may indeed have voted Conservative at the last election. They are looking to the Government and feeling let down. They have been told all along, "Work hard and try hard, and you will do well." Now their business is being ripped out from beneath them by a Government who are not listening to their cries for support.

What is our purpose in being here? I see mine as being to leave the world in a better state than it was when I arrived here. This is a once-in-a-generation test, and we are being judged—as a country, as individuals, and as a Parliament. I urge the Government to make the right choices, because our country is counting on us, and we cannot fail it.

8.42 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): I think that we can all agree that this was not an ordinary Budget; it was the Budget that was called for in extraordinary times. I welcome it, as I am sure many people across the country do. The covid-19 virus presents us with a situation that is incomparable to anything in recent generations. These are challenging times, and as my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary reminded us, we will all need to make sacrifices. I commend my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for the funding boost that he has given the national health service at this crucial time. He has shown that the health of the nation will always be the top priority, through extra spending to help us through this difficult period.

I make an appeal to all Members across the House. We can see and hear that our constituents are anxious about the future. It is incumbent on all of us to work together in the national interest; these are not issues to be politicised. We recognise the challenge ahead, and the only way that we will get through this is together. I commend those who have already been working collaboratively across the House.

I was particularly pleased by the Budget's focus on helping the small and medium-sized sector, for I believe that the public and private sectors work best in balanced symbiosis. They need each other, and the Budget recognises that. In a former life, I was a businessman, and I represented thousands of businesses in the west midlands. As a chartered accountant, I have built my career on working for SMEs. The people I helped were entrepreneurs—small business owners who, with their hard work and enterprising spirit, created jobs and stimulated our economy. They often had tight margins and took a great deal of personal risk.

I am proud of the small businesses and entrepreneurs in my region, but things are not always easy for them, and when faced with a crisis such as the one before us, many small businesses will find the additional burden unbearable. That is why I was so pleased to hear my right hon. Friend the Chancellor launch new measures last week, which I know from conversations with the business community have provided a lot of much needed reassurance and relief. Under those measures, businesses with fewer than 250 employees will be able to reclaim two weeks of statutory sick pay for employees who are unable to work because of coronavirus. We also welcome the rates relief for the hospitality sector.

The Government recognise that employers want to do the right thing and give staff the time that they require, and small businesses should not be punished for that. However, I ask those in the insurance industry, from whom I repeatedly hear nothing, to accept covid-19 as a recognised disease. While there may be a short-term cost, there is no point in their protecting short-term gains if they will lose customers in the medium term. I implore them to do the right thing, and to protect those businesses as much as possible.

Finally, let me record my thanks to, and pride in, our public services during this time of national crisis. They all provide a great service every single day, and it is our job to ensure that their sacrifices never go unnoticed. I am sure everyone in the House will agree that we stand by them, and do so proudly.

8.45 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Uncharacteristically, I congratulate the Chancellor on his Budget: a Budget that admits the immoral failure of Tory austerity. The Tories' decade of cuts has been savage, and, while I acknowledge that the Budget is a step in the right direction, it will not undo the damage done to our communities by austerity.

Let us not get carried away by the Tories' apparent budget U-turn; let us check the small print. The Chancellor was right to promise that

“whatever extra resources our NHS needs to cope with coronavirus, it will get.”—[*Official Report*, 11 March 2020; Vol. 673, c. 279.]

The coronavirus pandemic is changing rapidly and could be the greatest challenge in a generation, but there are some glaring omissions from the Budget, which, if unaddressed, will repeat austerity's failings.

Local councils are responsible for public health, and find themselves on the front line fighting coronavirus. Public health plays a huge role in preventing ill health, protecting the population and promoting education through communication, but with the new financial year for councils a fortnight away, there is still no mention of the public health grant. The Chancellor managed to find £500 million a year for potholes but said nothing about public health, and there has been an £850 million real-terms cut in public health funding. The Health Foundation predicts that an annual injection of £3.2 billion is needed to reverse Government cuts.

In my constituency, we have an endemic problem with public health funding. Earlier this month, my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield North (Feryal Clark) and for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) and I wrote to the Prime Minister to point out that public health grant calculations do not take measures of need and deprivation into account. Enfield is the ninth most deprived borough nationally. Even before coronavirus hit, the public health needs were complex and serious, yet Enfield receives £48 per head for public health whereas nearby Islington receives £104, more than double that amount. This simply feels like a postcode lottery. It is immoral to allow health inequalities to deepen in one of the poorest boroughs when fair funding could reverse the process.

That brings me to the second glaring omission, social care. We know that older populations and those with underlying health conditions are particularly vulnerable to this cruel virus, but it is also projected that the majority will recover. However, to be discharged after a hospital stay, many vulnerable people will rely on social care infrastructure, and there is a real danger that people will continue to be stuck in hospital. Let us take the example of my constituent's mother. Despite being medically fit for discharge, she found herself unable to leave hospital for many weeks while waiting for a social care assessment. Once the assessment was done, there was a lack of appropriate social care, so she was stranded in hospital for an extra two months. That meant that a hospital bed needed by a sick person was being occupied by someone who did not need it. In November last year, one in three people up and down the country were waiting in hospitals for social care services.

The pandemic's pressure on the NHS and the pressure on social care are intrinsically linked. An underfunded social care system only increases the pressure on the NHS when people cannot be discharged from hospital.

The Chancellor should recognise that the social care system needs rebuilding. A situation that was unacceptable before coronavirus is now intolerable. We need immediate financial support to help adult social care services, keep vulnerable residents safe, and reduce pressure on the NHS. Public health must be properly funded, and historical injustices in funding must be urgently addressed.

To conclude, I welcome increased NHS funding, but I will not fall for the populist Budget hype. Other parts of the health and social care system have been neglected. Until the glaring omissions of funding for public health and social care are addressed, the Budget lacks substance. My constituents demand proper funding for our council, which is on the frontline of the fight against the pandemic.

8.50 pm

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): The speech that I intended to make has been somewhat overshadowed by what we heard in the House earlier. The gravity forecast in the Chancellor's statement was rammed home with grim reality this evening and there is no doubt about the task that lies ahead.

I should like to begin by congratulating the Chancellor and his team on a Budget that was ambitious in scale and bold in reach—an orchestration of fiscal and monetary measures that truly delivered on our promise to the British people. It is right that the Budget placed at its core the small and medium enterprises that are this country's beating heart. It is only by setting conditions in which those wealth-creating and job-creating industries can develop and flourish that we can fund the public services that are the subject of this debate. It is their support and survival that has become the great imperative for the Government.

There are three aspects to the funding of public services that I would like to address this evening. First, in relation to GP pension relief, when I was first elected and met the chair of my local clinical commissioning group, he told me that the issue of GP pensions was the most significant problem for health services in my constituency. The threat of unexpected tax bills had resulted in a spike in GPs taking early retirement and an increase in GPs reducing their practice sessions. He estimated that in real terms that was a reduction of 50 to 60 patient contacts a week per GP. I have raised the issue repeatedly in this House, and I know how welcome the change is. It will bolster frontline services at this critical time; increase the availability of GP appointments; enhance staff retention; and, most importantly, boost morale at a time at which our brilliant doctors need all the help they can get.

Secondly, in relation to school funding, I was glad to see clear confirmation of our manifesto commitment to minimum levels of per pupil funding at primary and secondary levels. However, I would like to say a few words in relation to the significant funds that have been ring-fenced for special educational needs provision—£780 million. What is critical is not how much is spent but how it is spent. Talking to heads in my constituency, three themes have emerged. First, it is critically important that some of that funding goes towards early diagnosis. I have heard how damaging, not just for the child but for other children in the class, it is for the child to linger too long without a proper identification of their needs. If the child is distracted or disruptive because they cannot access the curriculum, that affects the whole cohort.

Secondly, special educational needs funding should support smaller teaching groups, because the evidence is overwhelming that outcomes for children with special educational needs can be radically improved when focused support is provided. Thirdly, I would respectfully request that this spend is guaranteed or bettered in the years ahead. As of last year, the Government withdrew the disabled students allowance in further education institutions. I understand why they did so. None the less, that underscores the imperative for full and robust SEN support during a child's formative school years.

Thirdly, in relation to public safety, I commend the funding that has been allocated to the trial of a domestic abuse court in England and Wales. I saw that as a clear reflection of the Government's root-and-branch commitment to tackling this hidden and heinous crime, by focusing it in a single court, rather than via the twin tracks of the family and criminal divisions. As the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) said in a Westminster Hall debate two weeks ago, that is a critical step for the protection of children, who are often innocent collateral. At present, there is often a paradoxical situation in which a perpetrator of domestic abuse is judged to be a violent criminal in the Crown court, but he is a "good enough Dad" in the family court when the issue of custody falls for consideration. That is not just a discrepancy—it is an injustice, and a domestic abuse court offers a joined-up forum to address it.

Staying on the subject of children, I hope that in the life of this Parliament the Government will go further and recognise the need to look at legal aid, particularly in the family court. As the outgoing head of the family division, Lord Justice Munby, put it last year:

"The fact is we have far more litigants in person than we did... Our court processes, our rules, our forms, our guidance, is woefully inadequate to enable litigants in person... to understand the system... That's a current reality."

I hope that this bold and reforming people's Government will seek to address that issue.

8.55 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): These are turbulent and worrying times. I know that all Members of the House share my gratitude and admiration for the dedication of the doctors, nurses, carers, paramedics, police, teachers, shop workers, cleaners, delivery drivers, travel staff, charities, journalists and all those up and down our country who are keeping everyone as safe and informed as possible in the most testing circumstances.

This is no time for political point scoring, but the Budget is not just for the present; it is for the future, and it is imperative that it is analysed thoroughly. Some £500 million has been pledged to Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals NHS Trust, but my local NHS proposes to use those vital funds to downgrade both Epsom and St Helier hospitals, reducing two A&Es to one and moving services away from the most deprived area and the people who need them most. St Helier hospital stands to lose an extraordinary 62% of beds and to become nothing more than a glorified walk-in centre. Under the spotlight of a pandemic, Members in every corner of the House can see clearly that we are in no position to be shrinking our acute health services. I welcome every penny committed to our NHS, but now more than ever we see the importance of the health service's operating at full capacity when it is needed the most at St Helier hospital on its current site.

[*Siobhain McDonagh*]

In unprecedented times, we operate day to day, but this Budget will outlive the coronavirus crisis. On Friday, as always, over half the constituents I met at my weekly advice surgery came to see me about a housing issue. I met Mrs L, who has been trapped in so-called temporary accommodation for two years, living in just one room and sharing a bed with her eight-year-old son, who suffers from epilepsy and autism, and her four-year-old daughter. I met a hard-working couple, Mr and Mrs N, who share a one-bedroom starter home with their two children, and their two friends and the friends' two children. That is four adults and four children crammed into a one-bedroom starter home. I met Mrs B, who is facing eviction from her privately rented home, where her family have lived for the past 20 years. She cares for her disabled daughter and relies on universal credit, but an extraordinary £1,000 hike in the monthly rent is forcing the family out and into temporary accommodation. There should have been a Budget for these families.

I am used to reading warm promises but the Budget lacked even enough of those. According to the Budget papers, the Government have made good progress on boosting the housing supply. I must have been on a different planet for the past 10 years. There are 1.2 million families on social housing waiting lists across our country, but just 6,464 social homes were built in 2017-18, the second lowest number on record. At that rate, it would take 172 years to give everyone on the current waiting list a social rented home. Of course extra funds in the affordable homes programme are welcome, but only if affordable homes are truly affordable, which is not 80% of market value. What is more, it remains unclear exactly how much of the new settlement will be made available for social rented homes. In the light of that, I extend an invitation to any Minister, on any Friday, to attend my weekly advice surgery to see what hope they can offer to the increasing number of my constituents waiting for a place to call home.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): There is still a lot of pressure on time, so after the next speaker I will take the limit down to four minutes.

9 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We have heard many tributes today to NHS staff for the efforts they are putting in to protect us all. I wish to add my own tribute to them, particularly to the frontline staff, and to every person who works in the care sector. Indeed, I pay tribute to anybody, whether employed in the care sector or not, who may be supporting vulnerable people in the weeks to come. I can well imagine the armies of volunteers who will be stepping up to the mark in the weeks to come.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister pledged in his first speech on the steps of Downing Street that making our streets safer was a key priority for this

Government, and I could not agree more. All of us in the wider Dudley area welcome the new multi-million pound “super station” to be built by West Midlands police. I do not wish to sound ungrateful, but Dudley needs more than that. The recruitment of 20,000 new police officers across the UK is incredibly important. It is vital that we see a greater visible presence, particularly in areas such as Gornal and Sedgley in my constituency, to deter against violence and vehicle theft. In my experience, as a local elected member, I know that it is a police force that engages and embeds itself in local neighbourhood communities that achieves results, not brand new buildings, computer screens and form-filling. We need a police force that is a part of local communities, not one that is seen as remote and largely out of touch. Some officers are great at what they do, but we need more of them and they need more support themselves.

Dudley, as part of the west midlands, will see part of the £4.2 billion of investment in city regions, giving elected mayors more say over transport in their area. Like our great Mayor, Andy Street, I welcome this much needed investment. HS2 is welcome in Birmingham, but Dudley is in vital need of better roads and better public transport links to improve connectivity to the Birmingham interchange and indeed the wider midlands. Better transport connectivity opens up incredible opportunities for employment, study and local regeneration.

I am pleased that the Budget brings a £400 million funding boost over the next year to further education to go towards enhancing access to higher-quality courses, covering the cost of expensive but important courses, and ensuring that further education providers can continue to recruit high-quality teachers. As I mentioned at Prime Minister's questions, and in my maiden speech, Dudley is to benefit from investment of £25 million as part of the towns fund, and the programme board, which incorporates all major stakeholders, has agreed to dedicate that to the creation of a university campus in Dudley.

Dudley College of Technology is doing amazing things, and I was blown away by the extraordinary offer it brings, in conjunction with local businesses, to the town and Dudley people. I hope Members here today will join me in congratulating the college on receiving a Queen's anniversary prize for education just a few weeks ago. The prize is the highest national honour awarded in UK further and higher education, so the £25 million funding will build on an already outstanding college, providing essential skills to set learners on a pathway to success in jobs for the future. However, more will be needed to secure a great university presence in Dudley, and I am placing on the record not only my support for the scheme, but a request for support from relevant Departments so that we can truly “level up” by offering people world-class opportunities that come from world-class education.

9.4 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Over the weekend, I got chatting to a shop assistant. She had a cough, so I asked whether she was able to stay at home until she felt better. She said no, because if she did not come in, her shifts would be cut, and if her shifts were cut, she would not be able to pay her rent. That is happening to working people all over the country and, as we stand on the precipice of a crisis unlike anything

that has happened in my life, we needed a Budget that rose to the challenge, one that protected the working class from the worst effects of the coronavirus outbreak.

But the Budget does not do that. It does not even undo the damage of the past 10 years, during which the Conservative party has systematically weakened our defences, run down our public services, pushed down the most vulnerable and cut down the power of working people, leaving millions insecure and on the edge. Now, the NHS is on its knees. Doctors and nurses are already pushed to the limit. The social security system is already broken. As this crisis makes social care more urgent than ever, the Budget ignored it. The elderly, the sick and disabled are being abandoned.

This crisis exposes the worst features of our rotten system: price gougers exploit it to make fortunes at our expense; private hospitals charge the Government millions for the NHS to use their beds; workers face mass layoffs; and insecure jobs force people to work, even when they are ill. Let us be clear: a market approach to the outbreak will condemn working-class people to decimation.

It is not found in this Budget, but there is an alternative, and it can be seen in the example of Denmark, where the Government have negotiated a deal between trade unions and employers to protect wages and prevent lay-offs. That alternative approaches the crisis with solidarity, equality and a belief in collective action. It confronts the challenges that we face together, with a plan that puts people before profit and public health before private property.

This is what we could do: guarantee economic security for everyone; give statutory sick pay to all workers at a decent rate, so that no one has to choose between health and hardship; suspend rent, mortgage and utility payments, so that no one is evicted, has their home repossessed or has their services cut just because they are sick; support local authorities and food banks to distribute food, so that no one goes hungry; equip our NHS to deal with the emergency by bringing hospital cleaners in-house and paying them the real living wage—they are at the frontline and they deserve protection; requisition private hospitals, rent free, because our need is more important than their profits; and repurpose manufacturing plants, because our hospitals need ventilators.

In this crisis, we cannot let the vulnerable suffer the most. We need to prevent a catastrophe in immigration detention by releasing detainees before the virus rips through those inhumane cages; bring abandoned homes into public use to give homeless people a roof over their heads; scrap the universal credit five-week wait, uplift the payment, end the benefits cap and suspend all sanctions; and give social care the same funding promise as the NHS has.

This crisis brings into focus our interdependence. We need each other. The chief executive officer is nothing without the factory worker, the bus driver or the nurse. An injury to one is an injury to all, as the old trade union saying goes, and none of us are safe until all of us are safe. This is an urgent demand to the Government: protect the vulnerable, guarantee support to all workers and make those with the broadest shoulders pay their fair share.

9.8 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I wish to concentrate on two issues: education and justice.

On education, I have visited every school in my constituency at least once, and a consistent theme that has come out is that the Government have not been open about how schools should cover the changes that occur to them as a result of Government action, rather than things that they control themselves. An example is the minimum wage: it is not that schools disapprove of it, but they just do not know how to cover it. I was therefore glad to see that the budget for schools will increase to £52.2 billion, and I am glad that the increase in per-pupil amounts will go up to £3,750 for primary schools and £5,000 for secondary schools by 2020-21. However, that has still not answered the question that I have been asking Ministers for a long time: does it cover the full amount by which the schools say costs have been increased as a result of our actions as opposed to actions that they control themselves? I would like an answer on that.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris), I am troubled by the special educational needs and disability spending requirements. I am pleased to see that investment has increased by £7 billion, but I do hope that the SEND review, which I welcome fully, will be comprehensive and fully take into account all the things that influence the sector.

On the question of justice, as a member of the Justice Committee, we did a report on the state of prisons and their governance. We had two aims: first, to ensure that prisons were places of rehabilitation; and, secondly, to ensure that they dealt with a massive backlog of repairs. That is not to make prison a luxury, but to make it inhabitable. In other words, there is a distinction between safety and rehabilitation. There is no lesser emphasis on rehabilitation, and the experience that I have gained from visiting prisons, both in this country and on the continent, has shown that rehabilitation is something that can work, and work effectively. I am fully aware of the £2.5 billion to transform the prison estate and provide 80,000 new places, but the concentration should not be on new places alone. The concentration should also be on dilapidated and decrepit prisons.

The estimate that we made in the Justice Committee was that there was a spending backlog of £900 million in the Prison Service to make prisons fit for human habitation. Against that, the £150 million that the Government have put forward seems relatively insignificant. I ask the Government to comment on that and on how we will address the £900 million that we have identified as the correct spending.

Finally, we should give the governors power. They should have complete control over how they deal with spending in their prisons, so that they are able to make sure that prisons are fit for living, because that will increase both the rehabilitation effects of prison and also their good effects on the people and on their future.

9.12 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Of the many learning points from the current coronavirus crisis, one stands out, which is that, in a crisis, people turn to the Government. Over the past 10 years, the capacity of the state to respond to crises has been deeply weakened by

[Paul Blomfield]

the funding decisions made for our public services, and it is a position that the Budget has left essentially unchanged. Capital spending is welcome, but, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies has pointed out, the revenue position is a completely different picture. Across the public sector as a whole, real-terms spending per person will remain about 8% below 2010 levels in the next financial year. We will pay the price for that, because we are facing this crisis with an NHS that is already stretched to the limit. Its resilience is corroded, and it has too little spare capacity. We had the warning signs—regular winter crises, patient stacked up in corridors—but not enough was done about them.

Beyond the NHS, the crisis in social care, which many Members have referred to, has clearly been deepening—not addressed but made worse by the disproportionate cuts faced by local government. Councils such as Sheffield have lost more than half their funding from central Government over the past 10 years.

On his accession to the job he currently holds, the Prime Minister said:

“And so I am announcing now—on the steps of Downing Street—that we will fix the crisis in social care once and for all, and with a clear plan we have prepared”.

He might have even used the words “oven ready”. Eight months on, it is clear that he never had a plan and his Budget does not have a plan.

I would like to raise a different point now, because while I welcome the measures in the Budget to support small businesses through the coronavirus crisis, they do not go far enough. Steve and Sara contacted me over the weekend. They run the popular Harland Café in my constituency—one of hundreds of cafés, bars and restaurants that employ thousands of people. They were worried then about the future of their business, and that was before the Government’s decision today—not telling them to close, but telling people not to go through their doors, hanging them out to dry without clarity and without the opportunity to draw on business continuity insurance. The Health Secretary was unable to answer the questions on those issues a short while ago, or on the other help that the hospitality sector will need. I do hope that the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, when he winds up, will be able to go further, because businesses such as Steve and Sara’s, and thousands more across the country, are on the line.

At the other end of the spectrum in terms of scale are our universities, which are key to the economy in Sheffield. We can already anticipate the impact of the coronavirus on their income. We have 15,000 international students between our two universities, worth over £210 million a year to the local economy. More than 7,000 are from China. Many of those planning to come this year will not be able to. If we lose, say, half of them, our two universities could lose £50 million in fees. Across the country, a 50% reduction in international students starting in September could produce a loss of £1.9 billion. Nobody has commented on that, so will the Economic Secretary also say what plans the Government have to support our universities?

9.16 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): This was a great Budget for the NHS, but a week is indeed a long time in politics. North Devon District Hospital is the UK’s

most remote mainland hospital and is unavoidably small. Our population is significantly older than the UK average, with more than a quarter of people being over 65, versus just 18% nationally. North Devon’s population reflects how the UK will look in about 20 years’ time, so getting our healthcare right is an essential blueprint for other regions during this crisis and in the future, and it is important to recognise how our solutions may differ from those elsewhere in the UK. We are delighted to be flagged as one of the 40 new hospitals, but unfortunately new buildings alone will not resolve the complex issues our hospital faces. As the most remote UK hospital on the mainland, we incur significant additional costs of delivery due to the diseconomies of scale of serving a small and geographically dispersed population. Although the community services formula goes some way to redressing this, it is not enough.

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust receives a rural premium of £3 million, but it believes that the deficit caused by remoteness is, in fact, £14 million. This then disadvantages other health systems in Devon, which have to supplement the difference. Despite this clearly being a levelling up of services within Devon, it is not the solution to the issue. I am delighted to see additional funding into our much-loved NHS, but I hope that further steps will be taken to ensure that the rurality and unique nature of North Devon’s population and location will be fully recognised as plans for our new hospital progress and as covid-19 does too.

While speaking in the Budget debate, it would be remiss of me not to mention a sector that is not always recognised for its public service—that performed by our pubs, particularly the more rural ones. My village pubs provide defibrillators, community shops, post offices and the opportunity to go somewhere to chat. This is vital when so many communities are remote and rural isolation is a real issue. Up until a few hours ago, a chat over a pint or non-alcoholic beverage could make a huge difference to someone’s day.

The Budget did recognise how important pubs are, especially in communities such as mine, where they are often the last remaining place to gather in a village. The freezing of spirit, beer and cider duty was warmly welcomed, as was the extension of the business rates discount to £5,000. However, in the light of the difficult and escalating situation with the coronavirus, I very much hope that my rural publicans are watching Parliament TV and hear me saying that I will do whatever I can to support them as we go through the challenges of the coming weeks and months, and I very much hope that they will provide the public service they always do to our local community.

The Budget was a very positive step for our public services. We are the party of our public services, we are the party of the NHS, and I hope over the coming weeks we will show ourselves also to be the party of the pub.

9.19 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Thanks to the 10 years of austerity Budgets and spending statements, our key public services have been cut to the bone and beyond, which means that they and the amazing people who work in them, who are already struggling with the day job, will now face incredible pressure and

uncertainty in the weeks ahead. Although pouring money into the NHS is essential at this time, the crisis has exposed significant gaps after years of inadequate annual spending rounds. It has also exposed the state-sanctioned poverty policies of this Government.

The Government could learn from France, where households and businesses are being protected from going under with a €300 billion package. In Hounslow, after £140 million of cuts over 10 years, our council, like all local authorities, has simply no headroom available to address the covid-19 crisis in social care, in public health or through support for volunteering to ensure the safety of vulnerable people in self-isolation.

In the short and ever-diminishing time available, I will cover issues that have dominated my postbag and that, unless the Government address them, will continue to do so and continue to be relevant, even once we are over this crisis. There was nothing in the Budget to enable councillors or the London Mayor to properly serve our communities at this time. The growing number of children with special educational and development needs have no or inadequate additional specialist support, which could make a difference for their future. There was nothing in the Budget to address mental health, and specifically young people's mental health, an issue raised with me at just about every secondary school I visit and in my constituency survey last year. The Government need to end the postcode lottery of mental health treatment and provide adequate funding for child and adolescent mental health services and for local early intervention services.

Another missed opportunity in the Budget was tackling violent crime, especially among young people, given the loss of 20,000 police officers, who are not going to be replaced quickly, and the new recruits who do have the innate knowledge of preventing and addressing crime that can only be learned over many years on the job. Alongside policing, council funding cuts mean that youth services have been cut by 70% since 2010, with the loss of the vast majority of experienced youth workers.

Although I welcome the £1 billion in the Budget to address cladding, I regret that there is nothing for those at the sharp end of the housing crisis. Purchase and even private rent are out of reach for many thousands of my constituents. More than 2,000 households are homeless in Hounslow and more are living in overcrowded or unsuitable housing. They will get permanent and adequate housing only with substantial and sustained Government action.

The elephant in the room in the Budget was the climate crisis. Billions for new roads were found and the freeze on fuel duty was upheld, but there was nothing for active travel or for solar, tidal or hydro power, which scream out for investment. I of course appreciate the fact that the Budget was delivered at a time of extreme uncertainty and that funding has gone to the NHS, but this is not a Budget for the people of this country and did not address the continuing underlying problems facing our society.

9.23 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): First, I pay tribute to the Government for the immense steps that they are taking to tackle coronavirus. Clearly the Budget makes an enormous contribution to help those who

have been hugely affected by what is the most serious situation that the country has faced in a generation. My thoughts are with everybody who is fighting to protect all of us.

Before I came into the House, I was a chartered accountant for some 15 years. When I see a Budget, delivered last week, where our debt is falling and is predicted to be four percentage points lower at the end of Parliament, and with a current budget surplus in every one of the next five years and economic growth predicted in every one of the next five years, I see beyond question an economy not only moving in the right direction, but an economy in safe hands.

It was our NHS and our health service, more than anything, that got the boost it really needed. It is a great pillar of our nation and, as our Health Secretary said earlier today, will continue to get the funding it needs. This was a Government that put its money where its mouth was and delivered on a manifesto that people believed in and voted in. That is why we have the majority that we have.

We need to face some facts. I am sorry that it is a political hot potato and that people in this country dare not say it, but we have an ageing population—one that is increasing continuously. In 50 years' time, we will see nearly another 9 million people aged 65 or over. We simply will have to pour money into the NHS just to keep on top of how our population is changing, and that is no short-term fix. It needs planning—planning for the very long term. To do that effectively and be trusted by the public to get on and do the job properly, we need a Government with stability and the majority that we now have. We have now committed record amounts, including an additional £6 billion on top of the already committed £34 billion.

Why do I stand in the Chamber and bang on about a new A&E at the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital? I do that because we need it, because we have the oldest constituency demographic in the country. I grew up there and by golly do we need another A&E. Ours is full constantly. I now know that with the funding we are putting into the NHS, that dream will become a reality.

I am really pleased that the east was not left out. There was huge talk about money for the north, but an awful lot of money is still going to be spent in the east, and there are already funds set aside for the NNUH, the Norfolk and Suffolk NHS foundation trust and South Norfolk CCG. They will all get better targeted investment. My one plea would be that we address social care in this country, and I now know that we will do that in this Parliament.

Just to finish off, for everybody who is preaching caution and saying that we are throwing away our fiscal rules, let me say this from somebody who was in business: now is the time to show that we really can do this. We now have record low interest rates. We have a mandate to run the country. It is exactly the right time to get on and do the job.

9.26 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): While Members have expressed a number of concerns about the Budget that I would echo, I wish to focus my remarks on coronavirus and the impact it will have on my constituency.

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

I spent this morning and early afternoon visiting a number of businesses in my constituency to hear at first hand the impact coronavirus is having on the ground. One organisation raised with me the fact that the loss of income is having a big impact in terms of cancellations of bookings and administration charges associated with refunding tickets for organisations. Another organisation raised the fact that the cancellation is costing in excess of £400,000 a week. In Lambeth, there are more than 30,000 self-employed workers. I continue to receive messages that they are seeing cancellations and a reduction in bookings as a direct result of the virus.

The Chancellor's response to the self-employed and those not eligible for statutory sick pay is to direct them towards universal credit. Unfortunately, the universal credit system is not fit for purpose. We have seen a sharp increase in food bank use under universal credit, and the five-week wait built into the system means that it is not suitable to deal with millions of temporary new claimants. The Chancellor must go further to ensure that universal credit works and to start that payment from day one so that the system can deal with those who need it due to coronavirus.

Many of my constituents are in insecure work and will also be in the private rented sector. They do not have adequate levels of security in their tenure to deal with the crisis. If we expect people to stay at home, tenants need to have a secure home for the entirety of the crisis. People should not be forced to choose between health and hardship. The support provided to mortgage holders is reassuring, but there seems to be little by way of support for vulnerable tenants who struggle to pay their rent and have been forced to leave their home. How can tenants be assured that they can self-isolate whenever they feel symptoms if they can also be evicted with two months' notice if they fall behind on their rent?

As the Member of Parliament for Vauxhall, which contains the world-class and famous South Bank area, I represent some of the most visited attractions and businesses in the country. That brings with it busy hospitality and a leisure centre that should be looking forward to a thriving spring and summer, but even now, when relatively new cases of coronavirus seem to be coming, those businesses are already struggling with the impact.

Members of the South Bank Partnership of businesses have told me that they are suffering from reduced footfall and booking numbers, and venues are seeing a drop in group bookings from Asia and mainland Europe. Bars and restaurants are seeing a drop in customers and future bookings, and major hotel chains have seen a 30% drop on per-room revenue compared with last year. This afternoon, the Prime Minister announced that the public should not go to theatres, but the Government are not enforcing mandatory closure, which means that many businesses will not be able to claim the insurance that was put in place to protect them. This is not working, so will the Chancellor work with me, the Mayor of London and these businesses to develop a forward-thinking recovery plan that helps these companies and gives them the reassurances they need?

The Government's measures to protect small businesses are welcome, but many of the businesses I have spoken to feel fearful about their future, and the Government's

package does not go far enough. Will the Chancellor resolve this crisis by funding local government and giving it guidance on implementing hardship funds, so that we can all continue to support our local businesses?

9.30 pm

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): I want to start by expressing my gratitude and admiration for the dedication and professionalism of all in our health services at this extremely difficult time. It is a challenge that none of us wanted to face, but it is important that we are united in doing so.

I congratulate the Chancellor on his determination to take mitigating action against the challenges of covid-19 in his ambitious Budget. It is a responsible and reassuring message from the Treasury, which has stepped up promptly and resolutely, echoing the Prime Minister's assurance that no one should be penalised for doing the right thing, and delivering unprecedented levels of investment in our public services at this crucial time. I stood on a platform of delivering more investment in our public services, and the record investment across the health service will undoubtedly ease the pressures on our much loved NHS. I will continue to press for a resolution of the PFI legacy at Royal Stoke University Hospital as we approach the spending review.

I am a strong believer that the key to delivering the best possible public services is to develop and adopt new technologies, while ensuring that we maintain a free-at-the-point-of-use, world-class health service. Those technologies range from innovative new medical devices, treatments and applications at hospitals and health centres to smart apps that maintain an individual's independence by monitoring their health in their own home. The current needs in responding to the coronavirus make the latter particularly pertinent.

Stoke-on-Trent is a world leader in the development of advanced ceramics, which has many applications, including across health. I am extremely keen to see the establishment of the advanced ceramics campus at Staffordshire University, to encourage the fusion of education, research and public sector innovation with leading private sector partners such as Lucideon.

I welcome the £1.5 billion in capital spending to refurbish further education colleges and the commitment of £2.5 billion for a national skills fund to improve adult skills. As it says on page 4 of the Red Book,

"The government is committed to giving everyone the opportunity to fulfil their potential, regardless of where they are from."

In Stoke-on-Trent, that could—and should—mean that the excellent facilities in local colleges could be used more fully to offer evening courses for local people in work who wish to gain new skills. That is very much part of the levelling up agenda, offering people of all ages and backgrounds the opportunity to gain qualifications, move up the employment ladder or look at the possibility of self-employment.

This Budget keeps us on the right path, with opportunities to secure better public services locally. It provides assurance that, no matter how difficult the weeks and months ahead may be because of the coronavirus pandemic, this Government will pursue the positive agenda that we were sent to this House to deliver.

9.33 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I want to pay tribute to our social care workers across the country—a workforce who day in, day out work hard to care for our loved ones who are vulnerable owing to age, illness or disability; and a workforce who are often among the lowest paid and in precarious zero-hours employment, yet whose skills, compassion and dedication make a daily difference between whether life is utterly intolerable or lived to the full.

Social care has suffered a decade of austerity and neglect by the Tories. We have known for many years that our population is ageing and that our social care system is inadequately funded and unsustainable, as demonstrated starkly in the 1 million people eligible for care who are currently not receiving any support, and in the £3.5 billion a year that is needed just to meet current needs.

The Government have repeatedly kicked the social care can down the road, and the consequences are now coming home to roost. Social care is on the frontline of the covid-19 pandemic, providing care for vulnerable people—many of whom will be in high-risk groups for the virus—and meeting additional needs as hospitals work to discharge people to free up bed space. Yet there has been a woeful lack of support and guidance for the social care sector in the context of the pandemic.

On Friday, more than 100 parliamentarians from several parties joined me in writing to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to ask him to guarantee full pay for social care workers who have to self-isolate because of covid-19. This commitment has already been made to NHS workers and contractors. It is vital for the protection of the vulnerable people who receive social care that staff who have direct contact with them, often providing intimate care, do not have to choose between the safety of those in their care and paying their own rent or feeding their family. Please could the Government make this commitment without further delay?

It seems hard to imagine that our current utterly broken social care system can cope in this current crisis, and the Government must, without further delay, deliver comprehensive reform. However, in the short term, emergency funding for social care to protect the workforce and those they care for is an absolutely vital part of minimising the impact and the devastation of this pandemic.

9.35 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I am very grateful to have been squeezed in at the end of this debate. It is quite clear that this Budget and all of us are very much under the shadow of the coronavirus update, and that we will have many stern days ahead of us. We must all pull together, and it is very good to see the House doing that today.

If I were able to, I would have liked to welcome a number of things in the Budget. I would have liked to have spoken about the environmental measures, and about the measures for veterans and on health in greater detail, as well as about the measures for education and even for potholes, all of which I welcome. If I may, in the brief time available to me, I will just make two points, which are about research and development and education.

For many years, this country has lagged behind others in the amount of GDP it puts into research and development. This has meant that we have problems with productivity, and that in many of the areas in which we excel, such as the high-tech areas of the economy, we are not doing as well as we could. I very much welcome the £22 billion going into that, and particularly the blue skies, ARPA-style agency that will be considering some of the high-risk businesses it will be possible to put money into in the future. I very much welcome that, along with some of the education steps that have also been taken, with the T-levels that are coming in. I also greatly welcome the money that has been put into mathematics, and also skills. One of the things that all businesses say in my constituency—I am sure it is the same for other Members—is that they simply do not have enough people with the right skills. The skills shortage is really something that we have to address, and I am very glad that this Budget does so.

The reason why I make those points and why I am so pleased to welcome these measures in the Budget is that, while we all pull together and deal with the dark days lying ahead of us with the coronavirus epidemic or pandemic, we should look forward to the future because we will have to rebuild the economy, help people to invest and help people to get on with and to rebuild their lives economically as well as personally. It is critical that we do that, because ultimately that is how we will build the excellent public services for the future that we all want to see.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. There are two more speakers, and I hope the remaining two speakers will take three minutes each, in which case we will have time to squeeze both of you in.

9.38 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): That is most kind of you, Madam Deputy Speaker; thank you for making that happen. I thank everyone who has made a contribution.

I wish to thank the Chancellor and his team for the tremendous efforts that have been made in producing this Budget, especially in the light of the current events that are overtaking all else. I welcome some of the measures taken. The planned increase in spirits duty will be cancelled, with no duties for cider or wine drinkers as well, although a packet of cigarettes will cost 27p more, which I have to say is good news. I welcome the abolition of the so-called tampon tax, and I would welcome further initiatives to combat period poverty. I am delighted to see the pledge to double the spending on research and development. I thank the Chancellor for all these things and congratulate him on them.

I express some concern about the fact that there was no mention at all of air passenger duty and its importance for us in Northern Ireland and, indeed, for the whole of the United Kingdom. Again, I understand the seriousness of the Budget in relation to coronavirus, particularly for small and medium-sized businesses. The Chancellor outlined measures to ensure that small businesses in England receive rates relief, but the same processes are

[*Jim Shannon*]

not in place in Northern Ireland. Our disappointment is that although the Chancellor said those things, unfortunately we do not see any benefit coming through to us at the moment.

The Health Secretary said that we will know “shortly”—perhaps in the next few minutes—how much money there will be to tackle coronavirus in Northern Ireland, and I hope we get the opportunity to hear that. Will the Minister confirm what money will be available for Northern Ireland, based on the Budget and Government information?

I welcome the fact that the Government will cover 14 days of statutory sick pay for companies with 250 employees, and the suspension of rates to pay sick leave, and so many other things that have been brought in for England. But are we in Northern Ireland any less British? Are our businesses any less deserving of help? Can we say that we have got what is needed from coronavirus aid? The answer is no, we have not, and I am very disappointed about that.

I have heard mothers say that if they have no school or paid day care for their children they will not be able to work, so if they have coronavirus and need to self-isolate, there will be real problems with childcare providers. I welcome the £210 million in the Budget to establish Treasury officials in Northern Ireland. The tax threshold has dropped, and there is no additional tax on red diesel—assistance that makes a difference for many things. I sincerely appreciate the Chancellor’s efforts in this uncertain time, but we need a whole UK approach. Just as in other times of national crisis the regions pulled together, so must we also do that. The Government intend to ensure that someone’s postcode does not dictate the help and assistance given, and neither should it dictate their income tax. Let us get this right.

9.41 pm

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): This will be a Northern Ireland double act. In my limited time, I wish to mention the impact of the Budget on Northern Ireland. Spending in Northern Ireland per capita is higher than in most other parts of the UK, but that reflects our legacy of division of violence, and there has been a lack of opportunity to restructure our economy over recent decades. I stress that only three out of 12 UK regions are net contributors to the UK Treasury.

Before the coronavirus crisis, the Northern Ireland economy was struggling to make ends meet—that was a result of 10 years of austerity, as well as of domestic mismanagement, and our failure to reform public services, or address the cost of managing a divided society where there is a lot of duplication. We need to get our house in order, and I welcome our feet being held to the fire in that regard, with things such as the forthcoming fiscal council.

There is an ongoing shortfall of £600 million to begin with, just to keep the lights on, never mind fulfilling the commitments in the “New Decade, New Approach” document. We need assistance and ongoing mature discussion between the Executive and the Treasury, about how we can better finance such issues. As the hon. Member for Strangford (*Jim Shannon*) said, we have a particular crisis with coronavirus. Northern Ireland is different from other parts of the UK, including in

terms of our economy, and although we welcome a lot of the initiatives that were announced over the past week—even tonight I think more money was announced for the devolved regions—it is unclear how far that will go to address our particular circumstances.

There is an issue with our ability to replicate the welcome 100% rates relief for small businesses in Northern Ireland, but that needs to happen. We have a particular dependence on tourism and hospitality, and we must ensure that those sectors are protected and able to survive. It is important that we get through this crisis with our economy in decent shape, and that we do not lose too many businesses along the way. Measures to support businesses and workers are important.

We can learn lessons from what is happening in other jurisdictions. In the Republic of Ireland, the Taoiseach has spoken about support for workers who would otherwise be laid off, and the Government should say to businesses, “We will make up that shortfall. Please don’t lay workers off.” In France, President Macron is offering to ensure that no business will go bust, and those are the types of lessons we need to learn for Northern Ireland. Hopefully, the Chancellor and Treasury will look favourably at that, and have a mature discussion with the Northern Ireland Executive over the coming days, to ensure an economic recovery plan for Northern Ireland.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Minister, Anneliese Dodds.

Hon. Members: Hooray!

9.44 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—that was slightly unexpected, but I am sure it reflected this wide-ranging and well-subscribed debate. We have heard some excellent maiden speeches. I wish I could praise them more fully, but it was wonderful to hear from the new hon. Members for Burnley (*Antony Higginbotham*), for Don Valley (*Nick Fletcher*), and for Great Grimsby (*Lia Nici*). I wish them every success in this place.

As my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (*Christian Matheson*) said, this was a Budget of two halves—a response both to coronavirus and to longer-term issues—but we needed an emergency Budget even before coronavirus came along. I am afraid I cannot agree with the rosy description the Minister gave of our economy at the start of the debate. Sadly, before the current crisis began, our economy was flatlining. We had three months of 0% growth up to January, we have had the lengthiest squeeze on living standards in this country since Napoleonic times, and we have had the slowest recovery from an economic crisis for 100 years.

We needed an emergency response in this Budget for the long term as well as the short term. I will talk about where there are some questions about the short-term response, but we broadly agree with the direction of travel and will work with the Government on those issues. However, we really need to see the long-term response. I hope we will have more detailed discussions about that, particularly once the present crisis has passed.

There has been much debate in the last few hours about public services. A number of Members talked about the new investment coming in, but a number also

mentioned confusion about testing. We got more clarity during the course of the afternoon, but I make this plea to the Government: it is critical to have transparency. It was clear, at least in what I heard from the Health Secretary, that policy has been driven to an extent by the availability of testing. If that had just been made clearer earlier, we would have avoided much unnecessary confusion. We also learned today that the NHS will be required to identify and contact individuals who will need to self-isolate. I know many GP surgeries are doing that already, but we must recognise the hours that that mammoth task will take up.

Surely we also need more detail on international action. We heard the Health Secretary say today that every effort is rightly being made to bring on new ventilator capacity, for example. Can we have more detail about what work is being undertaken with other countries so we do not have an unseemly scramble for resources that are so desperately necessary in our country and others?

There was much discussion, too, about social care. As my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) rightly said, we are in a difficult situation already when it comes to our social care services, with 500,000 fewer people receiving publicly funded care now than back in 2010. We did not have specific information about how social care organisations—not necessarily the small and medium-sized enterprises, which might be covered by other schemes—will be supported. A number of those bodies are already in financial difficulties. How will they be supported? We need that information.

On business support, the Health Secretary said he had his “eyes wide open” to the economic consequences of this crisis. His eyes are wide open, but he needs to take more action, given the dawning realisation of the potential impacts, which were described eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi). Many of us share her concerns—including, it appears, Paul Johnson from the IFS, who stated today that the support so far is insufficient. We need answers to questions such as, what will be the role of the British Business Bank? What will be the precise co-ordination between banks? We know the Government are working with them, but what exactly will be done?

Critically, we also need answers about insurance. I was pleased to hear that the Economic Secretary is talking to the insurance industry but, first, we really need to understand when and if the Government will state explicitly that it is necessary to close facilities such as pubs, restaurants and leisure facilities. We know that, lacking footfall, they will practically close, but they will not be covered by insurance. Please—we need more information about that. As the hon. Member for Meriden (Saqib Bhatti) said, please can we ensure that this coronavirus is recognised for insurance purposes and push the companies to do that?

Then, of course, there are questions about support for individuals. There is a debate about sick pay tomorrow, when I am sure many Members will mention, as others did today, the need for short-working arrangements. That was mentioned by the right hon. Members for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) and for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood). He is not a man with whom I am

always in perfect agreement, but he was absolutely right to point out the need for those arrangements. Germany is looking at introducing them again, as it did during the financial crisis, and Ireland is already shifting towards a similar position. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) said, we seem to be a bit behind the curve when it comes to the international response in that regard, particularly in comparison with France.

There are also many questions about social security, which is essential in a situation where, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) said, so many people are a payday away from poverty. We heard many questions about help for the self-employed, which was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) and my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). Simply saying that people can go on to universal credit or employment and support allowance, with all the issues we know they have, just is not good enough. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) said, unless we deal with income maintenance now, we will make the economic contraction even sharper than it needs to be.

There was much discussion today about housing. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) pointed out the dire impact of overcrowding in trying to deal with this crisis. I understand discussions about mortgages are going on and that there will be guidance on rough sleeping, but we need clarity on exactly what is going to change. Are the Government going to work with courts on evictions, foreclosures and so on?

Questions were raised about support for older people and whether the free TV licence would be provided for over-75s. What exactly is the action on free school meals going to be? It is good that the Government are talking among themselves—the Education Secretary talking to the Health team and so on—about free school meals, but what action will be taken? When will our devolved Governments know exactly which funds will be available? Just always saying, “We’ll get that information later” is not good enough.

The same situation applies to local government. As mentioned so many times, including by my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), there is no clarity yet about when public health allocations will become clear. We heard in the debate that local authorities will have even more responsibilities, for example, for burials in some aspects. Their rent will be diminished through the housing revenue account. It was telling that the Secretary of State said that help for charities would need to come from clinical commissioning groups, not local authorities. That perhaps reflects how hollowed our local authorities are, but how will the national volunteer effort, which we heard about again today, be delivered if it is not with the support of local authorities?

The Minister said at the start of the debate that we should be fighting this war while we are planning the peace. Then let us learn the lessons. We need to recognise how our response is being made harder because of changes that have occurred over recent years. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) listed the many sad, historic NHS

[Anneliese Dodds]

waiting list records we have recently reached. We did not have any reference, in introductory speeches, to the health inequalities data that have come out recently, and we did not have reference to the crises in mental health and other areas. We needed a long-term plan for social care before this crisis. We needed the 100,000 staff we are missing from our NHS before this crisis. We are asking those staff to make extraordinary efforts. They have a sense of grim determination, passion and commitment to do the right thing, but we should never, ever again be asking them to do the right thing with so few resources after 10 years.

9.52 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

It is a pleasure to speak at the end of this long but very interesting debate, with 34 contributions by Back-Bench Members from across the House. Before I attempt to respond to many of the questions, I would first like to extend my very best wishes to the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) on her birthday today. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

We have been fortunate in this debate to hear three excellent maiden speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham) said that he is the first Conservative to be elected in Burnley since 1910. He spoke about his passion to end hospital car parking charges. It is great that the Budget has moved us forward in that regard, with the changes beginning in April.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), who, very movingly, told the story of Tommy in two different scenarios, speaking very much to the aspirations of the Government in terms of investment in life opportunities. He also spoke very openly and bravely about his Christian faith.

We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici), who, supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), made the case for a free port in her constituency. The Government will take very seriously the representations she made.

I recognise that the debate was punctuated by a very important statement from the Secretary of State for Health. I also recognise that the hon. Member for Oxford East raised a number of questions, some of which I will be able to respond to. I am sure my colleagues across Government will be making further statements in coming days to clarify some of those points. The Government are committed to supporting our world-class public services with the investment they need: investment in the here and now, with a £30 billion package for the country to tackle covid-19, including a £5 billion Cobra response fund for the NHS and other public services; and investment for the future. She is right that there has been a material development as a consequence of today's announcement, and there are matters that we in the Treasury will reflect on carefully, but a support package for business was set out last week and we will look at that in terms of what we say later this week.

In last year's spending round, the Government pledged an additional £34 billion for the NHS by the end of this Parliament, together with 20,000 more police and an

additional £14 billion for education over the next three years. That was only the beginning of our ambition, however. We are determined to deliver for the people who put their trust in us. We are ready to take the big decisions necessary to transform our country. The Budget is proof of that commitment.

By the end of this Parliament, day-to-day spending on public services will be £100 billion more in cash terms than when we came into government a decade ago. Nowhere is our commitment more evident than in the national health service. In 2018, the Government agreed a historic multi-year funding settlement and committed to spend an additional £34 billion by 2024. Through the Budget, the Government will commit a further £6 billion.

Together, that provides the financial security and certainty that the health service needs to prepare for the future at a time when it is under unprecedented pressure to once again step up and go beyond the call of duty. It means that we can proceed with delivering 50,000 more nurses. It will fund the creation of 50 million more GP surgery appointments a year and it will enable work to start on 40 new hospitals. Crucially, we will also invest in the future health and wellbeing of our society, with £1 billion extra for adult social care every year of this Parliament, and nearly £650 million to help rough sleepers into permanent accommodation.

The Government's most important task is to keep the public safe. Thanks to the £750 million we made available at the spending round, the first of 20,000 additional police officers are now being recruited. Last week's Budget confirmed that we will make available an additional £114 million in support of counter-terrorism efforts. Ultimately, a safe and secure society rests on a firm but humane justice system that can reform and rehabilitate offenders back into society, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler) said. We will improve conditions for those living and working in our prison system, which my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) raised, while increasing the number of offenders required to wear electronic tags and expanding the number of hours offenders can spend doing unpaid work.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor made it clear that this was a Budget for businesses. If we are to unleash the potential of businesses across the country, we need to equip people with the skills to match our ambition. Last year's spending round provided schools with a three-year settlement, so that per pupil funding can rise at least in line with inflation, which was welcomed by my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) in her thoughtful contribution.

In this Budget, the Government will invest a further £95 million to support the roll-out of T-levels, and we will fund 11 maths schools across every region of the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, £1.5 billion will be made available for capital spending in the further education sector and we will bring together employers and educators to open eight new institutes of technology. Those measures will help to ensure that our country has the skills it needs to prosper, not just today, but into the 2030s, 2040s and beyond.

Alongside our increased investment in public services, we will redouble our efforts to clamp down on tax avoidance and evasion. The vast majority of taxpayers in this country—businesses and individuals alike—pay

their correct taxes on time and expect others to do the same. For that reason, the Government will give Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs more funding to tackle non-compliance and secure an extra £4.4 billion of revenue that is not currently obtained. Every penny that HMRC can recover will mean more money for frontline public services.

Now that we have left the European Union, our future is in our hands. The Government are determined to seize the opportunity to create a country that is not only stronger and more prosperous, but safer, fairer and healthier too.

This Budget will ensure that our police have the resources that they need to keep our streets safe. We will ensure that the NHS has the doctors, nurses and other professionals that it needs to continue delivering world-class healthcare, free to every man, woman and child, for decades to come. The Budget will also help our schools, colleges and universities to equip young people to thrive in life, and our economy to access the talent and skills that it needs to grow. I urge Members in all parts of the House to support the Budget tomorrow evening.

10 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed tomorrow.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

BETTING, GAMING AND LOTTERIES

That the draft Gambling Act 2005 (Variation of Monetary Limits) Order 2020, which was laid before this House on 20 January, be approved.—(*David Rutley.*)

Question agreed to.

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

PUBLIC HEALTH

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 129), dated 10 February 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 10 February, be approved.—(*David Rutley.*)

Question agreed to.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (IMMIGRATION)

That the Immigration (Citizens' Rights Appeals) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 61), dated 27 January 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 30 January, be approved.—(*David Rutley.*)

Question agreed to.

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

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the draft Civil Liability (Information Requirements) and Risk Transformation (Amendment) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 3 February, be approved.—(*David Rutley.*)

Question agreed to.

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

DEFENCE

That the draft Armed Forces Act (Continuation) Order 2020, which was laid before this House on 3 February, be approved.—(*David Rutley.*)

Question agreed to.

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

PUBLIC SERVICE PENSIONS

That the draft Judicial Pensions and Fee-Paid Judges' Pension Schemes (Contributions) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 20 January, be approved.—(*David Rutley.*)

Question agreed to.

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

COUNTY COURT

That the draft Justices of the Peace and Authorised Court and Tribunal Staff (Costs) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 3 February, be approved.—(*David Rutley.*)

Question agreed to.

Speaker's Statement

10 pm

Mr Speaker: I wish to make a further statement about the arrangements in Parliament in the light of the announcements made this evening by the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary on coronavirus. As the Prime Minister stated, we are now involved in a national fightback against coronavirus, which means that we need to restrict certain aspects of everyday life to prevent risk of exposure. In addition to the measures that I announced earlier, we will also be putting the following measures in place.

Parliament will stop all non-essential access from tomorrow in both Houses. All Members who have underlying health conditions, may be pregnant or are over 70 should pay particular attention to the advice of Public Health England. There will be no access to the Public Gallery, and use of the Side Galleries will be restricted to Members of both Houses. Members' tours for constituents will be stopped. The education centre will close, and educational and school visits will cease from tomorrow. Finally, there will be a reduction in the catering facilities open across the estate. The closure of certain outlets will be announced.

I have taken these decisions, which are consistent with the latest Government advice, with the Lord Speaker, and in consultation with Public Health England. These further steps are necessary to allow Parliament to continue to fulfil its constitutional duties, and will be kept under constant review.

I also wish to put on record my thanks to everyone on the parliamentary estate who is keeping this House running, and without whom we could not do so.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wanted to highlight to BBC Parliament that I am the Member of Parliament for Vauxhall, not my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi).

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has certainly put that on the record. I thank her for giving notice of her point of order.

Cavity Wall Insulation: Complaints

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

10.2 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this debate to be held today. I thank the Members from across the House who have stayed to take part. I shall speak about a problem that affects thousands of people across the UK—some estimates suggest that the number could be up to 3 million. It is a problem that Members, including me, have raised with the Government, but as yet, the people affected have been given nothing by way of resolution.

Inappropriately fitted cavity wall insulation might, on the face of it, sound like an issue that could be down to just a few rogue traders, but given what we now know, it is time for the UK Government to come forward with a sensible package of support for people who have felt the blunt end of Government interventions gone wrong. The scale of the problem could not be more stark. In 2018, the BBC reported that industry insiders estimated that at least 800,000 properties have defective cavity wall insulation. I want to explain why the injustice that many people in my Ogmore constituency and across the UK face is another symptom of the gross inequality across our country. I also want to tell the House why I believe that we need a new, independent body to oversee cavity wall insulation claims if the current body, the Cavity Insulation Guarantee Agency, is not able to do so.

From the outset, I want to make it clear that I am not against cavity wall insulation. If done properly, it is an efficient means of making our homes and other buildings more energy efficient, saving us power and helping to make the way we all live more sustainable. It can also help to reduce people's energy bills—something that we all welcome, of course. In the light of the climate and environment emergency that we must address, only a fool would suggest we should not use all the tools at our disposal to make the way that we live less environmentally damaging. Cavity wall insulation can and should form part of this; that much is clear. What is less clear is what happens when our interventions bring about unforeseen consequences—unforeseen consequences that cause damage to people's homes and leave them with a hefty repair bill.

As Members will know, most homes built before the 1970s had no form of insulation, and many were instead built with vast cavities within the external walls. Throughout the 1990s, as our awareness of energy efficiency and environmental issues expanded, the practice of retrofitting insulation in those wall cavities began to expand. Various Government schemes have followed, encouraging people living in energy-inefficient properties to have that work undertaken at a reduced or no cost to the homeowner.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; I did speak to him beforehand. He has raised this issue on behalf of his constituents, and I now want, through him, to raise it on behalf of mine. Does he agree that, yet again, something that the Government intended to be of great use to our most vulnerable and to the environment has been abused, and that the case of his constituents—and a number of

my constituents—has been replicated throughout the United Kingdom? Is it not therefore right and proper for an investigation to follow the trail of businesses that are no longer in operation to secure justice for those who have been taken advantage of, and who are worse off as a result?

Chris Elmore: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Indeed, it would have been wrong for him not to intervene. I do agree with him: this is an appalling failure on the part of businesses.

I commend the basis of the Government schemes to which I referred. They were admirable in their intent—and, indeed, they still exist today—but it has now become clear that many properties that have been retrofitted with cavity wall insulation should never have been retrofitted in the first place, and that in many cases the works have been so shoddy that people have been left with significant damage to their homes.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for securing this debate. May I briefly cite one example that reinforces the excellent point that he is making? My constituent Mr Robert Hughes, of Gilfach, Bargoed, bought a property which, according to his surveyor, had problems involving cavity wall insulation. The Cavity Insulation Guarantee Agency said that the insulation had been fitted properly, although that was clearly not the case. CIGA refused to respond to my constituent's concerns, and even refused to respond to his phone calls. I think that it should be examined carefully, because it is clearly at fault and is clearly not operating as it should be.

Chris Elmore: I agree with my hon. Friend. I shall say more about CIGA shortly, and about what I think could be done if Ministers were willing to intervene.

If installed incorrectly or in inappropriate properties, insulation can act as a bridge for moisture to move from the external to the internal walls, which can result in high levels of damp. Not only can damp cause higher energy bills—which is totally counter to the purpose of such schemes—but it can cause significant health issues for residents. The science tells us that regions affected by high levels of wind-driven rain are subject to a much greater risk of damp and mould-related issues. Effective safeguards are therefore vital in such areas to ensure that any retrofitting work does not make the problems of homeowners and renters worse rather than better.

Sadly, however, when we look at the map of the areas across the country that are most badly affected by wind-blown rain, we see that many of the areas in which there have been reports of high levels of cavity wall insulation complaints form an almost directly superimposable map. It is clear that something went wrong, and it is clear that unscrupulous companies have been taking advantage of Government schemes to make a quick buck.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech in favour of action to assist people who find themselves in this predicament—people like my constituents Pauline Saunders and Sandra Haggerty. Sandra is out of pocket owing to the cost of repairs following the installation of inadequate cavity wall insulation in her mother's house in Rogerstone. People have lost

thousands of pounds, and they need some form of compensation. Does my hon. Friend agree that they need action now, and not fine words from the Government?

Chris Elmore: I do agree. I will shortly talk about my own constituents and the problems that they have faced, including the considerable cost of any sort of repair bill. I know that very many people across the United Kingdom—arguably hundreds of thousands—need support from the Government.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for securing this really important debate, and I invite him to comment on my view that the Government can no longer delay justice for our constituents. Some of my constituents who have been affected are widows in their 80s who have been preyed on by UK Government-approved green deal sellers, and tricked into buying, in this case, perfectly good cavity wall insulation, but on credit costing tens of thousands of pounds and lasting until they are 106 in some cases.

Chris Elmore: I agree with hon. Lady and the wider comment that the Government really need to look at redress and an inquiry. I will call for further things in my speech.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. We absolutely need the Building Research Establishment to undertake a survey of all those properties—about 1 million, I think—to understand the scale of the problem and obtain redress for the owners.

Chris Elmore: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, which could form part of a wider review that the Government could instigate to secure redress for the many people who have been impacted.

I shall continue—this is obviously a popular Adjournment debate. Here is where the real injustice lies. Whenever this issue is raised in the House, Members and their constituents are signposted to the supposed forms of redress. First, they are told to lodge a complaint with the firm that undertook the works. That is where many of them hit their first brick wall, because many of the firms that completed such works have either gone into liquidation, have been folded into other companies, or simply no longer exist. Many people are then told to fall back on the guarantees issued through the Cavity Insulation Guarantee Agency—or CIGA, as many people refer to it. For the majority of people I have spoken to, CIGA often represents the biggest brick wall of them all, because what that industry-funded body appears to provide in far too many cases is protection in name only. I am sure that Members across the House have been approached by constituents who have sought an assessment from CIGA, only to be presented with various get-out clauses that prevent any kind of redress payment from being issued.

CIGA rightly says that it offers a guarantee scheme rather than a compensation scheme. CIGA guarantees were offered on a 25-year basis, but now that it has become clear that CIGA had no suitable system in place to quality-assure installers, any guarantee that was given is self-evidently weakened. Quite simply, how can a

[Chris Elmore]

product—in this case, cavity wall insulation—be guaranteed if the guarantor had no way of knowing whether the product was installed properly in the first place?

When we delve deeper, the opportunities for redress seem to weaken yet further. Significantly, one key clause in CIGA guarantees is referred to when responding to complaints: the maintenance clause. That, I would argue, is CIGA's trump card for inaction. The difficulty that people face in attributing damp to a single cause often allows CIGA to suggest that the cavity wall insulation may not have been the key determining factor. The bottom line is often that the damp could have come from elsewhere. I am not a surveyor, and I appreciate that it may well be difficult to determine the cause of damp in a property, sometimes many years after the cavity wall insulation was originally fitted. That is a point of contention about which too many constituents have now contacted me. My willingness to support that form of defence is weakened when I hear real-life examples of people living with this problem. Indeed, one constituent who contacted me was living in a property that had been fitted with cavity wall insulation before she moved into the address, and she had located two different copies of her CIGA guarantee. One of those copies contained the maintenance clause; the other, older copy did not.

That leads me to believe that over time CIGA has taken note of the significant problems that people are facing and, instead of offering the support it was set up to provide, is instead hiding behind a clause against which it is difficult to argue. That is why I believe that the many people to whom I have spoken about CIGA often come back to me with the same response: it is under-resourced and not fit for purpose.

Then people are pointed to alternative dispute resolution, or independent arbitration. Several constituents have expressed significant concerns about how independent that process is, and many are reluctant to go down that lengthy route as, once a decision is made, it is legally binding and cannot be challenged, apart from in the High Court. The process is also expensive. It costs £130, and the complainant must pay for an independent surveyor's report, so costs can stack up to £500. It can become, in essence, a one-way ticket to nowhere.

More recently, I was contacted by a constituent, Gavin Ward, who had cavity wall insulation fitted in April 2011. Gavin is in the Public Gallery this evening, so I would like to thank him for coming along today. Gavin owns his property and had lived there since 2001. Gavin maintains that prior to having the insulation fitted in 2011, there were no issues with damp in his property. He was door-stepped by Miller Pattison, which was installing cavity wall insulation locally, and was encouraged to have some fitted. Because he was in receipt of working tax credits the work was undertaken free of charge, with the install being funded by an energy company. Miller Pattison subsequently conducted a pre-installation survey, which proved that the property was free from damp and apparently suitable for the installation to take place. Luckily for Gavin, he retained a copy of the survey.

The installation took place and Gavin thought all was well. He sat back and waited for the insulation to start reducing his energy bills, but in the following

months and years the forecast reductions in energy bills did not transpire. In fact, his bills kept increasing and he found it increasingly difficult to keep heat within his home. During this period, Gavin's young son frequently suffered from recurring ear infections, his wife became more susceptible to asthma attacks, and Gavin himself suffered from chest infections each winter—something he not fallen foul of previously.

Some five years after the cavity insulation was installed, Gavin noticed some damp appearing. Then the electricians tripped out. Subsequently, Gavin found that one of the walls behind a piece of furniture was soaking wet, with what he describes as a pool of water inside the electrical box fixed to the wall. Gavin had an independent chartered surveyor undertake an assessment of his property, which indicated that the major damp issues now in his property had been caused by the cavity wall insulation. The damp problems increased yet further, and Gavin was informed that it was because the walls had now reached their saturation point, causing inevitable damp, mould, and spores.

Gavin has had a lengthy litigation battle, lasting three years, between his solicitor and the installers' solicitor via a no win, no fee funding arrangement. During this period the property has deteriorated significantly, with no offer made even to remove the failed product from within the wall cavity. During the process he has made some startling discoveries. First, it has become clear that Miller Pattison's initial pre-installation assessment was totally ineffective. Since the start of Gavin's attempt to take legal action against Miller Pattison, many of the company's assets have been folded into a new firm, Novora Building Services Ltd, which apparently is run by the same three directors, using all the same staff and assets; and Miller Pattison has gone into administration, removing the potential for legal redress.

It is clear that Miller Pattison is not an insignificant player in this: the company's administrators have told Gavin that EDF Energy has made a claim against the company for faulty insulation work. Miller Pattison has previously disclosed that it applied for 800,000 CIGA guarantees, and commonly received a startling 40 to 50 complaints per month. The events I have described are all the more suspicious when we consider that—I have been informed—Miller Pattison's managing director, Mike Dyson, was on the board of CIGA when the decision was made to grant the new firm, Novora Building Services Ltd, registered status. That means that Novora Building Services Ltd is now being used by CIGA to undertake remedial works in properties where similar problems to Gavin's have occurred. Given that many of Novora's assets were transferred from the defunct Miller Pattison, in effect the company responsible for the shoddy works is now being paid to correct some of its own mistakes.

CIGA's clients do not get a say in who undertakes their remedial works once they have successfully settled a complaint. The remedial work is not guaranteed and other victims are now facing problems from the poor remedial work—work that is, in effect, done by the same company. Frankly, the situation stinks. I am reliably informed that Mike Dyson stepped away from CIGA in January this year to concentrate on his new company. How convenient.

Gavin has now taken this issue to Action Fraud, and it clearly needs to be investigated as a matter of urgency. This phoenixing of one company into another clearly

needs checking out, because many of these phoenixed companies have changed from being cavity wall insulation fitters to cavity wall insulation extraction companies. CIGA has finally agreed to pay out on Gavin's property, but only for the removal of the insulation, which CIGA now agrees should not have been installed due to debris in the cavity that was not identified in the pre-install survey. Currently, no one is overseeing how many extractions are taking place, hiding the scale of the problem further. Why is there no register? Extraction will cost only a few thousand pounds, paid directly to the installer, but that pales into insignificance given that the true cost of the repair work has risen from £45,000 to in excess of £63,000. CIGA will not agree to do any of the remedial work because, it says, the homeowner has not maintained the property.

CIGA often seem to get away with extracting material from one wall only or doing a "top up", which is where some of the cavity's voids are filled in. Those options are cheap and a route to disaster for the homeowner. Gavin and his family have now been forced to move out of his property, as it is uninhabitable, but Gavin's case is just one example of many across the country where people have had to fight tooth and nail to get even a percentage of the compensation they deserve. We have seen: companies folding into other companies; and people with clear conflicts of interest sitting on the board of the supposedly independent guarantor. I am sure Members will agree that this illustrates just a small number of the hurdles people have to jump through to get the answers and compensation many of them deserve. Many other victims have not been able to sustain such a lengthy battle, and have lost their homes and health to the cavity wall insulation scandal. Pauline Saunders, who has spearheaded the Cavity Insulation Victims Alliance—CIVALLI—for many years now, has worked closely with Gavin and many other victims of this injustice. Pauline and her team at CIVALLI have helped thousands of people seek redress, and have kept the pressure on the Government in the process. I really commend her for her work on this.

I have gone through the nuts and bolts of the issue, and I want to explain why I believe it has become a real issue of inequality. Let us consider who many of these schemes are widely offered to: people on working tax credits; people on disability benefit; and people on other qualifying forms of welfare. The truth is that many of the people facing high repair costs to their properties are those who can least afford it, which is why it is vital that the UK Government step in and help to resolve this mess, once and for all.

So, today, I want to ask several key things of the Minister, which I hope he will properly consider in the spirit in which they are meant. Will he initiate an independent inquiry into the way cavity wall insulation complaints have been handled, to determine the scale of the problem and find resolution for people who have been left high and dry? Will he allocate more resources to CIGA to enable it to properly compensate guarantee holders where there is a clear need to do so? CIGA has only £18 million of assets, which is grossly inadequate. Failing that, will he set up a new, separate and properly independent body to deal with complaints about cavity wall insulation, with funding to compensate people where clear injustices can be found? Will he meet Action Fraud to ensure that it has all the resources it needs to

properly investigate companies such as Miller Pattison? Will he work with the Welsh Government to ensure that any such measures are made as accessible as possible to people across Wales, as well as across the rest of the UK? Will he comment on the Each Home Counts review and whether all of its recommendations have been taken forward and have started to improve the situation for future consumers? Will he determine how many companies have undertaken cavity wall insulation works under Government schemes that no longer exist and suggest how this problem can be addressed?

I appreciate that much of the detail of what I have gone through today is quite dense, but that just shows what a rough time people in my constituency and across the UK have been having. They have been left, largely on their own, to navigate this increasingly complex situation, and all because they thought they were doing the right thing. This is not about adding to the "claim culture", which becomes rife in too many parts of our economy; it is about giving people such as Gavin and his family proper access to redress mechanisms when there is clear evidence that they have been wronged. Many people have said that this issue has the potential to be as big as the payment protection insurance scandal. I agree, except that we now need a proper mechanism to be put in place to allow the victims of this scandal to be compensated, as the victims were with PPI. I thank the Minister for listening to the concerns I have raised today, and I hope to continue to work with him on this issue in a constructive manner.

10.23 pm

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Kwasi Kwarteng): I thought that was an informed and well-researched speech, so I thank the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) for it and congratulate him on securing this important debate. I found one phrase in his speech particularly engaging, as it sums up what we are doing in this House, and that was when he referred to "proper access to redress". That is a universal theme in this place. All constituency MPs feel that we want to give our constituents proper access to redress, and it was a very fair observation.

The Government acknowledge the charge that some companies have installed CWI in homes that were unsuitable for those measures and that they have done so using poor building practices. We also acknowledge that some of these companies have, as the hon. Gentleman suggested, gone into liquidation, which has meant that they have avoided any redress to former customers. But it is precisely for those reasons that from 1 January this year we introduced new design and installation standards into our main domestic energy-efficiency policy, the energy company obligation. I will talk a bit more about that in a moment.

Let me give some background. Cavity wall insulation has in the past been delivered through several Government schemes, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned in passing. ECO is the most effective at protecting consumers. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that some of the schemes did not work, which is why we are having this debate. The current iteration of the scheme, ECO3, is worth £640 million a year and will run until March 2022. Since it commenced in its first iteration in 2013, ECO has delivered nearly 2.7 million heating and insulation

[Kwasi Kwarteng]

measures in more than 2 million households, including the installation of boilers, electric storage heaters and wall insulation.

I know that the hon. Gentleman said that he is not against cavity wall insulation but wants to raise the issue of the egregious and unacceptable cowboy companies that are exploiting vulnerable people, but I have to say that more than 8% of the homes in his constituency have received measures under the scheme and, as far as I understand it, the vast majority of them have worked out in a beneficial way. The current focus of ECO is on fuel poverty. It reduces the heating bills of those households that are least able to insulate and heat their homes. The hon. Gentleman made the point that many of the people who were exposed to these sharp practices were the most vulnerable people in our society. The ECO scheme is directly focused on that population.

In Great Britain, cavity wall insulation is present in around 70% of the homes for which it is appropriate. It reduces energy bills and saves carbon. However, I fully accept that the insulation work carried out under the predecessors of the ECO scheme did not meet the standards that are now required—I am afraid most cavity wall insulation was installed under those schemes—which is why, from the start of ECO in 2013, the Government made clear guarantees and specific installation standards a requirement, to improve consumer protection. In addition, to monitor compliance, some 5% of all the measures taken are independently checked and the result is reported to the administrator, which is Ofgem. Installers of cavity wall insulation also now have to provide a 25-year guarantee for the measures that they install.

Nevertheless, we know that standards and consumer protection can improve. The hon. Gentleman mentioned an independent review; we are implementing the recommendations of the comprehensive and independent Each Home Counts review of quality and standards. As I have mentioned, from 1 January this year all installers that work under ECO have to be registered with TrustMark, which is the new Government-endorsed quality framework for energy efficiency. Compliance with TrustMark leads to improved and comprehensive consumer protection, and that includes a clear route to the redress that the hon. Gentleman talked about for his constituents. We now have updated design and we have installation standards, so the picture today is far better than the one that he described.

I fully understand and appreciate that we have had historical problems. We have consistently tried to improve standards, but we are aware that some historical installations of CWI have led to significant problems. Those problems have been seized upon by some companies that are, as the hon. Gentleman suggested, part of the evolving claims culture. There are instances of claims management

companies having contacted householders directly to report that they may be able to get compensation for failed cavity wall insulation. I am not saying that this is the case in the majority of instances to which the hon. Gentleman referred, but it has been reported that householders have been led to believe that their insulation is deficient when it is working perfectly reasonably.

The Government have recently published additional guidance for consumers who suspect that they may have had faulty cavity wall insulation installed in their homes. This published guidance is useful for some people who feel that they may have been led astray. My Department is consistently working with the ECO administrator, Ofgem, the Treasury, the Insurance Fraud Bureau and the Financial Conduct Authority to explore further options for addressing this issue across the sector.

I do not know the details that the hon. Gentleman very ably set out in his speech. The first that I heard of many of them was today; I read the article that he had written and I was aware of some of the difficulties. What I would say in the spirit of candour that he adopted when he opened his remarks is that I am very happy to meet him and to discuss some of the more specific cases with which he is very familiar and with which, regrettably, I am less familiar. None the less, I do know the policy and the various schemes under which many of his constituents might have sought or had this insulation installed.

Broadly, cavity wall insulation remains one of the most cost-effective measures delivered under the ECO scheme, and we are absolutely committed to making sure that a measure of confidence in ECO and CWI continues. To reduce the chances of poor insulation, the Department continues to engage with suppliers, the industry and also with TrustMark, to ensure that continuous improvement in standards. My officials also work closely with the main provider of guarantees, the Cavity Insulation Guarantee Agency, which, when I have spoken to its representatives, has embraced the move to more rigorous standards.

It is not the place for me, as a Minister at the Dispatch Box, to comment on those specific charges about individuals. That is not what I would be expected to do. What I would be happy to do is to talk more in a private situation—one on one—so that he can explain the particular faults and irregularities in CIGA as they transpired to him.

Wayne David: But there are many.

Kwasi Kwarteng: There may well be many—

10.32 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

Westminster Hall

Monday 16 March 2020

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

Sentience and Welfare of Animals

4.30 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 242239 relating to the sentience and welfare of animals.

It is a genuine pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Roger, because I know how committed you have been to animal welfare over many years in Parliament. I am sure that if you were not in the Chair, you would be speaking in favour of the petition—I hope that is not slightly presumptuous of me.

There is widespread support for introducing the recognition of animal sentience, as enshrined in article 13 of the Lisbon treaty, into UK law. Nearly 104,000 people signed the petition that led to this debate, and 43 organisations are backing the Better Deal for Animals campaign. I have only just joined the Petitions Committee, and this is the first petition I am speaking in favour of, but it is a real privilege to be able to debate it because we have been pushing for it for such a long time. I have taken part in Petitions Committee debates as a Back Bencher and been slightly frustrated that the person moving the petition has not been fully on board with the sentiments behind it, but I can assure the petitioners that I very much agree with what the petition asks for.

I will explain later why the sentiment behind the petition is so important, but I want to retrace the journey that has led us to today's debate. Back in November 2017—well over two years ago—I added my name to a new clause to the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill that was tabled by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). New clause 30 called for the EU protocol on animal sentience, as set out in the Lisbon treaty, to be recognised in domestic law post Brexit. For some reason, the Government did not want to accept new clause 30; various reasons were given at the time.

However, in the face of a mass email campaign from the public—those of us who were Members back then will remember that it was a massive campaign—and vocal support from charities and NGOs, the Government clearly had to do something. They promised to legislate separately, and the draft Animal Welfare (Sentencing and Recognition of Sentience) Bill 2017—all three clauses of it—was published in December 2017 and put out for consultation. It is fair to say that the sentience provision, which was only one clause, was flawed, as we heard when we took evidence about it on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. The consultation closed at the end of January 2018, but it was not until August 2018 that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs got around to publishing the outcome. The only excuse I have heard for the delay is that the Department had been absolutely overwhelmed by the scale of the public response. That was in August 2018, and nothing has happened.

When questioned about the lack of action, one Minister told me that the Department wanted to legislate on sentience. We heard all the usual things about the lack of parliamentary time; again, however, those of us who were in the last Parliament know there was an awful lot of time when we were sitting around doing very little, and it would have been pretty easy to get a very short Bill through Parliament. The Minister did say to me at one point that the Department was looking for a suitable vehicle to introduce legislation, so I provided one. With help from animal welfare organisations, I tabled a ten-minute rule Bill in April 2019, hoping it would spur the Government to action, but it did not. In fact, I have heard that a draft Bill was produced in July 2019 and circulated across Departments. I have heard, too, that it has been shown to animal welfare campaign groups. I have some inkling of what might be in it, but I have not actually seen it. Still, it is progress of some sort.

Since July 2019, when that mysterious Bill was perhaps put into circulation, we have had two Queen's Speeches—in October and December—and there was no mention of the Bill in either. Despite the Government's assurances way back in November 2017 that they would legislate before Brexit, we have now left the EU, with no legislation in place. Indeed, the animal sentience provision is one of the only provisions that were not carried over and incorporated into UK legislation when we left the EU on 31 January 2020, and the measure needs to be in place by 1 January 2021. Clearly, we are starting to run out of time.

If we do not legislate now, there are a number of risks. For example, the import of lower-welfare animal products could be permitted under new trade deals. That is something that I, the Minister and others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), thrashed out in some detail in the Agriculture Bill—some of us for the second time. It is an important issue for animal sentience. Another issue is that developers might not have to consider the impact of new roads, housing or major infrastructure projects on wildlife in the area. Through its overseas aid or trade programmes, the UK could invest in the kinds of intensive farming systems that are not allowed in the UK because of animal welfare concerns. It would be more difficult to take action against inhumane wildlife management practices and wildlife crime.

I find the Government's reluctance to act utterly bewildering. They are very keen to talk about how we have the highest animal welfare standards in the world; introducing legislation would simply be a way to underpin them. There is widespread consensus around this issue—not just in the House—and it is fair to say that new clause 30 would have passed if it had been put to a vote back in late 2017. Most people agree with the then Secretary of State for DEFRA, who said in October 2018 that:

“Animals are our fellow sentient beings. They show loyalty and devotion, and they know pleasure and pain.”

In a real display of irony before he took up his post, the current Secretary of State even chastised the US for its position on this issue, saying they displayed a backward “resistance to even acknowledging the existence of sentience in farm animals.”

I turn to the Bill—to the extent that I can, given that we do not actually have one in front of us. Many of us feel that the Government should have a positive duty, not a negative duty, to pay all due regard to the welfare

[Kerry McCarthy]

needs of animals as sentient beings when formulating and implementing policies. It should not just be about ensuring that no pain or suffering is caused to animals, but about considering the five freedoms and ensuring they have happy, healthy and fulfilled lives. The Bill should provide for animal welfare assessments to be prospective, not retrospective: any report to Parliament involving the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee should be done before policy is made, not afterwards. That should apply to all policy areas and to all sentient animals.

I have heard reports that the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government is seeking to be excluded from the Bill's remit, which could mean that it would not have to pay due regard to matters of animal sentience when giving the go-ahead for planning permission for mega-farms. I think we all feel that the Government should be able to have a say on that beyond the concerns about slurry and local environmental impact, which are used at the moment to prevent things such as the Nocton dairy farm.

Many of us would like to see in the Bill a recognition of the sentience of decapod crustaceans such as crabs and lobsters, and of cephalopods such as cuttlefish, squid and the extremely intelligent octopus. Campaigns are being led by The Shellfish Network and Crustacean Compassion—the Minister is nodding, so I am sure she is aware of them. I have heard that research on whether such creatures are sentient beings has been put out to tender; the closing date is 2 April. The research will be carried out between May and November. Can the Minister tell us why the tender process has been held up for so long? We have been asking for this provision to go in the Bill ever since it was first mooted. If the research does not conclude till November, it will be too late to get the conclusion of that research into a Bill that has to be passed before 31 December.

There also needs to be a power in the Bill to create an animal welfare advisory commission. I understand that the Government support the idea to an extent, but there is no chance of its being established as a non-departmental body. It would instead be within DEFRA, which raises concerns that it would not really have the independence it needs. It would need to be able to advise all Departments, so it is not just a matter for DEFRA. Scotland recently set up its equivalent Animal Welfare Commission, with 12 independent commissioners appointed. Why cannot the UK Government commit to doing likewise?

We pride ourselves in this country on our strong record on animal welfare. As every Member present will know, few campaigns fill our postbags and email inboxes like those focused on animal welfare. However, we cannot be complacent and allow economic pressures to roll our standards back. Some people—a vocal minority—question whether such legislation is needed. Some people want greater licence to ignore animal welfare concerns, either so they can cram animals into ever more intensive and industrialised farming systems, or so they can pursue so-called country sports.

Consecutive Tory Governments have repeatedly promised to recognise animal sentience in law and have been given chance after chance to act and bring forward legislation. The time for excuses has passed; the time for action is now.

4.40 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve once again under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and to follow the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who made a very valuable speech.

I believe that animals are sentient beings and fully accept that they feel pain and suffering as well as pleasure. The amount of pleasure that we showed to our dog and that our dog showed to us served as a genuine indication that animals are genuinely sentient beings. However, we also need to consider the issue in the context of UK animal welfare standards, of which I am rightly proud, and of what we have achieved by setting them up. I would certainly pay great attention to that and ask the House to do so as well.

On the hon. Lady's point about the law, I do not believe that the inclusion of a new clause in the withdrawal Bill was the right way to go about this. It is always convenient to add more and more to Bills until they become nothing more than Christmas trees. That would have been the case in this instance; we could have added endless numbers of things to the Bill. Under existing UK law, animals are already recognised as sentient—I will try to find the reference during my speech. We already recognise in law that animals are sentient creatures, and we should hang on to that firm belief.

I am quite exasperated by the hon. Lady's mention of trade deals. I am not sure how much more has to be said or written to say that we are not going for cheap trade deals that bring contaminated food into the UK. The matter came up in this Chamber last week, and the Minister in that debate made the point—as indeed, did I—that that has been ruled out for very good reasons. I suggest that we remember that.

I want to raise a couple of concerns about the Government's response. Finn's law—the Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Act 2019—which, as the hon. Lady will know, was introduced as a private Member's Bill by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), is a very good indication of general as well as specific thinking. Specifically, the law ensures that service animals such as police dogs and horses are offered greater protection, which is extremely valuable, and removes a section of self-defence law that is often used by those who want to harm service animals. Finn's law is indicative of a wider appreciation of animals shown by the Conservative party, and there seems to be agreement across the House that we should show such appreciation. That is a very good indication for the future.

The Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill will increase maximum sentences for animal cruelty offences from six months to five years. That is an appropriate sentence to apply to those who commit such offences. Since some of those issues were first raised with us in 2018, I ask the Minister why not enough has been done in the short term to bring those changes forward. Why are we still having debates like this? Why have we not been presented with Bills so that we can make our commitment plain in debates in the main Chamber? I would be grateful if the Minister responded to that point.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): I am the promoter of the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill, which my hon. Friend mentioned. Second Reading will take place on Friday 12 June, and I hope that hon. Members present and across the House will support it.

John Howell: I think that 12 June will be a real red-letter day because of my hon. Friend's Bill. I urge everyone to support it.

4.46 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and to follow the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell). Unsurprisingly, I, like many hon. Members, have been inundated with constituents' emails and letters about animal sentience. We are a nation of animal lovers; nearly half of UK households have pets—we own approximately 51 million pets.

Like us, animals are sentient beings with feelings and emotions, and can also experience suffering and pain. It is crucial that the Government recognise animal sentience and place animal welfare at the heart of their policy agenda. I am proud to belong to a party that prioritises the welfare of animals: the Hunting Act 2004 banned fox hunting, while the Animal Welfare Act 2006 protected the treatment of domestic animals.

This month, the Barnsley Brownies collected food and treat donations for the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals animal centre. Their charity badges are well-earned symbols of their compassion and kindness. Programmes such as the RSPCA's generation kindness project help to teach those important values to schoolchildren and influence how they treat animals and each other. I encourage the Government to recognise the importance of those values.

The national curriculum should contain lessons on how to take care of animals, especially wild animals that have been taken from their natural environment and need to be returned safely and unharmed. No animal should be forced to endure unnecessary suffering. People who purposely harm animals for their own enjoyment, or simply because they believe that the pain of animals is beneath their consideration, should be appropriately punished.

The RSPCA's 24-hour cruelty line receives, on average, a phone call every 30 seconds. In a single year, more than 1,000 reports were made in Barnsley alone. I have worked closely with the RSPCA in Barnsley and seen at first hand the work it does, particularly when I travelled around the local area with an RSPCA inspector over an afternoon. It is not enough that those convicted of animal cruelty offences receive merely a slap on the wrist. We need tougher sentences to prevent those who might do harm to innocent creatures from doing so. All animals, domestic or wild, should be protected by the same five-year maximum sentence.

I call on the Government to enshrine animal welfare standards in UK law so that public authorities pay attention to animals' welfare needs as sentient beings when implementing public policy. We need legislation that recognises the sentience of animals, acknowledges their capacity to feel, and commits to protecting them as creatures deserving of respect.

4.48 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) on having secured not just one debate this afternoon, but two. It is good to see that so many parliamentarians are interested in animal welfare issues, because that certainly

never used to be the case. I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, who organised a splendid dinner last week. There are no political divides between us when it comes to our interest in animal welfare measures, although unlike her, I am not a vegan. She has done a splendid job by having secured this afternoon's two debates.

I was very keen to leave the European Union for all sorts of reasons. I think our animal welfare legislation is perhaps the best in the world. I will not use my brief contribution as an opportunity to attack the farming community, because it faces a number of difficult challenges, but that will not stop me speaking out about animal sentience. I am a proud patron, like you, Sir Roger, of the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation. I have worked very closely with those pushing to recognise animals as the sentient things that they are. Animal welfare is undoubtedly of increasing concern among the general public.

We are in the middle of a crisis; it is a nightmare, like the worst sort of science fiction movie ever. If older people are to be asked to spend more time in their homes, animals will be of enormous importance to them. Scientists have proven that animals are capable of feeling pain. There should be no argument about that. Animals suffer fear and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) said, they experience joy and comfort. Animals have evolved to give themselves the best possible chance of survival. Sentience extends to being able to identify situations that cause harm; for example, mother hens teach their chicks which foods are good to eat.

Over the years, I have been involved in most animal welfare issues, particularly the campaign to stop live exports of animals and put an end to millions of farm animals being forced to endure journeys of hundreds of thousands of miles for slaughter or fattening. I was taken by the fact that the Prime Minister, in perhaps his first speech, said:

"Let's promote the welfare of animals that has always been so close to the hearts of the British people."

I am sure his father and partner are a great influence in those matters, so it is good to know that the person in charge of our nation tells us that he regards this as a very high priority. Inhuman practices show a complete disregard for the fact that animals experience the pain, stress and suffering of cruel journeys.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Let me first put on record my interest as a trustee of World Horse Welfare. Does my hon. Friend agree that the very act of transportation causes enormous stress? Although, unlike him, I did not advocate leaving the European Union, this is one area where it could be an advantage, in that it will enable us to prevent the stress that is placed on animals that are transported to the continent.

Sir David Amess: My right hon. Friend made that point far better than I could, and I totally agree. It is unacceptable that animals are kept in appalling conditions and that the evidence that they experience fear and pain is ignored. As a matter of urgency, industries such as farming must recognise the sentience of animals. They are trying to recognise that and adjust their practices accordingly, but perhaps in the next debate I will be able to enlarge upon that.

[*Sir David Amess*]

The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) said that we are a nation of animal lovers. Of that there is no doubt. Colleagues on my side of the House have found that people power is influencing our views—the general public feel strongly about this. Although the Animal Welfare Act 2006 acknowledged that animals experience pain and suffering, it did not explicitly recognise animal sentience. Now that we have left the European Union, that should be introduced into legislation. The Minister might argue that it is not necessary, but I remain to be persuaded.

Many parliamentarians were delighted to meet Finn the dog for Finn's law part two, or the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill, which will increase the maximum sentence for animal cruelty from six months to five years. Finn's law came into force in June 2019 and put in place protections for service animals, such as police dogs and horses, from violent attacks. It is that sort of legislation that gives the United Kingdom its proud position of leading the way on animal welfare issues. That is why I want us to lead the way and enshrine animal sentience in law.

We have a very high standard in this country, but if we do not take action to legislate on animal sentience, we will put that proud record in jeopardy. I am glad that we have left the European Union, but I want the United Kingdom to influence the rest of the world through our already high standards.

4.55 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am pleased to participate in this debate, secured by a petition with over 100,000 signatures, just like the debate on farm animals immediately after this one. I thank the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for her comprehensive opening to the debate. Like probably every Member, I received a huge number of emails from my constituents about this issue, and it is important to give voice to their concerns.

Since being elected in 2015, I cannot recall any animal welfare debate in which I have not participated, from straightforward debates about animal welfare to puppy farming, microchipping cats, bans on ivory sales, the fur trade—the list is endless. Those matters are hugely concerning to those we represent, and the debates matter to them. As we have heard, animal sentience is a self-evident truth for all living creatures. They feel pain, pleasure, distress and fear. It is incumbent on anyone with an ounce of compassion or empathy to recognise that and act on it. As elected representatives, we act on that self-evident truth through legislation to ensure that the welfare of animals is protected to the fullest extent possible. The Scottish Government have recognised the importance of that and acted accordingly.

There is some concern, which has been touched on, about a reduction in animal welfare standards below EU common standards in the wake of Brexit. I know the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) was quite irritated that the issue had come up again, but it does not matter whether this is inconvenient or irritating; the fact is that the fear persists among our constituents. We do well to recognise their fears and address them as best we can. In that spirit, I hope the Minister will tell us that those concerns are completely unfounded and will put

to bed the ghost of chlorine-washed chicken, as that is in the public imagination. It does not matter whether that fear is real or imagined; if it persists, it needs to be addressed further. I hope the Minister can assuage those concerns suitably. Perhaps she will tell us what commitments her Government will make to reassure those who are concerned that animal welfare standards might be sacrificed, to whatever extent, during trade negotiations.

Animal welfare is devolved to the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish National party Scottish Government have an excellent record in this area, and in a variety of debates, some of which I listed, I have heard Members across party political lines recognising the SNP's work. A few months ago, the SNP's programme for Government set out a range of new animal welfare commitments, not least to maintain EU animal rights standards as a minimum, and that there must be no compromise on or diminution of the standards as trade talks proceed with the US. That is a genuine concern; Tory Back Benchers and Ministers might raise their eyes to heaven in impatience, but these matters are extremely important.

I am particularly pleased that the SNP Scottish Government are set to increase the maximum penalties for the most serious animal welfare offences to five years' imprisonment and/or unlimited fines, and to make changes to the maximum penalties for various wildlife offences.

Chris Loder: Can I put it to the hon. Lady that the SNP Government are perhaps following my example of leading the way and saying that we need to ensure that those who have committed the greatest crimes against animals should be punished with up to five years?

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is a new Member to the House, and I am sure he is a welcome Member to his friends and colleagues. I am sure he will correct me if I am wrong—I may well be—but I am sure this measure was in the pipeline for the Scottish Government even before he started his selection process. Having said that, I pay tribute to him for bringing this important matter forward to the UK Government, because sadly the SNP's measures do not apply across the UK. I am sure he will press and persuade his party of Government to do the right thing, and he must be applauded for that.

Kerry McCarthy: The hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) can be excused, because he is very new, but we did spend quite a lot of time in the last Parliament debating an increase in animal sentences. I pay tribute in particular to Anna Turley, my former colleague who was Member for Redcar, who, under the guise of Baby's law—a bulldog in her constituency had been appallingly treated and videoed while he was being abused—did a lot of the work. The new Member may get most of the glory, but I do not want Anna to be forgotten.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Lady for sharing those points. I say to the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder)—I will not call him a new Member because we have said that enough—that I have been calling for maximum penalties of five years since I was first elected in 2015, so I have got a wee bit of a head start on him. We support each other in these efforts, because, quite simply, that is the right thing to do.

Another new measure in the Scottish Government's programme for Government is on slaughterhouses. In Scotland, 80% of slaughterhouses have CCTV fitted, but that will become a requirement for all slaughterhouses under the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Bill. Indeed, the first independent animal welfare commission to be set up will look specifically at how the welfare needs of sentient animals are being met and what legislative and non-legislative measures can be implemented to make improvements, where required, and for animal welfare to proceed on an evidential basis.

I do not think there is any dispute about animals being sentient beings; no one would deny, or seek to deny, that. Therefore, there is a responsibility on all Governments to recognise that comprehensively in policy and practice through legislation. It is as simple as that. I hope the Minister will seek to match the good work undertaken by the Scottish Government in this area, especially as we negotiate trade deals post-Brexit. That is the kind of reassurance that she knows our constituents are looking for.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Ind): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Patricia Gibson: I am sorry; I have finished.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Too late.

5.2 pm

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): I am delighted to speak and represent the views of more than 150 of my constituents who contacted me to offer their support for the debate. Anyone who has been in the presence of a cow being separated from her calf, as she hurls herself repeatedly at the byre door to try to get to her baby, knows full well that animals are sentient beings. From the thousands of videos on Facebook and YouTube showing animals being released from laboratories for the first time into a space where they can see the sky and feel the grass under their feet, we know that animals experience joy. Who, watching an octopus drag ocean detritus to cover herself and hide in full view of the shark hunting her, would not feel awe at her intelligence or recognise her desire to live and protect her young?

On 27 November 2017, the Scottish Government recognised that sentience and stated that

“the Scottish Government fully accepts the principle of animal sentience and will take all appropriate action to safeguard animal welfare standards. Animal Sentience has been recognised in Scottish legislation for over a century”.

In keeping with that statement, on 29 February this year, the Scottish Government created the first independent animal welfare commission, consisting of 12 members who will provide ethical and scientific advice to the Scottish Government. It is chaired by Professor Cathy Dwyer, an eminent professor of animal behaviour and welfare.

The commission will consider how the welfare needs of sentient animals are being met by devolved policy, possible legislative and non-legislative routes further to protect the welfare of sentient animals, and the research required for an evidence base for future policy development. It will also specifically consider how current policies

take account of animal sentience, the wider welfare needs of animals and what improvements could be made.

In Westminster, the Government have yet to incorporate the Lisbon treaty article 13 acknowledgement of animal sentience into law. That is quite ironic, given that the original framework was initiated by the United Kingdom when they held the presidency of the European Union in 1997. The Government have stated that the sentience of animals will continue to be recognised, with protections strengthened once we leave the European Union. We have heard on many occasions that that is the Government's view, but no animal sentience legislation has been forthcoming. We welcome their commitment, but yet we wait. We were told in a written response on 14 March 2019 that officials continue to engage with stakeholders further to refine the Government's proposals.

Now we have left the European Union, it is even more critical that the Government, at a very minimum, have animal sentience as a keystone value within future policy. All existing animal welfare laws instigated and passed in the House of Commons are in place because we wish to stop animals being subjected to pain. We do therefore already recognise animal sentience and should bring that recognition into law.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for giving way and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for securing this important debate during these trying times. As an animal lover and owner, I have found the contributions of Members across the House touching. Will the hon. Member join me in commending the work of Friends of Animals Wales, a charity in my patch of Rhondda Cynon Taf, and in particular Eileen Jones? They do fantastic work with the Welsh Government against the barbaric puppy farming trade and are also pushing for Lucy's law to be implemented to protect all dogs from such awful treatment. I pay tribute to them for their fantastic work.

Allan Dorans: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and totally agree with her sentiments. It is my view that we need to enshrine the protection of animals in law.

Neale Hanvey: Anyone who has had a pet and loved them, with that relationship having built up over the years, knows that that creature is sentient. Does my hon. Friend share my frustration that sentience has been described as some unnecessary additional clause to be added to legislation and ascribed as an ornament on a Christmas tree? Does he agree that sentience is surely not an additional ornament, but a central and fundamental tenet of any legislation? The analogy of sentience being an ornament is so inaccurate because sentience is the tree—the central component of animal welfare. Does he also agree that, in line with the Scottish animal welfare commission, that should be a central part of policy making in Westminster?

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. Before we proceed, I see a number of new Members present, so let me make the point for the benefit of Members new and old that interventions are supposed to be interventions, not speeches. We welcome speeches. If anyone wishes to take part in the debate, please simply rise in the usual manner. An intervention should be brief.

Allan Dorans: Thank you, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I agree with the sentiments he expressed.

5.9 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I want to talk about my experience of the criminal justice system, and how the sentences I have seen being given are a reflection of society's attitude to animals and an indictment of how we treat animals in my profession.

I cannot calculate the number of lower court cases in which I have acted, during which I heard the most harrowing details of animal abuse in interviews conducted by the RSPCA. However, I cannot remember one occasion when a perpetrator was sent to prison. Those cases rarely went to the Crown Court, because of the sentencing powers that we are talking about.

I pay tribute to the Minister and to any Government who have legislated to support animal welfare, but we must increase the punishment available to our courts to reflect the fact that animals are sentient beings, and that we value them as such. We must find a way to ensure that sentencing within the criminal justice system acts as a deterrent to the people who act in the most appalling manner, rather than most people being able to walk away from the justice system with, at worst, a community penalty.

I could tell you how much I love animals, Sir Roger, but you do not want to hear that. I know that this Government are committed to the highest possible standards of welfare for animals, and that they will bring forward the measures they think are reasonable and appropriate to achieve those aims. I know this is not in the Minister's portfolio, but could she comment on any discussions she has had with colleagues in the Ministry of Justice about giving guidance to the courts, the prosecution and the RSPCA, which mounts such prosecutions, to ensure that we have a rigorous attitude to animal prosecutions and that the courts provide harsh but fair sentences?

5.11 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I am pleased to have the opportunity to sum up for my party in this important debate.

There cannot be an MP anywhere who does not receive a large quantity of correspondence on this subject; East Renfrewshire is no different. It is interesting that there are large numbers of us here in Westminster Hall, considering how quiet it is in Westminster today. That reflects the fact that people all over the United Kingdom are focused on this issue. I have been very interested by the excellent speeches that we have heard today, particularly that of my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who is a tireless advocate for animal welfare, as is the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who moved the debate in such an excellent and powerful way, taking us through how we got to where we are now.

Evidently, there is a degree of reluctance—it is hard to get away from that. Despite assurances from the UK Government, the issue of animal sentience is not being dealt with in the way that many of us think it should be. That is disappointing. As we move forward and leave

the EU, there are real risks for animals, including wildlife and farm animals, and in how crime relating to them is dealt with. The hon. Member for Bristol East rightly pointed out how odd it is that the UK Government speak so positively about animal welfare, yet here we are.

On a personal level, it is important to me that the SNP has a strong stance on this issue. I have been a vegetarian for several decades, if not a vegan, like the hon. Member for Bristol East, but I might get there. It has become increasingly important to me and many others to know that animals are offered appropriate and proper treatment, and to have an acknowledgment that they are sentient beings and ought to be treated accordingly.

The SNP is committed to improving animal welfare standards, which is welcome, and we are taking action in Scotland this year to ensure that that continues to be reflected in legislation. It is positive that the SNP Scottish Government recently introduced the Animals and Wildlife (Penalties, Protections and Powers) (Scotland) Bill. It sends a clear and important message that animal cruelty and wildlife crime will not be tolerated in Scotland. The Bill delivers on a promise that the Scottish Government made to create new legislation to further protect animals and wildlife. It would be interesting to hear whether the Minister intends to reflect it in similar legislation here.

To be clear, a sentient animal is one that can experience feelings such as pain or pleasure. We have all seen that in reality; we all know what it means. We can summon images to our minds, such as loving and beloved family dogs—the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) spoke positively about them—or horses kicking their heels for joy. My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans) spoke about cows and calves; I think we all know what he was talking about—there surely cannot be any doubt about the principle. The hon. Member for Henley said that he felt that sentience was covered by case law, but let us be sure and have clear, indisputable regulation rather than relying upon that.

The hon. Member for Bristol East spoke about the repeated promises about legislation that the UK Government made, but that were still unfulfilled. I wonder if the hon. Member for Henley, who was politely dismissive of the issue of welfare standards in trade talks, could reflect further on that. His assurances are welcome, but some real assurance is needed, not just the repetition that we do not need to worry about that.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran explained, there is significant concern amongst our constituents and many others. People are fearful about the issue of chlorine-washed chicken, among other things. We need to be able to reassure people on those matters, as well as on welfare. Foremost among the commitments that the SNP Government in Scotland have made is one to maintain animal rights standards as a minimum, and not to compromise those standards during trade talks. As we have heard again today, as the trade talks begin, we must be clear that those animal welfare standards must not be traded away by the UK.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) spoke about the cross-party interest in animal welfare. It is important that we acknowledge that and, given that, we should be able to find ways to move forward. We have heard that the Animals and Wildlife (Penalties, Protections and Powers) (Scotland) Bill increases

the maximum penalties in Scotland that can be applied to the most serious offences, and that five years' imprisonment or an unlimited fine are possibilities. I think there is an appetite across the House for similar measures here.

In terms of the slaughter of livestock, we support that being undertaken as close as possible to the point of production, and with full regard for animal welfare standards, which brings me to the issue of slaughterhouses in Scotland. More than eight in 10 slaughterhouses in Scotland have already installed CCTV coverage in their premises on a voluntary basis, but we will legislate in Scotland to ensure that that is a requirement for all slaughterhouses.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock spoke about the first independent Animal Welfare Commission, which is being put in place in Scotland. It will be chaired by Professor Cathy Dwyer. It will specifically look at how the welfare needs of sentient animals are being met, possible legislative and non-legislative routes to further protect the welfare of sentient animals and the research requirements to provide an evidence base for future policy developments. They are sensible and structured measures. The hon. Member for Bristol East pointed out that Scotland had recently done this and, quite reasonably, asked why the UK Government had not done the same.

There cannot be any doubt about the clear and uncompromising message that animal cruelty and welfare will not be tolerated in Scotland. I am grateful to the Scottish Minister for Rural Affairs and Natural Environment, Mairi Gougeon, who has done significant work on that. The hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) spoke powerfully about the need for consequences for people who mistreat animals and penalties that deter people. The provisions in the Animals and Wildlife (Penalties, Protections and Powers) (Scotland) Bill, which was introduced in September 2019, are the type of measures he is talking about. Hon. Members are always positive when they hear that the Bill includes increased penalties for attacks on service animals, otherwise known as Finn's law. We rightly hear a great deal about that.

In her powerful speech the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) told us where we need to be now. The Government need to pick up on all the issues and demonstrate that they are listening, and that they intend to put in place measures in which we can have confidence and on which we can rely, so that we can point them out to our constituents, who are so concerned about the welfare of animals.

I was pleased when Kirsteen Campbell, the chief executive of the Scottish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, said:

“These exciting changes—

those made by the Scottish Government—

have the potential to be transformational for animals across the country”.

That is important, because the way we deal with animals says much about us. It is heartening to hear the level of people's concern not to let such things slip by, and to take account of the need to make proper welfare provision for animals. I was struck by what the hon. Member for Southend West said about the challenges we face just now, and how important pets will be to many people. I reflect on a fantastic charity that started some years ago

in my area, called Give a Dog a Bone...and an animal a home. It links up elderly and lonely people with pets that need a home. We will need a great deal more of that kind of work, and I hope that people will feel able to support such organisations.

I hope that the people who signed the petition that secured this debate feel the issues that concern them have had an airing, and that the Minister will give some assurances that there are changes afoot, and that there will be some kind of regulation.

5.21 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It gives me great pleasure to respond to this very good debate on behalf of the official Opposition. There is cross-party support for enshrining animal sentience in law, and I want to express Labour's full-hearted support for the effort to do so. We have heard powerful speeches today, but there are also community groups in each of our constituencies who engage in advocacy and campaign for 21st-century animal welfare laws. We know that what we do will make a difference to animals—domestic animals, animals in agriculture, and others—if measures are put in place correctly.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for her unrelenting campaigning on this area. She has a good position on the Petitions Committee, which gives her a new platform, and will continue to use that with force, ferocity and cross-party support for as long as Ministers fail to listen to her arguments. She made a good argument today.

I congratulate the Minister. This is the first time since she has been in her new role that I have had the opportunity to speak from the Bench opposite her. I am a big fan of cross-party working, and for most animal welfare legislation there is a lot of cross-party support. Sometimes the only thing that holds us back is the ambition to achieve what cross-party support has the potential to deliver. In relation to animal sentience, we have an opportunity.

Alex Davies-Jones: On the basis of cross-party working, will my hon. Friend please push the UK Government to end the barbaric practice of puppy smuggling across the UK, which hurts so many domestic pets and families?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend raises an important issue and, if the Minister has not yet read Labour's animal welfare manifesto from the general election, it is very good and well worth reading. Puppy smuggling is dealt with under point 10. It is horrendously cruel, on an epic scale. There is huge public support for dealing with the cruelty that organised crime gangs perpetrate on those tiny little dogs.

The debate shows why Parliament's online petitions are good: the fact that 104,000 people signed and 43 organisations back the petition shows that there is public support for enshrining animal sentience in law. I thank everyone who clicked on the link, then went to their email inbox to find the email and clicked the confirmation link to make sure their name could be added. I thank them for participating in earlier petitions as well as the present one, because the arguments have not changed. There may have been a slight adjustment as to which faces are around the table, but the importance of animal sentience remains.

[Luke Pollard]

The petition states:

“EU law recognises animals as sentient beings, aware of their feelings and emotions.”

That is enshrined in the Lisbon treaty and the Government chose not to move that provision over in Brexit legislation. There was an outcry at the time and Ministers have been dragging their heels ever since, trying to make the case that although the issue is important, enshrining it in law is not really necessary. I say that it is necessary and important, and that there is cross-party support for doing it.

To be fair to the Government—I regard the present and previous Governments as one continuous Conservative Government, although I know they like to think of themselves as fresh, since December—in 2017 they introduced a Bill. They withdrew it in 2018, but we are yet to see any signs of the crucial legislation since then. However, in the intervening year, a prominent and successful Conservative Back Bencher wrote in *The Guardian*:

“There is currently a cross-party consensus that we should enshrine the recognition of animal sentience in statute to underpin all our existing policies and inform new ones.”

The writer was, of course, the brand new Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, during his brief sabbatical from the role of Minister. One reason I have a lot of time for the Environment Secretary is that initially when he was freed from the clutches of office he made a bold, clear case for changes in agriculture, fishing and animal welfare. I hope that now he is thrust back into ministerial office—in the Cabinet, no less—the same independence of thought that he demonstrated on the Back Benches will come into play.

In the same article in *The Guardian* he said:

“One option might be to suggest that the US introduce a similar piece of legislation at federal level to drive the modernisation of its own laws. We could even send British advisers to Washington to help them do it as part of our trade negotiations.”

I am not certain that the US President would take kindly to British trade advisers advising him on animal welfare standards, but there is something important there: the people with whom we want to do trade deals must not undercut our animal welfare standards, in relation to agriculture, domestic pets or any element of the high levels of animal welfare we enjoy at the moment.

Kerry McCarthy: I assume that my hon. Friend is referring to the same *Guardian* article that I mentioned in connection with the Agriculture Bill. It is hard to believe that the Secretary of State would have written for *The Guardian* twice during his brief period of freedom. Did he not go on to say that we should protect animal welfare and other standards in future trade deals by enshrining them in law—in the Agriculture Bill, for example?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is dead right. There is an amazing amount of good political meat in publications by the Environment Secretary from the time when he was on the Back Benches. It feels as if the Opposition do not need to remind him of them, because I am sure his officials have churned through those plentiful publications, and the amendments he tabled to an earlier Agriculture Bill. Sadly, his new batch of Ministers

recently voted against those proposals, but they include things for which there is a lot of support, and there is cross-party support for what we are discussing today.

I do not think British diplomats in Washington instructing President Trump to raise his domestic animal welfare standards to get a trade deal with the UK would work, but it is important to maintain high levels of protection in law, so that during negotiations the people we are negotiating with know the strength of feeling of the British people and Parliament: that we will not accept any lowering of standards or undercutting of them in any trade deal. That is why we need the animal sentience legislation to be implemented before the end of the implementation period. We cannot allow our animal welfare standards to fall behind those of the EU, especially after the plentiful promises of Conservative Ministers.

The animal sentience legislation that I hope the Minister will announce needs to apply to all policy areas and all sentient animals. If an animal is sentient, they are sentient no matter how they are being used by humans or where they are living. The law needs to confer an active duty to respect that sentience on all aspects of government. Simply having a function within DEFRA to advise the rest of Government is insufficient because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East said, there are other Departments that need to reflect the importance of animals in their day-to-day work and that might not, as standard, take animal sentience on board. That is why an independent monitor is such a good idea.

The legislation should require the Government to publish an annual report detailing how the duty has been acted on, including the policy options considered and what animal welfare impact assessments have been undertaken. It also needs to recognise that decapods and cephalopods—that is, crabs and lobsters, octopuses and squids—are sentient animals. In Labour’s animal welfare manifesto, which, again, is a very good read and still available on the website, we make the case that lobsters experience anxiety, crabs use tools, and octopuses have been known to predict the results of football matches—at least, that is not quite in the manifesto, but the sense of it is.

That is why, in our manifesto, we talk about not allowing those precious creatures to be boiled alive, for instance. We know that if you put a lobster in a boiling pot of water, it experiences pain. The pain may be lessened by the experience of being slowly heated, but it is pain none the less, and there are better ways of doing it.

The petition calls for a new body to support the Government in their duties to animals, which I referred to briefly, to ensure that

“decisions are underpinned by...scientific and ethics expertise.”

It has been proposed under a few names. The experience of Scotland was mentioned by the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), and the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans) spoke about how Scotland has already got there. In Scotland, it is called the animal welfare commission, but it could also be an animal welfare advisory council. In our manifesto, we talk about an animal welfare commissioner. Regardless of the name or the precise format, the function is the same: to support and critically analyse, to advise Ministers and Government to make the right decisions, and to ensure that the effects are truly understood.

My party prides itself on being the party for animal welfare. At the last election, we were the only party to publish a manifesto exclusively on animal rights. In it, we set out how we would appoint an independent animal welfare commissioner to operate in England and in collaboration with the devolved Administrations. Now that the UK is no longer a member of the European Food Safety Authority, we need to establish a body that can advise DEFRA and all of Government independently, and to represent the wealth of scientific, ethics and animal welfare expertise available in the UK.

We know that at the moment there is no specific body that is under a statutory duty to enforce the welfare requirements of Labour's landmark Animal Welfare Act 2006, which my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) mentioned. That needs to be placed on a statutory footing, and an animal welfare commissioner would help to achieve that. I recommend that the Minister cut and paste that from our manifesto into her Department's work plan; if she did, it would enjoy the cross-party support that we have seen from the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), who were united in the same effort here.

The commissioner would be responsible for gathering the latest scientific evidence on animal sentience and welfare, to ensure that there is the most up-to-date, evidence-based understanding across Whitehall, and to ensure that our nation maintains its top ranking in the animal protection index. Working alongside Government, the commissioner would assist in the promotion of best practice in animal welfare internationally because, although we pride ourselves on the legislative framework, Britons care about animal welfare both at home and abroad. To see that, we need only look at changes that the tourism industry has made to remove animals from so many of the products sold to British tourists, because that is not something Brits support.

Ministers are often found saying that the legislation that has been proposed now that we have left the EU is world leading, but time and again the evidence does not support that high-falutin' soundbite. The Bills that have come out of DEFRA recently on agriculture and the environment have, I am afraid, been disappointing, at a time when many of us—including many of the "greenies" from across the parties and across the divide here—had high hopes that they really would deliver on that promise.

We cannot be world leading without an animal welfare commissioner. We are not even leading in the UK, because Scotland already has an animal welfare commissioner. England is already lagging behind. That matters as well. My little sister is a sheep farmer in Cornwall and, if she were to move north of the border, the animals that she now keeps in Cornwall would have a different legislative framework and different protections. That does not quite seem right for the same sheep, and I think there is an option to look at that again. I am not advocating taking sheep out of the Secretary of State's own county along the way, for fear of offending him, but having those standards across our islands is important when it comes to animal welfare.

As I conclude, I will mention briefly the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), who said in his remarks that he was exasperated by the language around chlorinated chicken. Indeed, many people in this place are, and the answer is very simple: put it in the Bill. That would

prevent our standards from ever being undercut. If the hon. Gentleman believes the words of Ministers—they are said so very often—there is no reason for that not be put in a Bill, because those words are already on record. The thing is, I do not believe Ministers when they say that. There is an important element of building trust in these areas.

James Daly: Can I ask a very simple question? What shred of evidence does the hon. Gentleman have to back up what he has just said?

Luke Pollard: The difficulty when we sit on the Opposition Benches, where our job is to scrutinise rather than to support, is that we look for evidence of the words. There is a genuine risk that standards could be undercut.

It is important to make a distinction here, because this is frequently lost in interventions, although I hope that will not be the case with the hon. Gentleman. It is not that we think the Government will somehow lower our standards immediately, but by signing trade deals that undercut our standards and permit food produced to lower animal welfare standards or with negative environmental impacts, we will be allowing in produce that undercuts our own farmers and our high animal welfare standards, and that creates an incentive to lower regulatory pressures in the UK—or protections, as the Opposition like to think of them.

That is not something that is supported. It is not supported by Labour, it is not supported by the SNP and it is not supported by many Conservative Members, nor is it supported by the National Farmers Union and other groups. There are elements of cross-party support for keeping standards high and keeping that in law; it is one of those areas where we can come together on a cross-party basis to say that animal sentience should be in law. If we did, it should be a simple Bill with good scrutiny—the Minister knows that there are many experts in this House who would happily advise her for free along the way—because it is important that we get it done. At the moment, far from getting done, it is just getting delayed.

I hope that the Minister, when she gets to her feet, will give a boost to the petitioners—all 104,000 of them, in nearly every single parliamentary constituency of the country—and reassure them that this petition will not only enjoy warm words from Government, but see Government action before the end of the implementation period at the end of this year.

5.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): It really is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this important debate, Sir Roger. I am not sure that we have yet reached a point on animal welfare where we are sharing glory, but if there is glory to be shared, you should certainly have a part in that, as should many of the hon. Members who have spoken in today's debate. I recognise that many hon. Members here have been involved in this area for a long time and will continue to be involved, and that is to be welcomed.

I thank in particular the Petitions Committee and its representative in this Chamber, the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), for giving us the opportunity

[*Victoria Prentis*]

to discuss this important subject. I also thank the 104,000 people who signed a petition to say that it is important that the House have this debate.

I start by saying that we should be proud of this country's animal welfare record. In preparing for the debate, I had a little look at the history books. We started legislating for animal welfare in the 1830s—a long time before we put into place many other provisions that we would now consider essential, such as for the protection of children—so it is true that we are keen on protecting animals in this country.

It has never been in dispute that, of course, animals are sentient beings. Today's debate demonstrates once again that we are a nation of animal lovers. All colleagues will know how deeply their constituents feel about these issues. We see that all the time in the love and money that people give to animal charities. We have heard today about the work that the Barnsley Brownies have been doing, and the excellent work that Give a Dog a Bone has been doing in East Renfrewshire. I pay tribute to all those who are involved in that way.

James Daly: If we are mentioning community groups, I must speak up on behalf of my constituent Helena Abrahams, who runs Gizmo's Legacy. We talk about how we treat animals and how important they are to us, but, as the Minister knows, thousands of cats are disposed of every year without being scanned for a chip by local authorities. Cats are part of the family and need to be returned home rather than simply thrown into landfill. Will she agree to meet me or Ms Abrahams to discuss the matter further?

Victoria Prentis: It will give me enormous pleasure to agree to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that. I am a former officer of the all-party parliamentary group on cats and, indeed, the proud keeper—I certainly would not call myself the owner—of Midnight, voted parliamentary cat of the year the year before last. He definitely keeps me fully under control and has no difficulty in telling me about all his welfare needs.

Until 31 December, we are covered by article 13 of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union, but the Government have committed to introducing new laws on sentience, as we heard many times. We had an extremely clear manifesto commitment to do that, and I confirm that we will do so as soon as we can, but I am sadly unable to say exactly when that will be.

Obligations on keepers of animals under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 make it an offence to cause unnecessary suffering to any animal, and anyone responsible for an animal must take reasonable steps to ensure that the animal's welfare needs are met. At this point, I thank those vets, charities and animal welfare organisations working around the clock with Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs officials in these difficult times of reacting to the spread of the coronavirus to develop guidance for pet and livestock owners. We want to help owners and keepers to take proportionate hygiene measures while supporting animal welfare.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) spoke of the comfort that animals can give us in these frightening times, which was an important, well-made point. We are pleased to support

the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill, a private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder), who has just popped out of the room. It had its First Reading on 5 February 2020. It is the same Bill that the Government introduced in the last Parliament, and this small but critical piece of legislation will increase maximum sentences for animal welfare abuses tenfold, from six months to five years. It was good to hear the breaking news during the debate that we will next hear about this important Bill on 12 June.

I understand the concerns raised about the loss of protections as we leave the EU. I have never spoken ill of Government lawyers, and I certainly would not like to start now, but article 13 of the Lisbon treaty was proposed and promoted by UK Government lawyers. It states, as I think we all agree, that animals are sentient beings and that the EU and member states should pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals when formulating and implementing policies, but only in relation to a limited number of EU policy areas. Article 13 also provides some wide-ranging exemptions for cultural and religious practices and so on. It does not—I hesitate to criticise it, but we must—confer directly applicable rights or legally enforceable requirements. Frankly, it does not provide the sort of protection for animals that we want going forward.

Now that we have left the EU, we have the opportunity, as my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West said so powerfully, to do things differently and in a way that reflects the importance we attach to animal welfare. Of course, what really matters is that we can enforce standards of animal welfare. I listened with interest to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly). We must find a way to ensure that sentencing acts as a deterrent, and I am extremely happy, given my legal background, to have many conversations with him about that, so we shall take that offline.

We have some world-leading animal protections in place in this country. The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) will be pleased that we have introduced a ban on the commercial third-party sale of puppies and kittens, known as Lucy's law, and I pay tribute to the charity from her constituency that worked on that. The ban will help to clamp down on puppy farming and to ensure that our much-loved pets have the best start to their lives. It comes into force on 6 April, which will be welcomed.

Alex Davies-Jones: My birthday.

Victoria Prentis: On your birthday? That is good news. We have coupled the ban with a very effective public awareness campaign—not everything is to do with legislation; there are other methods of getting the animal welfare message out there—called “Petfished”, on how to source puppies and kittens responsibly and how to watch out for the tricks that clever and deceitful sellers use in this area. I encourage all those who have not seen it to have a quick google.

The Wild Animals in Circuses Act 2019 recently came into force, ensuring that wild animals can no longer perform in travelling circuses. CCTV is now mandatory for all slaughterhouses in England. We also support the Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Act 2019, commonly known as Finn's law, which increases protections

for police animals. It was mentioned by my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell). I spoke from the Back Benches in favour of that Act, as I think he did, and I met Finn, which was truly an honour.

The Government will introduce the necessary legislation on animal sentience as soon as we can, and I look forward to debating the details of the legislation with Members, particularly those present. Several useful points have been made during the debate, which I will take back and feed in.

There is considerable and growing interest in cephalopods and decapod crustaceans and whether they are sentient. At DEFRA, we have to follow the science, and because we want to ensure that this matter is progressed, we commissioned an independent review of the science on the sentience of those creatures, as the hon. Member for Bristol East said. A tender for the review was published on 6 March, and its findings will provide us with a robust scientific view later this year. I do not know the history of this matter, I am afraid—I have been the Minister only since just before the review was commissioned—but I think it is important that we look carefully at what that review says. It will be a full review of the evidence out there, and I look forward to sharing it and discussing it with the hon. Lady.

Kerry McCarthy: I sort of look forward to that, but if the research is due to run from May to November, and if this legislation has to be in place by the end of December, and given that we will obviously break up for Christmas, when will we actually have that debate? What is the window for that legislation to be brought forward? I do not see that it can make it.

Victoria Prentis: While absolutely committing to bring forward the legislation at some point, I am not committing to bringing it forward this year, which I am seeking to explain is not necessary because other protections are in place.

I have listened with interest to discussions on sentience, including on whether a new animal welfare advisory body should be created. It is clearly important that the Government receive the right expert advice when assessing the impacts on welfare needs. Various models might be appropriate. DEFRA already has an animal welfare committee tasked with providing independent, impartial advice to Ministers on welfare matters. We heard from the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans) about the introduction of the Scottish animal welfare commission to provide advice on sentience. It undertakes interesting work, and I assure the hon. Gentleman that we follow the progress of that commission extremely closely. The Home Office's Animals in Science Committee advises on all matters concerning the use of animals in scientific procedures. There are a number of models that we can choose from, and we are actively exploring the options.

I thank the hon. Member for Bristol East for securing the debate on this important issue. I know that she attempted to introduce a private Member's Bill on it in the last Parliament. Unfortunately, there was no parliamentary time to debate it, but I look forward to debating our new proposals with her when we can bring them forward. The Government place great importance on the welfare of animals, and the measures I set out

demonstrate the steps that the Government have taken, and continue to take, to strengthen our high animal welfare standards.

I end, because it is important that I do this, by putting to bed the ghosts of the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and reaffirming, whether necessary or otherwise, that the Government are absolutely committed to maintaining high standards of animal welfare, food security and environmental protection. The Secretary of State, as the shadow Minister rather teasingly referred to, is very committed to high standards, as am I. Chlorinated chicken is absolutely not allowed under English law; it is simply not something that we have to worry about. High standards are here, and we hope that higher standards will come in the future. Nobody need be worried about spooks in the night.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): I call Kerry McCarthy to wind up the debate.

5.49 pm

Kerry McCarthy: For clarity, Sir Roger, may I ask whether I have a set amount of time, or until 6 o'clock? I do not intend to speak until 6 o'clock, but the position is not that I specifically have 90 seconds to sum up the debate, is it?

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): For clarity, the next debate cannot start before 6 o'clock.

Kerry McCarthy: Okay. I will not take up that much time.

The Minister's response has left me thoroughly confused and more than a little concerned, and I think that the people from the campaign "A Better Deal for Animals", some of whom are watching here today, will be equally alarmed by what she said. It might not have been my belief, but my understanding was that the Government were committed, in their manifesto, to introducing the law as soon as possible. First, there was the original promise. Let us not forget that there was going to be a Back-Bench revolt. New clause 30 had been introduced by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). The Government were going to lose on that. The Government made a promise that they would legislate, so that they did not lose. They bought off their own Back Benchers, as well as the Opposition, by promising to legislate.

Therefore, there was a promise to legislate before Brexit, which has turned into a promise to legislate before the end of the transition period. There was a manifesto commitment to do this as soon as possible, but the Minister has just said that it might well not be this year.

Victoria Prentis: It is important to clarify this matter, as the hon. Lady has raised it specifically. The manifesto commitment is to bring forward the legislation as soon as possible. That is absolutely our position and that is what we will do. However, being realistic, we are in an emerging situation. We do not know what will happen over the next few months, and there are three very important DEFRA Bills going through both Houses of Parliament. I cannot, in those circumstances, absolutely swear to her that it will be this year. I tried to give

[Victoria Prentis]

reassurance in my speech that we already have animal welfare safeguards in our law, but the Government's position remains the same: we will bring the legislation forward as soon as possible. Unfortunately, I do not know exactly when that will be.

Kerry McCarthy: The manifesto was obviously for the election towards the end of last year, and we then had a Queen's Speech. One would have thought that if there was a manifesto commitment to do something as soon as possible, the Bill would have been mentioned in the Queen's Speech. I appreciate that there are pressures on DEFRA and I certainly appreciate that there are many more pressures on the Government now than there were back then, but I do not think that we can use the coronavirus as an excuse for not having put something in the Queen's Speech when none of us knew about that at the time. My concern is that the Minister seems to be trying to have it both ways by saying, "We will legislate; we have promised to legislate," while also saying, "We don't really need to legislate."

This might genuinely be the Government's view: "We do not feel that we need to legislate; we already have protections in law, but we know that at some point we will have to bring in a law, because we promised to do that to get out of an awkward situation." We saw that with the Bill that became the Wild Animals in Circuses Act 2019. That was a far smaller matter, but again there was, I think, an Opposition day debate, and a huge number of people were supporting the change. Then it was dragged out; there was pre-legislative scrutiny and all sorts of things for a tiny little Bill that applied to, I think, 21 animals. It took forever.

My fear is that the Minister is trying to kick this issue into the long grass in the same way as the Wild Animals in Circuses Bill was in the long grass for an awfully long time. Many people outside the House will not be happy at all with this situation. Therefore, I will conclude by saying that there was a commitment to bring the concept of animal sentience into UK law. There was not a commitment to show people or illustrate by examples that it is already covered in UK law. We had that argument.

The commitment was to put this into UK law. There was then a manifesto commitment to put it into UK law as soon as possible. This is all very much Brexit related, and it was meant to be done by exit day—the end of January this year. Perhaps the transition period will be extended. Who knows? But the Government have made a clear commitment, and everyone expects them to live up to that commitment.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): I must now put the Question. Unfortunately, although most of the main players for the next debate are here, we must wait until 6 o'clock to start it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 242239 relating to the sentience and welfare of animals.

5.54 pm

Sitting suspended.

Caging of Farm Animals

GERAINT DAVIES *in the Chair*

6 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 243448 relating to the caging of farm animals.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and to introduce the second petition in my time on the Petitions Committee. This petition, "End the cage age", which was led by Compassion in World Farming and backed by a dozen other animal welfare non-governmental organisations, is another one held over from the last Parliament. The petition closed at the start of last September with 107,187 signatures. I remember that it was listed for debate, but another Brexit petition meant that it could not be debated. The then Minister, who is now in the Lords, was very disappointed, because he was keen to see some action on this. However, here we are. Better late than never.

The petition states:

"Across the UK, millions of farmed animals are kept in cages, unable to express their natural behaviours."

That relates to the earlier debate on animal sentience. The petitioners

"call on the UK government to end this inhumane practice by banning all cages for farmed animals."

That would entail bringing forward legislation to amend the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007 and to phase out the use of sows in farrowing crates, individual calf pens, and barren and enriched cages for farmed animals including laying hens, rabbits, pullets, broiler breeders, layer breeders, quail, pheasants, partridge and guinea fowl.

The Petitions Committee tries to do outreach on some of the petitions and it reached out to farmers ahead of the debate by posting on the Farming Forum website. There was not an overwhelming response, but everybody has other things on their mind now. Among the responses that came in were the following comments:

"Animal welfare is of paramount importance to farmers."

"It is in farmers' interest to treat livestock well."

"It is a small minority of farmers that mistreat their animals."

It is important to put on record that this debate is not anti-farmer; it is about ensuring that current standards are adhered to and showing that we can do better, as we know other countries have. We always ought to look at how we can move animal welfare forwards, not backwards.

There has been some welcome progress at the European level over the years. There have been EU-wide bans on veal crates and barren battery cages for laying hens, and a partial ban on sow stalls. As I am sure the Minister would tell us, sow stalls have been banned altogether in the UK, which shows that being in the EU did not stop us going further when we wanted to, although that is often used as an excuse. Animals have been recognised as sentient beings in EU law under the Lisbon treaty, which we have already discussed.

Cages continue, however, to be used on British farms, despite well-established alternatives that allow animals to express their individual needs and have been proven to be economically viable. If the UK wishes to maintain

and enhance its status as a global leader in farm animal welfare as we leave the EU, we ought to follow the lead of those European countries that have already banned caged systems.

“End the cage age” campaigners found the Government’s written response, published when the petition reached 10,000 signatures—quite some time ago—hugely disappointing. I hope we will hear more from the Minister today than a repetition of that response. The Minister’s officials look saddened. I do not know if one of them wrote the response. I am sorry if that was the case, but we would like a more encouraging response today.

In their response, the Government suggested that the main determining factor in protecting animal welfare is “good stockmanship and the correct application of husbandry standards.”

Caged systems, however, which prevent so many essential natural behaviours, mean that welfare will inevitably be very poor, no matter how good the stockmanship is. A sow confined in a crate in which she cannot turn around will suffer because she will not be able to exhibit natural behaviours, even with the best care and stockmanship.

The Government go on to say in their response that cages have already been banned

“where there is clear scientific evidence that they are detrimental to animal health and welfare.”

However, a wealth of robust scientific evidence demonstrates that enriched cages for laying hens and farrowing crates for sows are highly detrimental to welfare, yet they remain in use for millions of animals. I am still working my way through the Government’s response, which continues:

“Enriched cages provide more space for the birds to move around than conventional cages and are legally required to provide nest boxes, litter, perches, and claw shortening devices which allow the birds to carry out a greater range of natural behaviours.”

No one is arguing that enriched cages might not be better than an alternative, but that does not mean that they meet animals’ needs.

The reality is that hens confined in enriched cages still have only a little more space than an A4 sheet of paper per pen. These cages severely restrict many natural behaviours, including wing-flapping, running, perching at a reasonable height above the ground, dust bathing and foraging. Germany, Austria and Luxemburg have banned, or are in the process of banning, enriched cages. The UK should not lag behind, not least because the main supermarkets have already stopped selling eggs from caged hens or have committed to do so by 2025.

We could argue that if people can buy eggs produced to the welfare standards they want, it is down to consumer choice. What is the problem? However, when eggs started being stamped with method of production, it made a big difference in consumer patterns. That is why some of us are keen to see method of production on other forms of produce. However, many people would not make that choice, whether because of price, availability or lack of awareness. When eggs end up in other products, one does not know their method of production. Just relying on consumers to take the lead is not the answer.

On sows, the Government boast that the UK is ahead of most other EU pig-producing countries in terms of non-confinement farrowing, with 60% of sows in crates

to give birth and the remaining 40% housed outside and free-farrowed, that is, crate-free. The Government said in their response:

“Research is on-going to develop and test indoor free farrowing systems under commercial conditions which protect the welfare of the sow, as well as her piglets.”

Again, the reality is that several indoor free farrowing systems that give the sow freedom of movement while protecting piglets are already commercially available and in use in several countries including the UK, so I am not sure what research the Government are talking about. Indeed, systems designed and produced in Britain are being used in the UK, USA and Canada. Sweden, Norway and Switzerland have already legislated to ban the routine use of farrowing crates. Again, Britain should not lag behind the leaders in recognising the science and ending unnecessary suffering.

On calf pens, the Government said in their response:

“The UK unilaterally banned the keeping of calves in veal crates in 1990, sixteen years before the rest of the EU. However, as young calves are highly susceptible to disease, up to 8 weeks of age, they are permitted to be kept in individual hutches of a specified size with bedding provided, as long as they have visual and tactile contact with other calves.”

The organisations that support the “End the cage age” petition argue that, in reality, group housing from birth can provide health and welfare benefits for calves, provided that groups are small and stable, and that housing provides sufficient space and ventilation, and is hygienic and well managed. Cattle are social animals, and evidence shows that calves are much more stressed and fearful when housed individually, preferring to be housed with other calves.

On layer and broiler breeders, the Government said in their response:

“In the UK, the use of cages to house both layer breeders and broiler (meat chicken) breeders is prohibited under the UK’s farm assurance scheme standards.”

It is not compulsory, however, to sign up to a farm assurance scheme. Outside those farm assurance schemes, cages for layer breeders and broiler breeders are not prohibited.

The final example I will give is game birds. About 50 million game birds are purpose bred to be shot each year. The vast majority of those are pheasants. Around a third of that total are actually shot and about 3 million make it into the food chain. However, that is a debate for another day. There is a debate on driven grouse shooting—I do not think it covers pheasants and partridges—that we might just get around to having before the Easter recess. Again, that is a Petitions Committee debate. For the purposes of this debate today, however, I will not get into the ethics of that issue.

Breeding birds used to produce the birds that will be shot are often confined to raised metal cages that are placed outdoors for the whole of their productive lives. It is true that statutory welfare codes for game birds state that barren raised cages for breeding pheasants and small barren cages for breeding partridges should not be used. However, as I understand it, that is only a recommendation; it is not legally binding and it does nothing to discourage the use of such cages. Even the British Association for Shooting and Conservation called for an outright ban back in 2010, stating that “the available space in such cages is so limited that the welfare of the birds is seriously compromised and the system does not conform, whether enriched or not, to the five freedoms which are the basis of the UK’s animal welfare law.”

[Kerry McCarthy]

In 2009, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs initiated a major study, costing more than £420,000, into whether cages could meet the welfare needs of game birds used for breeding. The report was not published until July 2015. I had completely forgotten how many written questions there were, and how much we had done to try to chase the Government, asking, “Where on earth is this report?” Of course, the study was commissioned by a Labour Government. Then, when there was a coalition Government, it just seemed to disappear entirely. As I said, it took until July 2015 for the report to be published. However, the eventual report was pretty disappointing, in that it did not examine the issue of whether cages could be justified; it just compared cages of different sizes and with different types of enrichment.

Before I conclude, I will briefly mention the Agriculture Bill, which currently awaits a date for its Report stage in the House of Commons. Clause 1 sets out a new system of farming subsidies, seeking to ensure that public money is used to deliver public goods. Those public goods include improving animal welfare, but the Bill is silent on what constitutes better animal welfare, or exactly what farmers would be rewarded for, although I think that we made it clear in Committee that farmers should not be rewarded just for meeting the current legal standards. They should be rewarded for going above that level, but then the question arises: how far above that level is worthy of reward? Many of us are keen to see that it is those farmers who are willing to go substantially beyond the legal minimum requirements of normal good practice, not only on preventing animals from suffering but in giving them positive experiences, who should be rewarded under the financial incentives in the new subsidies system.

To ensure that financial assistance supports genuinely higher levels of animal welfare, the Bill should provide that payments may only be made in respect of farms that enable animals to engage in their natural behaviours, as identified by scientific research. Farmers operating cage systems should not receive any support under animal welfare payments.

If the UK truly wishes to be the global leader in animal welfare, we need to take steps to end the cage age for more than 6 million animals that are confined each year. Several countries across the EU have already prohibited certain cages that we still allow in the UK. The UK needs to set an example and take an ambitious approach to increasing the number of animals farmed to higher animal welfare standards if it is not to be left behind.

6.13 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

I was very keen to take part in this debate because it is in response to a public petition. As a result, we are partaking in democracy in action and I was very keen to come along to contribute. I am also delighted to take part to ensure that I represent the many constituents of mine in Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill who signed not only this petition but the petition that was discussed in the previous debate.

Animal welfare is taken extremely seriously in Scotland and by the Scottish Government. The Scottish National party has been very vocal in addressing concerns about the caging of animals and we are currently taking steps to strengthen animal welfare legislation through our Parliament. Indeed, a consultation seeking views on proposals to strengthen the enforcement of animal welfare legislation by increasing the maximum available penalties and the use of fixed penalty notices took place in Scotland, and it has guided the Animals and Wildlife (Penalties, Protections and Powers) (Scotland) Bill, which had its stage one debate in the Scottish Parliament just last week, on 12 March. The Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 makes it an offence to cause any animal unnecessary suffering.

Recently, MEPs voted in Strasbourg to demand a new law to protect animals, and called on national Governments right across Europe to roll back on intensive battery farms for rabbits, and to financially reward farmers who use pens instead of cages. They have also called for the European Commission to come forward with housing guidelines for rabbits and other animals, and to ensure that imported animals enjoy the same welfare rights and the same food criteria as their domestically reared counterparts.

The SNP Scottish Government invest £20 million a year in support of animal health and welfare, and they employ highly skilled and qualified workforces across Scotland, led by our chief veterinary officer, Sheila Voas. The Government in Scotland also recently introduced an animal welfare Bill, which sends a clear message that animal cruelty and wildlife crimes will not be tolerated in Scotland, nor indeed—hopefully—across the United Kingdom. So, if the UK leads the world on this issue, as a Scotsman it is comforting to know that that once again Scotland is leading the UK; of course, that is not for the first time and not only in this particular area.

The Scottish animal welfare Bill is rightly far-reaching and punitive. If someone is found to cause unnecessary suffering to any animal, whether it be a pet, livestock or an animal involved, say, in the practice of animal fighting, that will result in a custodial sentence of up to five years and the potential for an unlimited fine. These measures will go some way to combating those who make money from these inhumane and barbaric practices. If the UK needs a precursor, it need look no further than Edinburgh and the Scottish Parliament.

The Bill will deliver on the Scottish Government’s commitment to create new legislation to further protect animals and wildlife. We will ensure that the welfare needs of animals are met by placing a duty of care on the people who are responsible for their upkeep and maintenance. The welfare of all our protected animals is provided for under the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006, which places a duty of care on pet owners and others responsible for animals to ensure that the welfare needs of animals are constantly met. The Scottish Government will produce supplementary information in the guidance for that Act, and will update that guidance regularly. The programme for Government of 2019-20 commits to increasing the penalties set out in the 2006 Act for causing unnecessary suffering, resulting in a five-year term of imprisonment and an unlimited fine, as I have previously mentioned.

We know fine well that this is an area that many people across the United Kingdom have serious concerns about; the sheer number of people who signed both the petitions that we have debated today illustrates that perfectly. The direction of travel in a post-Brexit set of nations is key in how we implement further legislation. If the UK truly wishes to be a world leader on this issue, we must enact these changes, accept that they need to be made, and show a desire to implement them.

I also agree with the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who opened this debate, that if we are going to end the use of cages and pens, we should ensure that the moneys given out go to the people who enact the policies that we want to see across the United Kingdom.

6.19 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) on leading this debate on the second petition we are considering today, and on the detail of her speech. I commend her for what she said and I agree with her completely. Science has shown that animals have the capacity to feel and have emotions, as was made clear in the previous debate, and it is vital that the UK Government recognise that.

I wish to pay tribute to Compassion in World Farming. The day before we left the European Union, I was in Brussels and I went to the Compassion in World Farming headquarters to discuss various issues. It does a first-class job. At last week's dinner, which the hon. Member for Bristol East hosted, I was very impressed with the chief executive who explained how the organisation started, which was as a result of farmers. When the hon. Lady said that farmers do love animals, she was absolutely right. Many of them are what we could describe as big softies, so I do not think it is the House's intention today to bully them. Great progress has been made but, as ever, I want them to go further.

There is huge support on the issue. Without wishing to put too much pressure on my hon. Friend the Minister, the aspirations of more than 100,000 people will or will not be met, depending on how she responds to this debate. Like many colleagues, I am appalled by the cruel conditions in which millions of farm animals throughout the world are kept: in cramped and restricted cages, preventing them from performing their natural behaviours, and causing extreme frustration and suffering.

Pigs, hens and game birds are kept in cages that confine and restrict their movements. Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation figures show that there are currently 500,000 sows in the UK and 50% of them are in cages. Sows are placed in farrowing crates to limit their movements when giving birth, as has been said. In the following weeks, the metal frame means that they cannot turn around and can scarcely move backwards or forwards. The crates have been banned in Sweden, Norway and Switzerland, and we must implement a ban here now. It is unacceptable that animals have to endure such horrendous conditions.

The Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation has called for a ban on farrowing crates. The use of farrowing crates is allowed and they are used routinely in the rest of the EU, except in the countries I have mentioned. However, there are commercially available free farrowing

systems such as 360°, PigSAFE, and SWAP, which are acceptable alternatives. The foundation calls for a ban on farrowing crates that severely restrict the sow's movement and her strong instinct to build a nest before giving birth—I do not know how many colleagues recognise that a pig tries to build a nest before giving birth. The farrowing crate is a small metal cage in which pregnant sows are imprisoned for weeks on end, usually from a week before giving birth until the piglets are weaned three to four weeks later. The sow is subjected to that treatment roughly twice a year.

The metal frame of the crate is just centimetres bigger than the sow's body and severely restricts her movements. She is completely unable to turn around, can scarcely take a step forward or backward, and frequently rubs against the bars when standing up and lying down. Beside her cage is a creep area for her piglets. The flooring is hard concrete and some form of heating—mats or, more commonly, heat lamps—is used as a substitute for the warmth of the mother's body. That really is not acceptable. Can parliamentarians imagine being imprisoned in a metal crate for weeks on end, unable to see the sun, feel a blade of grass or turn around? It is cruel beyond belief, which is why I support Compassion in World Farming.

The Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation also feels strongly about cages for egg-laying birds. My wife insists that when we go shopping, we purchase free-range eggs. Caging egg-laying birds causes immense suffering. Cages confine and restrict the hens' movement. They prohibit many of an animal's natural instincts, and they are a grim reflection on our society. Despite the obvious failings of these miserable cage systems, around 16 million farm animals are trapped in them every year in the United Kingdom.

We need a kinder future for animals. As someone who has kept chickens in reasonably large numbers in an urban area—I do not know whether the neighbours were always pleased about it—I know one can become very fond of one's hen. Could I wring a chicken's neck? It just would not happen. They are wonderful animals. I hope we can persuade the small minority of the farming community to stop keeping them in such a cruel manner.

Luxembourg has already banned the use of enriched cages—I know it is only a small country—and Austria and Germany are beginning to phase them out. In conclusion, in response to the petition on this issue last year—in fact, I think I chaired the proceedings and that the then Minister is now in the other place—the Government highlighted that cage bans have already been introduced where there is clear evidence that they are detrimental to the welfare of animals. Science shows us that the caging of animals is cruel and inhumane. Will the Minister reply positively and tell us that over a period, these outdated practices will be banned?

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I am glad you keep hens and buy free-range eggs. Very good.

6.27 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am very happy to participate in this debate, although I have a sense of déjà vu because, now that we have established and agreed that animals are sentient beings, by definition we should be repulsed by the idea of

[Patricia Gibson]

keeping them in cages when that is not necessary under any circumstances that I can think of. In the spirit of *déjà vu*, I want to once again thank the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for her excellent opening of the debate.

Nothing captures the imagination, attention or strong feeling of our constituents more than the issue of animal welfare. It does not matter what aspect of animal welfare. Like other MPs, I get more emails about animal welfare than I do about any other issue that has ever presented itself in the five years that I have been an MP. Various important issues have come up, but nothing has prompted my constituents to email me more than the issue of animal welfare. The petition has garnered 106,000 signatures calling for the prohibition of the use of caging for animals. Ultimately, that is an animal welfare issue. We all want to see the highest possible standards of animal welfare that can be achieved and delivered for our furry friends.

As I have said to the Minister—this is another case of *déjà vu*—in the wake of Brexit, many people are concerned about what it will mean for animal welfare in the UK. SNP Members of the European Parliament backed the “End the cage age” campaign. The European Parliament voted to demand a new law to protect animals, and called on national Governments to roll back on intensive battery farms and to financially reward farmers who use pens instead of cages. We have heard much about that today. The European Commission was also asked by MEPs to introduce housing guidelines to ensure that imported animals enjoy the same welfare and food safety criteria as their domestically reared counterparts, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) indicated.

The bottom line is that it should never be acceptable to cause any animal unnecessary suffering. Again, we can all agree on that, because there is never a good reason for doing so. That is why the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 made it an offence. In addition, a consultation sought views on proposals to strengthen the enforcement of animal welfare legislation by increasing the maximum available penalties—something that, as I said, I have called for since being elected in 2015—and the use of fixed penalty notices.

The Animals and Wildlife (Penalties, Protections and Powers) (Scotland) Bill was debated at stage 1 in the Scottish Parliament only last week. Its provisions were referred to by Kirsteen Campbell, the chief executive of the Scottish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, as “exciting changes” that

“have the potential to be transformational for animals across the country”.

Importantly, the Bill will speed up the processes for making permanent arrangements for animals to be taken into possession to protect their welfare, and doing so will not require a court order.

Cages for animals feel instinctively wrong to me, and will to many people. Keeping animals confined goes against their natural instincts and seems evidently cruel. About 16 million animals are confined in cages every year in the UK. I am sure many owners believe that there is no detrimental impact and that they are not harming their animals, but this is a practice with which

many of us are not, and should not, be comfortable. How many of us have seen pictures of these huge colonies of hen farms and instinctively recoiled? I know that I have. Although those animals may be well fed and kept clean, such conditions cannot make for a happy hen. How could they?

It seems that the real driver may be the attitudes and values of the consumer. If the Government will not drive change, consumers will. For example, the supermarket Morrisons broke cover a couple of weeks ago and became the first major supermarket to sell only free-range eggs. Morrisons is a commercial enterprise. It exists to make a profit, so the importance of that move cannot be underestimated, especially since that supermarket—as so many others still are—was formerly perfectly content to stock eggs laid by battery hens. Supermarkets make such changes based perhaps only on what matters to their customers. Certainly, it puts pressure on other supermarkets to follow suit, which in turn puts pressure on egg producers.

Ultimately, consumers will get what they want by driving change through exercising their choice. For example, 60% of all eggs laid and bought in Scotland are free range. Given that consumers are becoming increasingly discerning about what they eat, and the process of how it gets to their plate and how it is sourced, there is every reason to believe that that figure will rise. Morrisons is simply responding to that. Well done to Morrisons for meeting its goal to stop selling eggs from caged hens five years before its target of 2025.

The hon. Member for Bristol East said that waiting for consumers to drive change is simply not good enough on its own, and I agree. However, the carrot and stick together are important tools. About a year ago, there was a debate in Westminster Hall about microbeads. I remember saying that the real driver of removing microbeads from products was consumer concern. The move away from plastics by retailers is probably almost entirely based on what consumers are complaining about and what they want. The industry is following what consumers want—admittedly, more slowly than perhaps we would like.

Owing to consumer concerns, the chain McDonald’s did away completely with the use of plastic straws. McDonald’s delivered what its consumers wanted. Think of a big company such as Adidas. Normally, we would perhaps not associate such companies with driving environmental change, but at the end of the day they exist to make money and will do what their customers want. Owing to consumer concerns about the climate, Adidas now creates running shoes made entirely from ocean waste. Those are small steps by huge companies, but the consumer is king. If consumers exercise their power, they can drive really important and innovative change.

At the base of all that is the need to ensure that all living creatures, who have no voice of their own, are given the best care and the most compassionate consideration that we can afford them. That is why I am pleased that the SNP Scottish Government invest £20 million annually in supporting animal health and welfare, and employing a highly skilled and qualified workforce, led by Scotland’s chief veterinary officer.

The petition is timely, and a bit of a wake-up call. Increasingly, we as a society are becoming more concerned about the food we eat and the creatures around us,

which can often be open to exploitation but which have no voice. We are concerned for our environment and we have a new-found respect for the natural world as it comes increasingly under threat.

We can choose to listen to the concerns of our constituents and work with them towards the ultimate goal of ending such practices as caging animals, or we can be dragged along by our constituents who, as consumers, will exercise their power to effect change. Being dragged along is never an easy prospect. It is always best to work with our constituents, and with the farming and livestock industry, to seek ways to improve the quality of the lives of our animals. We want our animals to be not just healthy but happy. I hope that the Minister will tell us what she thinks we can do better, and do more of, to try to ensure both the happiness and the health of our animals.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I now call, to speak on behalf of the Labour party, our own spring chicken, Daniel Zeichner.

6.37 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Davies. I will not respond to that, but it is always a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair—I am not going to cluck. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for speaking to the petition so eloquently. She brings her expertise and her tireless campaigning work on improving animal welfare to the debate, and as always made an excellent and thoughtful contribution. I will echo many of her comments.

I fear our numbers are slightly reduced because Members are, understandably, in the House for an important statement, but we have had some very good contributions. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) pointed out that the devolved Administrations always move ahead of Conservative Governments in Westminster. Not all Conservatives, of course, are culpable; the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) delivered a powerful speech. I associate myself with his comments about Compassion in World Farming and his account of the suffering endured by animals in farrowing crates, which should concentrate our minds.

There have been improvements over the past few decades, and some of the very cruel and restrictive caging systems have been improved. Part of that was done when we were members of the European Union. We played a leading role not only in securing our own improved standards, but in leading and persuading others across the continent. It is worth remembering that we helped to end the use of barren battery cages for egg-laying hens, veal cages for calves, and sow stalls for pigs. All those things were achieved because we were part of that bigger grouping—a role that we have sadly cast aside.

It is important to pay testament to the progressive thinking across our country, which has meant that we have often been ahead of those in other countries with such bans. However, I am sad to say that every year in the UK we still keep around 16 million farmed animals in cages and extreme close confinement systems, when

we are well aware, as we have heard, of the significant detrimental impacts on animal welfare, and when viable alternatives are available.

The majority of farmed animals in cages are egg-laying hens, kept in the so-called enriched colony cages that replaced barren battery cages, banned by the European Union in 2012. They are of course an improvement, but that space is still too restrictive for birds to properly express many of their natural behaviours, such as wing flapping, dust bathing, and pecking and scratching. Regulations stipulate that those cages still must provide the birds with only 750 sq cm of space each, of which only 600 cm must be useable—barely the space of an A4 sheet of paper.

To reintroduce an anecdote I told in the Agriculture Bill Committee—which you, Mr Davies, were not able to enjoy—many years ago I was the welcome recipient of a rescue chicken that fell off a lorry nearby. Trevor the chicken was a great joy to me, but that transformation from a caged bird into one that could display all the natural characteristics and behaviours of a chicken—very quickly; it is astonishing how powerful nature is—was very telling for me, and it underpins many people's concerns about welfare.

Of course, this issue is not just about egg-laying hens. Hon. Members have referred to the farrowing crates that cage 60% of our pigs. Although the sow stalls that keep pigs caged for the entirety of their pregnancy were rightly banned back in 1999, sows can still be caged in that way for up to five weeks at a time prior to birth and during the weaning of piglets in farrowing crates. During that time, the sow is quite often completely unable to turn around, can scarcely take a step forward or backward, and cannot reach the piglets that are placed next to her for suckling. The scientific evidence that sow welfare is severely compromised in farrowing crates has been well established for many years, and we now know that keeping pigs caged in that way leads to bar biting, prevents them from carrying out natural behaviours such as nesting, and can lead to higher stress hormone levels, longer farrowing durations and higher stillbirth rates.

We understand the arguments from the industry about the need to prevent the death of piglets by accidental crushing; however, looking at the evidence, I think the arguments are shifting. There is plenty of robust research and combined studies to date that show little significant difference in the mortality of piglets in crated versus loose-housed systems. Alternatives exist, as has been explained, and I think we are moving in that direction. I fear the real issue is one of economics and costs, but that is the kind of issue that can be addressed.

We have also heard about the issues surrounding calf pens. Although veal crates are banned, young calves can still be kept in solitary caged hutches for the first eight weeks of their lives as soon as they have been taken away from the mother cow. The logic is said to be that young calves are highly susceptible to disease, but we also know that cattle are very social animals, and there is much evidence that calves are more stressed and fearful when caged individually in this way so soon after birth. Research shows that housing calves in pairs before weaning leads to a number of positive outcomes without compromising health or production, fulfilling their need for social contact while also apparently leading to increased weight gain compared with those housed alone.

[Daniel Zeichner]

As we have also heard, it is not only animals farmed for food that are still kept in cages. Around 50 million pheasants and partridges are mass produced in the UK to be shot, with large numbers of breeding birds confined for most of their lives in so-called raised laying cages that are left outside, exposed to the elements and to extremes of temperature.

Regulation is limited to a code of practice for the welfare of game birds reared for sporting purposes and the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which recommends that entirely barren cages are not used. However, that code is not legally binding, and I fear it is too often flouted. Labour believes that we must put an end to the use of cages on our farms and in our production systems, and the strength of numbers supporting this petition demonstrates how popular that would be. I was struck by those figures: sometimes we see extreme numbers of people from certain places signing petitions and smaller numbers signing from elsewhere, but the people supporting this petition are well spread out across much of the country. I think that ending the use of cages is something that the British people would universally welcome.

Due to those welfare concerns and consumer demands for better welfare products, the main UK supermarkets have already made moves on this issue. As we have heard, Morrisons has done so, and in 2018 Tesco unilaterally introduced a requirement that all dairy calves on its supplier farms be reared in pairs or groups. The use of farrowing crates has also been identified by the British Veterinary Association as one of seven priority animal welfare problems relating to pigs, and both the Soil Association and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals already prohibit the use of farrowing crates under their labels. We have already debated how we move forward, but in our view, what is missing is considered Government action to step in and introduce measures to end the use of these caged systems on our farms, once and for all.

Simply leaving the burden of responsibility for making this change with individual consumers is problematic, because for so many people, price is still the key driver. We entirely understand that; we do not in any way condemn people who are forced to make choices because they are on limited incomes and, even if they would like to support higher standards, cannot afford to do so. We had this discussion in some depth in the Agriculture Bill Committee. Labour's view is that we have to make it easier for people to make the right choice by excluding low-cost, low-welfare alternatives. There is clear evidence that if standards are lifted, industries respond and prices begin to settle, so this is a case in which we need clear leadership.

We in this country pride ourselves in leading on higher animal welfare standards, but sadly, other countries are moving ahead of us on this issue. Luxembourg has already banned enriched cage colony systems for egg-laying hens, and Germany and Austria are phasing them out. Norway, Sweden and Switzerland have already banned sow farrowing crates, and free-farrowing systems are being developed in other European countries, particularly Denmark and the Netherlands. We recognise that such bans would need to be phased in, with proper safeguards in place to support the agricultural industry during that transition. Back in 1999, the Labour Government rightly

banned sow stalls, and that had a clear impact on the domestic pig industry, so it is vital that Government help is there to support a switch to alternative systems.

It is also vital—this is a recurring theme—that we ensure that any home production of animal products produced to these higher-welfare, cage-free standards is not simply undercut and replaced by imports produced in countries that still use lower-welfare caged systems. That should be one benefit of our new-found freedom to take back control, so I encourage the Government to do so. This is why it is so important for the Government to put into law their promises that upcoming trade deals will not simply sell out our farmers by allowing lower-standard imports.

The Government know this is the right direction of travel, which is why we have been hearing some quite positive noises from them. Both the previous Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), and the current farming Minister, the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), have said that the Government's aim is for farrowing crates to no longer be necessary. The Government's belatedly released "Farming for the future"—one of my favourite documents, which lays out their plans for British farming post-Brexit—says that they want to establish an animal health and welfare pathway in partnership with farmers and stakeholders to improve animal welfare and health, including in relation to confinement. However, we feel this is all too vague.

The Government's new Agriculture Bill, which we hope will soon be considered on Report, is the perfect place to introduce measures for supporting farmers in ending the use of cages. However, sad to say, the Government have so far rejected every one of our helpful amendments aimed at better promoting farm animal welfare and enabling the ending of cages and intensive farming practices. They have rejected amendments that would establish a stronger baseline for animal welfare regulation across the board; ensure that those receiving public money for improving animal welfare went above and beyond this baseline, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East so eloquently explained; promote the conduct of research into the impact of highly intensive livestock farming practices on animal welfare; and give the Secretary of State the power to introduce a phased ban on sow farrowing crates and to explicitly allow farmers to receive public money for phasing out those crates.

What we need from this debate is rock-solid commitments that ending the use of cages on our farms is a true priority for the Government and proper detail on how they plan to achieve that through their farming policy. The Government have stated on numerous occasions their aspiration for the UK to become the global leader in farm animal welfare once we leave the EU, and if they were serious about that ambition, they could embrace a cage-free future now. I challenge the Minister to explain why this suffering should be allowed to continue, and why she thinks we should end the cage age one day, but not yet.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Thank you so much for that, particularly the story of the liberation of Trevor. I assume Trevor was not an egg-laying chicken.

May I say briefly to Patricia Gibson—this is just a small point of procedure—that I notice that Steven Bonnar, who made a contribution, has left before listening to the wind-ups? I would be very grateful if she had a quick word with him because that is not the convention. Finally, to complete the hen party, I call the Minister, Victoria Prentis.

6.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis): I think I will call you “Mr Chairman”, Mr Davies. I do not think I will call you anything else in the circumstances.

I thank the Petitions Committee for giving us the opportunity to discuss this very important subject, and it is a pleasure to follow excellent speeches from Members of all parties—particularly from my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who I have heard speak passionately about such issues many times. Indeed, we rehearsed many of the arguments in the Agriculture Bill Committee when he was the Chair and was prevented from opining on the subject, so it is good to hear from him today. I also thank the more than 100,000 people who signed the petition and brought this issue to our attention, and I acknowledge and praise the animal welfare campaigners who have played an enormous part over the years, with celebrity endorsements, advertising and general encouragement to improve our animal welfare standards. We have come a long way, particularly with the welfare standards of chickens such as Trevor.

The Government have made it clear that we place great importance on the welfare of farmed animals. The “End the cage age” petition calls for a ban on the use of barren and enriched cages for farmed animals, and I assure hon. Members that the Government are keen to explore the issue. Indeed, the Prime Minister noted in Parliament last year that he was keen to introduce animal welfare measures. We will continue to focus on maintaining world-leading farm animal welfare standards through both regulatory requirements and statutory codes.

The welfare of our farmed livestock is protected by comprehensive and robust legislation, backed up by the statutory species-specific welfare codes. The codes encourage high standards of husbandry, and keepers are required by law to have access to them and to be familiar with them. As part of the welfare reforms, I am pleased to say that the third of our newly updated welfare codes—for pigs—came into force on 1 March, and I will say a bit more about that later.

The Government have set ourselves a challenging agenda of animal welfare issues that we will tackle, and we are taking action on many fronts to improve the health and wellbeing of farm animals. A major example is that we are committed to ending excessively long journeys for live animals going for slaughter and for fattening. We will soon launch a consultation on how we deliver that manifesto commitment, and I am keen to press ahead with that as soon as we can. Our “Farming for the future” policy statement, which is favourite reading for the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), was published last month and reiterates that, in line with our national values, we wish to continue improving and building on our position.

As part of our reforms to agricultural policy, we are developing publicly funded schemes for English farmers to provide public goods—including animal welfare enhancements, which are valued by the public and not sufficiently provided by the market. Such enhancements could include improving animal welfare in relation to the use of cages and crates. Not all the examples that I am about to mention are absolutely relevant to the debate, but given that this is a matter which the hon. Members for Cambridge and for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and I have discussed many times, it is important that I explain our thinking. We intend to develop publicly funded schemes to support farmers in England to deliver enhanced animal health and welfare, so the schemes are intended to reward them for going above and beyond already high standards, which I think the hon. Member for Bristol East recognised.

To take broiler chickens as a specific example, delivering enhancements may include farms using slower-growing, high-welfare breeds of chicken that have the freedom to exhibit natural behaviours through increased communication and a stimulating environment, or through the freedom to roam, peck and scratch outside. For dairy cattle, the enhanced freedom to exhibit natural behaviours could involve increased access to stimulating loafing or outdoor space, and the freedom to access and graze good-quality pasture. I will come to welfare enhancement for pigs later, but they could include rooting and foraging as well as addressing the issues of crates and tail dockings.

Daniel Zeichner: I assume the enhancements will be delivered through environmental land management schemes. Would the measures that the Minister is describing be delivered through the tier 1 system?

Victoria Prentis: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the system is currently being devised. I am very keen to include him as much as I can in the way we do that. Some of it might well be tier 1 funding, some might be tier 2, and some—though I doubt it—might even be tier 3, but I do not want to rule anything out at this point. It is really important that we keep an open mind, look at how the tests and trials are going, and then look at how the scheme is developed through the pilots. The point I am trying to make today is that it is certainly intended that public goods include animal welfare.

All hon. Members present can think of many improvements that we would like to see. For example, we might want to look at animal health improvements, such as reduced lameness in cattle and sheep, and at lower levels of antimicrobial resistance. We will focus on welfare enhancements that deliver the greatest impact and benefit, based on scientific evidence. I do not want to stray too far from the parameters of the debate, but it is helpful to continue to have such conversations as the system is devolved.

I want to emphasise that cages are not used in England to keep some of the farmed animals referred to in the petition—namely farmed rabbits, broiler chicken breeders, layer breeders and guinea fowl. It has been mentioned already that the UK unilaterally banned veal crates in 1990, 16 years before the rest of the EU, which eventually caught up. Conventional battery cages for laying hens were banned here in 2012. I am pleased to say that we already have a much larger free-range sector than any

[Victoria Prentis]

other EU country, and free-range sales represent about 67% of retail egg sales—not necessarily eggs incorporated into food—in the UK.

The Government are currently examining the future use of cages for all laying hens, and I welcome the commitment from our major retailers, with positive support from our egg producers, to stop retailing eggs from enriched colony cage production systems by 2025. I was interested in what the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said about Morrisons, and we obviously welcome its going further. The Government are also considering the use of cages for game birds, including the systems used for breeding pheasants and partridges. The hon. Member for Cambridge outlined how they are governed by the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and its associated code of practice, which provides keepers with guidance. The Act and DEFRA's code are enforced by the Animal and Plant Health Agency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West described farmers as big softies, and I should probably confess at this point that I have kept pigs in the past. They are one of my favourite animals—if a Minister is allowed to have favourite animals. My pigs were extremely free range, to the extent that they sometimes caused a nuisance in the village—the Agriculture Bill Committee heard a lot about that. As we heard earlier, the UK has led the way on improving pigs' welfare by banning the keeping of sows in close confinement stalls in 1999. I am not in any way criticising that decision, but it is worth noting, as my hon. Friend did, that we were about 80% sufficient in pigmeat in 1998. The figure had fallen to about 50% by 2003, and it is currently about 56%. I am extremely keen not to outsource animal welfare issues to other countries.

The Government have made it clear that we remain completely committed to the ambition that farrowing crates should no longer be used for sows. Indeed, the new pig welfare code, which I mentioned earlier, clearly states:

“The aim is for farrowing crates to no longer be necessary and for any new system to protect the welfare of the sow, as well as her piglets.”

It is important that we make progress towards a system that both works commercially and safeguards the welfare of the sow and her piglets, and that we do so as quickly as possible. The UK is already ahead of most pig-producing countries on this issue, with about 40% of our pigs living and farrowing outside. Good progress has been made, but there is more to do.

As the hon. Member for Bristol East said, DEFRA has funded research into alternative farrowing systems. The commercial development of farrowing systems and practices is not sufficiently advanced to recommend the compulsory replacement of all farrowing crates, but I

am keen to work with the industry on this—using both carrots and sticks—because it is important to not simply move production abroad.

I thank the hon. Lady for securing the debate. The Government place great importance on the welfare of all our animals. The measures that I have set out demonstrate clearly the steps that the Government have already taken and will continue to take to strengthen our high animal welfare standards. We are actively exploring options to do with the use of cages and will work with industry to improve animal welfare in a sustainable way. The provisions in the Agriculture Bill will help us to do that.

7 pm

Kerry McCarthy: I thank everyone who took part in the debate. As the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), said, the debate was poorly timed as the 6 pm start coincided with the start of the statement on covid-19 in the main Chamber. I appreciate that some of the petitioners may be slightly disappointed that, as a result, the turnout was not as good as for the previous debate on animal sentience, but I assure them that that does not mean that MPs do not pay attention to our email inboxes or do not care about these issues. We definitely want improvements.

I appreciate that all Departments have a lot on their plates at the moment, but DEFRA in particular is overwhelmed—it suddenly has three major Bills and some smaller ones kicking around, having gone without significant legislation for quite some time. I impress upon the Minister that there are many people out there who would like to see higher animal welfare standards. To that end, I hope that we can use the mixture of the carrot and the stick that has been mentioned, rewarding farmers through the Agriculture Bill but also banning things that we decide are ethically unacceptable once alternatives are in place, as is the case for farrowing crates, in particular. I am sure that we will revisit the issue. I thank the Chair for coming because I know that he had some reservations about turning up—it shows great pluck of him to have actually come along.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): It is the least I could do.

Kerry McCarthy: That was chicken joke!

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I am a free pig. Thank you so much, animal farm.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 243448 relating to the caging of farm animals.

7.2 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 16 March 2020

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Independent Reservoirs

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): On 3 September 2019 the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Teresa Villiers), commissioned an independent review following the Toddbrook reservoir incident (31 July-1 August 2019) where part of the spillway collapsed following significant heavy rainfall. The damage did not breach the reservoir dam itself, but as a precaution, some 1,500 people in Whaley Bridge were temporarily evacuated while the dam was made safe. The review has been led by Professor David Balmforth, supported with technical expertise from Dr Peter Mason and Dr Paul Tedd. The review panel has provided me with a comprehensive report. This sets out their findings into what might have led to the damage and whether there was anything that could have prevented or predicted it, and identifies lessons for wider reservoir safety. (Full terms of reference for the review are on gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/toddbrook-reservoir-incident-2019-independent-review>)

I would like to thank the review panel for their detailed investigation of what led to this incident.

Report findings

This report explores the causes of the spillway failure at Toddbrook and concludes that a combination of factors led to the partial collapse last August. It has identified that the original design of the auxiliary spillway was

“inadequate and not fit for purpose” and that this was “exacerbated by intermittent maintenance over the years”

which when combined with the level and force of flow over the spillway at the end of July ultimately led to the partial collapse on 1 August. It has not been possible to determine which factor was the primary cause of failure on the day, and the report finds that:

“With consistent good quality maintenance over the years leading up to the event, the spillway might not have failed during this event. However, it would have been unlikely to survive the probable maximum flood which is many times greater than the flood in which it failed”.

The report identifies that there may be a lack of understanding of the risks to spillways within the reservoir community, and has made recommendations to address these. For example, the design concerns had not been identified previously, including at inspections prior to 2018, and the report notes that

“had the drawings been reviewed at the time of the 2010 inspection, the deficiencies in the spillway design might have been identified then and remedial action taken”.

Good practice examples have been highlighted, and used to inform recommendations for the whole reservoir community—this includes the provision of a package of historical information to inspectors, such as the original design drawings that were provided by the Canal and River Trust’s (CRT) supervising engineer for the 2018 inspection. These were used by the inspector to identify

potential concerns relating to the spillways longer term viability leading to a requirement under a measure in the interests of safety (MIOS)¹ for CRT to investigate further.

The review also found that communication between those involved could be improved and strengthened for the avoidance of doubt in the future. The inspection report

“was written in a style often found in inspection reports”, but this

“did not convey any sense of urgency or require any precautionary measures”

which the CRT then relied on to determine their work programme. It further identified that although the inspector provided initial feedback on the need for a robust maintenance programme to CRT engineers at the time of the inspection, “it would appear that this had not been completed some eight months later when the incident occurred”. It was not until the CRT received the final inspection report in April 2019, combined with internal arrangements to communicate earlier, that full consideration was given to any of the required actions. The review panel find that

“Given the significance and credibility of risks to the reservoir, our view is that more could have been done to communicate the urgency of the MIOS and statutory maintenance to the owner at an earlier stage”.

As a result of his review, Professor Balmforth reports that compliance with the current legislation is good:

“Overall there is 97% compliance, so reservoirs are believed to be safe”, but have concluded “... as the incident at Toddbrook so aptly demonstrates, a compliant reservoir might not necessarily be safe”

and

“There is clearly a need to close the gap between compliance and safety”.

Report recommendations

Professor Balmforth has made 22 recommendations in his report for application across the reservoir network and community. These include:

Eight recommendations covering the inspection of reservoirs covering improved guidance, detailed inspections of spillways and the wording and timing of reporting to owners.

Two recommendations on the supervision of reservoirs covering the reporting of condition by supervising engineers and the actions needed by the responsible person(s) for safety within the owning organisations.

Four recommendations proposing further work is done to consider the implementation of or changes to the current legislative framework.

Five recommendations for improved operations and maintenance, including the responsibilities of the owners and greater powers for the regulator to enforce statutory maintenance requirements.

Three immediate actions to be taken as a result of the spillway design concerns identified at Toddbrook, which are already in hand.

The Government have accepted all the recommendations.

A full list of the recommendations and the Government response to each one is in table 1 in the attachment. The report will be published today on gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/toddbrook-reservoir-incident-2019-independent-review>.

Incidents such as that at Toddbrook are very rare and this report confirms that we have a strong record of reservoir safety and that compliance, including by the Canal and River Trust, with our safety regulations is good. We should not, however, be complacent and need

to ensure our approach continues to be fit for purpose, so I will be asking Professor Balmforth to lead a second stage review, which will undertake a wider assessment of reservoir safety legislation and its implementation.

Reservoir safety work already underway

DEFRA and the Environment Agency have contacted all large raised reservoir undertakers to identify any which may have similar design concerns to those found at Toddbrook. Any identified will be expected to have an urgent inspection/investigation to ascertain what remedial work may be needed. The Government will also consult on making a requirement for all large raised reservoirs to have an emergency contingency plan in place.

DEFRA commissioned a research study into small raised reservoirs in 2017, which has recently been completed. The report will be published shortly and includes evidence about the number of small raised reservoirs and the risks they pose. This evidence will be used to assess any need for possible changes to the legal framework in determining if there is a case to extend current regulations to reservoirs between 10,000 cubic metres and 25,000 cubic metres capacity. The research also considered options for risk designation and my officials will review the findings and engage with stakeholders in assessing whether changes are needed.

¹ Under the Act and to an engineer MIOS actually means that if certain work is not carried out within certain timescales then the reservoir could become unsafe.

The attachment can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2020-03-16/HCWS162/>.

[HCWS162]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Seafarers and Offshore Workers' Pensions: Automatic Enrolment

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I am tabling this statement for the benefit of hon. and right hon. Members to bring to their attention secondary legislation to ensure that seafarers and offshore workers continue to benefit from automatic enrolment into workplace pensions.

Our workplace pension reforms are designed to address the fact that millions of people were not saving enough for their retirement, and automatic enrolment (AE) was created to help them with their long-term pension savings. AE has been a great success to date. Over 10 million people have been automatically enrolled into a workplace pension and more than 1.6 million employers have complied with their legal duties across the whole economy. It is estimated that 26,000 more workers in the maritime industries were saving into a workplace pension in 2019 as a result of AE.

After the Pensions Act 2008 became law, most employers were brought into AE duties via secondary legislation introduced in 2011 but it was decided to give more time

for employers in the maritime industries to allow for fuller consideration of the circumstances of workers in this sector. Seafarers and offshore workers were subsequently brought into AE in July 2012, via regulations and an Order in Council, and following a further public consultation. The 2012 legislation included sunset clauses taking effect on 1 July 2020.

Following a post-implementation review (PIR) in 2018 (which can be viewed, here: www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2012/1388/pdfs/ukiod_20121388_en.pdf) and, based on the available evidence, the Government concluded that AE should continue to apply to all qualifying workers in the maritime industries. In order to deliver on the review's recommendation, I am today announcing my intention to lay instruments in both Houses. These instruments will remove the sunset clause from the existing legislation so that it continues to provide for workplace pensions for eligible employees in those industries.

In accordance with section 149 of the Equality Act, I can confirm I have given due regard to the need to: eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act; advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it; foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it. In respect of these instruments, I have considered my duties under section 31(3) of the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015. In my view, it is not appropriate to make provision for a further statutory review in The Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Automatic Enrolment) (Amendment) Regulations 2020.

A regulatory impact assessment will be published alongside these instruments, and can be viewed at: www.legislation.gov.uk. The Regulatory Policy Committee has validated this impact assessment which has been given a green rating.

A copy of the committee's opinion will be published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS160]

In-work Progression Commission

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Department for Work and Pensions is establishing an In-work Progression Commission in order to increase its evidence base and support policy development on helping people to progress in work. The commission will define the barriers individuals and groups face to progressing and moving into higher paid work. It will advise Government on how to support individuals to overcome these barriers. To inform the work of the commission, a call for evidence will seek examples from employers and the third sector about what makes a difference in helping people to progress.

The work will be led by Baroness McGregor-Smith and supported by an advisory panel and officials in the Department for Work and Pensions. It will report to me in the coming months.

[HCWS161]

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 16 March 2020

EDUCATION

Further Education Colleges: Future Skills

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Education on 2 March 2020.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Apprenticeships are down 46% since the introduction of the levy. What will the Minister do in National Careers Week to turn that around?

Gillian Keegan: Apprenticeships are at the heart of our vision for a world-class technical education system, and we have specifically focused on quality in the past year or so. High-quality starts have increased to 63% from 44% in the previous year. Quality is the most important thing, and we are pleased to say that the number of starts is increasing this year.

[Official Report, 2 March 2020, Vol. 672, c. 595.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan):

Errors have been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury).

The correct response should have been:

Gillian Keegan: Apprenticeships are at the heart of our vision for a world-class technical education system, and we have specifically focused on quality in the past year or so. High-quality starts **on standards** have increased to 63% from 44% in the previous year. Quality is the most important thing, and we are pleased to say that the **proportion** of starts **on standards** is increasing this year.

Children in the Care System: Sibling Contact

The following is an extract from the Adjournment debate on 4 March 2020.

Vicky Ford: ... The legal framework is clear on allowing contact between siblings and placing them together where it in their best interests. Historically, there have

been concerns that **some contact arrangements were not made** on the assumption that contact should always take place.

[Official Report, 4 March 2020, Vol. 672, c. 956.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck).

The correct response should have been:

Vicky Ford: ... The legal framework is clear on allowing contact between siblings and placing them together where it in their best interests. Historically, there have been concerns that **some contact arrangements were made** on the assumption that contact should always take place.

DEFENCE

Mental Health of Veterans

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Mental Health of Veterans on 11 March 2020.

Johnny Mercer: ... The reality when it comes to figures and so on is that we are—the rate of suicide in the service community is eight in 100,000; in the civilian equivalent cohort it is 32 in 100,000. People who have served in the military are less likely to take their own life. However, he is absolutely right that each one of these suicides is a tragedy not only for the individual and their family, but for us as an institution, because we owe this unique debt of gratitude towards those who serve.

[Official Report, 11 March 2020, Vol. 673, c. 126WH.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Defence People and Veterans, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer):

An error has been identified in my reply to the debate secured by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone).

The correct statement should have been:

Johnny Mercer: ... The reality when it comes to figures and so on is that we are—the rate of suicide in the service community is eight in 100,000; in the **civilian equivalent cohort it is 17 in 100,000**. People who have served in the military are less likely to take their own life. However, he is absolutely right that each one of these suicides is a tragedy not only for the individual and their family, but for us as an institution, because we owe this unique debt of gratitude towards those who serve.

ORAL ANSWERS

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