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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 15 June 2020

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 4 June).

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

Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Weddings Sector: Covid-19

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support the wedding sector during the covid-19 outbreak. [903164]

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What plans he has to reopen places of worship as the covid-19 restrictions are eased. [903177]

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What plans he has to reopen places of worship as the covid-19 restrictions are eased. [903185]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): May I begin by sending my best wishes and those of the Government to our colleague, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan)?

As Communities Secretary, ensuring that places of worship can open has been one of my priorities. Their contribution to the common good of our country as places of solace, inspiration and provision for the most vulnerable in our society is clear. I am pleased that they can now open for individual prayer. I have worked with faith leaders and representatives to ensure that this can be done safely, including publishing guidance last week and working with the places of worship taskforce, which I established last month. I am told that the Archbishop of Canterbury and Cardinal Nichols went this morning to Westminster Abbey and Westminster Cathedral respectively, and I look forward to working with them and others to ensure a broader reopening of places of worship.

Laura Farris: I represent some of Berkshire's best wedding venues, such as Wasing Park. We welcome the Government's proposal to set up a taskforce looking at safe weddings, but there are couples in my constituency

who are desperate to let their friends and family know whether their weddings can go ahead this summer. Can my right hon. Friend say when a date will be announced for summer weddings?

Robert Jenrick: I fully appreciate the concerns that my hon. Friend raises. I know how important weddings are for venues and, of course, how many people's plans have been disrupted. I can tell her that there is a significant effort across Government to allow people to hold weddings—in particular, small ones with appropriate social distancing—as soon as we can, but this must be done safely. My right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor and I are working with faith leaders on this issue, and in the meantime, venues such as Wasing Park can avail themselves of the job retention scheme, the business rates holiday and the small business grants to help them get through the coming weeks.

Chris Green: Does my right hon. Friend agree that reopening churches and other places of worship is an incredibly important step in the right direction for our spiritual welfare across the country and symbolises the direction of travel, with the country returning to normality?

Robert Jenrick: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. People of faith have shown enormous patience and forbearance in recent weeks, unable to mark Easter, Passover, Vaisakhi and Ramadan with their family, friends and community in the traditional way. As we control the virus, we are able to move forward, and as we reopen our economy, it is right that the importance of faith and places of worship is recognised.

Tim Loughton: I had an interesting Zoom call with my constituency clergy last week, and they are confused. One vicar said to me, "So is it right that I can invite five members of my congregation to the church grounds for a barbecue and some beers, but if we start saying prayers, we'll get busted?" I suggested that he could advertise his services as a barbecue with a very long grace. We need much clearer guidance if we are to get our churches properly and fully back into use as soon as possible. Frankly, they should never have been put out of use in the first place.

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's important question. We published guidance last week for places of worship before they reopened for individual prayer. I am grateful to all the volunteers across the country who have worked hard to clean and prepare those places of worship over the last few days. The guidance was worked through by faith leaders in our taskforce. Places of worship can open for funerals, and Public Health England has previously published guidance on how to manage funerals safely. As I said, I very much hope that we can set a date for weddings soon.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State has announced the reopening of places of worship for individual prayer despite some faiths only practising communal prayer in their place of worship. This separation has caused confusion, which turned to chaos when the Government only published the nine-page guidance on Friday. Why did the Government not provide clear and timely guidance to all places of worship, regardless of their method of prayer?

Robert Jenrick: I will explain the process that we have been through. We have worked for several weeks with leaders across all the faiths on our taskforce to produce guidance that is applicable to all faiths and then to support individual faiths in translating that into the particular practices of their faith. I appreciate and am conscious of the fact that the first step in this process—individual prayer—is much less relevant to some faiths than others. In particular, it has limited applicability to Muslims and Jews in our communities, but I hope that they will see this as the logical first step towards a much broader reopening soon.

Towns Fund

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): What recent progress he has made on the towns fund; and if he will make a statement. [903165]

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): What recent progress he has made on the towns fund; and if he will make a statement. [903167]

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): What recent progress he has made on the towns fund; and if he will make a statement. [903182]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): Our £3.6 billion towns fund will play a vital role in supporting our country's economic recovery, investing in housing, skills, technology, culture and town centres, as we move beyond the immediate covid-19 response. I am pleased that in the majority of cases work has been able to continue despite the challenges posed by covid-19, and later today the Minister of State with responsibility for local growth, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, will publish towns fund guidance, setting out the steps by which Redcar and all the 100 towns with which we have agreed these historic deals can proceed.

Jacob Young: I thank my right hon. Friend for his ongoing commitment to the towns fund, specifically in relation to the up to £25 million for Redcar town centre. Does he agree that the best use of this money is to help kick-start revenue-generating projects to secure local government finances in the years ahead?

Robert Jenrick: I agree with my hon. Friend that we want to see economic activity returning to great places such as Redcar. The purpose of the fund is both to provide immediate economic stimulus and confidence to those places and to set them up in the longer term for more sustainable economic growth and prosperity. I have heard his strong representation for a new horizontal pier in Redcar.

Alicia Kearns [V]: Local authorities in Rutland and Melton very much welcome the multiple cash injections from central Government, but they are now turning their attention to how we recover financially from this period. Both Rutland and Melton want a significant boost in domestic tourism and high street business trade, so what funding has my right hon. Friend considered for local authorities on top of the towns fund and pandemic relief so that local authorities can come back stronger?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the £27 billion the Government have provided to communities to ensure that they have the resources they need as they get through the pandemic. Both Rutland and Melton will also receive funding from the £50 million reopening high streets safely fund as they welcome the return of high street activity in the great towns she represents, such as Melton, Uppingham and Oakham.

Mark Jenkinson: My constituency is the beneficiary of stronger towns funding for Workington, and the future high streets fund for Maryport. Across Cumbria we have nine such allocations, which I am sure my right hon. Friend agrees have the potential to change Cumbria significantly. Does he therefore have a plan to join up the teams leading these bids to ensure that Workington, Maryport and Cumbria more widely get the maximum benefit?

Robert Jenrick: I know how closely my hon. Friend has been involved in some of those town deals. We want to ensure we get the maximum economic benefit from this investment, and so my officials are encouraging communities that benefit from multiple town and high street deals to work together to create a convincing and ambitious plan for the future.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for his warm words about my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) earlier. All of us in the SNP family, and I am sure in this wider House, want to see Amy get back to full health. She is not just a colleague of mine here; she is one of my closest friends here, and I look forward to her coming back and resuming her duties and rightful place.

Last year, among the backslapping and hoorah from Scottish Tory MPs, the Secretary of State's predecessor came to the Dispatch Box and announced millions of pounds of stronger towns funding, complete with assurances that this money would be Barnettised. Over a year later, the Scottish Government are yet to hear any more about this. Will he confirm that his predecessor's announcement is still valid, and what is the timescale to deliver this overdue and promised funding?

Robert Jenrick: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will convey to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire and her family the strength of feeling and support she has on both sides of the House.

On the hon. Gentleman's question about the towns fund, I will make of with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and revert to him, but I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the many town and city deals that have happened across Scotland in recent years that have been championed by my colleagues in the Conservative party and are bringing the same benefits to those communities—investment in technology, skills, heritage and town and city centres.

David Linden: I am afraid that that response from the Secretary of State will sound like backsliding. Many people can go back and look at *Hansard*. There were lots of Scottish Tory MPs in here and there was great promise about some of this money coming to Scotland. If I am picking up the Secretary of State right, that now seems to be being pulled away. I hope very much that this will not be used to shore up what was the red wall. Can he give me a cast-iron guarantee that the money will be Barnettised? Otherwise, those promises last year will seem like empty rhetoric.

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman is trying to sow grievance where there is none. I have said that I will find out from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor exactly the status of that funding—whether it is going to be Barnettised—and I will revert to the hon. Gentleman as soon as possible.

Green Belt

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps he is taking to help protect the green belt around London. [903168]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): The green belt is very important to all of us, and we continue to maintain strong protections for it through the national planning policy framework. It is clear that boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances and when all other options have been examined.

Theresa Villiers: Does the Minister agree that if we are to protect the suburban environment, that means not just safeguarding the green belt but rejecting proposals for overdevelopment on non-green-belt sites like Victoria Quarter in New Barnet or the tube stations at High Barnet and Cockfosters, which are threatened with high-rise development that is entirely inappropriate for the surrounding suburban area?

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged to my right hon. Friend for that question. She is an assiduous campaigner for her constituents in Chipping Barnet. She will know that I cannot comment on any individual cases, but applications should be considered in accordance with the development plan. The Secretary of State asked the Mayor of London to pay regard to place in the siting of tall buildings, so where there are clusters of tall buildings, it may be more appropriate to site new tall buildings there than elsewhere. My right hon. Friend may, with advantage, take up that matter with the Mayor of London.

Building Safety Programme

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): What steps he has taken to improve the building safety programme. [903169]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this question. I would like to acknowledge the commemorations taking place in her constituency to mark the tragic loss of life from Grenfell Tower three years ago. In the present pandemic, the residents and others there managed to pay tribute and to commemorate with respect and care. I congratulate them on their efforts and my hon. Friend on all her unstinting work.

Building safety is a priority for this Government and for me personally. The Government recently announced the biggest change in a generation on building safety, to be delivered through the upcoming building safety Bill, together with, now, £1.6 billion of support for remediation of unsafe cladding. We will leave no stone unturned to ensure that residents are safe now and in the future.

Felicity Buchan: I would like to start by thanking you, Mr Speaker, for lighting Parliament green last night for Grenfell.

I welcome the £1 billion additional funding for the remediation of non-ACM cladding, but, as we all know, it is not just a question of the money—it is about actually getting the work done. Will my right hon. Friend update me on what progress he expects within the next six months?

Christopher Pincher: Again, I am grateful to my hon. Friend. She is absolutely right to highlight the pace of implementation as being important. Registrations for the new building safety fund, which opened on 1 June, have now reached 458. I am pleased to say that the draft building safety Bill will be published soon for scrutiny, and remediation continues across the estate where it is needed, despite the covid-19 crisis. We are determined to do all we can to support residents.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) [V]: In remembering all those who lost their lives at Grenfell and the families and friends who are left behind, it is shocking that three years after Grenfell there are still 2,000 high-rise residential blocks that have dangerous cladding on them. The £1 billion building safety fund is welcome, but it will only remediate 600 of those blocks; it will do nothing to touch lower-rise residential accommodation, dangerous insulation and other fire safety defects, leaving thousands of people worried about their safety and their financial circumstances. Will the Minister go back to the Chancellor and put it to him that we now need a great deal more cash—the Select Committee says probably up to £15 billion—to ensure that fire safety defects are removed from all residential buildings within the next two years, which means five years after the Grenfell disaster?

Christopher Pincher: As I said in answer to the previous question, pace is crucial in this regard, which is why the Chancellor has made available in this financial year £1 billion to remediate those buildings that suffer from non-ACM cladding. That is on top of the £600 million that we have made available for ACM-clad buildings. The hon. Gentleman is right that it is going to be necessary for a great many buildings to be remediated. We would expect some of that funding to come forward from the building owners so that those who let or are leaseholders in the buildings do not fall liable for the funds. We believe that £1 billion, now, to get on with the job, will go a great deal along the way to make sure that buildings are made safe for their residents.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Three years on from the Grenfell disaster, when 72 people tragically lost their lives, 245 buildings are clad in dangerous ACM and at least 1,700 are clad in equally flammable material. If the remedial work continues at the same snail's pace, it will take up to 39 years for the work to be completed, yet if someone wants a controversial billion-pound planning application approved, it seems that high-value chicken dinners get things done. Will the Minister advise the House as to what influence can be applied to quickly make all our high-rise buildings safe once and for all?

Christopher Pincher: First, I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place; this is the first time since he took up his shadow position that we have sparred across the Dispatch Box—

Mike Amesbury: Second.

Christopher Pincher: It is the first time that the hon. Gentleman and I have sparred across the Dispatch Box—that is correct, so let us hold on to that.

The hon. Gentleman was rather ungenerous: we have made £1.6 billion available to remediate the buildings that need it. Remediation work has begun or been completed on 95% of all social-sector buildings that had unsafe ACM cladding on them, and remediation work has begun or been completed on 40% of such buildings in the private sector, while the other 60% have their plans in train. We want these buildings to be made safe as quickly as possible. That is why we have put the money on the table, why we will press for action to be taken and why the buildings will be made safe under this Government.

Private Renters: Covid-19

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to protect private renters facing financial difficulties as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [903170]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): The Government have introduced measures to help tenants to continue to pay their rent; we are supporting workers by paying up to 80% of their wages; we have increased the amount available to welfare claimants; and we have raised the local housing allowance rate to the 30th percentile of market rents in each area.

Dr Huq: I thank the Minister for his response, but on the day that Marcus Rashford, a 22-year-old footballer, wrote to all of us in the House to raise the spectre of family impoverishment under coronavirus, does he recognise the fact that a substantial proportion of private renters have dependent children—they are not all bedsit-land stereotypes? Will he bring forward immediately the plans to end section 21 evictions? The Conservatives are the party of the family; if people are losing their jobs already, they should protect families and homes now.

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged to the hon. Lady for her question. We have committed to bring forward legislation to enhance renters' security, and that includes the abolition of section 21 evictions, but we will do it in a safe, sensible and sustained way. In the interim, the Government have worked with the judiciary, legal representatives and the advice sector on arrangements to ensure that courts are better able to address those tenants who are in difficult positions, and we have spent £7 billion of public money through the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that people can get the help that they need. We are working with the National Residential Landlords Association. It advises me that private rented sector rents have fallen by about 1% in the latest round of tenancy renewals. We are working hard across the space, particularly with the private rented sector, to make sure people get the help that they deserve.

Thangam Debonnaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I associate myself with the remarks by hon. Members about the victims and survivors of Grenfell.

Today the Treasury Select Committee says that freelancers, new starters and many others have fallen through gaps in the financial support schemes. Local housing allowance does not even cover average rents. Anyone with no recourse to public funds cannot even get universal credit. Over a million people are struggling with rent, but this is fixable. Will the Government today heed the calls of Shelter, Citizens Advice, Generation Rent, numerous charities and building societies and the Labour party, act now, and prevent people from losing their homes in an evictions crisis in the autumn?

Christopher Pincher: As I have made clear, we have worked hard to protect tenants from the prospect of eviction and also to ensure that they have the funds to live their lives. That is why we introduced the furlough system, which provides 80% of people's incomes. That is why we have increased the LHA. It is why we have made available to local authorities £500 million to help those households facing crisis. The prospectus of the hon. Lady, which is simply to kick the can down the road and to pile up costs for people who may not be able to afford them, is not the right one. I think she should go away and think again.

Local Authority Funding: Covid-19

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of funding for local authorities during the covid-19 outbreak. [903171]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mr Simon Clarke): We have paid an unprecedented £3.2 billion to local authorities to address the pressures that they are facing in response to the pandemic, including £17.9 million to the hon. Lady's own council, on top of an increase of £13.5 million in its core spending power this year. We have introduced measures worth more than £5 billion to help to ease councils' immediate financial pressures. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I are currently working closely with Cabinet colleagues on a comprehensive plan to ensure councils' financial sustainability over the financial year ahead.

Kate Osamor [V]: I thank the Minister for his response, but the financial cost of covid-19 to Enfield council is expected to be more than £68 million and the Government have so far funded only a fraction of that burgeoning cost. The Minister is fully aware of local authorities' statutory duty to provide a range of services to their communities. In the absence of fair funding, should local authorities begin making plans for more austerity to fill the funding gap by cutting vital services such as libraries, waste collection or adult social care?

Mr Clarke: The answer to that question is unequivocally no, they should not. As I set out in my previous answer, we are working closely with the Treasury on a comprehensive settlement for the sector, which we will bring forward in due course.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): The recent reports on disparity in the risk and outcomes of covid-19, published by Public Health England, confirmed that black and minority ethnic communities have been

disproportionately affected by covid-19. What plans does the Minister have to ensure that areas that have been badly hit by covid-19, particularly those with large black and minority ethnic populations, receive the support necessary to recover from the social and economic effects of the outbreak?

Mr Clarke: The hon. Lady's question is a good and important one. Obviously, that is something that the Government have published research on, and it is obviously a fast-evolving situation. We continue to work closely with councils that cover areas of high density of BAME population, including, for example, Bradford. We want to understand those pressures and as we do, then we will adjust our response accordingly.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Hounslow Borough Council has identified spending pressures of around £15 million and income losses of £95 million due to covid-19, and the funding gap is rising. Our local authority is heavily dependent on aviation and my constituency has the fourth largest amount of furloughed employment. How do the Government plan to support partnerships between councils, industry, training providers and community organisations to ensure that our economic recovery and our community recovery go hand in hand?

Mr Clarke: The hon. Lady asks an excellent question. Clearly, it is important that local authorities and business work together. We have so far allocated a total of more than £103 million to Hounslow Borough Council precisely to help ensure that we support the whole community. That includes a generous settlement of grants for businesses as well as additional funding worth more than £14 million for the council. It is vital that any authority with particular issues—for example, links to aviation—that is struggling to make the books balance speaks to the Department, and we will of course always be happy to offer detailed advice.

Local Authorities: Lost Revenue

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the value of revenue lost by local authorities as a result of the covid-19 outbreak.

[903172]

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What recent estimate he has made of the value of revenue lost by local authorities as a result of the covid-19 outbreak.

[903212]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mr Simon Clarke): We are working closely with the sector to develop a good understanding of the pressures that local authorities currently face. We have announced £3.2 billion of additional funding, councils will be able to defer £2.6 billion in business rates payment, and £850 million in social care grants was paid in April in a move aimed at helping to ease immediate pressures on local authority cash flows.

Jeff Smith: Manchester has lost £136 million in revenue this year alone. In Greater Manchester, the funding gap is £406 million. In the UK, it is £10 billion. The Minister

just told us unequivocally that local authorities should not make plans for more austerity. Is he committing to fully fund those gaps?

Mr Clarke: As I explained in my previous answer, we will issue a comprehensive spending plan, which ensures that we do not leave local authorities facing unmanageable spending pressures in the year ahead. I point out that Greater Manchester councils have received £168 million of additional funding in response to the pandemic and their core spending power in this financial year increased by £150 million. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has held detailed talks with Sir Richard Leese, and obviously an invitation to have further conversations as required always stands.

Gerald Jones: The financial position of Merthyr Tydfil and Caerphilly County Borough Councils, which cover my constituency, was difficult enough before the pandemic owing to years of UK Government austerity. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that the Welsh Government receive the funding they need for Welsh local authorities and the funding that the Prime Minister committed to Wales in February to tackle the effects of Storm Dennis? The impact of the floods and the pandemic have caused a hugely difficult situation for local authorities in my area and across Wales.

Mr Clarke: The winter storms have passed from memory, given everything that has happened subsequently, but they were terrible and had a significant impact on several communities, particularly on the west coast of the country. I am very conscious of that. We of course make a commitment that the funds that were promised will be paid. Local government is a devolved matter and therefore my Department does not engage directly with Welsh councils, but they can rest assured that they will receive their fair share according to the Barnett formula.

Mr Speaker: Off to lovely Lancashire with shadow Minister Kate Hollern.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab) [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker, but it is not so sunny today I am afraid.

The Government made a promise to councils that they would provide full support so that councils could do whatever it takes to get through the coronavirus crisis. According to Local Government Association figures released on 29 May, councils needed as much as £6 billion to cover the cost of coping with the ongoing pandemic. If things returned to normal, that was the Government's promise. However, we all know it is obvious that things will not return to normal in July. Will the Minister speak to his Treasury colleagues and keep his promise to cover the deficit faced by councils and prevent them from going over the cliff edge? I acknowledge the Minister's earlier responses, but he has yet to give a complete commitment to funding councils' deficit.

Mr Clarke: We are obviously very conscious of the £9.3 million that we have given to Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council. It is crucial that we deliver a suitable funding settlement for local authorities. We are working hard with Treasury colleagues to do that. The hon. Lady can rest assured that we will bring further details to the House as soon as we are ready.

Covid-19: Departmental Priorities

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his Department's priorities of the covid-19 outbreak. [903206]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Luke Hall): Supporting the national and local response to covid-19 has been our top priority since March. We are giving councils the resources they need to respond and have injected £3.2 billion of new grant funding. This includes support for vulnerable people such as rough sleepers, where we have taken unprecedented action. Nearly 15,000 people have been housed in emergency accommodation, including hotels, since the start of the lockdown period.

Alyn Smith [V]: I am grateful for that answer. In a consensual spirit, because this challenge affects everybody everywhere, can we recognise the remarkable achievement, proving what we can do when there is political will, of bringing rough sleeping to all but zero? However, we need to build on that and take it forward. What plans does the Minister have to work across the House to make sure that we can build on that success and end rough sleeping altogether?

Luke Hall: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the way in which he asked his question. We have seen a remarkable effort from local authorities, volunteers, the homelessness sector and councils of all party political persuasions, who have worked together to bring so many rough sleepers and people in danger of sleeping rough off the streets to give them the support they need. We are of course working with local authorities across the spectrum to put plans in place to support people into longer-term accommodation. Alongside that, we have announced £433 million to deliver 6,000 units of new move-on accommodation and personalised, wraparound support. I am always very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss this further.

Reopening of High Streets and Town Centres

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure the safe reopening of high streets and town centres as covid-19 restrictions are eased. [903174]

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): What progress he is making on plans for the safe reopening of high streets and town centres as covid-19 restrictions are eased. [903180]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): Helping our towns and cities develop safe trading environments, particularly on high streets, is vital to the Government's efforts to kick-start our economy, get people back to work and get businesses trading again. We continue to examine all the options to revitalise our high streets. I want to spark a vibrant café culture to support hospitality businesses and make it easier for them to operate outdoors, with seating and tables for temporary markets set up, and for the streets to be temporarily pedestrianised. Many councils are already doing these fantastic things and I will be publishing our plans shortly.

Mark Pawsey: Rugby town centre has reopened today with the unique innovation of images of a rugby ball placed on the ground to remind people of the need for social distancing. As a former salesman, I know that "You can't sell if you don't tell", so does the Secretary of State agree that in addition to the practical safety measures that he has spoken about, councils must reassure people that town centres are open for business by accompanying them with an effective local marketing campaign?

Robert Jenrick: Our £50 million reopening high streets safely fund, of which Rugby is one beneficiary, allows local authorities to create communications plans to give people the confidence to get back on to our high streets, to support local businesses and to help the economy move forwards.

Antony Higginbotham: This morning I was able to go to some businesses in Burnley and Padiham and see the incredible work that they have done to get themselves covid-secure, but covid is only one of the challenges facing our high streets, and Burnley has missed out before on the towns fund. Will the Secretary of State reassure me that he is still committed to working with me to make sure that Burnley's local economy is reinvigorated for the long term?

Robert Jenrick: I can give my hon. Friend exactly that commitment and help to reassure his constituents. I know that Burnley is benefiting from the historic high streets heritage action zones. We will also shortly bring forward the competitive round of the towns fund, when Burnley will be able to apply. I very much look forward to seeing his application, and I support and strongly endorse the campaign of his local newspaper, the *Burnley Express*, and encourage his constituents to support their local business community by finding time to shop local.

Local Economies: Covid-19

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the renewal of local economies as covid-19 restrictions are eased. [903175]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mr Simon Clarke): Obviously I very much welcome the fact that today is a big moment for all our local economies as shops reopen, which is really positive news. We have given councils, businesses and communities over £27 billion thus far to support them as we move to recovery from this pandemic. That includes almost £13 billion in business grants, which has so far supported 832,000 businesses, and the £50 million reopening high streets safely fund, which the Secretary of State referred to. Today we are also publishing the guidance on the £3.6 billion towns fund, which will enable 100 places across England to make further progress with their town deals.

Jane Hunt: I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I have welcomed the super announcements to help business improvement districts with various funds, to support local economies through the uncertainty of the covid-19 pandemic. This has been a vital lifeline for Love Loughborough, the BID in my constituency. Given the need to ensure that our

town centres have the resources they need to get back on their feet, what further steps are being taken to support BIDs as the lockdown restrictions are eased?

Mr Clarke: BIDs have a significant part to play in our high street regeneration programme, and they will be even more important given the setback we have all experienced during the first half of this year. That is why we have legislated to allow BIDs that were due to re-ballot this year to continue until March 2021 and have announced £6.1 million in emergency support funding for BIDs. I am pleased that the Love Loughborough BID—not one to be said unless you have a taste for tongue-twisters—will receive £12,747 from this additional fund.

Building Safety Fund

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): What criteria his Department uses to determine eligibility for the new building safety fund. [903176]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): The eligibility criteria for the building safety fund are set out in the prospectus that was published in May—as Members know, the fund was launched on 1 June. Where buildings are not eligible, our guidance is clear that building safety is the responsibility of building owners, and we have given expert advice on a range of safety issues and measures that can provide clarity.

Lucy Powell [V]: As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) has explained, the fund is not big enough for the demand, and many buildings in Manchester are ineligible for it. Last week, I met residents of Skyline Central 1, whose building will not be eligible because the freeholder has already begun works on the property, yet the freeholder is passing all those costs on to leaseholders, to the tune of £20,000-plus each. So what more will the Government do to ensure that leaseholders are not bearing the brunt of removing dangerous cladding from their buildings?

Christopher Pincher: I am obliged to the hon. Lady for her question, and I know she is campaigning doughtily on behalf of her constituents. As I have said, we have been absolutely clear that where those buildings are already being remediated—where remediation was under way before 11 March—residents, leaseholders, should first seek to recover the costs from the owner, and the owner should do this from the developer of the buildings where the defects are found. The point of the fund is to get the remediation work under way quickly. I can quite understand the points she has raised and I am happy to talk to her further about that case.

Regeneration of Towns

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): What plans he has to support the regeneration of towns. [903178]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mr Simon Clarke): Our £3.6 billion towns fund will create jobs and drive economic growth in towns across England, and the new high streets task force, along with our £50 million reopening high streets safely fund, will help local areas to kick-start the safe reopening of their town centres.

Rob Butler: The new unitary Buckinghamshire Council has ambitious regeneration plans for Aylesbury, which has garden town status, with an excellent masterplan already prepared. Will my hon. Friend confirm that funding will still be available from central Government for the imaginative and innovative garden town project, which will make Aylesbury a place where people will want to live, work, visit and invest, long after the coronavirus crisis?

Mr Clarke: Yes, I can. Well planned, well designed, locally led garden communities play a vital role in helping to meet this country's housing need well into the future. As we announced at Budget 2020, the Government have demonstrated their support for the Aylesbury garden town through a £170 million housing infrastructure fund award, which should help to unlock its full potential.

Home Ownership: Support

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con): What plans he has to help support people to buy their own home. [903183]

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): First Homes, our new flagship home ownership programme, will discount homes by at least 30% for local people and first-time buyers, reducing income and deposit requirements. We recently closed our consultation on First Homes, and we will publish our response very soon. This will add to other Government-backed schemes, including Help to Buy, which have supported over 627,000 households since 2010.

Rob Roberts [V]: Around this time last year, a friend of mine purchased a property as a first-time buyer. On a purchase price of £275,000, he paid £3,700 in land transaction tax, which is the Welsh equivalent of stamp duty. Had he completed his purchase just eight miles away, across the border in England, he would not have paid any stamp duty at all. I commend my right hon. Friend, along with the Treasury, for this policy to assist first-time buyers, but will he join me in calling on the Welsh Government to raise the threshold for first-time buyers to £300,000 to mirror England so that young people are not incentivised to move out of my beautiful constituency?

Christopher Pincher: My hon. Friend is right; Delyn is a beautiful constituency. He is also right to point out that stamp duty or land transaction tax in Wales is a devolved matter. The Welsh Government are not particularly successful at building houses, including social homes. I think they have built fewer than 140 in the last five years, so the message to the Welsh Government is: could do a little better. But I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that in England, stamp duty relief means that 80% of first-time buyers will pay no stamp duty at all, and cuts the price for 95% of those who do pay the tax. This relief has benefited over 500,000 people since its introduction three years ago.

Topical Questions

[903224] **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): Yesterday marked three years since the tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire. No words will ever be enough, but my thoughts, and I am sure those of the whole House, are with the survivors, the bereaved and the community of north Kensington. Over the weekend I laid a wreath beside the tower on behalf of the Government. We will continue to work to ensure that this tragedy can never happen again.

Once again, I want to thank everybody across local government for their continued and dedicated response to covid-19. We have backed those efforts with £3.2 billion of additional funding, and today I want to reassure councils that I am working closely with Cabinet colleagues on a comprehensive plan to ensure their financial stability for the remainder of this year. I will say more about that shortly. Finally, as many shops reopen their doors to the public this morning and we look to the next phase of our recovery, my Department will be leading efforts to revitalise our local economies with a collective determination to realise Britain's enormous potential.

Felicity Buchan: In order to get our high streets back up and running, we might need a temporary relaxation of licensing laws—for instance, to get more tables and chairs out on pavements. Clearly we do not want a free-for-all, but what steps is my right hon. Friend considering?

Robert Jenrick: I am very sympathetic to the argument that my hon. Friend has made. I would like to see more outdoor seating and for it to be easier and cheaper for small businesses to get licences. I would also like to see more temporary markets and more pedestrianisation, and for it to be easier to do things such as putting marquees outside pubs for longer this summer. These are all things we need to do to help our economy get going in the summer months, and I will be working with local councils to bring forward our proposals very shortly.

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is caught up in a cash for favours row that now reaches inside No. 10 Downing Street, but last week he did not even have the courage to show up and answer questions in this Chamber, so I hope he will be answering now. Given the gravity of the allegations surrounding his unlawful decision on the Westferry development, will he agree to make a full statement to the House, publish all correspondence and disclose all conversations with other Government Ministers and officials relating to the case, to reassure the public that the integrity of the planning process cannot be auctioned off at Conservative party fundraising dinners?

Robert Jenrick: Propriety in the planning system is extremely important and I take my responsibility as Secretary of State very seriously indeed. The application to which the hon. Gentleman refers was highly contentious—all applications that come before the Secretary of State are highly contentious—and had been contested for many years. In fact, it had only come before Ministers in my Department and my predecessor in April because Tower Hamlets Council had itself failed to determine it. I took the decision in good faith and with an open mind. I am confident that all the rules were followed in doing so.

It is not unusual for a Secretary of State to come to a different conclusion from a local authority. It is not unusual for a Secretary of State to come to a different conclusion from a planning inspector—no disrespect to the great people who work there—and my predecessors did so on a number of occasions. All the relevant information relating to this matter is with the Cabinet Secretary. I have taken, and will take again, advice from my permanent secretary about what further documentation we might be able to publish. As the hon. Gentleman says, we want to ensure that the correct processes of the planning system are followed. That means publishing documents while bearing in mind the legitimate interests of the parties to this case, which remains a live planning application.

[903225] **Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con):** Back in March, the Chancellor rightly told the House that event hire companies with business properties would be eligible for rate relief and a corresponding leisure and hospitality grant. However, subsequent guidance from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government excluded those companies. Will the Secretary of State clarify the position—at present, neighbouring local authorities in my part of Hampshire are making different decisions for the same firms—or does he think that the new discretionary grant fund is the way to go? Right now, my local authority will do neither without the Secretary of State telling it that it can.

Robert Jenrick: My understanding is that the new discretionary fund would allow a business such as the one my hon. Friend raises to benefit from that. I know he has written to me in the past asking for further clarification, but I am happy to come back to him once again and ensure that that business has the clarification it needs to receive the funding it desperately requires at this time.

[903226] **Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab):** The Secretary of State has admitted that giving full consent to Richard Desmond's Westferry development was unlawful because of apparent bias, so why did he not immediately recuse himself from taking the decision instead of unlawfully trying to force it through?

Robert Jenrick: Let us be clear about the circumstances here: all the parties to this application—that includes the Mayor of London, the applicant and Tower Hamlets Council—agreed to redetermine the case at my suggestion. The court consented to do that and that is now what will happen. If underlying the hon. Lady question is one asked in writing by, I think, the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed), as to what the involvement of my Department was in this matter, I am happy to clarify. My Department knew about my attendance at the event before I went to it. It knew about the fact that I had inadvertently sat next to the applicant. I did not know who I was going to be seated by until I sat at the table. I discussed and took advice from my officials within the Department at all times.

[903230] **Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con):** In beautiful Hastings and Rye we have seen a noticeable increase in constituents contacting me about being terrified and intimidated, victims of the antisocial behaviour of particular neighbours. What measures is my right hon. Friend taking to support social housing landlords in dealing with and reducing the increase in this disturbing behaviour?

Robert Jenrick: First, let me say that it is completely unacceptable for anyone to feel unsafe or intimidated in their home. Earlier this year, I announced an additional £165 million for the troubled families programme to tackle some of the issues of antisocial behaviour and to help to transform people's lives. Later this year I will publish our social housing White Paper, which I hope will empower tenants and improve the quality of life in social housing forever. We have also given landlords, the police and councils a significant range of powers to tackle antisocial behaviour, including criminal behaviour orders and community protection notices.

[903227] **Sarah Jones** (Croydon Central) (Lab): Did the Secretary of State know, when he signed the planning consent for Westferry, that the next day a new levy would come into effect, which would have cost the developers tens of millions of pounds more?

Robert Jenrick: That was a matter of public record. It was referred to in the planning inspector's report that my Department received in November, so all parties would have been aware of that.

[903233] **Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend agree that the work done with rough sleepers during this crisis presents a unique opportunity? Will he commit to redoubling efforts to bring together the national Government, local government, the voluntary sector and, crucially, employers to make sure that we can build on this platform, so that more rough sleepers can be found sustainable homes and careers and we can work towards the Government's very laudable aim to end rough sleeping for good?

Robert Jenrick: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. One of the great successes and few silver linings during the pandemic has been the fact that, working with charities and councils across the country, we have helped to bring in more than 90% of those people who are sleeping rough on our streets. That is something we should all be proud of and it has undoubtedly saved hundreds if not thousands of lives, but that is just the beginning. I am now working with the homelessness Minister—my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall)—and Dame Louise Casey on a long-term plan to give those people the accommodation they need to move on and restart their lives. That begins with working with local councils and bringing forward more than 6,000 new homes.

[903228] **Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP) [V]: The Secretary of State's answers to the hon. Members for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) and for Blaydon (Liz Twist) are entirely unsatisfactory. He accepts that he acted unlawfully in overruling a local authority to grant planning permission to a wealthy Tory donor, helping him to avoid £40 million in tax. Will the Secretary of State explain to the House how he expects the public to have confidence in planning procedures given his actions, and why he thinks it is appropriate for him to remain in post while a police investigation of his behaviour is ongoing?

Robert Jenrick: I am happy to clarify a number of those points, the vast majority of which were factually incorrect. I understand that a Labour Member of the

House of Lords did make an allegation to the police. That was swiftly assessed by members of the Metropolitan police, and they informed me that there were no criminal matters to investigate and they had no intention of taking it further. I would welcome the hon. Gentleman's withdrawing that suggestion.

I entirely stand behind the decision that I made. I made it with an open mind, because we want to see more homes built in this country and in particular in our capital city. This development would have led to 1,500 homes and 250 affordable homes. I remind the House that this contentious decision came to my desk as Secretary of State because the local council had failed to determine it in accordance with the law.

[903234] **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con) [V]: Hinckley business improvement district has worked over the past decade to increase footfall and reduce shop vacancies. In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), the Secretary of State talked about the vision that may well be in place. Will he expand on where he thinks BIDs should be in the future of driving forward such places as Hinckley post covid-19?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mr Simon Clarke): I thank my hon. Friend for his question, which is a very good one. As he rightly says, BIDs have a very important role to play in this regeneration. We see them at the heart of the process of making sure that the high street comes back stronger from this pandemic and that we make good progress in making sure that the high street is genuinely fit for the future. That means meeting the needs of modern consumer habits.

[903229] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): On the Westferry development, the Secretary of State has just told the House that the Department was advised of the conversation with Richard Desmond at the fundraising dinner before he overruled his own planning inspector to approve the Westferry development, but a whistleblower in the Department says that there is no record of the dinner appearing in official documents. That is potentially a serious breach of the ministerial code, especially as the Secretary of State himself has just admitted that it is a highly contentious application. Will he now confirm when and how he advised the Department of the meeting, given the question of bias that this issue raises?

Robert Jenrick: I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Lady with her pre-prepared question, but as she will have heard in my answer a few moments ago, the Department was fully informed of my attendance at the event. I discussed with my officials the fact that the applicant had raised the matter. I advised the applicant that I was not able to discuss it, so I think I have answered her question comprehensively.

[903235] **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): My right hon. Friend has ensured throughout the coronavirus pandemic that local authorities have been supported and supported well. My local authority, Sefton Council, has concerns about future funding arrangements. What more can his Department do to help?

Robert Jenrick: We said at the start of the pandemic that we would give councils, which were responding to covid so brilliantly, the resources they need, and we meant it. We have announced more than £3.2 billion of new grant funding, including more than £17.5 million for Sefton Council. As I said earlier, we are going to keep working with councils, including Sefton, to ensure that they have the resources they need.

[903231] **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): May I start by sending, on behalf of all my Liberal Democrat colleagues, our very best wishes to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) for a speedy and full recovery?

Who will make the re-decision on the Westferry Printworks development in place of the Secretary of State, and how will they address the concerns about apparent bias expressed by the High Court in its judgment?

Robert Jenrick: As is usual in cases when planning applications are re-determined, a different Minister in the Department will be chosen and will make the decision, and whenever that case comes forward, he or she will do as I did and approach this matter without any bias, with an open mind, and do the right thing.

3.30 pm

Sitting suspended.

Social Distancing: 2 Metre Rule

3.35 pm

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on publishing the review of the 2 metre social distancing rule.

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): I thank my right hon. Friend for his important urgent question. As part of our work to slow the spread of coronavirus, the Government have put in place social distancing guidance. The guidance specifies that everyone must keep 2 metres away from people outside their household or the support bubbles that have been in place since Saturday. I am grateful for the commitment and the perseverance of the British people in following these guidelines over the past few months; I know it has entailed huge sacrifice.

We keep all our public health guidance under constant review to ensure it reflects the latest advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies and the latest evidence that we have on the transmission of the virus. The Prime Minister has commissioned a comprehensive review of the 2 metre guidance. It will take advice from a range of experts, including the chief medical officer and the chief scientific adviser, as well as behavioural scientists and economists. It will also receive papers from SAGE, which is conducting a rolling review of the 2 metre guidance already. The review will examine how the current guidance is working, and will look at evidence around transmission in different environments, incidence rates and international comparisons.

Unless and until there is any change to the guidance, everyone must continue to keep 2 metres apart wherever possible, and must continue to follow our “stay alert” guidance, by washing their hands, for example, and self-isolating and getting tested if they have symptoms. I am aware there is a great deal of interest, understandably, in this matter on both sides of the House. However, I am sure that the House would agree that it would be premature to speculate about that review’s conclusions at this stage. We will, of course, keep the House updated on this work, and we will share any developments at the earliest possible opportunity.

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the Minister, for whom I have a very high regard, for his announcement of the review, but it was nearly three weeks ago that the Prime Minister told me at the Liaison Committee that he would commission just such a review and publish it in good time for the reopening of shops and other businesses today.

Let me be clear: I do not believe that we should act contrary to a rigorous scientific assessment; quite the reverse. What I asked the Prime Minister for was a scientific review. Among the questions it should consider are these. First, like the virus, science does not recognise national boundaries, so what is peculiar about the UK that has meant that we have had to have a 2 metre rule, when almost all other countries around the world, advised by reputable scientists, have had a smaller distance?

Secondly, what lessons have been learned from countries such as Germany, France, Singapore and Australia about their experience of shorter distance rules after a quarter of a year of operating them? Thirdly, many of those countries have a shorter distance rule, but require face coverings to be worn. Why is it right for them, but wrong for us?

Fourthly, there is a much lower rate of covid transmission outside compared with indoors. Why do we have the same rule regardless of setting? Will the review consider the total impact on lives and public health of the 2 metre rule, including the consequences of people being unable to work? Finally, and vitally, will it conclude in good time before 4 July, so that if more businesses are able to reopen then, including hospitality businesses, they can plan for what social distancing to enforce?

Millions of people—workers in pubs, cafés and restaurants and those in manufacturing industry, as well as children going to schools and young adults in colleges and universities—depend on this decision. We are fortunate in this country in having some of the very best scientists in the world, but so far our outcomes have not always been the very best in the world. Therefore, Ministers, officials and scientists should have the confidence, as good science itself does, rigorously to challenge current thinking and to apply lessons from the experience of others.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. I can reassure him that his kind words about me are reciprocated; I of course have huge respect for him, not only for what he did in his previous roles in Government but for the work he is doing now as Chair of the Science and Technology Committee.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of striking the right balance—and it is a balance—between protecting public health outcomes and public health, and understanding the impact that the restrictions are having every day on businesses. I am entirely seized of the difficulties of striking that balance.

My right hon. Friend asks whether the review will take into account the wider impact on society through the impact on business. I can reassure him that, given that economists are a key group in putting together this review, that is exactly one of the things that we will look at—scientific and medical evidence, but economic evidence too.

The work is already under way. My right hon. Friend highlighted the importance of timescales. Work has been ongoing for some time within SAGE constantly to review and consider the impact and appropriateness of the 2 metre rule, but I hear exactly what he says about how important it is that businesses that are getting ready to reopen get guidance as early as possible to enable them to prepare.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is clear that the review must report within a matter of weeks. I will of course reflect to him the feeling, which I suspect my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) will not be the only Member to convey, that it is important that this is done as quickly, efficiently and rigorously as possible to give businesses as much certainty as we can.

My right hon. Friend touched on the differences between the distances in different countries. The UK, Canada, Estonia and Spain, for example, have a 2 metre rule in place; the USA has 1.8 metres; Belgium, Australia, Germany and Italy have 1.5 metres; South Korea has 1.4 metres, and France and other countries have a 1 metre rule. The reality is that there is not a fixed science and there continues to be a scientific debate about what is the most effective distance.

[Edward Argar]

One of the reasons that we have a 2 metre distance in place at present is that the scientific evidence from SAGE is that a reduction from 2 metres to 1 metre would carry somewhere between a twofold and a tenfold increased risk of transmission. That is why we have the present guidance, but we are very clear that the review will give us the basis to make considered decisions on the most appropriate way forward in striking the balance between public health and economic impact.

As ever, advisers advise—we have some of the best scientific advisers in the world, but we will of course look at the scientific advice from around the world—but ultimately Ministers decide, and Ministers will decide on the basis of the review and the evidence.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I congratulate the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), on securing the urgent question. We all want society to reopen, but we need to know the basis on which any changes will be made and by when they will be made.

I say that because, as we heard, a review was promised by the Prime Minister on 27 May, and he said at the time that we would get the results before 15 June and the reopening of non-essential retail. It is now 15 June and that review is nowhere to be seen, so what confidence can we have that this latest review will be published on time? The hospitality sector could reopen in England on 4 July, the date on which this review is due, but as we heard, even if it comes out on time, it will still be too late for businesses to put in place effective systems for reopening on that date. What about all those businesses that have already gone to great expense to reorganise on the basis of 2 metres? Will they receive financial support if the guidelines change?

As we heard, we know that if we change the rules on social distancing, we change the risk, so it is not only critical that the Government follow the science; they also need to be honest with the public about the level of risk that they consider acceptable. What evidence will be made available, particularly to those most at risk, in the event that we do see a change to this rule?

It is important that the review is not undertaken in isolation. The Government's own scientific adviser and the World Health Organisation have said that measures should be eased only when there is a fully operational testing and tracing system in place. Will the review consider the robustness of that system, and can the Minister tell us when we will have a fully functioning system, with an app, in place?

Finally, since 11 May the Government advice has been to wear face-coverings where social distancing is not possible. That advice only became compulsory on public transport today. Can the Minister say why it took a month to make that advice compulsory? The Government were too slow on that, and have been too slow on PPE, on testing and on social care. We cannot afford to be too slow on this as well.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the shadow Minister, as always, for his remarks and for, as ever, the constructive tone that he adopts on these occasions. I share his view that we do want to see the United Kingdom reopening for business, but we want to see it do so in a way that is

safe for those going out and shopping—and I encourage people to go out and frequent their shops from today. I also want to ensure that when we are able to safely open hospitality again, we get it going and do so in a safe way based upon the evidence.

On timescales, like my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark)—the Chair of the Select Committee—and the shadow Minister, we recognise the importance of getting this information and this decision out there as swiftly as possible, because it is important to give businesses all the time we can to prepare for it. Equally, however, the shadow Minister would not expect me to set a particular deadline while the work is being done. I have said that that will be within a matter of weeks and that we recognise the urgency for business, but it is important that those conducting the review can do so properly and rigorously, so that it is useful for the decision we have to make. Once that review has reported and the Prime Minister has had the opportunity to consider it, I would, of course, expect the findings to be made public.

On the WHO's comments, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the fact that the 2 metre distance is only one part of the measures—only part of the complex package that is in place to reduce risk and to protect public health. As we have seen, different countries around the world have adopted different approaches, such as on whether to reduce the distance and have imposed different requirements on the wearing of face masks. Therefore, there is, in a sense, a menu of different options all of which can reduce risk, and the question is how to come up with the most appropriate balance between reducing risk while also opening up business. On the Committee we see economists and clinical and scientific expertise feeding into that balance-picture. As the Chancellor said at the weekend, it is not binary; we must consider this in the round, considering all relevant factors.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned test and trace. It is a hugely important part of the armoury of options to chase down this disease and allow our economy to reopen. As he will have seen last week, we made a very good start in the first week of the operation of the new test and trace system. We also saw a very, very high willingness on behalf of members of the public to self-isolate when asked to do so, and I pay tribute to everyone who has done that and thank them for doing so.

Finally, I say to the hon. Gentleman that I believe that throughout this pandemic we have been learning every day about how the disease behaves, what is needed to tackle it and what steps are most effective, and I am confident that we have done the right thing at the right time throughout. However, as with any responsible Government, of course there will be lessons to learn and it is important that we are willing to learn them.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) on securing this urgent question, because this is the most important and significant strategic decision the Government are going to have to make as they unlock the economy. The problem is that so much of this debate has been shaped around the idea of the economy as an economic tool, but it is not just economic. The reality is that, with our focus on covid, we are in danger of losing sight of what will happen, probably to the poorest in society, if people start to fall unemployed and suffer depression and

increased illness. This will have a major effect on the ability of people to manage their lives. So this is not just economic. It could be six weeks before we discover the outcome of a review, but I do not believe that a single fact is going to change in that six weeks. The reality is that the advisers are all divided; the Government must make a decision and get this one right.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. I have huge respect for him and for his campaigning on this issue, particularly in the context of the extraordinary work he has done on social justice over many years. He highlights the importance of looking at the impact of covid-19, not just in the immediate context of health outcomes, but in the context of its broader social and economic impact. He is absolutely right. He is also right to emphasise the need for urgency, and that is exactly how we will conduct this review.

On his final point, he is right: the science is mixed. There are different scientific opinions, and a balance must be struck between the best scientific advice and consideration of the impact on the economy. As a great former Prime Minister once said:

“Advisers advise, and Ministers decide.”

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: The risk of viral spread is influenced not just by the distance between people, but by the length of time they spend together. While research is measured in minutes, people could be sitting in a pub or restaurant for hours. Other factors include ventilation, the activity engaged in, and whether face coverings are mandatory. The Government cannot wish away the fact that the risk of transmission increases as people get closer, and more than doubles from 2 metres to 1. Is it not safer to keep the distance at 2 metres but to work with all sectors to develop protective measures for when that is not possible? It could be a combination of personal protection, in the form of mandatory face coverings, and structural protection, such as using glass or perspex screens between tables in restaurants. We all recognise the impact on the hospitality sector, but surely a second wave would be devastating.

Edward Argar: Before I answer, may I put on the record on behalf of myself and my hon. Friends our very best wishes to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) for a swift and full recovery? I hope that the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) will be able to convey our sentiments to her when they speak. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire is a member not just of the SNP family but of the family of this House, and we all wish her well.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire is well versed in these issues and is an eminent clinician in her own right. We have made it clear that the 2 metre rule taken in isolation is not the only factor. She is right to highlight the broader context: it is not just about distance, but about duration of contact, how close that contact was, and whether measures were in place to mitigate that, be it screens or other measures. She is absolutely right and, we must always remember that this is not a binary question—it is not just the 2 metre rule, or the distance rule, and nothing else. We must look at it in the round, as the Chancellor and, I believe, the First Minister of Scotland rightly said. That is exactly what this review will be doing—looking at all those factors in the round,

to come up with appropriate scientific and economic advice to the Prime Minister and Ministers so that they can make a balanced decision.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The Minister is absolutely right that the evidence is changing daily and that we have a menu of options to deal with the transmission of covid. Increasingly, face coverings look effective. Would it not be worth relaxing some measures, such as the 2 metre rule, which make the pubs and restaurants in Thirsk and Malton and every other constituency financially unviable, and tightening up in other areas, such as requiring the compulsory wearing of face coverings in shops, and in pubs and restaurants when moving to and from a table?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes a very good point and, as ever, a gentle but clear plug for his constituency encouraging people, when it is safe to do so, to come and enjoy those businesses and that hospitality. He is right to do so, because I—like every other Member of this House, I am sure—have spoken to restaurateurs and those in the hospitality industry and pubs, who are all very clear about the impact that this has on the operation of their business. We are incredibly sensitive to that, but it comes down to making an appropriate judgment on the scientific evidence, balancing economic impact and keeping the disease under control. He is right to allude to other measures within that package or menu of options, which will of course be taken into consideration in the review.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): A number of businesses in my constituency, just over the river in Vauxhall, were home to a thriving nightlife, with the culture of the South Bank. A number of them are small businesses in hospitality, tourism and the creative industries, with a number of people on freelance contracts and a number of people who have not been able to get any Government support over the last few months. They have all played their part in adhering to the lockdown rules, but their sector will be the last to open up. Social distancing rules will make a big difference to their ability to survive the next few months. Will the Minister take into account the particular nature of this sector? What assessment has been made of the additional impact of social distancing on these businesses?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady is right, and I suspect that, like other Members, she has had many constituents coming to her to explain how this could make a real difference to the financial viability or otherwise of reopening their businesses. We are incredibly sensitive to that. The Chancellor said over the weekend that it could make the difference between a third of pubs being able to open up or three quarters, depending on where the distancing level is set. I am incredibly sensitive to this, but as I said, it is not a binary choice; a number of measures will be considered in the context of this review. As I am sure her constituents and mine would wish, it is important that we strike a balance between protecting public health, on the basis of the best scientific and clinical evidence we have, which is what the review will look at, and getting the economy up and running again as soon as we safely can.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): If our objective is to work towards social and economic normality while maintaining our hard-won control over the virus, as the

[Jerome Mayhew]

incidence of infection in the general population reduces day by day, would it not be possible to reduce the social distance from 2 metres while maintaining downward pressure on the rate of infection? Is the acceptable rate of infection—below 1—a scientific or a political decision?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Through the package of measures we have put in place to protect public health and press down on the transmission of this disease, we are seeking to do exactly that—as the incidence and infection levels go down, to start relaxing those restrictions where we can, step by step and in a cautious way, to allow businesses to operate. It is quite right and understandable that Members have different views on the pace at which we should be going on either one of those, but it is exactly those considerations that this review is looking to investigate.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): As the Minister has already acknowledged, as well as the social distancing rules, a rigorous system to test, trace and isolate every case is critical to keeping people safe. The WHO has said that the system has to be proven “robust and effective” before further easing of lockdown measures. NHS leaders and leading scientists have said that test and trace is not fit for purpose, and local authorities, which have a critical role in tracing, say that their remit is still unclear and they do not have the critical data they need. When will he ensure that all local authorities have the information they need to support test and trace fully?

Edward Argar: I thank the hon. Lady, her party’s spokesperson on this issue. In the first week of its operation, having been stood up pretty much from scratch, this system has performed extremely well, with 67% of those testing positive successfully contacted and responding with the information needed, and 85% of their contacts agreeing to self-isolate. There is more to do—of course there is—but that is a very positive start to this programme, led by Baroness Dido Harding, in its first week of operation. In answer to the second point, it is right that we continue, as we have done throughout, to work hand in hand with local authorities, as well as other public health authorities.

Mr Speaker: I call the gallant Member, Bob Stewart.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Mr Speaker—at least I have got that right this week. Mr Speaker—not Mr Deputy Speaker. I have at last acknowledged it.

My question is very much like that from my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew). As the R figure approaches zero—in some places, it is getting there—why the heck do we need social distancing, face masks on public transport and social isolating? If we get near zero, surely we can get back to normal.

Edward Argar: I am always grateful for questions from my hon. and gallant Friend. The latest figures—as of last week—are that R is not near zero, but is between 0.7 and 0.9. That shows that the infection and transmission rate is going down, but it is still only just below 1, which is why we must keep up the pressure on this disease and keep transmission rates down. He is right: as my hon.

Friend the Member for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew) suggested, as that figure and the transmission rate fall further, there will be more opportunities to relax, step by step and cautiously, the restrictions, but we are not there yet.

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, I represent Derbyshire Dales, where tourism, hospitality and pubs are essential, not only to the local economy, but to the mental health of constituents. Will he reassure me that these issues will be at the top of the list of factors considered in the reviewing of the 2 metre rule, not least to enable the opening up of pubs promptly but when it is safe to do so?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is right. She, too, champions her wonderful constituency of Derbyshire Dales, which I have had the privilege of visiting in the past. She is right that it is important that we can open up pubs and restaurants and other similar businesses as swiftly as we can, but it is important we do it when it is safe and when transmission rates and public health measures suggest it is appropriate.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Scientific analysis is good, but many of the Secretary of State’s Back Benchers have long argued for a reduction of the 2 metre distance guidelines without basing that on science. Can he confirm, therefore, given that economists are on the review panel, that enough weight will still be put on the evidence from the scientists and that, if there is to be a relaxation, public health measures will go alongside it? On the economy, will he also look at the additional cost to business and consider the additional business support required to accommodate these measures?

Edward Argar: Quite rightly, right hon. and hon. Friends on the Conservative Benches, in their comments about relaxing the social distancing rules, were reflecting the fact that the science is mixed; there is no scientific consensus across the world. There are different distances around the world in different countries. That is why we have this review under way. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that it will consider not only the clinical and scientific evidence, but the economic impact and evidence. It will look at that in the round, which is, as the Chancellor said, exactly the right thing to do. All that will be carefully considered, and decisions will then be made by Ministers on the basis of that review and the scientific evidence available.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Given that the scientific advice is mixed and muddled and that the economic and business advice is overwhelming and clear, why do Ministers not today announce the halving of the distance and ask businesses to put in other measures, including protective clothing and screens where appropriate? If we want our hospitality industry to survive in any form, it needs to know today so that it can prepare its routes and tables and screens, and all the rest of it. Leaving it until 4 July will mean many more lost jobs.

Edward Argar: The reason is that the current scientific advice is that the 2 metre rule significantly reduces the risk of transmission and we have not yet beaten this disease. That is why the Prime Minister has put in place

this review—to consider not only the scientific and clinical evidence, but—exactly as my right hon. Friend would expect—the economic evidence and impact. It is right that it be done on the basis of a review and of evidence, but I hear his very clear plea that the sooner the better for the sake of businesses. I accept that.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: During the lockdown, small businesses in my constituency have planned considerable changes to their business models in preparation for reopening in a way that is safe for employees and customers. That not only takes time but is an extra financial burden for small businesses, in particular. Will the Minister please confirm what extra financial support is readily being made available for understandably worried small and medium-sized enterprises to help cover the extra financial costs associated with reopening?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to talk about the amazing work that many of our businesses, large and small, have done to get themselves ready to reopen. I would encourage people, following the rules, the guidelines and the social distancing guidance, to get out there and support their local shops now that they have been able to reopen. As she will know, in recent weeks the Chancellor has put in place a significant package of support for businesses and individuals, and that is still there. It will obviously, as he has set out, taper in the coming months as the economy is able to reopen more fully. We have supported businesses throughout and we will continue to do so.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): I fully support recent statements by the Prime Minister that as the number of new cases falls it is right to re-evaluate our social distancing measures. In May, the Government of South Korea reduced their social distancing requirements to simply two arm's lengths. It is crucial that we ensure that our businesses have the best chance to recover and rejuvenate, and are provided with the measures that will best permit them to do so. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy recently stated that if we do not reduce social distancing measurements, 3.5 million jobs will remain at risk. Does my hon. Friend agree that if it is safe to reduce social distancing measures, then that is the most reasonable and responsible thing to do?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that if and when it is safe to reduce social distancing measures, that is what we should do, but it is for the review to report and advise us, and the Prime Minister, on exactly that.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): The Minister will be aware that many of my constituents' businesses are based around tourism, and that many of those may not reopen again in the winter should they find that distances are not reduced. First, may I ask him to join our Cornish campaign—Think Local, Shop Local? Secondly, will he employ all possible counter-measures to ensure that our tourism and hospitality sectors can be protected throughout covid-19?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight this. I am very happy to join him in supporting Think Local, Shop Local in Cornwall. I do not know if

I qualify for these brief few seconds as an honorary Cornishman, but if I do, that would be a privilege. He and my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) have highlighted to me how important this sector is to their constituencies and their local economy, so it is right that we work to reopen businesses as soon as we safely can.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers so far. My colleague Diane Dodds, the Northern Ireland Assembly Economy Minister, is attempting to address this issue and to strike the delicate balance between precautions and economic survival. She has been taking scientific advice on it from leading scientists. Will the Minister commit to sharing his Department's scientific evidence with the devolved Assemblies to enable us all to have the most up-to-date information so as to make informed decisions and begin to move forward?

Edward Argar: We have a very close working relationship with the Government in Northern Ireland. We will continue to maintain that and to share information as appropriate, as we have done throughout this pandemic. I pay tribute to the work of the Government in Northern Ireland in tackling it.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): *The Lancet* reports that there is a 2.6% chance of catching covid-19 at 1 metre and a 1.3% chance of catching it at 2 metres. The World Health Organisation recommends 1 metre. It is now time for the Government to decide. The Minister knows that this will be game-changing for reopening our schools and reopening our economy, but also for impeding the spread of this pandemic. He speaks about making the right decision at the right time. One metre is the right decision; now is the right time, not in two weeks.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. and gallant Friend for that question. The WHO says that the distance should be at least 1 metre, so it is not prescriptive in that respect. We should make sure that we note that. He makes a very powerful case for getting our economy, and particularly our small businesses and hospitality businesses, moving again. We are making good progress in tackling this disease, and we do not want to put that at risk. The review will give us the scientific evidence to make an important decision on the way forward.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: Anybody who has seen the crowds waiting for shops to open today, the people at recent demonstrations, and, indeed, MPs queuing at Parliament will know that it is human nature to push the limits. A distance of 2 metres gives a margin for error. If it is reduced to 1 metre, surely people will push that limit as well and stand even closer. I ask the Government to keep the rule in place for as long as it is required, knowing what human nature will do.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, but the 2 metre social distancing rule has both a health and an economic impact. Therefore, we must look at this in the round, on the basis of both sets of evidence, which is exactly what this review will do.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): It is fantastic that more shops are now reopening in Stoke-on-Trent, and I hope that everyone supports our local retailers and market traders, but does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital to maintain social distancing and that we should reduce it from 2 metres only when the risks have been assessed and it is safe to do so?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is exactly what the review will look at.

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): Caravans and chalets on holiday parks have to be at least 6 metres apart, so residents could easily observe current social distancing guidelines. When the Prime Minister undertakes his review, will my hon. Friend ask him to consider allowing holiday parks to open immediately? In doing so, he would help rescue the economy of coastal towns, which are already among the most deprived communities in the country.

Edward Argar: If I recall correctly, my hon. Friend has raised this issue previously. He is right to have done so and I am very happy to give him the assurances he seeks. I will pass his comments on to the Prime Minister.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Even if the Government were to reduce the limit as a result of this review, it would make very little difference to theatres and grassroots music venues. Neither a 1 nor a 2 metre limit will make much difference to their capacity, because, just like us, they would still have to keep rows closed. Even with a 1 metre limit, half of the venue would be closed. Will the Minister ensure that the review takes that into account? Will he also pass on that information to the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, to ensure that support remains in place for those sectors, even if the limit is reduced to 1 metre?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. A lot of the debate has focused on hospitality, pubs and restaurants, but he is absolutely right to talk about the impact on music venues, cultural venues and theatres, all of which play a huge part in our national life. I will, of course, highlight that issue for those conducting the review and the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: Can my hon. Friend confirm that the comprehensive review launched by the Prime Minister on the 2 metre rule will report back to Government as swiftly as possible? That will be very important to pubs and restaurants in South Derbyshire, which are changing at the bit to reopen and welcome customers back.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend emphasises what a number of right hon. and hon. Members have quite rightly said, not least my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), about the need for the review to report with speed and urgency. I know that that message will have been heard very loud and clear.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) [V]: Throughout the coronavirus crisis the Government have failed the public. They failed to lock down quickly enough, failed on personal protective equipment, and failed on test,

track and trace. Tens of thousands of people have needlessly lost their lives as a result of those failures. The Government's chief scientific adviser has previously warned that

“the risk at 1 metre is about 10 to 30 times higher than the risk at 2 metres.”

Is not this push from Tory Cabinet members and Back Benchers to scrap the 2 metre rule a clear example of putting profit before public safety?

Edward Argar: Well, it is nice to see the hon. Gentleman, who shadowed the team I was in when I was a Justice Minister, but I have to say that it is unsurprising that his tone remains the same. We are doing the right thing at the right time. We are, of course, always seeking to learn lessons, and we are willing to take advice and listen to the scientific and economic advice and evidence. That is what we are doing with this review. Surely he would welcome our taking the appropriate advice and then considering our decisions on that basis.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: The current scientific advice says that the risks of transmission are far less in the open air than in enclosed spaces. Clearly, the position now should be that the Government need to look at reducing the social distancing rules when people are in the open air, while potentially keeping the advice strong when people are in enclosed spaces. That is clearly important for the hospitality industry, where beer gardens and restaurants with external areas where people can sit outside could restart. Clearly at the moment, with a 2 metre rule in place, they will be unable to. Will my hon. Friend look at the scientific evidence to see if we could actually have two sorts of guidance, one for when people are in enclosed spaces and one for when people are in the open air?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the fact that this is not simply a binary choice, as there are many other factors that play a part, which other Members have alluded to—be it the length of time that one is in close contact with someone, the distance, and also whether it is inside or outside. Those are exactly the sort of considerations that those conducting the review under Simon Case will be considering.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): As we have found over the past few weeks, consistency of messaging is important, and 2 metres is currently consistent across the UK. All Governments in the UK have been questioned on this issue, so I ask the Minister to ensure that this and any future review involve consultation with the devolved Administrations. Can he confirm the mechanism that will be used for this, given that the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport expressed concern at last week's Scottish Affairs Committee that the ministerial implementation groups have not met for at least two weeks?

Edward Argar: Throughout this pandemic, we have had a very close working relationship between Edinburgh, Cardiff, London and Belfast, sharing information and having regular discussions between Ministers—indeed, as I understand it, not just territorial Office Ministers but across Health and other Departments. That will continue.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): Across my constituency of Watford, lots of people are today going to the intu centre and many of the shops and using the high street. I am hearing from many businesses that we need to allow them a certain level of flexibility as we come out of this review. Some shops where customers can wear face coverings should be allowed to have 1 metre distancing, and other areas should perhaps remain at 2 metres, but we should do it in a way that helps customers and helps shops and businesses get back to business.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the different pieces of the jigsaw that we have in use at the moment, be it distance, face covering or a whole range of other measures. I can reassure him that all those will be considered in the context of the review.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP) [V]: Given that the evidence shows that the risks from transmission increase between two and tenfold with reductions from 2 metres to 1 metre, would the Minister agree that comparisons internationally over distance can be misleading while infection rates in the UK remain higher? Can he assure the House that in consideration of the risks involved in any such reduction, commercial and political interests will not be placed ahead of the need to keep the public safe?

Edward Argar: While I note the hon. Gentleman's point about international comparisons, actually I believe that learning lessons from other countries is something that can be valuable and is something that will be taken into consideration in this review. We should always be willing to look externally to see if there is anything we can learn. As I have made clear to him and to other Members previously, it is important that we consider the scientific evidence and ensure that whatever we do keeps pressing down on the virus and protects public health, but at the same time we must not lose sight of the fact that it is important we get our economy up and running again as swiftly and safely as we can.

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): Businesses throughout Longbridge, Northfield, Weoley Castle and Kings Norton have done everything they can to follow the guidance, but they are desperate for the 2 metre rule to be reduced so that they can survive, and in many cases so that they can reopen. Will the Minister commit to publishing detailed guidance when the review is finished, so that organisations such as Northfield business improvement district can help to keep customers and staff safe and businesses can thrive?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is a great champion of businesses not only in his constituency but across his great city. I hear exactly what he says, and we have been clear that once the review has reported and the Prime Minister has had the opportunity to consider it, we expect the conclusions to be made public.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very kind remarks about my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan). We are all really rooting for her today.

It seems that one of the most obvious outcomes in politics is that the review will conclude that 2 metres will become 1 metre and the Government's cavalier approach

to easing the lockdown will continue. Thank goodness we in Scotland have a "caution first" Scottish Government. Having listened to some Government Back Benchers today, one would almost believe that the health crisis is over and the issue is simply the reopening of the economy. Is the Minister prepared to stand up to them and tell them directly that there will be no reopening until the risks are overcome?

Edward Argar: I would not prejudge what the review will say—it would be wrong to do so—but I do not believe that the hon. Gentleman's characterisation of the measured and sensible contributions from right hon. and hon. Members on the Government Benches is correct. We have been clear that it is important that we do what is right from a public health perspective and that we strike the appropriate balance between beating the disease and keeping people safe and, where we can do so safely, allowing businesses to start to work again.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The Chancellor's world-leading packages of support have provided a lifeline to millions of people and businesses during these difficult times, but that can go only so far. Blackpool South now has the highest unemployment rate in the entire nation, and our local economy's dependence on the tourism and leisure sectors has left us particularly vulnerable. Local businesses now need a successful summer season if they are to have any chance of survival at all, so will my hon. Friend commit to supporting those sectors and opening up the economy by relaxing the 2 metre rule when it is safe to do so?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his constituents in Blackpool, and my right hon. and hon. Friends the Ministers in the Treasury and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will have heard what he said. He was absolutely right in his final sentence: we are keen to get his local economy and the economy around the country going as soon as we can, but when it is safe to do so.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The pub and beer trade in my constituency employs almost 2,000 people. Companies such as Fuller, Smith & Turner, which is based there, say that the difference between 2 metres and 1 metre is the difference between only 50% of pubs opening and most pubs being able to open. When the Minister does his review, will he take into account what is now happening at some pubs, which is that they are doing takeaways, causing long queues, and as the warm afternoons go on social distancing is forgotten and people are urinating everywhere—on footpaths and in public places? That is also a health hazard, but it would be mitigated if more pubs were able to open, so I hope he will consider that.

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady makes a sensible point, as she always does. The review is being conducted under the auspices of the No. 10 permanent secretary, but with scientists, economists and others feeding into it. I am sure they will have heard what she said, but I will nevertheless ensure that it is passed on.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I am sorry to be a bit of a killjoy, but while we lose ourselves in thoughts of pubs and restaurants reopening, could we

[Mr William Wragg]

perhaps attend to the minor matter of our national education system and the ability to have children return to school? The current 2 metre rule makes that impossible. On Friday I visited my old primary school, Norbury Hall in Hazel Grove, to see some of the measures being taken there. It will be absolutely impossible to return all children to school by September unless the rule is sorted out.

Edward Argar: If I recall correctly, my hon. Friend was a distinguished teacher before his service in the House and served on the Education Committee before he ascended to his current chairmanship of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. He is absolutely right to highlight the fact that there are impacts on schools as well as on businesses; that is one of the things that will of course be taken into consideration.

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): As the Government ease the lockdown, we still do not have a sufficient test and trace system set up, the R level is increasing above 1 in some regions, and we still have more than 1,000 new confirmed cases every day. Should the Government be changing crucial social distancing measures, knowing that information? What immediate action is being taken in areas where the R rate has gone above 1 to help get it down? Would lowering this distance be putting profit before people and the economy before health?

Edward Argar: I would caution the hon. Lady, on the basis of the SAGE advice, that in no region is the R rate above 1. Out of 10 models done recently one suggested that in two regions it might have gone up, but we consider this in the round, not by cherry-picking one study and ignoring the other nine; so it is not above 1. On her points about test and trace, we have set up the system from scratch and I believe we have done extremely well in the progress we saw reported in the statistics on the first week of the operation of that scheme. On her final point, we have made it clear throughout that this is about following the scientific advice and opening up the economy when it is safe to do so.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con) [V]: May I say how surprised and delighted I am to hear so many colleagues, on both sides of the House, who seem to have as their hobby being epidemiologists, and it is great to hear what they have to say? I say to the Minister that I am very reassured by the tone he is taking in the answers to these questions. He will be aware that in the United States, Sweden, Belgium, Germany and now China there has been a resurgence of covid-19 and that if we were to make any moves too soon nobody would thank us, including businesses, if we had to go back into lockdown.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is right to say that this is about conducting this review so that we have the best scientific and economic evidence, and so that we can make the right decision at the right time, when it is safe to do so.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Whether the 2 metre rule is maintained or shortened, as the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) mentioned, many businesses

will find it will still not be viable to reopen. Given that, will the Government consider extending financial support to businesses that have to remain closed because social distancing measures would make reopening not financially viable?

Edward Argar: As the hon. Gentleman will have heard the Chancellor say on many occasions, we continue to keep all measures to support individuals and businesses under constant review, and I know that the Chancellor will have heard the point he makes.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I concur with what has been said by many right hon. and hon. Members who have warned about the implications for the hospitality industry, in particular, unless we change these rules sooner rather than later, and about the impact on coastal towns. I come back to what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), because has there not been greater flexibility on social distancing for pupils in schools but not for the many adults? That is part of the problem of why so few children are able to come back. Can we look at this urgently? Otherwise in September we will still have many, many children deprived of an education.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend, a distinguished former Children's Minister, makes a very good point and that is exactly the sort of thing I will pass on to ensure that the review team considers it in the work it does.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The Minister rightly says that this review has to balance economic and health factors, but the weight of importance of the health factors will obviously be more for those who are vulnerable or shielding. Will the Government be publishing particular advice for people in those vulnerable categories? Will he publish some of the health advice so that they can have confidence in the Government's overall decision?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the fact that this disease appears at the moment to hit different groups of people with different characteristics differentially, with some being hit much harder than others. One reason why we are undertaking this review is to make sure we look at all that evidence in the round. I do not want to prejudge it, but, as he will know, we have always published a range of guidance and advice at each stage, often tailored to different groups, and we will continue to do that, where it is appropriate.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) [V]: The Minister will be aware that what looks like a very marginal change in the R number, which demonstrates the infectiousness of the disease, can have serious consequences for public health. With the current 1,000 or so new cases a day, if the R number were held at 0.9 over 60 days, those 1,000 people would infect 7,000 other people. If we allowed it to creep up to just 1.1, they would infect 25,000 other people, which means that three and a half times as many people would get the disease and three and a half times as many people would, sadly, die. So will the Minister commit, when the review is published, to publishing not only the Government's assessment of how the R number will be affected by any proposed changes but also the Government's projections of how many more people

will catch the disease as a result and how many more people will die if the Government reduce the 2 metre requirement?

Edward Argar: The review will consider economic and, particularly, clinical and scientific evidence. As I have said before, once the review has reported and the Prime Minister has had an opportunity to consider it, I would of course expect the conclusions of that review to be made public.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Our economy is heading for a deep recession, and the Government were slow to lock down, slow on PPE and slow on testing, tracking and tracing. As a result, we have the second highest death rate in the world. Easing the 2 metre rule will cost more lives. Not easing it will lead to millions unemployed. Either way, the Government's negligence means that people are going to continue to suffer. The scientific and economic impacts of relaxing the rule are already available. Why are the Government running scared of making a decision?

Edward Argar: Throughout, the Government have taken advice from the best scientists and clinicians we have available, and we have looked around the world as well. That is exactly what this review will do. When the review reports, advisers will have given advice and Ministers will decide on the basis of that advice.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): One in five jobs in Eastbourne rely on hospitality. UK Hospitality estimates that at 2 metres, businesses will operate at an unsustainably crippling 30% revenue, but at 1 metre, they would operate at between 60% and 70% and approach breaking even. We must of course pursue a safe recovery, as the Minister has outlined, but with the summer season now upon us and with opportunities to trade being time-sensitive, can he assure me that this guidance is being considered with the utmost urgency?

Edward Argar: I am happy to give my hon. Friend the assurance she seeks. We are very much aware that time matters, and this review is being conducted as swiftly and as rigorously as it can be.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Before it is safe to reduce the 2 metre rule, do we not require a world-beating track and trace system to be in place? And does a world-beating track and trace system not require a fully functioning app?

Edward Argar: As I have set out, I believe we have made an extremely strong and successful start with our track and trace system. Baroness Harding, who is heading that piece of work, has made it clear that the app is important but that it is, as she characterised it, the cherry on the cake. It is not essential to the effective system that we have already got up and running.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): Some hospitality venues in Rushcliffe have told me that even if they were allowed to open, doing so with a 2 metre rule in place would make their business economically unviable. Can the Minister reassure the owners of those businesses in my constituency that the Government are listening to their concerns and that that reality will be factored into Government policy across the board?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend's constituency is very near mine, so I suspect that our constituencies have a similar perspective on that. I am happy to give her the reassurance she seeks.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): If the review is based on genuine scientifically robust debate, I will have no problem with it, but does the Minister accept that if the Government are going to move from 2 metres to 1 metre, they cannot do so on the night before 14 July and expect consumers to have the confidence to go back into bars and other places? It is fine and well to have the review, but there has to be good public messaging as well.

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman makes a typically sensible point. It is important that the review is able to be conducted with proper scientific and economic rigour to ensure that we have the evidence base we need. I am not going to prejudge what the decision will be or what the review will say, but he is also right to highlight the importance of businesses having as much time as possible to prepare for whatever decision may be made.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): On the health arguments, should we not remember that our hospitals have lost capacity in order to operate at 2 metres, and will the Minister assure me that the review will look at how many more beds we could get into hospitals to deal with the elective surgery backlog once they are safe in terms of covid?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend makes an important point about getting our NHS back up and running again not just for emergencies, but for elective procedures and other procedures, which is what we have been doing. The infection control context within a hospital is slightly different—indeed, considerably different—from that in businesses and other contexts, but he is right to highlight the impact that the necessary restrictions are having in a range of contexts on the ability to treat people or to serve people and businesses.

Mr Speaker: In order to allow the safe exit of hon. Members participating in this item of business and the safe arrival of those participating in the next, I am now suspending the House for three minutes.

4.35 pm

Sitting suspended.

Public Order

4.38 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Like all Members of this House, I was saddened and sickened at the far-right thugs who came to London this weekend on a so-called mission to protect the statue of Sir Winston Churchill, claiming to want to protect our country's heritage, yet failing to understand that our country's heritage is founded on a set of shared values—tolerance, respect for people and property, and adherence to the rule of law. Those thugs, far from protecting our heritage, did all that they could to destroy and undermine those values. There is no place for their sickening conduct and hate in our society. They were violent, they were aggressive and abusive towards police officers, and they were patently racist. It is right that a good number have been arrested.

I would now like to give the House the latest operational update from the police. In total, more than 210,000 people have attended demonstrations across the country following the death of George Floyd. At least 160 protests took place this weekend, with the vast majority passing peacefully, but counter-demonstrations sparked ugly scenes.

On Saturday, 2,000 people attended counter-protests in Westminster, with eruptions of violence throughout the day. Racists and far-right hooligans clashed with the police and fights broke out. Smoke bombs and glass bottles were lobbed at the police in shameful scenes. Thirty-eight officers were hurt across the country this weekend as they were kicked, punched or pelted with missiles. On Saturday alone, there were 137 arrests for offences including assaults on officers, violent disorder, breaches of the peace, possession of offensive weapons and class A drugs, and drunk and disorderly behaviour. In total, at least 100 officers have now been injured, as well as three police horses and one police dog, and at least 280 arrests have been made.

As that ugly operational picture demonstrates, many of the so-called protesters came with the deliberate intent of causing harm to those around them and to police officers. That hooliganism is utterly indefensible. There can be no excuse for pelting police officers with missiles. Of all the dreadful images to emerge from this weekend, the one of the man desecrating the plaque of PC Keith Palmer was the most abhorrent.

PC Keith Palmer served our country in so many ways, having first served in our armed forces. He then came to this place and made the ultimate sacrifice during a terror attack at the heart of our democracy. I know the whole House will join me in sending our thoughts to his family, colleagues and friends. He will never be forgotten.

As I said last week, when I became Home Secretary I vowed to stand with the brave men and women of our police, for law and order and against the terrorists, the thugs and the criminals who threaten people, towns and communities. I am unapologetic for reiterating that pledge today because sadly, backing our world-class police has never been more important. The scenes of violence and disorder in recent weeks have only underlined the challenges they face.

We ask our frontline police officers to do the most difficult of jobs. Those courageous men and women run towards danger so that we do not have to. They put

their own lives on the line to protect us, to protect the public. They take on the drug dealers, murderers and violent criminals every single day to keep our streets safe. They uphold the rule of law and give us the security and freedom to live our lives as we choose. I remain saddened at the lack of respect shown to our brave officers by a small minority of people.

The senseless violence is taking a huge toll on our police. On Friday, I spoke to officers from forces in England and Wales who had been attacked in the line of duty to hear at first hand the devastating impact on them and their loved ones. Their accounts have only strengthened my resolve to step up the support for our police. An attack on our brave police is an attack on us all. I refuse to allow our outstanding officers to become society's punchbag, or monuments to heroes who served their country to be vandalised and desecrated.

The Government are considering all options to stop those who seek to attack emblems of our national sacrifice and pride, including the proposed desecration of war memorials Bill. I can confirm that my right hon. and learned Friend the Justice Secretary will meet my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) and for Bracknell (James Sunderland) this afternoon to take that forward. My message today is simple: actions have consequences. I want vicious individuals held to account for the violence and criminality that they perpetrate. I want to see them arrested and brought to justice.

Finally, I turn to the unprecedented national health crisis we find ourselves in. Coronavirus has tragically taken the lives of more than 40,000 people in our country. To protect us all and to stop the spread of the deadly disease, any large gatherings remain unlawful. The severe public risk forces me again to urge the public not to attend future gatherings or protests: if you do so, you put your loved ones at risk.

It is clear that the far-right thugs who descended on London at the weekend, with the intent to cause harm, shamed themselves with some abusive and violent conduct. They were violent. They were abusive and aggressive towards the police. They were racist, and there are no excuses for this behaviour. So to the quiet, law-abiding majority who continue to be appalled by this violence and who have continued to live their lives within the rules throughout this pandemic, I say that I completely hear their anger at the scenes they have seen on our streets; to the police who continue to be subjected to the most dreadful abuse, I say that they have my full backing as they act proportionately, fairly and courageously to maintain law and order; and to the criminals, I simply reiterate my earlier remarks: "Your behaviour is shameful. No matter who you are, if you have broken the law, you will face justice." I commend this statement to the House.

4.45 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for her statement and for advance sight of it. Like everyone else in this House, I was appalled by the scenes in London this weekend. The violence, intimidation and antisocial behaviour were unacceptable, and as I said over the weekend, we condemn these acts absolutely.

It was clear that people, including the far right, had come out with the intention of causing violence, coupled with Nazi salutes and missiles hurled at the police. It was despicable to see a man apparently urinating by the memorial dedicated to PC Keith Palmer—a man who defended this very building to keep us Members safe. For such a disgusting act to occur next to a monument to a man who gave the ultimate service to his country shows how vile the events of Saturday became. PC Palmer's bravery will never be forgotten.

In these terrible scenes, we were reminded once again of the bravery, dedication and professionalism of our frontline police officers, and we again owe them a debt of gratitude. I understand that 23 officers were injured this weekend, and that is, of course, in addition to officers who were injured in previous incidents. I ask the Home Secretary to update us on their wellbeing. I have been in contact this morning with policing representatives to pass on the thanks of those of us on the Opposition Benches.

On the issue of the law around war memorials, I recognise the importance of local memorials including cenotaphs, and I will scrutinise carefully the proposal on the issue that the law as it stands puts the financial value of repair above the hurt caused to the community. On sentencing, bearing in mind some of the media coverage at the weekend, I should point out that the maximum sentence for criminal damage is already 10 years, and sentencing guidelines for damaging memorials would need to be developed considering sentences already handed out for other serious offences.

The Prime Minister should also be clear that we will not allow him to move the focus from the action to address the discrimination that people face now. Let us be clear: there should be no attempt to draw comparisons between those who were intent on violence this weekend and the legitimate cause of the Black Lives Matter campaigners, who have brought attention to the impact that racism and inequality continue to have both here in the UK and across the world. Now is the time for action. To borrow a phrase from another movement for equality and justice, what is required now are deeds not words.

The Prime Minister's decision to announce yet another review falls woefully short of what is required, because he could act now. He could implement all the recommendations of the Lammy review that have been sitting there since September 2017. He could bring forward actions on the Wendy Williams lessons learned review now. He could address the fact that just 60 people have been compensated so far in the first year of the Windrush compensation scheme—just 60 out of thousands, which is unacceptable. To use the Prime Minister's own words, these plans are "oven-ready" and could be done now. The Prime Minister has the information to act now. The Prime Minister has the recommendations in front of him to act now. The Prime Minister has the power to act now. Are we not in the middle of a powerful national moment when more delay is not the answer? Is it not the truth that by failing to act now, the Prime Minister just is not offering the leadership required?

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments about police officers and policing, and for the support he has given to our injured officers. What we have seen over recent weeks has been completely appalling.

There are a number of points I would like to make in response to the hon. Gentleman's comments. It is important to recognise—I said it, in fact, this time last week—that peaceful protest remains an essential and vital part of our democratic society. Of course black lives matter. The movement itself and the response in terms of the points that they have been making, as we discussed last week on the Floor of the House, are absolutely important and essential. It is vital that we look at the ways in which we can address the issues of inequality and social justice across our country and society. That is why the Prime Minister has announced a new cross-Government commission to effectively champion the voice of black and minority ethnic groups in particular. The new commission on race and ethnic disparities will absolutely look at some of the issues the hon. Gentleman touched on. If I may, I will come on to the issue of Windrush separately.

These inequalities are live inequalities, which means, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, we must act now. The aim of the commission, importantly, is to set out something that is forward looking and positive: a positive agenda of change that balances the needs of individuals, communities and society, but maximises opportunities and ensures fairness for all. That is, of course, something that all Members in this House should rightly welcome and work on collectively. Again, I said that last week and I will keep on saying it. We should unite in our core purpose and objective. We are all leaders and we can absolutely drive this agenda forward. It will build on the work of the race disparity unit and go further in terms of understanding why disparities exist and what does not work. It will build on recommendations that have already been made to the Government.

That brings me on to the point the right hon. Gentleman made about Windrush and the Wendy Williams review. I have been clear to the House, and I will say it again on the Floor of the House this afternoon, that I shall be returning to this Chamber to provide a full update on its recommendations and on the way in which the Home Office itself is under taking much work in terms of a change of culture. It is looking at itself and at the conduct that has taken place, historically, in the Home Office. Those are vital and important issues that have to be addressed, and they have not been addressed previously.

We will be looking at how we implement the Williams review. Work is taking place right now specifically on compensation and increasing that compensation. The hon. Gentleman will understand that every single case is a bespoke case that has to be looked at on an individual basis. These are complicated cases. They cannot just be solved and resolved overnight with payments. We have a team of people working assiduously to look at every single case. If the hon. Gentleman would like an update on the work that has taken place on the compensation scheme, the outreach work and the programmes that have been undertaken and are still forthcoming with our online stakeholder teams, I would be very happy to update him on that work.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con) [V]: For the past two weekends, parts of my constituency have experienced some appalling acts of criminal damage, including smashed windows, offensive graffiti and, even worse, violence towards frontline police officers. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should

[*Nickie Aiken*]

recognise the outstanding service those brave officers have given to ensure the safety of both peaceful protesters and local residents, whose lives are frequently disrupted by such protests? Will she commit to bringing to justice the hooligans responsible, and reassure all those on the frontline that they have the Government's complete support?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I thank her for her question, as the Member of Parliament for the constituency that was affected by the shocking scenes already touched on in my statement and in opening remarks. There are a number of points to make. The police have been absolutely incredible, and I pay tribute to the Metropolitan police—all the officers and their operational command over the weekend. I was in constant contact with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner throughout the weekend, and I have seen many of the teams myself and was in touch with the commissioner again this morning. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to pay tribute to all the officers who served to keep her constituents safe at the weekend, and also to man the protests and arrest the individuals perpetrating violence and crime. In answer to her final point about ensuring that the perpetrators of the violence, the thuggery and the hooliganism face justice, we will absolutely support the police in all their efforts to bring forward the investigations, using police bodycam and CCTV footage, and make sure those individuals face justice.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) [V]: I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement.

I am on record as a vigorous defender of free speech and the right to peaceful assembly, but the violence and racist behaviour we saw at the weekend was totally unacceptable, and the desecration of PC Palmer's memorial was appalling. I commend the police on their bravery and restraint.

We are still in the middle of a public health crisis and people should not be taking part in mass gatherings, because it is not safe: it puts health at risk and potentially puts lives at risk, given the threat we are all still facing from the virus. That said, it is very important that we do not let this reprehensible public disorder and the debate about statues distract us from the most important issue: the inequalities suffered by black and minority ethnic people in modern Britain.

We were starkly reminded of these inequalities at the weekend when the third anniversary of the Grenfell fire passed, still with no justice for the victims, and when "Channel 4 News" revealed the Government's suppression of reporting about the true extent of the disproportionate impact of covid-19 on black and minority ethnic communities. The Prime Minister has announced yet another review, but what we need is not another review but action on the recommendations of the many other reviews that have already reported.

I would have thought that a review such as that announced by the Prime Minister was the Home Secretary's remit, so why is the Prime Minister announcing public policy from behind a paywall in *The Daily Telegraph* rather than doing so on the Floor of the House? When will this House get to debate the terms of the review and

the way in which it is to be conducted? What is stopping the Government implementing the recommendations of the "Windrush lessons learned" review without further delay? When will the full findings of the Public Health England report be put into the public domain, and will the Government implement the recommendations of Professor Kevin Fenton? Finally, what is stopping the Home Secretary getting rid of policies such as no recourse to public funds, which we know impact adversely and disproportionately on black and minority ethnic children?

Priti Patel: As I have already stated, the Prime Minister has rightly announced that he is establishing a new cross-Government commission, and that will, again rightly, build upon many of the recommendations of the work that has taken place, in addition to the previous work of the race disparity unit. Everybody in the House should welcome that; this is a constructive and positive move forward, and it will be led, along with the review of the public health measures around covid-19 that the hon. and learned Lady referred to, by the Equalities Minister in the Women and Equalities Department.

The hon. and learned Lady mentioned the Windrush recommendations delay. There is no delay at all. I spelt out when I gave the report here on the Floor of the House the timeframe on which I would be reporting back to the House of Commons. I am sticking to that timetable and will be here on the Floor of the House before we break for the summer recess not just to outline the recommendations of the "Windrush lessons learned" review, but to expand on some of the potential policy changes and our review of many practices within the Home Office itself.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): Those who seek to destroy public order are trying to divide us, when in fact the British public speak as one. We stand against racism, we stand against violence and vandalism conducted by whomever and for whatever reason, and we support our police. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those individuals seeking to violently foster division deserve to face the full force of the law?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and it is a poignant and important moment to recognise that, notwithstanding the intolerance we have seen on the streets of London—our capital—over the weekend, we are all one nation and we are all one community. We can celebrate our differences, but at this time in particular we should be coming together to work together to address many of the issues that have been raised. There is no doubt about that. My hon. Friend is right, and he will know from his time as a police special the vital work that our police have been doing. I commend them and I praise them all. As I said in my statement, they are the ones who run towards danger to keep us all safe.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I join the tributes to our police force and police officers, and also to PC Keith Palmer. The Home Secretary will be aware of the involvement of far-right extremist groups in organising this weekend's appalling violence and the vile attacks on the police. There were people giving Nazi salutes and also people who have been involved in promoting vile racism and in extremism on and offline. The Government's independent adviser on

countering extremism recommended that the Home Secretary chair a new taskforce on countering hateful extremism. Has she set up that taskforce, and what action is it taking?

Priti Patel: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right about the people we saw on the streets and their abhorrent behaviour. Specifically in terms of the taskforce that she mentions, work is taking place now on that and has been for some time within the Department. I will happily write to her and share the details.

Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con) [V]: [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Kate, I am terribly sorry, but I cannot hear you, and I suspect the Home Secretary cannot either. We will try to come back to you when that issue can be resolved.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I echo the remarks that have been made paying tribute to the work done by the police force in the face of such horrific mindless violence and acts at the weekend, but may I draw the Home Secretary's attention to the fact that many of us are concerned that we are yet to see the details of the review the Prime Minister has announced? It threatens to be a distraction from the real problem at the moment, which is that so many BAME communities in this country feel that they are the disproportionate victims of stop and search and many other inequalities. We have to address those inequalities and we have to act now. We cannot allow this review to be a distraction and yet another review that sits on a Whitehall shelf, paying lip service to action rather than actually providing the action that we need.

Priti Patel: It is important that I reiterate something I touched on in my statement last week in the House: we are at a pivotal moment and the commission being established by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is the right approach. If we are serious, this is not just about building upon past reviews and looking at previous data, although we should of course do that. It is also not about previous policy—many Government policies are under review anyway, as we have demonstrated in response to covid. This is about combating the real inequalities in our society. In fact, it is about ending many of the gross disservices to many communities across the nation, where we see pressing inequalities, such as a lack of access to social justice. We must find a way to address those sensitive and difficult issues in an accurate and responsible way by addressing their root causes. That is exactly the objective of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, which is why he has taken this course of action.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): Over the last few weeks, we have sadly witnessed vile attacks perpetrated by violent extremists of all stripes on our streets. Further, the Home Secretary and I, along with other Conservative colleagues, have been subject to torrents of hateful prejudice and, frankly, racist abuse from the left's legions outside as well as, sadly, in the case of my right hon. Friend, from sources on the Opposition Benches as we refuse to conform to their prejudices. Does the Home Secretary agree that the Leader of the Opposition should condemn all these attacks and support the full weight of the law being applied equally to everyone, no matter how righteous they believe their views are?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He is absolutely right. We should collectively call out racist and intolerant behaviour. I am saddened that the Leader of the Opposition has effectively failed to depart from the divisive, hateful, racist politics of his party's former leader. As for that letter, I will not be dignifying it with a response.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): Our police have shown tremendous restraint and admirable calm in the last two weeks when faced with dangerous attacks and subject to crowds with covid-19 still very much a factor. Will the Secretary of State ensure that anyone who attacks our police will face the full force of the law, and that those who attack service animals will be prosecuted as quickly as possible under Finn's law?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She speaks with great passion on behalf of her constituents in highlighting the abhorrent and appalling attacks that our police officers and police animals have been subject to. First, the people who commit such attacks should all feel the full force of the law—there is no doubt about that—but we should also recognise that assaults on police officers have an intolerable impact on them as individuals. They are human beings; they are people too. They have family members and loved ones who worry about them when they leave home to go to work. That is why, as I have said previously, we will bring in legislation later this year on protecting our police, and the police covenant, to ensure that they have their rights upheld in statute.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): This weekend we saw neo-fascists and the far right marching on the streets of Britain. Now more than ever, we need a Government and a Home Office that can be trusted to tackle the racism and prejudice that still exist in British society, yet the lessons learned report on Windrush found that the Home Office displayed “ignorance and thoughtlessness” on issues of race, while the majority of the victims of that policy are still without compensation. Given that, can the Home Secretary tell me how people can be expected to trust the Home Office to adequately address racism in British society?

Priti Patel: I recall that when I came to the House I actually called out the Home Office for the “institutional ignorance and thoughtlessness” that was identified in the Wendy Williams lessons learned review. I have read that entire review, and I hope the hon. Lady has too. On her question about dealing with racism, I have made it my personal commitment to work with Wendy Williams to bring in many of the recommendations, and I will come to the Floor of the House, as I have said several times already, to talk about that further.

When it comes to compensation—I am sure the hon. Lady has already heard what I have had to say—every single case is treated in the right way: individually. These are all individuals who have experienced a great deal of suffering through dreadful treatment, yes by the Home Office, but also by successive Governments. It is important that everybody in this House recognises that when it comes to compensation, every single person is a victim and every single person deserves the right kind of treatment, commitment and support so that they receive the right level of compensation.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the approach that the Home Secretary has outlined during recent days and the robust approach she has taken, and I thank her for speaking with me on Friday ahead of the protest march that took place in Cleethorpes. Thankfully, that passed off without severe incident, but nevertheless, as she pointed out in her statement, the very fact that these marches are taking place at a time when social distancing rules are still in place causes unnecessary anxiety, particularly to the elderly and vulnerable. Will she give an assurance that she will continue to work with the police, local authorities and others to ensure that those protest marches are deterred and do not take place?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for the way in which he has been addressing this issue locally, as a leader and figurehead in his community and constituency. It is incumbent on us all to continue to make the case that we are in the midst of a public health emergency, and people's lives are at risk from mass gatherings and participating in protests. It is right that every agency—the police, police and crime commissioners, MPs, the NHS and local authorities—comes together to continually reiterate that message, and I commend my hon. Friend for the work he is doing locally.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for unequivocally condemning the far-right thuggery and abhorrent behaviour that we witnessed on our streets. I pay tribute to the police officers and wish those who were injured a speedy recovery. Today, the Prime Minister has announced another review. We have had the race disparity audit in 2017. We have had the Lammy review. We have had the McGregor-Smith review. We have had the lessons learned review. We have had the Public Health England covid-19 review, of which we still do not have the details because they are being hidden by the Government. This review covers the inequalities in health, education, employment and justice that are faced by BAME communities. Why do we need another review of issues that we have known about for decades, rather than getting on and doing what needs to be done to address them?

Priti Patel: I am saddened by the hon. Lady's tone. I thought that she would welcome an attempt to combat the inequalities in our society and end what has been a great disservice to many communities across our nation who are subject to real and pressing inequalities. I think it is right that we should all work together in a measured, responsible and reasonable way. I am just sorry that the hon. Lady is not of that persuasion.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): There was widespread revulsion in my constituency the other day when the news emerged that somebody had defecated on a war memorial in Market Harborough. I strongly welcome my hon. Friend's commitment to introduce legislation to protect such memorials. While my constituents are doing everything they can to fight this deadly virus, they see on TV far-right thugs coming here to urinate on a memorial to a fallen police officer—they do not speak for the people of this country. The weekend before that, they saw hooligans disrupting the important Black Lives Matter protests by injuring dozens of police officers—they do not speak for Black Lives Matter, and they do not speak for this country either. Does my right

hon. Friend agree that the people who really represent this country are our brave police officers, who are putting themselves in the line of danger to protect innocent people? Will she do everything she can to back them to the hilt, accelerate the work on the police covenant and ensure that the hooligans who injure our police officers end up where they belong—in jail?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on every level, and I thank him for the passion with which he spoke. I pay tribute to our police and our public service personnel who were supporting them over the weekend. They worked flat out, selflessly, to try to protect the public from the thugs and hooligans who were perpetrating the most appalling criminality, violence and disorder and the most aggressive and revolting behaviour. Racism, thuggery and that kind of hooliganism should never be tolerated at all. My hon. Friend speaks for the nation when he says that those individuals should face the full force of law, and that is effectively what will happen to them.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Home Secretary will be aware of the illegal rave that took place at Carrington in my constituency on Saturday, at which three people were stabbed and one seriously wounded, a woman was raped, and the police reportedly came under attack from the crowd. Is she confident that the police have the powers and resources to act on intelligence received to prevent these illegal events from happening as we go into the summer? What steps will she take to assure the police that they will have her support in taking all necessary action to bring those who organise such events to justice?

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. Our police have been under unprecedented strain and pressure, as we have all seen and as I said in my statement. I pay tribute to her police force and her chief constable, Ian Hopkins, who has been incredible throughout the whole covid period. With regard to that disgusting and disgraceful event at the weekend, again, through police intelligence, planning and preparing, the police were able to go in, in the right way, to break it up and take the necessary course of action. She asks an important question about the type of intelligence out there that can help us to identify illegal gatherings, mass gatherings, protests—basically events that will lead to public disorder and hostility. Our police are working flat out, which is how they were able to map, through an intelligence picture, the type of activities taking place this weekend and to plan operationally—for police numbers, the type of policing, the tactics and the command operations put on standby and then enacted. It is important that we constantly stay in touch with the police—as all Members are aware, I speak to them every day—and that we use that information and intelligence to make sure they are protected, prepared, resourced and equipped to do the right thing to protect the public.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): As the House will be aware, we are going through the worst public health crisis in a century. It has killed more than 40,000 people in this country, many of them from the BAME community, and will sadly take more. Does my right hon. Friend agree that anyone attending large public gatherings, especially when not following distancing advice, is putting not only themselves at risk but the lives of their families and friends and of everyone in their communities?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right. As I have said many times, including at the weekend—I would urge all Members to do the same in their own communities—we are in a pandemic and are not out of the woods when it comes to this horrendous disease. We have made tremendous progress, and are all grateful for that. The British public have shown tremendous resolve and resilience throughout the pandemic, but it is right that we continue to reinforce the message that mass gatherings—six or more people—are illegal and people should not be participating in them. Also, the strain it puts our police officers under has been seen this weekend, whether in London, Glasgow, Leeds or Manchester. That is simply not right. We have to do more collectively to make sure we can stop the spread of the virus and protect our police.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: I think we can all unite in condemning the violent actions at the weekend—they were totally deplorable—but we must not allow those actions to detract from the genuine concerns of the Black Lives Matter movement. I am beginning to lose count of the number of reports and reviews there have been during my five years in Parliament. What will the Prime Minister's cross-departmental review achieve that the others have not, and what can the Home Secretary say to allay my fears that it is just a populist exercise to make the Government look busy rather than an attempt actually to change anything?

Priti Patel: I am disappointed by the tone of the hon. Gentleman's question. I refer him to what I have said already. The purpose of the review and of the Government's work is to drive actions and outcomes and to address many of the core issues that hon. Members across the House have been raising. These are legitimate issues that we should collectively be working together to address, and that is what the Government and the Prime Minister will be doing.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Home Secretary join me in praising the action of Patrick Hutchinson, who rescued a white demonstrator from the other side of the riot, as it were, because he did not wish him to be injured and thus the Black Lives Matter movement to be discredited, and will she also endorse what I think I heard the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) say, which is that trying to impose the values of the modern era on people and personalities from a past age is rather irrelevant compared with making sure we examine how people behave towards the black community today?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is right. I think all Members will join me in saying that the gentleman he refers to represents the very best of Britain. Our country needs more people like him. His actions this weekend spoke volumes. I pay tribute to him and the way he conducted himself and stepped in. On my right hon. Friend's point about coming together and statues, I would say that we learn from our past so that we can have a stronger, more resilient and more secure future, and that is absolutely right.

Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con) [V]: Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the hard-working neighbourhood policing teams from Staffordshire police,

who were on hand at recent Black Lives Matter protests in my constituency, in Burton and Uttoxeter, to ensure that those present adhered to social distancing guidelines? Will she confirm what additional support the Government are providing to the police as they meet the challenges of policing during the pandemic?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I of course wholeheartedly commend her neighbourhood policing teams for the incredible work that they are doing, and have been doing for more than 12 weeks, in response to the covid health emergency, engaging with the community and encouraging people to stay at home to control the spread of the virus.

My hon. Friend asked an important question about resourcing. We are—not just now but consistently throughout this Government—increasing the number of police officers. As she will be aware, her own area of Staffordshire will receive 90 more police officers, and her police force has had a cash increase of approximately £14 million. That money goes to the frontline, to protect our communities and to keep people safe. That money is a real investment in our police officers, which is exactly what they have called for, for a considerable time.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: I begin by saying that I am disappointed to hear the Home Secretary's lack of clarity on when exactly she intends to update the House on the implementation of the Wendy Williams review of the Windrush scandal. People have died waiting, and many more are suffering. However, I share her disgust at the far-right activity that took place over the weekend. I personally have received racist and Islamophobic emails from the far right over the past few months. Will she outline what steps her Department is taking to tackle far-right activity online and offline?

Priti Patel: I refer the hon. Gentleman to my earlier comments on Windrush. He will have to wait patiently. Also, Members need to recognise how casework for Windrush compensation schemes is undertaken. These are complicated cases. He is welcome to come to the Department to learn more about the actual work that we do. I invite all colleagues who would like to do so to come in to see the work of our Windrush team.

When it comes to the type of thuggery, racism and abuse to which the hon. Gentleman referred, a great deal of work is taking place, not just in the Home Office but across Government. That is because, as I said in my statement and several times in response to questions, we are a tolerant country and society, and there is no place in it for any of that activity, racism, intolerance or hatred.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con) [V]: I associate myself with the comments of both the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State regarding peaceful protests and the police. Since the tragic death of George Floyd in the US, we have heard lots of personal testimonies and experiences in the media, from the public and even in this House about racism in the UK. How does my right hon. Friend respond to the accusations from some on the Opposition Benches of "gaslighting" when she shares her personal experiences of racism?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. As I have said, I will not even dignify that pathetic letter with a response. It is fair to say that, sadly, too many people are willing casually to dismiss the contribution of others, others from different ethnic minority backgrounds, who do not necessarily conform to their preconceived ideas, views, stereotypes or expectations of how ethnic minorities should think. That in itself is racist. As I said last week, and as I have said every single day, I will not be silenced by those who choose and want to continue to silence me. It is right that in order to combat the real inequalities in our society, we all come together. This is not about point-scoring and behaving in really quite a dreadful, insensitive, racist and intolerant way. We owe it to many people across our country and across society to come together to find solutions to the inequalities that they face.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): As the Home Secretary has rightly pointed out, there has been a prohibition on gatherings of more than six people since 1 June. What discussions has she had with police forces about the enforceability of that rule, and how many people have been issued with a fine for breaking it?

Priti Patel: I speak to police officers every single day through the police leadership—the National Police Chiefs Council—and we do have the figures. I do not have the figures with me in terms of the number of fixed penalty notices that have been issued, but I would be more than happy to get the hon. Gentleman the figures that we have and write to him.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I would like to thank the police in Kensington for their effective and sensitive policing over the course of the past few weeks. The Mayor of London has effectively closed one of my two neighbouring police stations, Notting Hill, by closing the front counter. Now that we, as a Government, are putting more money into policing, does my right hon. Friend agree that the Mayor should reconsider his decisions on London police stations?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments about the very respectful way in which aspects of her own constituency have been policed, particularly over the weekend in terms of the commemorations around Grenfell that took place. When it comes to policing in London, obviously the Mayor of London acts as the police and crime commissioner. It is disappointing that he has chosen not to invest in policing, support policing and back the police in the way that my party has been doing in government. My message is really very simple: Londoners have a great opportunity next year to vote for a Conservative candidate who will put law and order at the heart of his agenda and back the police, particularly in London, 100%.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Winston Churchill uncompromisingly fought the Nazi terror. That legacy is recognised the world over, and the British people are rightly proud of that. Nazi salutes near the statue of Winston Churchill are a travesty of what he stood for and what he fought against. Does the Home Secretary agree that we all have to be much more vigilant and much more uncompromising about the rising threat of right-wing nationalist extremism in our midst?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): One hundred police officers being injured is unacceptable. I thank my right hon. Friend for her boldness and courage in speaking out against these attacks on police officers. Will she consider reviewing section 35 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 so that police officers can check and verify the names and addresses of violent protesters to ensure that they cannot exploit the loopholes in the law that are allowing them to avoid justice and prison sentences?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend raises a very important point in relation to policing and arrest. The police absolutely have the powers that they need; this point has been raised already. It is important, though, once people are arrested, that they go through the right processes, and that also means the right processes in the criminal justice system. My staff, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor, will always look to do everything we can to protect the police through police powers and protection, but fundamentally make sure that the thugs involved absolutely face the full force of the law.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: The Prime Minister has announced yet another review in *The Daily Telegraph* today, and the Secretary of State has vigorously defended this and tried to reassure hon. and right hon. Members that it will be the answer. Does she not understand that people want to know that they are being listened to and that swift action is going to be taken to address racism in this country? How can she reassure people that there will be meaningful action from this Government?

Priti Patel: In answer to the hon. Lady's question, there are some important points here. We cannot prejudge what communities think or what their experiences are. It is right that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has commissioned that review—yes, to build on previous lessons and data that we have in Government, but also, importantly, to engage with the communities that are impacted.

Marion Fellows *indicated dissent.*

Priti Patel: I am saddened that the hon. Lady is shaking her head, because, as I said earlier in the House and I will state again, it is important that everybody learns lessons. It is important that we respect all communities, it is important that we show tolerance and understanding to all communities, and that is exactly what the Prime Minister will be doing through this new commission.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): My constituents, who have been doing the right thing and making huge sacrifices to restrict the spread of the virus, have been watching the events in London over the past two weekends with a mixture of disbelief and anger. I join them in demanding that the Mayor of London get a grip, and if he will not, will my right hon. Friend step in and get a grip?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The British public have made enormous sacrifices throughout the covid crisis, and it is right, as I have said, that the sacrifices they have made and the hard-won gains we

have made as a country in tackling coronavirus are not lost through these gatherings. He is right, and I, too, would urge the Mayor of London, as I have been doing—as have the police, and the Met commissioner as well—to stand firm and discourage these gatherings. Quite frankly, if the Mayor of London is not prepared to do that, then we will absolutely do that, and fill that void.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: We know this Government have failed to implement the recommendations from the Lammy review and the Windrush lessons learned review, and they chose to hide the recommendations of Public Health England's review of the impact of covid-19 on BAME communities. Can the Home Secretary explain why anyone should draw any confidence from the Prime Minister's cross-governmental commission in response to the Black Lives Matter protests?

Priti Patel: The answer is very simple: we are the ones getting on and doing the job, and I completely disagree with the hon. Gentleman's comments.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I join the Home Secretary in paying tribute to our amazing police officers for their courage and their bravery in keeping us all safe. On far-right activity, does she agree with the words of the head of the Metropolitan police anti-terror unit, who says that the far right is the "fastest-growing terrorist threat" facing our country, and if she does, what specific steps are we taking to challenge that threat?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on the issue of far-right terror. This has evolved in recent years—that is a complete fact—and we have seen all sorts of terror attacks in the UK carried out specifically by lone actors associated with this dreadful, hateful and corrosive ideology. Various activities are taking place, much of which are being worked on through agencies that work with the Home Office; significant investments have been put in place by the Home Office, but also with our agencies. I would be more than happy to provide further details to my hon. Friend, because this is a growing trend, and that is exactly why we have been investing very heavily in this area.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Home Secretary on not only the tone but actually the content of much of what she has said. I hope that in protecting war memorials, this will be not just about war memorials, but about all memorials that are culturally sensitive and significant, and that this focuses on community payback, not just putting people in prisons.

In Brighton, we saw 10,000 to 20,000 people march for Black Lives Matter. Most were very good—socially distanced and almost all wore masks—but, at the same time, we saw a number of far-right extremist thugs standing on our memorial and doing Nazi salutes, drinking alcohol and getting drunk, just as we saw here. However, we must not dismiss these people just as such thugs, because we know that they are organised. They have killed people before, including personal friends of mine—people I knew not only here in Britain but in Norway. May I ask the Secretary of State what she is doing to co-ordinate with international colleagues to ensure that the communications and ideology of these people are disrupted?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in the way he has outlined and highlighted this just appalling issue. There is a great deal of work taking place internationally, mainly through our intelligence organisations and agencies, with the shared work they are doing. In fact, last Thursday I had my latest briefing on some of the organisations and groups, and some of the ways in which they connect and share information—open-source activity, as well as on the dark web. As I have already highlighted, and as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), I am more than happy to provide further information about the work that has taken place. This is a serious and growing threat, and we have lone actors operating around the world on virtual networks. There is a great deal of work that has taken place that we can be proud of, but at the same time we have to be vigilant to protect our people and our country, and to prevent some terrible atrocity from taking place.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: The Scout movement across the country and in Harlow has transformed the lives of thousands of children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds; I have seen that in my constituency. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the removal of the statue of the Scouts' founder would not only be a threat to public order but would damage the reputation of the incredible Scout movement? Does she further agree that if statues are to be moved, we should have proper national and local conversations and democratic consent so that people can understand the true history of the individuals involved? We should not forget the important work that the Scout movement has done in the past and will do in the future.

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is correct in his comments. The Scouts is a fantastic organisation, and it is heroic around the country in terms of the work that it does across all our constituencies. At the grassroots, it helps to transform lives through the skills of young people and providing opportunities. He hits the nail on the head when it comes to the most salient point, which is that we live in an open, free, tolerant society with democratic processes. It is those democratic processes that should be followed when it comes to discussions about statues coming down or even going up. It is right that we follow those processes, engage our local communities and stakeholders and work with those processes and our local councils to make sure that that happens. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has made that point.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) [V]: I agree with the way that the Secretary of State has characterised the racist demonstrators at the weekend. I see that the Prime Minister has announced another review via the pages of *The Daily Telegraph*. I have listened carefully to what the Secretary of State has said today, but I am still not clear what is stopping the implementation of the recommendations from reviews that have already taken place.

Priti Patel: As I said earlier, the aim of the commission is to set out a new, positive agenda for change, which means looking at the needs of individuals, communities and society, but also looking at opportunities. It will also build on previous work that has taken place, including the work of the race disparity unit, but it must go

[Priti Patel]

further than just looking at that work: it wants to find solutions and present recommendations and, importantly, actions, both for Government and for public bodies.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): Our nation's capital has been shamed by the scenes that we have seen over the past two weekends, yet so many of my constituents stay at home and follow the Government's advice. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those scenes do not represent the best of Britain, and that the best of Britain are the people who continue to be law-abiding and who stand with our police who protect our great nation?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I thank him for the passionate way in which he has spoken this afternoon. I pay tribute to our police obviously and, importantly, to the sacrifices that people have made throughout the covid-19 pandemic. I recognise, of course, the silent, law-abiding majority of our great country, our great nation, who like us all in this House watched those scenes at the weekend, with complete horror. We stand with the people who live by the rule of law, stand up for justice and order, and completely call out the scenes and the atrocities that we saw at the weekend.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Cumbria police report that since the lockdown, officers have been spat at on 27 separate occasions. Each weekend, we see the police and rangers report a minority of visitors abusing them and locals, and being guilty of littering, vandalism and complete disregard for the welfare of wildlife and of livestock. While it goes without saying that most visitors behave impeccably, will the Home Secretary fund and enforce a new promotion of the countryside code so that everyone respects local communities and protects our environment?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that it is a small minority who cause the most harm, while the law-abiding play by the rules, live by the rules and conduct themselves in the right way. It is important to say that in beautiful parts of the country—of which there are many, including the hon. Gentleman's constituency—much more work can be done, not only by the police but by local authorities and local agencies, to ensure that there are awareness campaigns. The police have been doing that and the Home Office has been supporting and working with them to communicate those messages, but we need many of those other agencies in the hon. Gentleman's community and throughout the country to reinforce those messages.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I share the alarm at the actions of the far right this weekend and commend police officers for their bravery and courage. In the preceding days and weeks, senior police officers made tactical decisions not to uphold the law; does my right hon. Friend agree that tactics of that kind, while well-intentioned, signalled weakness and should not reoccur?

Priti Patel: It is important to say that all policing decisions are based on operational independence and recognising the situation around every single event. We must all recognise that it is not for us to judge that, particularly in Parliament. I speak to policing leaders every day, as Members know, and I have seen and heard

of all sorts of scenarios that have confronted the police over the past two weeks. It is the right thing and the right approach to back our police, but obviously when there are challenges in policing—when there are tactical issues or issues with operational command—it is right that we raise that directly with the police, and it is right that we also do that with police and crime commissioners, who obviously have responsibility for the way in which their forces operate and much of the policing that takes place in their force areas.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): During the coronavirus, the already sky-high level of violence and abuse against shop workers has doubled. We have all seen the pictures of non-essential retail opening today; that will be a key public order issue for our police to manage. Many of the answers lie in the Government's call for evidence, which they have now sat on for nearly a year; in the interests of public order, will the Home Secretary commit to publish it as soon as possible?

Priti Patel: I would be more than happy to look into that and follow up on the hon. Gentleman's important point about retail reopening throughout our country. Over the past 12 weeks we have seen some of the most appalling assaults on shop workers. Only yesterday I saw the most appalling footage from the Ealing Road in Wembley of an assault on an independent retailer. It is simply unacceptable, and it is right that we resource and support the police and that they do the right thing in investigating such abhorrent crimes. We can do more on this issue by coming together. Over years and years I have seen, as the hon. Gentleman will have, the most appalling and abhorrent abuse of our retail sector and shop workers. It is another policy area in which we must do much more work.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that in our country we do not turn to criminal damage and mob rule to enact change, or erase our past, but do so through well-tested and effective democratic channels?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are blessed: we live in an open, free, tolerant and democratic society and country. I think we are one of the greatest countries in the world. We have these processes and levers and it is right that we all use them, for whatever cause we support, to drive the right outcomes and to drive justice.

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): Public Health England's review of the effect of covid-19 on BAME communities showed what we already knew: BAME communities are disproportionately affected by the virus. Will the Home Secretary outline why the Government chose to hide the missing recommendations from Public Health England's review? Will the Government now reveal those missing recommendations?

Priti Patel: As I said on the Floor of the House last week, my hon. Friend the Minister for Equalities has rightly taken charge of the review, and its recommendations, findings and details will be published. I am sure that the hon. Lady, along with all Members, will not only look forward to that but work with the Government to be

constructive. It is a matter for the Minister for Equalities. I am sure we will be happy to come back with further details if we can.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. Many residents of mine across Keighley and Ilkley were quite rightly outraged by this weekend's violence targeted towards our police, which can only be described as thuggery carried out by ignorant fools. Will she commit to bringing the hooligans responsible for assaulting police officers to justice, and can she assure me that our officers have the full support of the Government?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about applying the full force of the law to those thugs and hooligans who were on our streets this weekend, and about the support that the Government have given to our police officers. He will know that in West Yorkshire alone, the force will receive 256 more police officers and a cash uplift of approximately £36 million. That is transformational in terms of policing and it again illustrates our commitment to backing the police.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the Home Secretary for condemning the actions of the small minority of people intent on causing problems at the weekend. For two successive weekends, we have seen the best and worst of people out in parts of my constituency, in and around the south bank and the Waterloo area. The image of Patrick Hutchinson and his friends picking up that gentleman shows us the best.

A number of businesses in and around the south bank area are concerned because, while they are planning for their recovery, they are now seeing a level of violence around that area. I am worried about the police's ability to cope with that. Is there anything more in this short time that the Home Secretary could do to help the Metropolitan police to get additional resources? Officers from Lambeth and Southwark are always abstracted to help out with the major protests, and as businesses reopen, they do not need also to be worrying about the safety of visitors coming to the area.

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I understand the concerns faced by her local businesses in the light of everything that has happened recently. I speak to the commissioner virtually every day. I am in touch with her and her team about policing and resourcing, and I have frequently asked whether more resourcing is required. I hope that the hon. Lady will lobby and work with the Mayor of London to further this. It is fair to say that more can be done in this area. In terms of police resource, I am sure she will know that the Metropolitan police has had a cash increase of over £193 million and will be receiving more than 1,300 new

police officers, so the officers are there and the cash is there, but quite frankly, the leadership from the Mayor of London is something that certainly could improve.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): This afternoon we have heard my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's commitment to equality and fairness. We have also heard her being extremely robust about supporting our police officers, who do such a fantastic job, sometimes in incredibly difficult and dangerous circumstances. What really matters is that we take a lead from the Home Secretary and find the solutions to the inequality and unfairness that have resulted in the protests over the past few weeks and the awful violent actions that we saw this weekend, and that we all work together to bring our communities closer together and address those inequalities that have brought about such conflict.

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. She will know through her own work on her Select Committee, the Women and Equalities Committee—I pay tribute to her for the work that she is undertaking—that there are a range of inequalities that cover all sorts of aspects, whether ethnicity, race, gender or sex, and it is right that we find ways to work together to act in a responsible way to find the right solutions and drive the right outcomes. I think that all right hon. and hon. Members have a responsibility to show leadership on this, in our own constituencies but also at national level. We must give voice where we find injustice and inequality, but we must also do right by that inequality and find the right kind of outcomes and solutions.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement.

5.48 pm

Sitting suspended.

5.53 pm

On resuming—

BILL PRESENTED

INTERNET ACCESS (CHILDREN ELIGIBLE FOR
FREE SCHOOL MEALS)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Siobhain McDonagh, supported by Julie Elliott, presented a Bill to place a duty on the Secretary of State to ensure that all children eligible for free school meals have a broadband connection and facilities to access the internet at home; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 10 July, and to be printed (Bill 137).

Electricity

5.54 pm

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Kwasi Kwarteng): I beg to move,

That the draft Electricity Capacity (Amendment etc.) (Coronavirus) Regulations, which were laid before this House on 20 May, be approved.

Before outlining some of the provisions made by this draft instrument, I will briefly provide some context. The capacity market is at the heart of the Government's strategy for maintaining the security of electricity supplies in Great Britain. It secures the capacity needed to meet future peak electricity demand, in a range of scenarios, through competitive technology-neutral auctions, which are normally held four years and one year ahead of the relevant delivery year. This draft instrument, together with capacity market rules changes to be made, performs two broad functions. First, it will ensure that the capacity market remains compliant with its state aid approval by giving effect to Government commitments recorded in the state aid approval decision. Secondly, it will make temporary modifications to support providers in the light of the effects of coronavirus.

The context of the capacity market state aid approval is, briefly as follows. The EU Commission state aid approval of the capacity market in 2014 was annulled in November 2018 by a judgment of the general court of the Court of Justice of the European Union. This introduced the standstill of normal operations of the capacity market until October 2019, when the European Commission completed its reinvestigation of the capacity market and granted state aid approval. On the back of this approval, the Commission state aid approval in October 2019 recorded the Government's commitments to make technical changes to the capacity market design, to reflect recent market and regulatory developments, including reforms that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy had already identified through the statutory five-year review of the capacity market in July 2019.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I am glad that the Minister has started with the very important context, because, of course, an 80-page EU document explaining the history and the requirements should have been appended to our documents. Why, however, do we think it a good idea to comply with the proposition that our interconnector-imported energy has to increase from 4% to 9% of our total by 2021, when we should be going for self-reliance and resilience?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I know that my right hon. Friend is a noted sceptic about climate change—or he was, certainly, until very recently—but he will know that any country that, like us, wants to reach the net zero commitment will necessarily be reliant on much greater interconnector capacity, from Europe in many instances and sometimes from countries such as Norway that are outside the EU, than is currently the case. That is exactly why we are proceeding on this path.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Should we not be looking at the underlying proposition, given the enormous increase in renewables? Is it not absurd that we have been importing electricity through the interconnector while paying renewable companies, particularly those connected to

wind farms but also some connected to solar, to switch off because of low levels of demand? Is there not a disconnect in this market at the moment?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I think there are issues, which the right hon. Gentleman raises, with regard to pricing and the ability to have a much more flexible grid system. With respect, however, these regulations have nothing to do with that. That is a separate debate.

John Spellar: With respect, the Minister seems to be embedding the current dysfunctional system in new regulation. I fully accept that the Government have to do something about this because of EU decisions, but, equally, there does not seem to be, and I do not get the sense of, an understanding that this is a defective mechanism that needs to be reformed, and probably quite quickly.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the system needs to evolve. We are looking at some of the smart pricing he alludes to and the flexibility of the system, and I am sure he will read our White Paper with interest. However, the issue of the flexibility of the system is not really germane to this statutory instrument on the capacity market, which, as he and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) know, is a technology-neutral device.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Have the Government taken into consideration the demand on energy that will arise from their policy to build 100,000 houses a year over the next few years? Are the Government's goals, as set out by the Minister, achievable, given that house building programme and the associated increase in population?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I think it is achievable, but what the hon. Gentleman is talking about is way outside the scope of this statutory instrument. As I have said, we are talking about flexible pricing; we are talking about the growth of renewables. This Government are committed to 40 GW of offshore wind power by 2030, which is a marked increase on the 30 GW ambition that we had. We are talking about nuclear as well—we have Hinkley Point. There are all sorts of generating power on the system. As I have said, we have a White Paper coming up, which talks about all these issues. Once again, with respect, I have to say that this is a very specific SI regarding the operation of the capacity market. The House will have plenty of time to debate other forms of electricity and power generation in the weeks ahead.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Is it still not the point, as the Minister has said, that there needs to be greater flexibility, that the market needs to evolve and that he could therefore still be more ambitious with these regulations? If he is tying changes to state aid in the regulations to effectively temporary measures regarding coronavirus, it is quite clear that that is about flexibility and how he could approach that. Could he not have been a bit more ambitious with what is in these regulations?

Kwasi Kwarteng: All I can do is repeat the answer that I have given. These regulations reflect our past discussions about the operation of the capacity market. The hon. Gentleman and I and others in this Chamber will have plenty of time to debate a new system. I ask the hon. Gentleman to have a little patience. We have a White

Paper coming up and it would be precipitous to have an extensive debate about these issues in legislation ahead of the publication of the White Paper. He has asked many questions about that, and I advise him to wait for the debate on the White Paper.

John Redwood: I do not know why the Minister referred to climate change in answer to my previous question. I was not talking about that and, as he says, it has nothing to do with the regulations, so may I have another go? Why have we agreed to more than double our importation of energy through interconnectors? Is it a good principle that we should be paying a capacity payment to foreign providers of electricity who want to sell us their surplus power, but who would not necessarily have it available when we wanted it?

Kwasi Kwarteng: In regard to climate change, my right hon. Friend will know that one of the big issues, or successes, that we have had in decarbonising electricity power generation has been through taking coal off the grid and having renewables. All the assessments that we have had and looked at show that an increase in interconnector capacity is part of that mix, just as nuclear is part of the mix, just as offshore wind and now onshore wind—the pot 1 auction—are part of the mix. All these things are part of the decarbonisation story of our power, and this is very important to us, which is why we have increased—or seek to increase—our interconnector capacity.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Has the Minister finished?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I was just anticipating further interventions. I will try to make some progress if I may. I want to turn in particular to the temporary modifications that the draft instrument seeks to make in recognition of the fact that coronavirus has had a big impact—a negative impact in some cases—on the ability of capacity providers to meet some of their obligations under the capacity market rules. The approach we are taking, in making temporary easements, is similar to that adopted to support capacity providers during the capacity market's standstill last year, and these measures are fully accounted for in the draft legislation. As the disruptive effects of coronavirus may lead to more capacity providers facing termination of their agreements, this draft instrument will increase the time for capacity providers to appeal to the Secretary of State against notices to terminate their agreements. The legislation will also provide the Secretary of State with discretion to extend the time for capacity providers to comply with requirements in order to avoid a termination.

In conclusion, this draft instrument will ensure security of electricity supply by ensuring that the capacity market continues to comply with its state aid approval and by reducing burdens on capacity providers during the coronavirus pandemic. Furthermore, we fully believe that these changes will maintain absolute integrity and confidence in the market. On that basis, I commend the draft regulations to the House.

6.4 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I concur with the Minister that today is not the time to have a major debate about a number of wider issues relating to energy, although there are lots of issues which we could

debate. Among others, there is the whole question of whether the capacity market itself is fit for purpose in our present energy arrangements. I do not intend to raise that issue today, but I hope there will be other occasions on which it can be raised and discussed.

I look forward to the emergence of the White Paper, which the Minister mentioned. We are now almost on the first birthday of the imminent emergence of the White Paper, so it would be helpful if he could indicate when the White Paper actually will emerge and, when it does, whether it will be fully formed or more of a greenish White Paper than a whitish White Paper. I am sure that he will be able to elucidate this afternoon exactly what form it will take and when it will arrive, which I trust will be very shortly.

This statutory instrument does two things in particular. First, it introduces a number of changes to the capacity market, following the annulment and eventual reinstatement of the UK capacity market's state aid approval by the EU Court and the European Commission. Secondly, it introduces a number of measures relating to performance requirements, the Secretary of State's discretion, and how reconsideration and review of decisions take place in respect of the effect of the coronavirus pandemic on construction, finances and network connections.

The Opposition regard the measures in the second part of the SI as sensible and proportionate to the particular problems we have at the moment. It is right that, where capacity market contractors have problems with construction deadlines or financing arrangements, there should be the leeway and discretion set out in the SI to help them through the difficulties that exist at the moment.

However, I have one small question about that part of the SI. The Minister mentioned that there will be leeway and discretion on deadlines—for example, in terms of assurances of performance in the run-up to the capacity market operation. I note that arrangements for assurances of performance or termination of contracts for non-performance have expanded from six months to 12 months. That provides—particularly where a capacity market contractee has contracted in the T-1 market—for the possibility of ending the contract because of non-performance right up to the point at which that performance is expected to take place. Does the Minister have any concerns about that potential timescale? If not, why not? If he does have concerns, could any other formulation that protects the arrangements in the way I have described be used to get around that problem? I would be grateful for his views on that.

There are some more serious issues with the other part of the SI, which makes changes to the capacity market rules. As the Minister has informed us, those changes arise as a result of the coming back to life of the capacity market, as it were, after its annulment following the judgment in the EU courts that the capacity market might not have been compliant with state aid rules, because the Commission had not sufficiently considered those state aid considerations when it first looked at the UK's capacity market application before the market itself had come into being. The Commission produced a report and an agreement after that judgment and after the market had been annulled, which put the capacity market back into being, but on the basis of a number of undertakings that the UK Government had provided. One can reasonably infer that some of those undertakings

[Dr Alan Whitehead]

were part of the reason why the Commission said that the capacity market could continue and that its construction was indeed not in contravention of state aid rules.

The UK suggested six measures for the capacity market, and they were appended to the Commission decision on 24 October 2019. In the explanatory notes to this statutory instrument, the Government refer to those amendments to the capacity market. They are amendments to demand-side response and to permission for access to the market for holders of store contracts and various other things, none of which are terribly controversial or indeed produce deleterious outcomes to the capacity market. Therefore, on balance I welcome them, particularly those on demand-side response, although I would say—this may be a redundant reflection—that if two of the changes to demand-side response had come into the capacity market earlier we might not have had the challenge to the EU courts in the first place. The challenge was based largely on demand-side response, and therefore the whole question of annulment would not have arisen. [Interruption.] The Minister says “Who knows?”, and we should perhaps not dwell on this for too long, other than to be slightly sorry that that is the case.

The explanatory notes state that this instrument implements the majority of the commitments recorded in the state aid decision, but it is quite a generous reading of what those commitments are and what this instrument does. Can the Secretary of State set out for us what commitments given at the time of that judgment are not included in the measures today, and if and when he intends to implement them in legislative changes to the capacity markets subsequent to this instrument? If he is not intending to do that or to implement those other things that have not been listed for implementation in today’s SI, why not?

I can help point the Minister to the nub of this question by reminding him of two of the commitments, the first of which is about including foreign capacity in pre-qualification to the capacity market. That is not the same as increasing the amount of interconnection coming through the system; it is about pre-qualifying generators that are not in the UK for bidding into the capacity market for capacity through the interconnectors, but not related to the actual size of the interconnection that goes into the UK itself. The second involves introducing a generation emissions ceiling on capacity both by kilowatt hour of electricity and by the average per year for installed kilowatt hours for contracting. I know the Minister has consulted on that particular change, but it does not appear before us today. I wonder why that is and whether the Minister intends to put forward separate legislation to bring that and other matters that are in those commitments concerning capacity markets on to the statute book, or whether the Minister intends to simply not carry out the commitments that were made at the time of the judgment.

If the Minister was able to enlighten me about those particular questions, then I am sure we would find it possible not to divide the House today on this statutory instrument, but rest content with the present state of the debate; that those questions had been answered and that the portal to the wider debate could then move forward from a successful statutory instrument today.

6.15 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I am very concerned about the regulation, its provenance and whether it will limit our freedom of manoeuvre in ways we do not wish from the beginning of next year, when I hope we will be redesigning an energy policy that is fit for purpose to meet our three main priorities.

The Government have been very clear on their environmental priorities. They are not the subject of our debate today and I have no wish to go into them. They are an important matter that the Government have set forward, but the Government have always said that they have two other crucial priorities that matter a great deal as well. One is to have good-value power—power that people can afford in their homes and which can make us more competitive in industry and commerce—where I think we have room for improvement. We also wish to pursue a policy of independence, so that we have resilience and reliability in our system. I therefore find it extremely worrying that we have responded to a state aid challenge upon us in the dying days of our membership of the single market, or its rules, when we are no longer a member of the European Union which sponsors it. We are setting forward a trajectory that says we will increase our imported power from 4% to 9%, mainly from the continent of Europe—from the EU—as part of our defence against historic allegations concerning state aid that would presumably go away from 1 January once we have left the European Union completely and once we legislate to make our own position clear.

Today’s regulation is not well described in the explanatory note. If one reads the 80-page European Commission decision document, one can see exactly how thorough its investigation has been since 2014 of our capacity market, how detailed its intervention in it has been, and how detailed the Government’s response has to be in this and in other work they have done to try to conform to the EU’s wish to redesign our capacity market in a way that it finds acceptable and in a way that is clearly designed to promote a much wider European integrated energy market. Now, that may well make sense for neighbouring states close to each other on the continent—between Belgium, France and Germany. That is their choice and I have no problem with that. But as we are an island nation which used to be able to generate all its own power, I have some difficulties with that. We have many great advantages to generate wind power, wave power, solar power, hydro power and other renewable power, as well as prodigious reserves of other types of energy where the Government wish to gradually reduce or clean their use. There may well be clean ways of burning some of that carbon, with carbon sinks and so forth, which they will need and want to use.

It seems that the proposal today is from another age when we were gradually being linked into a continental system, which, incidentally, is a lot dirtier than our own system and has been really struggling to reduce its dependence on coal and its very weak strategic position of chronic dependence on Russian gas. The last thing we want to do as a country is connect ourselves to an ever bigger possible dependence on Russian gas via power generated on the continent when we have a wish to do our own thing.

It is a pity that the explanatory note does not mention the phrase “state aid” or explain upfront that the regulations arise because of a state aid case. It refers to “Commission

Decision SA.35980". Those who follow these things know that "SA" stands for "state aid", but it is not as clear and transparent as it might be. The average Member of this House probably does not follow those matters in that much detail and is not aware that we are being asked today to pass legislation because of a state aid infringement that goes all the way back in allegation to 2014. We ran that market relatively successfully from 2014 to 2018, it was suspended from 2018 until the end of last year, and now there has obviously been some sort of deal to get it up and running again.

The explanatory note states:

"Part 1 amends the description of a DSR CMU to clarify that a DSR CMU cannot provide capacity primarily by using a storage facility which reduces its import of electricity".

Is that not interesting? First, we have to translate it. "DSR CMU" is the process that the shadow Minister was telling us about. One of the responses to a capacity market auction is to bid in an offer to buy less power than otherwise would have been bought as another way of contributing to the stability and resilience of the system rather than offering to provide more power for those who want to buy it. It is curious that the proposal is linked to any proposal that might reduce the import of electricity in the way that it does. That adds to my worries about the nature of this EU policy and intervention against the broader background of the EU's trying to create a comprehensive European energy market with us fully linked into it.

The shadow Minister said that perhaps we were found to have acted illegally. The Commission is clear that that was the case for the period 2014 to 2018. It states that in its view the UK unlawfully implemented the capacity market in breach of article 108.3 of the treaty provisions on state aid. It has now come up with a form of words at the end of its decision that says that if we do those sorts of things, it will see its way to believing that we are not compliant.

I do not suppose that the House has the appetite for a serious debate about any of that today and I understand that we are considering a statutory instrument, not our wider energy policy, but we should not let this go without some things being said. First, the regulations are the direct result of the most enormous intervention and intrusion into British energy policy and I hope that from 1 January next year, we will proudly set out our own energy policy and not need that sort of intervention. Secondly, the thrust of the policy was to make us more dependent on a European energy provision system that is neither secure nor particularly green. I strongly repeat that being dragged into more reliance on Russian gas is the last thing we want.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): My right hon. Friend made a point about EU energy not being particularly green. Does he share my concern that we put ourselves on the back and say we have burnt no coal or had no electricity derived from coal over 30 or 60 days, yet much interconnector electricity has been manufactured by those dirty forms of energy that we are trying to get out of our market in the UK?

John Redwood: That is exactly right. People like to claim that we are importing nuclear energy from France, for example, but we are importing European energy in a pretty unified system, which has surplus capacity because

it has not only French nuclear but an awful lot of dirty coal, Russian gas and so forth, which should cause us concern.

Thirdly, can we in future have an honest and clear explanation so that more Members of Parliament might understand what is going on and think it is a matter of some concern? I do not think that most of our colleagues realise that we are talking about resilience—our ability to keep the lights on in difficult conditions that might arise in future. We are talking about the pricing of electricity and these very big strategic issues. And finally, we are talking about whether this country is now going to have its own energy policy, or whether we are hastily legislating so that we can, for the foreseeable future, still be effectively under EU state aid rules, edging ever closer to integration with EU energy policy.

6.25 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Minister is keen to keep reiterating that the capacity market is integral to the security of supply and that these regulations allow the capacity market to continue to operate, thereby providing that security. That is fine and I agree with that sentiment, but I think that also means that there is a reluctance to look at the wider issues. If we are talking about the security of energy supply and how important the capacity market is, there is an argument that we should look at some of the bigger pictures.

I welcome the fact that the changes result in compliance with state aid and allow the capacity market to function. On another positive, I welcome the move to reduce the minimum capacity threshold in the capacity market from 2 MW to 1 MW. The chief executive of the UK's REA—the Association for Renewable Energy and Clean Technology—stated that this will

"make it easier for cutting-edge clean technologies to compete."

That endorsement is clearly very positive. However, will the Minister explain what measures are in place to ensure that we do not get more diesel generators bidding into the capacity market with the lowering of the threshold? What we want is more reliable renewable from energy.

Has an assessment been undertaken as to whether grid pinch points could cause any restrictions for these potential newer forms of renewable generation, particularly in Scotland? That is also critical, given that these regulations allow for multi-year contracts, in terms of the demand-side response. We need to make sure that there are no pinch points preventing new renewables from coming on-stream.

Paragraph 7.3 of the explanatory memorandum details changes from the regulations with respect to capacity market units not getting paid by simply not charging batteries. In terms of managing demand, does the Minister think that it is acceptable that EDF was recently paid a reported £50 million to halve output from Sizewell B for four months? Surely there is a better way to manage long periods of low demand for energy. Has he assessed how fit for purpose the energy market is for future pandemics or long periods of low demand? It is not just about security of supply at the upper end—we need it at the lower end as well.

On the bigger picture, what is the Minister doing to facilitate the co-location of large-scale storage alongside renewable energy sources such as offshore wind? This and the removal of the capacity cap in contracts for

[Alan Brown]

difference options would complement the capacity market. That needs to be reviewed as well. I stress that pumped hydro-storage is a perfect way to manage fluctuations in high and low demand and thereby provide security of supply. When are the Government going to assist in a route to market for the big projects that are in the pipeline in Scotland? Pumped hydro-storage is much more effective than nuclear and it is much more cost-effective, so we need to forget the white elephant of nuclear and in particular the desire to get small modular reactors up and running.

I turn back to the demand-side response, which, as outlined, is an accepted use within the capacity market, and there are some changes in the regulations in this regard. What assessment has the Minister made of the reduction in overall energy demand if the Government set and implemented a proper energy efficiency programme to ensure that all properties achieve energy performance rating C by 2030? Does he accept the research findings of the UK's energy research institute, which said that this could reduce energy demand by 25%? That 25% reduction in demand is the equivalent of six Hinkley Point C stations, so why, again, is there the obsession with nuclear? A reduction in demand would make a massive difference and minimise the need for the over-reliance on the capacity market to keep the security of supply.

On energy efficiency and reducing demand overall, the Committee on Climate Change stated that the UK Government should match the ambitions of Scotland, and the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee reports that as well, so energy efficiency is critical to lower demand.

John Redwood: I was interested by what the hon. Gentleman was saying about pumped-storage schemes, which are crucial to flexibility. I was interested that he also thinks they can be very good value. Has he got some in mind? How are the Government responding to his idea of pumped storage?

Alan Brown: There is an extension at Cruachan, and I forget the name of the other one up in Scotland that is in the pipeline. SSE is bringing them forward. The difficulty is with getting an agreement on a pricing mechanism, a bit like the stumbling block that has happened with tidal lagoons and talk about a regulated asset base for nuclear, even though I am against nuclear. It needs a review of that kind and a long-term support mechanism for supply. Clearly pumped-storage hydro provides security of supply over a long period of time, rather than, say, 15 years for renewables. I am asking the Government to look at finding that support mechanism.

John Redwood: Pumped storage is also very important for the short term, because, as the hon. Gentleman knows, it can be switched on very quickly when there is a short-term peaking issue, as with the Dinorwig scheme. It has a lot to recommend it in that respect.

Alan Brown: I think we are in agreement across the Chamber for once. Obviously the pumped aspect can use electricity when there is low demand, so electricity can be taken at a cheaper price and used to pump water up to fill the hydro, and then the hydro can be used when there is peak demand, so it works on both sides of the equation.

Paragraph 8.1 of the explanatory memorandum references the European Union, but then is silent on the issue of leaving the EU, because it states:

“This instrument does not relate to withdrawal from the European Union”.

However, I would suggest that the operation of the capacity market does relate to withdrawal from Europe. Paragraph 7.1 confirms that capacity is also provided by “interconnection with other countries.” The right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) has given his view on that interconnection. The regulations do still relate to leaving the EU. Will the Minister tell us what the current position is? Once again, it looks as though there will be a possible no-deal crash-out on 31 December. How will the UK participate in the single energy market?

Today, I checked the UK Government guidance on trade and energy from 1 January 2021 onwards. It was last updated on 6 November 2019, but basically it puts all the onus on the energy operators. The Government advise:

“Although it is a matter for individual businesses to work out what steps they need to take, the government anticipates these may include...interconnector owners/operators will need to continue to work with their stakeholders and regulators to prepare alternative trading arrangements and updated rules...interconnector owners/operators will need to continue to engage with the relevant EU national regulators to understand their processes for the potential reassessment of their Transmission System Operator certifications.”

Given how important energy is for us and that interconnectors are an agreed integral part of the capacity market, why is the latest UK Government guidance still effectively saying that traders are left to their own devices looking ahead to this critical deadline of 31 December 31/1 January? What discussions has the Minister had with energy suppliers? Where are we on a free trade agreement for energy, looking forward?

It seems to me that the regulations are yet again part of a drip-feed approach to energy policy. This has been touched on by the shadow Minister, and the Minister alluded to the White Paper coming forward, but we need definitive timescales for when we are going to see the White Paper. It would be good to get a better feel for what the White Paper is going to be. Given that year delay, it would be nice to at least have a forewarning or an understanding of what is going to be in it.

We know that the economy has taken a massive hit because of coronavirus. Despite the title of the regulations, they only skim the effects of coronavirus. It has been rumoured that the White Paper will cover that, so it would be good if the Minister could say, “The White Paper will cover the effects of coronavirus and how we are going to re-stimulate the economy.” Hopefully, that will be with a green industrial revolution. I suggest that will need to include more onshore wind, more offshore wind and greater support for floating offshore. I have mentioned pumped hydro storage, hydrogen production and carbon capture, which are all vital strategies that we need the Government to get on with. I hope that we hear a bit about that and that the Minister can answer some of the questions I have raised. There is effectively nothing wrong with what has been brought forward, but it is just not enough; we want to see more.

6.35 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng: We have had a very wide-ranging debate—far more wide-ranging than any I can remember on secondary legislation. I suggest that many of these

subjects would be better discussed in a fuller debate, of which we will have many ahead of legislation in the autumn. The White Paper I hope will come soon. I had not realised it was the first birthday of its putative publication, but I am sure that it will come soon, and we will witness many debates about energy policy.

Let me touch on a few things that hon. Members raised. I do not share the fear expressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) about interconnectors. Going from 4% interconnector capacity to 9% is not indicative of an encroaching EU superstate or anything of that nature. Any Energy Minister who wanted to hit those net zero targets would be looking at interconnector infrastructure. My right hon. Friend will know, as will my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay), that Germany does have a problem with coal, but the majority of our interconnector capacity comes from France, Ireland and Norway, which are actually doing very well in terms of clean power generation.

With respect to the remarks by the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) about T-1 and suspension, it will not be 12 months de rigueur; it will be up to 12 months. Each and every exemption will be looked at on a singular, case-by-case basis. It is not true that year-long extensions will be given without regard to the circumstances. On emissions, I think we are going to have separate legislation—potentially secondary legislation—regulating or capping emissions, so again, I ask him to be forbearing and patient in respect to legislation regarding emissions.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) talked about the demerits of nuclear, about hydropower storage and about floating offshore wind, all of which are fascinating subjects but which I am afraid are outside the limited scope of this statutory instrument on the capacity market. However, I would be very happy to engage him in debate about many of those fascinating and interesting opportunities and innovations in the energy sector.

The Government continue to believe that the capacity market is the right mechanism for delivering security of supply at the lowest—

Alan Brown *rose*—

Kwasi Kwarteng: I happily give way.

Alan Brown: One point I raised that was specific to the regulations was about ensuring that we do not get more diesel generators bidding into the capacity market. I mentioned the reduction in the minimum threshold from 2 MW to 1 MW. Will the Minister address that point?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Forgive me; the hon. Gentleman has raised some very specific points about our future energy policy, and I wish and hope that we can have a wider discussion of those specific points.

If I may reach a conclusion, these regulations are absolutely necessary to ensure the continued security of electricity supply. All our stakeholders in the market—the generators—say they want some security. The suspension of the market as a result of the judicial decision last year was very damaging and created a great deal of uncertainty. The SI deals with a lot of that uncertainty and is welcomed not only, I understand, by the hon. Member for Southampton, Test but across the sector.

John Redwood *rose*—

Kwasi Kwarteng: I give way one more time.

John Redwood: But will the Minister confirm that we can legislate now for 1 January next year and have the system we want? This is only a very temporary thing if the Government come up with a sensible policy.

Kwasi Kwarteng: It is of its nature temporary. As my right hon. Friend will know from his long experience in Parliament, the last time we had an energy Bill was in 2013. The Government may well wish to introduce another energy Bill but, whether that is the case or not, there will be ample opportunity after 1 January 2021 to debate the future of our energy system. All the issues raised with regard to flexibility will be relevant, and I am sure that he and others will engage fully and enthusiastically in that debate.

The regulations are necessary to ensure continued security of electricity supply. They will also ensure, obviously, that the capacity market continues to comply with its state aid approval, which was granted last October but does not necessarily bind us forever and a day. The regulations also provide support for capacity providers during the coronavirus epidemic.

On those two grounds of state aid and dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, I commend the draft regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Electricity Capacity (Amendment etc.) (Coronavirus) Regulations, which were laid before this House on 20 May, be approved.

6.40 pm

Sitting suspended.

Environmental Protection

6.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I beg to move,

That the draft Environmental Protection (Plastic Straws, Cotton Buds and Stirrers) (England) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 19 May, be approved.

Before I begin my remarks, I want to address the issue of why the draft regulations are being brought before the House now instead of earlier in the year. Originally, the regulations were laid in March this year and set to come into force in April. However, in light of the unprecedented situation that this country has faced due to covid-19, they were delayed to reduce the burden placed on industry and to avoid adding further to the demands placed on local authorities.

Many businesses should have been prepared for the ban, given that our plans have been widely publicised, but we received correspondence from many stating that supply chains had faced disruption from the widespread outbreak of covid-19, so sourcing alternatives to single-use plastics had been challenging. We were asked to delay entry into force for a short time while at the peak of this crisis.

Delaying regulations was only a temporary measure in response to the crisis. Our commitment to turning the tide on the widespread use of single-use plastics is as strong as ever, and we seek to limit our impact on the natural environment.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I spent my working career supplying food service packaging items, and I see today as a pretty sad day. Having sold many straws and plastic stirrers in my working career, I find it of concern that if I supply a plastic drink stirrer I am guilty of an offence and would be liable on summary conviction to a fine. I think that is a pretty disappointing state to be in. I thank the Minister for the delay, because for many of the suppliers of these products, their customers have not been able to use the products as a consequence of the hospitality sector being shut down. The delay that she has introduced is very welcome.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I know how much work he does with the packaging industry, which, it has to be recognised, is indeed an important part of our economy. I welcome the fact that he recognises that this measure is much needed. Indeed, we brought the whole industry on board with us, and we listened to it. That is why we are giving this slight extension in bringing in the regulations: it was specifically at the request of the industry.

Turning to the purpose of this SI, the Government are committed to eliminating plastic waste and the terrible effects that can result from plastic being in the environment. Single-use plastic items—products that are made wholly or partly from plastic and designed to be used only once—are increasingly common, and their use and inappropriate disposal continue to raise significant environmental issues. Unlike other materials such as paper or wood, plastic can persist in the environment for hundreds of years. Therefore, if released into the environment, items such as plastic straws can endanger wildlife and damage habitats, and small pieces of plastic

items can often be ingested by animals. Furthermore, plastic that escapes into the environment will eventually break down into microplastics, which are permeating our food chain as well as ending up in our soils and the sea. The full impacts of this are still being uncovered.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I understand exactly the logical reason why the Government are bringing this forward tonight. However, the Minister will realise that many businesses and companies have to find alternatives to plastic. Does she recognise within this SI the need for investment in research and development in emerging technologies that are producing biodegradable, single-use, plastic-type product alternatives?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, which is perceptive, because the Government are definitely encouraging research and innovation in this field. He specifically mentioned biodegradable products. There is a great deal of discussion about that. Consulting and taking advice on it continue to be very important. We have carried out a consultation, because we need to know what even those products break down into before they come into general use. We have to be just as careful.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not plastic that is the problem, but waste, and we should be doing all we can to tackle that? Will she join me in commending companies like ReNew ELP in my constituency, which is leading the way in chemical recycling?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend. This is all part of the whole new world that we are moving into of creating a circular economy where we research what we are making and design it so that we can reuse it, repair it or make it last longer. That is why the Environment Bill is so important, because it will contain many of the measures to reach this stage through the resources and waste strategy. I must also praise the company in his constituency that he mentioned.

Mark Pawsey: Does my hon. Friend agree that plastic is a problem and waste is a problem, but people are also a problem? People are not disposing of these products appropriately and they are getting into the wrong place. Would an education process to get people to put the right product in the right box and get it recycled be part of her endeavour?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Just before the Minister replies, I want to make sure that hon. and right hon. Members are paying attention to the remit of the SI, if I can put it that way.

Rebecca Pow: I think you can see, Madam Deputy Speaker, that this is a wide subject and people are generally interested in this whole issue of waste and plastics. Of course, my hon. Friend's point about people is absolutely right. Even with my own children, I still have to teach them what to put in which boxes for the recycling: it drives me absolutely nuts. In the Environment Bill, we are bringing forward measures to align all the collection services, which will, once and for all, I hope, sort out the situation to which he refers.

The proposed measures in the resources and waste chapter of our Environment Bill will transition us towards a more circular economy—I have mentioned that already—which will change the way we consume resources. However, there is much we can already do to address the issue of single-use plastics, so let us now look clearly at what this statutory instrument will do. It will restrict the supply of single-use plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds to end users in England, helping to reduce the amount of plastic that pollutes our environment. These new regulations will support the voluntary actions being taken by industry, led by the UK plastics pact, while ensuring that all businesses move to more sustainable alternatives. Our current data show that we use a remarkable 4.7 billion straws, 1.8 billion plastic-stemmed cotton buds and 316 million plastic stirrers every year in England, which is a huge quantity. This intervention will drastically reduce the use of those single-use plastics by an estimated 95%. When taken in conjunction with our wider policy approach to move towards a more circular economy, this will be another landmark moment, following our carrier bag charge and our microbead ban. These regulations will be coming in ahead of the EU's introduction of such a ban.

Taking advantage of our new-found freedom enables us to be more flexible and to have a more tailored approach, which will enable us to bring in our own exemptions—for example, the exemption for those with disabilities. Let us look at those exemptions. There is no doubt that plastic is an incredibly useful and versatile material. Plastic straws can withstand high temperatures, such as for tea and coffee, and can be moulded to bend or fit into a particular shape. That allows people suffering from certain conditions, such as motor neurone disease, who struggle to hold a cup to access hot and cold drinks, and liquid foods. My husband was seriously ill and we had to use straws as he got increasingly ill, so we can see why an exemption such as that is important. That is why we have included exemptions in these regulations for accessibility, forensic reasons, and medical and scientific uses.

Following the introduction of the regulations, plastic-stemmed cotton buds will still be available for purchase by individuals who need them. Plastic straws will be available through pharmacies, without any requirement for proof of need, which means that relatives, friends and carers could buy them on behalf of those who rely on the items. Similarly, we are allowing for catering establishments, such as restaurants and public houses, that supply food and drink ready for visitors to consume to continue to provide plastic straws on request—again, this is without proof of need, for the reasons to which I have just referred. In these instances, it will be against the regulations to display and advertise the fact that straws are being supplied, in order to limit the impulse for people who do not need them to request them.

The regulations allow business-to-business sales, for example, between a manufacturer and a catering establishment, to ensure that businesses can supply items to those who need them. We have also exempted other establishments such as schools, care homes and prisons from these regulations on plastic straws, so that they can be made available for anyone in their care who may need them. Finally, there is also an exemption for plastic straws that are classed as packaging. For example, some medicines in pill form are packaged in straws, to

be dispensed one at a time. These exemptions for medical, scientific and forensic purposes will be reviewed and updated as we move forward.

We are determined to get this right, and it is vital that businesses and the public are informed about what they can and cannot do. Local authorities are obliged to ensure that guidance is published ahead of the regulations coming into force, and anyone caught still supplying the items against the rules set out in this legislation could face civil sanctions, such as stop notices or a variable monetary penalty.

Of course, we hope that the enforcement measures will not be necessary. Industry is already making good progress to remove the items from their shelves, and public demand for the items is falling. But the regulations need to have teeth to show that the Government take the issue of plastic pollution seriously. The new regulations send a signal to industry and the general public that we need to think carefully about the products we buy and the materials from which they are made. The regulations will help people to make more sustainable choices, and I commend the draft regulations to the House.

6.55 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The Opposition will not oppose the regulation today, but we would like to place on record our disappointment at a number of missed opportunities. There are two elements to the statutory instrument—the plastics and the single use. This regulation deals only with removing the plastics and does not attempt to deal with or solve the problem of our single-use economy that we need to tackle. It fails to recognise the waste hierarchy of reduction first, and just aims at legislating in a piecemeal way, one item after another.

Of course, we agree that plastics have become unsustainable. In 1950, we produced 1.7 million tonnes, and now we produce 350 million tonnes. The Minister has already talked about the number of items that we produce, including the 1.8 billion plastic-stemmed cotton buds, of which 10% are flushed down toilets, with a devastating impact on marine life when some, inevitably, get out of the system.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): My hon. Friend and I represent opposite ends of the same city. As a coastal city, we are at the receiving end of some of that rubbish and disposable plastic as it washes up on the beaches. Does he agree that this is a very important step forward, but it is only a step forward and there is a long way to go in order to clean up the beaches that he and I represent?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree, and we both will have been on beach clean-ups and seen the awful amount of rubbish that is either left there or has washed up.

With the work of nature documentaries such as “The Blue Planet”, and environmental organisations such as Friends of the Earth, Keep Britain Tidy, Surfers Against Sewage and others, the public mood has shifted dramatically on plastics. I remember in 2002 at the world summit on sustainable development our talking about not being able to garner public support for action on plastics. How things have changed, and that is to be celebrated. That is why, of course, the Government have been able to pledge, in their 25-year environment plan, to eliminate avoidable plastics by 2040. Will the Minister set interim targets for this plan and will she bring forward further

[Lloyd Russell-Moyle]

plans to demonstrate how she will achieve the overall target? Without milestones, there is a danger that we will not realise that we are off course before it is too late.

I would like to hear from the Minister what assessment her Department has made of the impact of covid on the use of plastics. Companies such as Just Eat and Deliveroo are reporting huge increases in sales. I have seen restaurants that were no longer using plastics but have returned to plastic items. While of course we recognise that there is a public health emergency, we need to do all we can to lower transmissions while ensuring that businesses have confidence in their knowledge about the risks of items, but let us return to the age-old—centuries-old—idea of a washable spoon, rather than a paper, plastic or wooden stirrer. It does not seem beyond the wit of man to return to something that we have used for a very long time—

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): We want cutlery!

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Proper cutlery! I hear lots of support.

To highlight the problem of single use, in 2018, McDonald's UK faced a huge public backlash after the images of its distinctive striped plastic straws on picturesque beaches around the world, and it made a move to paper straws—laudable, fantastic, we would all say. But today it uses 1.8 million paper straws a day and that is 675 million a year. The tragedy is that these straws cannot be fully recycled, so they end up being incinerated, adding to landfill or even getting into our seas—the very thing that they were meant to prevent.

Replacing one dangerous product with a slightly less dangerous product or energy-exhausting product defeats the point, when the reality is that most people do not need to use plastic straws. We can move away from the idea of unnecessary consumption. Huge numbers of supermarkets and food outlets have already moved away from plastics to wooden or compostable cutlery, but these too end up in incineration. As we know, incineration in this country has a particularly poor energy generation ratio compared with that in other European countries.

DEFRA's own impact assessment on the regulations has assumed that plastics will be replaced on a like-for-like basis, so while we are pleased to see the Government trying to eliminate plastics, it is very disappointing to see this missed opportunity to tackle the problem of single use. The Government are patting themselves on the back because of a ban on three items of plastics, when we need to shift our throwaway culture. We urgently need the extended producer responsibility scheme that is being considered in the European Union, and we should be taking the lead. Such programmes put an obligation on the producer to create more sustainable products. They incentivise companies that are doing the right thing, as well as disincentivising the wrong thing. When will we see the plastic bottle deposit scheme actually introduced in this place, and when will we see it reflecting the material used, rather than just the one-size-fits-all model that, unfortunately, has been adopted in Scotland?

With fast fashion and the inability to repair, we see not just straws and cotton buds being thrown away, but almost everything we can consume being thrown away. We are creating and destroying at alarming rates.

Jim Shannon: To take the returnable plastic bottle option a stage further, if we are to make that happen we need to have the co-operation of the giant supermarkets and similar. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that that would be a way forward?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: It is. Actually, I was on a phone call with the hon. Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) earlier today, and many of the producers were saying they welcomed and wanted to move towards that sort of scheme, which I was very pleased to hear.

As I have said, we are creating and destroying at alarming rates, but we must design a more circular economy. Where are the Government on the right to repair? That is another issue now being talked about globally—the right to have items repaired, rather than throw them away, whether they be electrical or composite plastic items. The Government are also a signatory to the sustainable development goals, No. 12 being the implementation of a 10-year framework for programmes for sustainable consumption and production. It says that developed countries must take the lead, so what lead has DEFRA taken in changing production patterns, rather than just these particular regulations? I contend that simply banning plastics, although a welcome step, is not enough in respect of creating sustainable production patterns, as agreed under our international obligations.

I would like to ask the Minister some specific questions about the regulations' implementation. What guidelines will be given to local authorities on the enforcement of these regulations? What resources will be given to local authorities to ensure that they are enforced? Will there be annual reporting on the compliance visits, on the problems found and on the responses to complaints from the public about unlawful retailing of straws and other plastic products? Finally, when will the Government bring forward their plan for extended producer responsibility, rather than piecemeal SIs?

As we face a climate and ecological crisis, we must stop making piecemeal changes. We must have some hard conversations about changing corporate and consumer behaviour. Our short-term convenience must not come at the cost of our planet and future generations.

7.4 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in support of the measures before the House. I speak as the chairman of the all-party group on ocean conservation. The regulations mark another important step forward in our fight against plastic waste.

I take on board some of the comments made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle); we all recognise that there is more to do. No one is pretending for a moment that this marks the end of our fight against plastic waste, but it is an important step. It has been talked about for some time and generally has the support of the public. It is absolutely right that we introduce the regulations at this moment to try to address one source of a great deal of the plastic waste in our society.

There is an urgent and pressing need to get to grips with the issue of plastic waste. It is right to acknowledge the progress that the Government have already made: the charge on plastic bags has resulted in billions fewer plastic bags in the system, and the microbead ban is very welcome. I echo the comments made by colleagues about the deposit return scheme, which will be another important step forward in this fight. The Government have taken the issue seriously and have come forward, when appropriate, with measures to address it, and I am sure that will continue and today will not be the end of that.

I put on record my acknowledgement of and thanks to a number of organisations in Cornwall in particular that have campaigned for measures to ban plastic straws and other items. I have the great pleasure of working closely with Surfers Against Sewage, which for 30 years has led the campaign in our fight against pollution in our oceans. The Final Straw Cornwall has also campaigned heavily on this issue.

In Cornwall, we see the impact of plastic waste right on our doorsteps, as do the tens of thousands of people around the country who take part in beach cleans every year. Too much of the plastic waste in our society ends up in our oceans and along our coast. The regulations will certainly help to reduce that and make the job of those of us who regularly participate in beach cleans an awful lot easier.

The statistic that I continue to cite is the prediction that if we do not take drastic action by the year 2050, there will be more plastic than fish in our oceans. We cannot allow that to happen, and it is steps such as these regulations that will help to make sure that that does not happen. I very much welcome the sensible measures in the regulations, and I also welcome the sensible exceptions to allow plastic items to be used in medical and other settings when it is deemed appropriate.

While I have the Minister's attention, I wish to mention something else. Although I absolutely welcome the measures that we are considering, now is surely the time to take a look at a couple of other things that we need to ban: sky lanterns and balloon releases, about which there is a great deal of concern. These matters were last considered in 2013, and I wish to put on record that now that we have banned plastic straws, cotton buds and stirrers, surely this is the time to ban sky lanterns and balloon releases. They do untold damage to our environment, they can damage property and they do a great deal of damage to wildlife and farm animals. Surely now is the moment, once the issue we are considering is put to bed, to come forward with further measures to take those items out of the system as well and stop them polluting our environment.

I thank the Minister for her work on the regulations. I very much welcome these measures and am happy to support them wholeheartedly.

7.8 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I wish to make a few brief remarks in support of the introduction of these measures. I congratulate the Minister on bringing them forward. She and I campaigned on this issue on many occasions when she was on the Back Benches, so it is good to see her have the opportunity to bring them forward in Government.

The territorial application of the regulations is limited to England and Wales, but as others have observed, much of this plastic waste ends up in the sea, and the sea joins us all, so we are as likely to find this waste on the beaches in Orkney and Shetland as we are in Cornwall. This concerns and affects my constituents substantially, and I am sure that they will be as pleased as I am to see this progress being made.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) made the fair point that this is just a statutory instrument, and we need to look at the nature of our consumption as a whole. He is right about that. I would add to that wider view the relationship between developed western countries and developing countries, because so many of these items put into the waste system are not dealt with in this country; they are exported. We find it difficult to control what happens, and it is effectively a case of being out of sight and out of mind. That is why it is infinitely preferable to cut off the use and supply of these items at source, which is the effect of the regulations.

I add my voice to those who have referred to the need for a deposit return scheme. That is overdue, and I would like to hear from the Minister—in so far as she is able to say, while remaining within the ambit of the debate—when we might expect to see some concrete proposals. I know that she has a personal and political commitment, so it would be good to hear what we can do to help her push that through Government.

These regulations are timely. I am sure we have all noticed that the great progress we have made on the removal of disposable coffee cups and the rest of it has faced a setback as a consequence of the covid-19 pandemic. In fact, I notice that we have plastic cups back at the Table at the front of the House. That is probably a consequence of the concern that people naturally have about transmission; I make no criticism. But we will have to deal with this, because the pandemic may be with us for months, but the damage done by plastic pollution and microplastics will be with us for decades, if not centuries.

7.12 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Like others, I support this SI to ban the supply of single-use plastic stirrers, cotton buds and straws. I think the range of exemptions proposed is fair. I also believe that it is reasonable to have postponed implementation, so that businesses and local authorities did not have to deal with this in the midst of the pandemic.

As a modern economy, we will always need single-use plastic—the covid emergency alone will have seen the use of hundreds of millions of single-use plastic items—but as a society, we need to get much better at treating plastic as a precious resource to be used only where necessary, and reused and recycled wherever possible. It is plastic waste that is the problem, not plastic. Plastic as a packaging material is safe, secure, hygienic and cheap. It is also tough and long-lasting, which has a hugely negative environmental impact when it is not properly disposed of, because it can last for centuries in the natural environment.

Tackling plastics pollution is one of the defining environmental challenges of our generation, which is why I welcome the energetic campaign run on this issue by the *Daily Mail* and Sky. There is an important place

[Theresa Villiers]

for bans such as the one we are considering as part of a wider strategy to address plastics pollution, because these regulations are an important means to push producers to switch to more sustainable materials and to push all of us to dispense with items that are not essential.

This will only be effective as part of a wider package of measures. I therefore join others who have spoken this evening in urging the Government to maintain progress on extended producer responsibility. We also need to see the long-awaited deposit return scheme delivered in accordance with the timetable set by the Government, and we need to ensure that both those schemes operate in a way that minimises costs for business at a time of turbulence in the economy. I also ask the Minister when we will see the carrier bag charge extended to smaller retailers.

It is important to emphasise again that domestic action alone is not going to solve this problem; if we are to address the scourge of plastics pollution in our oceans, we need to use our aid budget to support the developing world positively and energetically in dealing with its plastic waste responsibly. Significant steps have been made through initiatives such as the Commonwealth Clean Ocean Alliance, but addressing this kind of issue should be included in the UN convention on biological diversity, and preferably COP26, too.

Turtles choke on plastics, dolphins can drown if they get tangled up in it, seabirds can inadvertently feed it to their young, and marine life ingests millions of small pieces of it. Plastic is a tremendous asset for our society and our economy, but we must become much more responsible in how we use it, because of the terrible harm it can do when thrown away. We must act to prevent the environmental disaster of plastics in our oceans, and I welcome this statutory instrument as a helpful step forward in achieving that goal which we all share.

7.16 pm

Rebecca Pow: First, I must welcome the shadow Minister. I do not believe we have confronted each other yet. I look forward to working with him, on the Environment Bill in particular, and I thank all other Members who have joined in the debate today. That shows how passionate we are about plastic and getting rid of it, and I will address some of the points that were raised.

I was slightly disappointed that the shadow Minister referred to this as a missed opportunity and said he was highly critical of steps being taken. I believe he is unaware of quite how much is under way, and I look forward to working on the Environment Bill with him and exposing to him just how committed the Government are and how much is being done through not only that Bill, but the resources and waste strategy.

We obviously recognise how important this subject is, and I want to touch on a few of the things that are being done: we already have the microbeads and microplastics ban; there is a huge reduction in single-use carrier bag usage; we have launched the Commonwealth Clean Ocean Alliance, which was referred to just now, to stimulate global action; and we are delivering on our promises through the resources and waste strategy and seeking powers through the Environment Bill. Under those powers, there will be a charge for single-use plastic items, the

deposit return scheme for drinks containers will be introduced, the packaging waste regulations will be reformed, and greater consistency in household and business recycling collections will be introduced—I touched on that earlier.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I appreciate the mentions of the Environment Bill; will the Minister ensure that we get back into Committee, because we do not yet have a date for sitting?

Rebecca Pow: We are well aware of that and will let the hon. Gentleman know in due course when the Bill will be back, because we are all very keen to get on with it; he is absolutely right about that, and the commitment is fully still there.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned local authorities. Local authorities will inspect the businesses to check that they are following the regulations. They will be able to visit shops or stalls, make test purchases, speak to staff and demand records, and they will be given the full range of civil sanctions in order to ensure compliance, including powers such as being able to issue compliance and stop notices, as well as the ability to impose fines. They will also be obliged to publish guidance, because they will be the regulator, and we will give draft guidance before that comes into force. I hope that clarifies that.

The hon. Gentleman touched on targets, which was a bit naughty, because he moved away from the essence of the statutory instrument. I am surprised that he was not caught out, Madam Deputy Speaker, but he is new, so you were being very lenient. I just wanted to reiterate that, through the Environment Bill, we have put in place a whole process in which the targets are set, checked and then rechecked. I believe the whole system is very strong. We also have milestones in the resources and waste strategy, which sets recycling targets for packaging. All packaging will be recyclable by 2025. The hon. Gentleman talked about bringing back washable cutlery. I washed a spoon today, by the way. Perhaps we should go down that road—good suggestion.

I just wish to touch on a few comments from some other colleagues. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), who, of course, has done so much work on this agenda, fully understands and appreciates how committed the Government are to this agenda and how we are introducing this strategy to reduce waste, to recycle, to repair and to reuse. I reiterate that all packaging will be recyclable by 2025. In particular, she mentioned the extension to the carrier bag charge. We have consulted, as she knows, on extending the charge to all retailers and increasing the minimum charge to 10p, and the Government's response will be issued shortly. We have, of course, had a slightly different few months than we expected with the coronavirus, so we have had to allow people doing doorstep deliveries still to use carrier bags, but a charge is still being made in store, if one goes in store to do the shopping. That extension will be coming forward shortly.

I wish now to thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who is no longer in his place, for all his work on ocean conservation. He is absolutely right that these things affect Cornwall and its wonderful coast, and he is very passionate about his work. He welcomed the regulations, which I am very pleased about. He touched on sky lanterns, which are regulated by the General Product Safety Regulations

2005 and enforced by local authority trading standards, and, as such, the local authorities could ban the release of them. Sky lanterns have recently sometimes been let off to thank our workers in the NHS. We should all be thanking them, but I plead with people not to let off sky lanterns, because they are a danger to nature and wildlife. With it being so dry, we have also had a lot of wildfires.

Finally, I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for his support for the regulations, although I remind him that this and all other environmental issues are devolved. Scotland has banned plastics and cotton buds, but it has not yet decided what to do about straws, and we are waiting to hear what it will do.

In summary, in order for us to leave the environment in a better state than that in which we found it for the next generation, it is essential that we have the right legislation in place that will have an impact on our effect on the natural world. Plastics are causing incontrovertible harm to the marine and terrestrial environment, and we need to act now. These measures are an important part of our wider strategy to tackle plastic pollution. They will serve as an important marker to reduce our reliance on single-use plastics, and I commend them to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Environmental Protection (Plastic Straws, Cotton Buds and Stirrers) (England) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 19 May, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We will have a three-minute suspension to allow for the safe exit and entry of hon. Members.

7.23 pm

Sitting suspended.

Public Health

7.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): I beg to move,

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2020 (S.I. 2020, No. 558), dated 31 May 2020, a copy of which was laid before the House on 1 June, be approved.

The amending regulations we are discussing today were made by the Secretary of State on 31 May and were laid before the House on 1 June. I must note that the regulations were amended again, on 12 June, with changes coming into effect between 13 June and today. Hon. Members have previously raised concerns about that sequencing, which I would like to address directly.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way at this early point. I can inform you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I do not intend to inflict a speech on the House later and will be withdrawing from our proceedings. May I just ask the Minister briefly why the Government have chosen to use the urgent procedure with regard to the regulations?

Jo Churchill: I thank my hon. Friend for that. If he will allow me to go through what I wanted to say, I hope it will be clear why we have used that procedure.

The rapid and frequent amendments to the regulations have been critical to ensuring that the Government can respond to the threat from the pandemic and its impact. The use of the emergency procedure has enabled us to respond quickly, begin a cautious return to normality and reopen the economy as soon as possible. I recognise that there may be frustrations that we have had to run parliamentary process in parallel during these unprecedented times, but I believe that we have demonstrated the advantages of our flexible constitution. I wish to make it clear that these are extraordinary times and measures, and we are definitely not setting a precedent for how the Government engage with Parliament on other matters and in more usual times. I am very grateful to all hon. Members for their patience and continued support during these difficult times.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): May I just pick the Minister up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg)? The thrust of the Amendment (No. 4) regulations—I accept, if you will give me a little latitude, Madam Deputy Speaker, that they are not the ones that we are debating, but I think the Minister referred to them in her remarks—was announced on Tuesday or Wednesday last week. I do not see what would have prevented a draft of those regulations from being laid for debate on Thursday, so that the House could have taken a decision on them before they came into force. Would that not have been better, particularly because they are legally quite complicated in respect of how family support structures are translated into law? That would have been better for our legislative process.

Jo Churchill: I thank my right hon. Friend for those remarks. I will certainly take that back and feed it in, because I know that he is not alone in feeling that we could improve the time sequencing slightly, in order to

[Jo Churchill]

get to a place where these matters are debated fully. I reiterate, however, that these are unprecedented times, and being able to debate complex differences between the timings needs to be thought about.

Mr Wragg *rose*—

Jo Churchill: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I am going to make a little progress and then I will of course take another intervention.

All over the world we are seeing the devastating impact of this disease. It has already radically altered our way of life, and it has, very sadly, taken loved ones away. That is why the Government put in place social distancing measures to slow the spread of the virus and protect our NHS, in order to save lives, and they have been successful. Despite the tragic loss of life, the UK has slowed the spread of coronavirus. Our health system was not overwhelmed and it retained sufficient hospital beds, ventilators and NHS capacity. I am extremely grateful to the public for their continued compliance with these measures, which have been instrumental to our reaching this point.

Now we must begin to recover and slowly rebuild our way of life. The Government's objective is to return to our way of life as soon as possible, restarting our economy in a safe and measured way that continues to protect lives and support the NHS. On 11 May, the Prime Minister made a statement to the House outlining the Government's road map for easing restrictions. We have entered phase 2. This involves gradually replacing the current social distancing restrictions with smarter measures that have the largest effect on controlling the epidemic but the lowest health, economic and social cost.

Mr Wragg: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister, to whom I pay full tribute for her incredibly hard work, for indulging me with this intervention. Would it not be possible for the Government to at least lay a written statement on their reasoning as to why some measures have been relaxed and others have not?

Jo Churchill: If my hon. Friend will indulge me as I go through my opening speech, I will address that in my concluding remarks. There is transparency in relation to the SAGE minutes, which are readily available and give a clear example of why decisions are being made and the scientific basis for them.

We are very aware of the burdens that these regulations have placed on society and on individuals. The 1 June amendments play a significant role in reducing the restrictions and lifting some of that strain. It is necessary for the Government to respond quickly to the reduced rate of transmission and to protect individual rights. At all times the regulations in place must be proportionate and necessary. Following on from the small change made to the 13 May amendments, which were debated by a Committee of this House on 10 June, these amendments go a step further. We recognise the toll placed on individuals and families unable to meet loved ones, and have amended the regulations to allow for groups of six to meet outdoors. We hope that these amendments will relieve that burden to some extent.

I will now outline the changes made on 1 June, which include allowing increased social contact outdoors, in either public or private space, for groups of up to six people from different households; enabling elite athletes to train and compete in previously closed facilities; opening some non-essential retail while expressly providing for businesses that remain closed; ensuring that venues such as community centres can open for education and childcare services; and ensuring that those required to self-isolate on arrival in the UK can stay in hotels. We have also amended the maximum review period to 28 days. This longer review period ensures that we will be able to fully take into account the impact of any previous amendments before making further changes.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): I have looked at the regulations. Am I right in thinking that people are still prevented from staying over at a friend's house or a partner's house, or has that been amended as well?

Jo Churchill: It is my belief that they can stay over if they are within the guidelines of the social bubble—that is, if they are a single person. There are several distinct areas and I am happy to discuss them with my hon. Friend, or to write to him to clarify them. They are clearly laid out in the regulation of what is or is not applicable.

The Government continue to work on the process of gently easing restrictions as it is safe to do so, in line with the ambition set out in the road map. Working alongside scientists and experts, we must act swiftly to respond to current infection levels and our assessment of the five tests that have been set out previously. I am sure that we all support the aim to protect and restore livelihoods by only keeping in place restrictions that are proportionate and necessary. We of course remain ready to reimpose restrictions if the need emerges in the future, although we all hope that that will not be the case.

Mr Harper: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. In asking her a question, may I respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker)? The reason for the confusion goes back to the point that I just made. My hon. Friend asked about what has been called the “bubbling” of households, the putting of households together, which was announced at one of the press conferences last week. It has been turned into legislation, which was laid before this House on Friday, but we are not yet debating it. So we are debating one set of amendments, but a new set has already come into force and the reason for the confusion is that we are not yet debating it. I think that rather proves my point that we should really have debated that legislation in advance of its coming into force. I hope that my hon. Friend's confusion, and he is not a man easily confused, demonstrates the point about why that is important.

Sir Charles Walker: I thank my hon. Friend.

Jo Churchill: I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) for the clarity with which he put that.

I have already noted that further amendments were made on 12 June and have now come into force. Those will be debated by this House in due course. I am

grateful to all parliamentarians for their continued engagement in this process, and for their continued scrutiny, which is rightly and importantly exercised for each set of amendments.

7.36 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Today marks 12 weeks since the country went into lockdown and we saw the biggest peacetime restrictions ever. Over the past 12 weeks, the public have made huge sacrifices. The vast majority of them supported and adhered to the lockdown, and it is right that we take a moment to acknowledge the sacrifices they have made in the interests of public health—the business that faces an uncertain future, the child who has missed out on crucial social and educational opportunities, and the grandparents who just want to give their grandchildren a hug. We know it has been hard, and we thank them for doing their bit.

We also thank those in the NHS and other parts of the public sector, those in social care, and of course the millions of other people who have made their own contributions in the collective fight against the virus. While we have seen over the weekend images that represent the worst of this country, let us not forget that many, many more have in recent months shown us what the very best of this country can look like.

It is also right to take a moment to remember the more than 41,000 lives that have been lost to the virus, each one a tragic loss. We mourn them all.

We are here today to consider the third iteration of the regulations, just as further relaxations come into force to allow non-essential shops to open for the first time. Those measures are probably the single largest relaxation since lockdown was introduced—but we are not here to debate those changes. In our view, we ought to be, but instead we are here to debate the changes that came into force two weeks ago, on 1 June, and the interventions on the Minister that we have heard demonstrate why there is some anxiety.

Changes should be debated and have democratic consent before they are introduced. I thank the Minister for acknowledging Opposition concern in respect of that, and I understand why urgent action is needed, but it should be perfectly possible for us to debate regulations at short notice. We in the Opposition stand ready to co-operate with whatever is necessary to make that happen.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Considering that Government have one job and one job alone right now, which is keeping us safe and preparing for the days ahead, is it not inexcusable that they are not able to keep Parliament up to date at the same speed as they announce things to the media?

Justin Madders: I will come on to the discourteous way in which the Prime Minister has been announcing these things to press conferences instead of this Chamber.

It is important that this Chamber has a role because these are not minor or consequential changes that can be nodded through without debate. They affect millions of people's lives, and we know that if we get it wrong, the consequences will be devastating. Debating them weeks after the event, and in some cases when they have been superseded by the next set of regulations, demeans

parliamentary democracy. Changes such as these should always be accompanied by a statement to Parliament, not just showcased at Downing Street press conferences. We are not merely a rubber-stamping exercise to create the veneer of a democratic process. We should not be debating these measures late, and we should not be debating them without seeing the full extent of the information on which the Government based their decisions. We know that the next review of the regulations must take place on or before 25 June. If that review leads to further relaxations, will the Minister commit today that any regulations introduced off the back of that will be debated here before they are implemented and not retrospectively?

The reviews, which are legally required to happen under the regulations, took place on 16 April, 7 May and 28 May. I ask the Minister: where are they? In a written question, I asked the Secretary of State whether he would publish those reviews. I received a reply last week stating that the Department of Health and Social Care had indicated that it would not be possible to answer the question within the usual time period. Why on earth not? If the Government have conducted these reviews, why are they not in a position to disclose them? I find this absolutely incredible. Here we have the most far-reaching impositions on everyday life in this country, yet we have no idea what the Government's own reviews of them say. These are reviews that are required under legislation.

Sir Charles Walker: They are far-reaching, and it is a pretty poor reflection on this Chamber that it is empty. It is probably only a third full, even with the social distancing rules in place. Where are our colleagues getting upset about the removal of people's civil liberties? Neither side here has a great story to tell.

Justin Madders: If these regulations were actually going to be changed as a result of what we said here, we might see a better attendance, but the Government have shown the contempt in which they hold this place by introducing them way after the event. The question is: where are the reviews? What is it that we cannot see in them? This betrays a cavalier attitude to transparency, and it does absolutely nothing to engender confidence that the decisions that are being taken are the right ones.

Peter Kyle: We have to get this on to the record. My right hon. Friends the Members for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) want to be here engaging in the debate, but they are unable to be here because the virtual Parliament has been closed down for debates such as these, and they have to shield. The Government are telling them not to be here. That is the reason they are not here. Is that not correct?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am sure there are many Members who cannot be here for good reasons but who would like to take part in the debate. They are following the Government's advice, which is to work from home wherever possible. This just shows how confused the approach is sometimes, and it really is an affront to democracy that those Members cannot take part in important debates such as these.

Mr Harper: For the benefit of the House, I understand that that particular point about participation in legislative debates is currently being considered by the Procedure Committee. I think the Government have indicated that if the Procedure Committee can come up with a sensible way of including colleagues who need to participate remotely in legislative debate, that is something that the Government will look on favourably. I hope that is helpful to the House.

Justin Madders: I thank the former Chief Whip for his intervention. I would certainly welcome that development. I have not heard anything from the current Leader of the House to explain why we can take part remotely in some debates but not in others. I will not take any more interventions, because I know we are up against time.

Turning to the regulations themselves, they include, as the Minister outlined, some relaxations including the reopening of some outdoor retail as well as various outdoor sporting activities. They also make provision for elite athletes in anticipation of the return of professional sport, including the Premier League later this week. I am sure we are all looking forward to that, although anyone who has witnessed the Arsenal back four this season may consider the definition of an elite athlete to be a triumph of hope over reality.

It is not all one way, however, and for the first time, the regulations include a list of venues that must now close. I fail to see any logic, coherence or consistency in the Government's approach to these venues and, critically, there has been no impact assessment of those venues. The first set of regulations, despite their sweeping nature, had no impact assessment at all. We understand, of course, why that was not possible in the first instance, but we have made it clear that we do not want that to become the norm, because we know that the impact of these regulations will be huge. We are now on the third set of regulations, 12 weeks after the lockdown started, and we have still had no impact assessment. How can the Government continue to issue new laws with such sweeping powers when they cannot tell us what their impact is?

Is there a document the Minister can point us to that sets out the Government's own assessment of whether they have met the five tests they set themselves for relaxing the lockdown? Certainly, there is concern that the threshold for relaxation has not yet been met. Only yesterday, the World Health Organisation expressed concern that we might be coming out of lockdown too early. According to a recent University of Oxford study on each country's level of readiness for easing lockdown, we are now fourth from bottom in the entire world.

The questioning comes not just from outside bodies but from the Government's own joint biosecurity centre, which has not reduced the threat level—still level 4—and says very clearly that only when the threat reduces to level 3 can there be any relaxation of restrictions. I implore the Minister to set out exactly why the Government feel they can depart from the opinion of their own joint biosecurity centre.

All these concerns matter not only because of the enormous impact of the regulations but, frankly, because the Government appear to be winging it in respect of

which regulations they choose to apply. Take the new category of venues to be closed in schedule 2—model villages, zoos, safari parks, aquariums and so on. Clearly, that was an oversight in the original regulations, but we have seen a rapid U-turn on parts of the regulations so that, as I understand it, zoos and safari parks are no longer required to close. How have the Government got themselves into such a mess that we are debating on the Floor of the House regulations that they do not fully support? How can it possibly be consistent with the rule of law for the Government to present us with regulations and say, "Actually, we're going to pretend that bits of this are not there"? It is an absolute shambles. To preserve the rule of law, it is vital that people do not act outside the law, but how can we expect it to be enforced properly if the Government say that bits of the regulations do not need to be followed? The changes come to us late, without any assessment of their impact, and after some of them have been pulled. That does not inspire confidence that the Government are in control of the situation or following any kind of plan.

As we know, the WHO, the Association of Directors of Public Health and some of the Government's own scientific advisers have said that the easing of lockdown should not occur until the testing and tracing system is proven to be more robust, but the reality is that the system is in chaos. The Government have not been able to publish the number of people tested each day for more than three weeks now. How can testing and tracing work properly if we do not know how many people are tested each day? A third set of data from the test and trace system shows that it needs a lot more work. Just over 8,000 people were tested, but only two thirds of them were contacted. Missing out a third is not what I would call an effective and robust system.

And what of the app? It seems that the world-leading, game-changing, virus-busting app is not as important as it once was. That is a fate that probably awaits us all in here, but the app has suffered a downgrade before it has even been launched. Last month, the Secretary of State said it would be crucial and that downloading the app would be a public duty. Now we are told that it is not vital; it is more of a cherry on the cake. Which is it? Will the Minister explain how it is safe to open non-essential retail if people who might come across someone who is infected cannot be traced because there is no working app in place?

The Government have been too slow on testing, too slow on social care, too slow on personal protective equipment, and too slow on the lockdown, and now it seems they are too slow on tracing. The Prime Minister promised a world-beating system by 1 June, but that date is long gone. Newspaper reports suggest that we may not get a fully operational system until September. When pressed in debate on the last set of regulations, the Minister could not give us a date when it would be ready.

This matters because the restrictions are being lifted now. The Government must demonstrate that they have got a grip of the testing and tracing strategy in order to restore public confidence in their handling of the pandemic and to ensure that we do not risk another catastrophic spike of infection that will lead to a second lockdown, with all the damage that will bring. The Government have taken the decision to lift the restrictions. It is for

them to demonstrate that they are listening to the experts and publish the full scientific evidence behind the decisions that have been taken.

We want the Government to succeed and remain committed to working constructively with them, but that is a two-way street. I have now spoken three times on these regulations. On each occasion I have stressed the importance of the Government's operating within the rule of law, following due process and providing us with a full evidence base supporting the decisions they take. On each occasion the Government have failed to listen to those concerns. They have failed to demonstrate that they are following the science, they have failed to show that they are assessing the impact of their decisions, and they have failed to show that they grasp the importance of accountability. This Parliament and this country deserve the full picture, so I hope next time we debate these issues we get just that.

7.49 pm

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Tonight we are debating the continued removal of civil liberties and we are not having a vote at the end of this debate. We need to start voting on these matters. I find it absolutely extraordinary that 10, 11, 12 weeks into this crisis we are yet to have a vote. This is important stuff—important to my constituents, this country and Members, and we need to get back to business as usual, as much as we can.

Peter Kyle: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Charles Walker: Very briefly.

Peter Kyle: I will be brief. The House of Lords—the other place—voted tonight. It did so electronically. Does the hon. Gentleman not think that that would be a more sensible way forward here, because we could have been doing it already?

Sir Charles Walker: I will come on to that point.

We have got to get people back to work. I am going to lose hundreds of small businesses in my constituency and thousands of jobs—and that is just if we all go back to work tomorrow. If we delay week after week after week, more and more jobs will go and more and more businesses will close, not just in my constituency but in yours, Madam Deputy Speaker, and in everyone else's in this Chamber—all colleagues. It will be catastrophic. It is going to be really, really bad for a lot of people. Not having a job, losing your business and not having a home have bad outcomes—bad health outcomes, bad mental health outcomes, and just bad outcomes all round for your family and community.

We talk about when we do not have coronavirus any more—when we have banished this virus from our shores. Well, we may have to learn to live with this virus. I did a bit of research and found a book by the virologist F. M. Burnet, written in 1953—a very good read it is too. He was an expert on Spanish flu, and he wrote this:

“Influenza remained unduly active and unduly fatal through 1919 and 1920, but gradually reverted to normal character. The change from the young adult incidence of fatality to the standard type involving virtually only the old was not complete until 1929.” That was a decade.

You will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that as most viruses mutate they become less fatal, and hopefully that it is what is going to happen to coronavirus; I suspect that it will be the case. There is this idea that we can stand here and say, “We're not going to go back to work—we're not going to go back to normal—until we banish coronavirus.” But we could see this hybrid Parliament lasting a lot longer than any of us thought it would last. We could see a lot more of our constituents out of work and a lot more businesses failing; in fact, our whole country could fail.

We talk about leadership; we talk about the Government leading. That is a realistic expectation—that the Government lead—but what about our obligation to lead? Parliament came back two weeks ago after the Whitsun recess and we had a number of votes. We were asked to queue for half an hour, in the sunshine, and we started whingeing and tweeting out. Why were we whingeing that we were being asked to stand in a queue? My God, for crying out loud, our constituents had been doing it for the past 10 weeks, and yet when it is our turn we do not like it at all. Where is the leadership there, I ask you? And it did not go unnoticed by our constituents.

I will return to the issue about democratic accountability and the democratic deficit, and why this place needs to meet vibrantly to debate matters of great concern. You will remember, Madam Deputy Speaker, that during the EU debates there was heat, passion and emotion, but it never spilled over into the streets because we were the safety valve. We were allowed to let off steam in this Chamber on behalf of our constituents, and they felt they had a voice. But now in London we are seeing people who feel passionately about an issue—who feel it viscerally in their hearts—not having voices in Parliament organically, through a debate, sharing, debating and discussing their concerns.

That is why it is so important that we start voting on matters of civil liberty—that we take it upon ourselves to return to this place to lead the country back to work. It is not good enough to think we have done our bit by clapping fantastic NHS health workers and people in supermarkets, and yet when it comes to our turn we say, “No, that is for other people.” We have got to get back to work—ourselves and the nation.

7.54 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): What an honour to follow that! I agree with much of what the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) said. It is important that we debate civil liberties and indeed vote on them, and recognise that at the moment we are choosing to put some of them in abeyance for the greater good, which is to protect people's lives and, in the long term, livelihoods.

Leadership is hugely important, but what are we saying to the public? “Those people who can work at home should and if you can't, we will do everything we can to try to make it safe for you to work in your normal workplace.” If people can work at home, they should, yet here we are, the leaders of the country, having proved—the screens around the Chamber are proof of it—that we can work at home and we have chosen not to. That is the opposite of leadership; it is poor leadership. I therefore disagree with the hon. Gentleman on that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am anxious that we return to the substance of the regulations. We have had quite a wide-ranging debate about virtual Parliament versus any other kind of Parliament, but we are here to discuss the regulations.

Tim Farron: My remarks were merely a bridge from the excellent speech of the hon. Member for Broxbourne.

The restrictions that we are discussing have been a huge imposition on our lives and livelihoods. I would argue that they have been necessary to protect us, our loved ones and especially those who are most vulnerable in our society. Millions around the country have made colossal sacrifices. In every community, countless people selflessly battled with loneliness, and families and businesses plunged into financial insecurity, even destitution. Our communities in Cumbria have been among the hardest hit. In Westmorland and Lonsdale, there was a 312% increase in unemployment last month—the highest in Britain. For thousands back home, it is not a case of fearing that financial hardship might come at the end of the lockdown; it has already arrived. Thousands are at risk and hundreds are in the midst of destitution.

In Cumbria, we are deeply concerned about the survival and sustainability of the tourism and hospitality sector in particular. I want to focus my remarks on how the restrictions affect that industry. Visitors come from Britain and all over the world, not only for the landscape, but for a world-class industry that receives and serves them. We have the best pubs and restaurants using local produce, the best accommodation and the best attractions from steam railways to lake cruises. We have heritage and history from Wordsworth to Donald Campbell and an innovative first-rate retail sector that is integrated with that visitor economy. Cumbrian tourism normally brings in £3 billion a year. It is the biggest employer in Cumbria, and of course tourism is the fourth biggest employer in the country.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The news from back home in Northern Ireland today is that the hospitality sectors can open on 3 July. That means the restaurants, the cafés, the coffee shops, the pubs and the visitor centres are opening. Is that an example of what should and could happen here for the hon. Gentleman's constituency?

Tim Farron: I am grateful for that relevant intervention. The point is that we need to do what is safe and compensate those people who are unable to go about their normal business if it is not safe. I am not one of those people who say, "We just follow the science." A judgment still needs to be made on the basis of the science, but we need to have the guidance up front and early. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, Northern Ireland is opening up on 3 July and perhaps England will open on 4 July, but we need the information on which to base those decisions.

In the Lake District national park—the most populated national park in the country—80% of the working-age population works in tourism and hospitality, an industry that has basically closed down for the past three months. It is not the case in every part of the country, but the tourism in the national parks and in the coastal zones of the UK is largely cyclical. Visitors rely on the feast of the summer to see them through the famine of the winter. Lockdown turned our summer to winter. Even

if businesses are permitted to open in a limited capacity, the restrictions on customers will continue to prevent them from making up all that lost income. If the tourism economy is able to fully reopen only in the autumn, we condemn people to three winters in a row: three winters of making a loss; three winters of financial hardship. As the Government ease the lockdown restrictions, it is entirely sensible for the Chancellor to begin the slow unwinding of the furlough scheme for many businesses. After all, there is light at the end of the tunnel and hope for the future—but not for everyone. We must not fall into the trap of thinking that the ending of the lockdown will mean that business can begin to make profit again; being open for business is no guarantee of having business. A business cannot pay its staff even 10% if it is not making any income to pay them with, and that is going to be the case for a good number of businesses in the tourism and hospitality sector. If the Government insist on no exemptions to the phasing out of the furlough from August, many businesses in Cumbrian towns and villages will be forced to lay off huge swathes of their staff or to fold altogether.

As well as the huge increase in job losses on my patch, 37% of the working population are now on furlough—that is the fourth highest level in the country and the highest by far in the north of England. If we do not recognise that the tourism and hospitality industry is in a unique and precarious position, we will simply end up killing hundreds of otherwise healthy businesses in the autumn, in which case, what would have been the point of the Government's expenditure so far? The furlough scheme would just become a waiting room for unemployment, and I will not settle for that.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point about tourism. It is worth £3 billion to Cumbria, and £320 million lands in Thanet—North Thanet and South Thanet as a whole—because of it. Would he now consider it appropriate that people should be able to sleep on their boats, and use their caravans and campervans, because these family units could be spending money on things locally, although not in the pubs and restaurants, obviously? Would he consider that to be sensible at this time?

Tim Farron: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, which is that we should be considering intelligent ways of unlocking. The industry could reopen in phases, and I have been encouraging people involved in the hospitality industry in the lakes and the dales to get the breakdown of what is possible for their business and their industry to the Government early, so that it informs the Government's decision making. Many of the things he suggests should be considered, and I am sure they are being. As I will discuss in a moment, we could have done with the guidance on what is permissible significantly sooner—that is, we do not have it at all, even with only 19 days to go.

It is not right for us to simply accept that for many people in hospitality and tourism the furlough scheme may just end up being that waiting room for unemployment, if no support is provided to take them beyond the autumn, because of the cyclical and seasonal nature of our hospitality and tourism industry. I will not settle for that. I am sure I speak for dozens of colleagues from right around the country, from all parties, who recognise

this problem in their own communities. I urge us all to work together to make sure the Government see the need for a special package for the hospitality and tourism industry, in Cumbria and across the whole country.

In Cumbria, we pride ourselves on our warm welcome to visitors and the strength of our communities. Not only will the impact of this on hospitality and tourism be catastrophic for those directly involved, but untold damage and hardship will be caused to other industries and businesses that are tied into and utterly inseparable from the tourism economy. I am talking not only about the restaurants, pubs and attractions, but about the retail industry, entire supply chains, the maintenance industry, and those involved in furnishings and fittings. We provide a first-class welcome for our visitors and we are proud of it. From the awesome pubs and vibrant retail industry to the fantastic hotels and cosy homestays, our communities are a credit to the awesome part of the world we get to call home, but our visitors experience only the tip of the iceberg. Below the surface an enormous amount of work goes on to maintain and supply the visit that people enjoy; these are the businesses caught in the tension of being both desperate to get back to work and concerned to keep themselves, their families and their customers safe. Keeping restrictions in place is absolutely right to protect lives and prevent a second spike, which would be even more damaging to our economy, but we also have a responsibility to protect Cumbria's families from hardship and destitution.

There is still no sign of the Government guidance, which it was promised would arrive last Friday, on the reopening of some of the tourism and hospitality industry. There is still no clarity on which parts of the hospitality industry will be able to open from 4 July in England or what the timetable for any gradual reopening might be. We are now just 19 days away from 4 July, and the tourism industry is still completely in the dark. Businesses not only need the guidance to ensure that they are meeting all the Government criteria; they also want to know how they can market with confidence to attract customers safely ahead of time. The lack of clarity from Government on which parts of the industry will be able to open from 4 July continues to hamper business planning, prevent bookings and stifle potential income opportunities.

There are three simple things that the Government could do to ensure the survival of the tourism industry through to the spring of 2021. The first is to publish the guidance today. Thousands of people are living in considerable anxiety day to day, having been robbed of even the small amount of certainty that a road map would provide. If the restrictions are to be eased in a way that will maintain health protection, businesses need the maximum time available to prepare and put appropriate measures in place.

Secondly, the Government must be flexible in their phasing out of the furlough scheme for tourism and hospitality and recognise that if they phase out the scheme for businesses with no income at this stage, they will needlessly kill off many of our local businesses that would otherwise be able to thrive and prosper in the future.

Thirdly and finally, the Government must introduce a bespoke support package for the tourism and hospitality sector, to see it through to the spring of 2021. Our lakes

economy exists on feast and famine. The lockdown came at the end of the winter famine, and then the feast was cancelled. If they dump us out in the cold on our own as we approach the next winter famine, they will kill an industry and plunge thousands of my constituents into hardship. I am not having that—not when a support package through to next spring could see us come out fighting, ready to bounce back as the high season begins.

We take seriously our responsibility to care for the lakes, the dales and the whole of Cumbria's spectacular landscape. We cannot wait to welcome visitors back to enjoy the fells, the food and the finest places on the earth, from Dent to Coniston, Grasmere to Kirkby Lonsdale and Windermere to Kendal, but without financial support there could be barely any tourism and hospitality sector there to welcome them. Will the Minister and her colleagues show that they are serious about protecting lives and livelihoods by announcing those measures to protect the tourism industry today?

8.7 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): It is a genuine pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), because my area, like his, has a number of tourism and hospitality businesses. I have met a number of those businesses virtually, and they too will be waiting to see the guidance on how they are able to open in a way that is profitable and sustainable. They no doubt look forward to seeing that guidance.

I want to cover two things. The first is the process of how the Government make these regulations and the House debates them. The second is the amendment to regulation 7, on gatherings, and pertains specifically to an event proposed in my constituency.

My first point relates to one that I touched on in my interventions on the Minister and in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker). I note that on social media, one of our colleagues has clipped my remarks and used them as an explainer for the rather complicated set of amendments that we are debating. I have not yet had a chance to look at it, because that would have been inappropriate and difficult in the Chamber, but I will see whether my explanation has clarified things.

It is worth reminding ourselves that this set of regulations are the biggest restrictions on the liberties of British people since the second world war, and potentially even including some of the wartime restrictions. The first set of regulations were made on 26 March and came into force immediately. They were clearly very significant, and they were made under the emergency provisions. Although the regulations were made under the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984, the substance of them had been debated quite fully as part of the debate on the Coronavirus Bill, which got Royal Assent that week. To be fair, although the original regulations themselves had not been debated, the substance of them had been debated at length by the House as part of the passage of the Coronavirus Act 2020, so they were properly debated in the House. Since then, though, they have been amended by the different sets of amendment regulations—I shall not trouble the House by reading out all the titles.

[Mr Mark Harper]

I note that although the Amendment (No. 2) regulations were debated in a Delegated Legislation Committee, as the Minister said, they are going to be approved by the House only today—they are on the Order Paper—and we are now debating the coronavirus (No. 3) regulations, which, as set out in the exchanges, have in some cases already been superseded by the (No. 4) regulations, which were laid before the House on Friday and in some cases came into force almost immediately afterwards, with some regulations coming into force on Saturday.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne put his finger on it when he noted that the regulations are actually quite complicated and not everybody will understand them in great detail, but because they are the law a breach of them is actually an offence. We are creating criminal offences here, and when we do that it is important that we let people know what the offence is and how they can make sure that they remain within the law. I suspect that if we were to do a survey among Members of Parliament, even they probably would not get all the regulations correct. They are quite difficult to follow, given that they start off with a set of regulations that is then amended over and over again. It is quite a challenge to work out what the current legal position is. Given that sanctions are involved, that is difficult.

If I were to explain to the public—who are, after all, the people we represent and the reason we are here—why they should care about what might seem like a piece of esoteric processology, I would say that it is because we are debating laws that they have to live under and that place enormous restrictions on their liberty and how they live their lives and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne said, have really quite significant impacts on their livelihoods, as was clearly illustrated by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale when he recounted the impact on his local tourism sector, as there has been an impact on mine. The regulations include detailed provisions about what businesses can trade, how they can trade and how they can make money or not make money, so it is important that we debate them seriously.

It is worth my briefly going through how we have ended up with these regulations. As I said, the first set of regulations were in effect debated as part of the debate on the Coronavirus Bill. There were then some amendments that were largely minor and technical, so people could probably live with the fact that they were not debated in detail. The second set of amendments—those that are not being debated by the House today, because they were debated in Committee, but will, I suspect, be approved by the House today—contained some important changes and significantly increased the maximum penalty from £960 to £3,200. Admittedly, that is the maximum after a number of offences, but it is a significant penalty increase, and the amendments have not yet—until this evening—been approved by the House. So far, that criminal offence or sanction has been imposed only by the stroke of a Minister's pen, not by the approval of the House.

The Amendment (No. 3) regulations, which we are debating, contain some significant changes. They change fundamentally the structure of the regulations from restrictions as to whether we could leave our homes and the reasons why we could do so towards in effect saying

that we could leave our homes whenever we liked but just could not stay away overnight. That is a significant change in the way the regulations are structured and, again, that has not been properly debated by the House until today.

The other significant change in the regulations is that they alter the rules about gatherings. Originally, more than two people were not allowed to meet in a public place. These regulations change the rules on gatherings to cover both public and private places and put a restriction on gatherings to be of no more than six. I will come on to that a little later in my remarks, because it is relevant to my particular constituency case.

The final thing that these regulations do that I want to focus on—the Minister touched on this in her remarks—is to extend the review period from 21 days to 28 days. I am not sure I quite follow the logic that the Minister set out, because I was happy with the shorter period on the basis that the regulations are very significant restrictions on liberty, and therefore I think reviewing them more frequently is better. On the Minister's point that the length of time for the review has been extended to allow changes to come into force and an assessment to be made of the impact of those changes on, presumably, the R number and the level of infections before we make another set of changes, I understand the logic behind that, but that does not really seem to be exactly what we are doing. The review period as set out in the regulations is 25 June, which is nine days before the point in the Government's plan at which we will potentially open up the leisure, tourism and hospitality sectors. That nine-day gap will not leave people a lot of time to prepare, because 25 June is only 10 days after the very significant and welcome changes to open up the non-essential retail sector, which have taken place only today.

If those changes today were to have an adverse impact on the spread of the virus—I do not think they will, because businesses are operating in a covid-secure way—we probably would not know about that in 10 days' time because of the period that the virus takes to show up and feed through into the data. So we would not be in a position on 25 June to know whether the changes that have taken place today have had any impact. We would not know, therefore, when we were potentially going to announce the opening up of the hospitality, leisure and tourism sectors, whether the changes today have had any impact or not, and whether we need to make a course correction. I am not sure that the extension of 21 days to 28 days for the review period makes a lot of sense, because we are not debating the regulations at the time when they come into force or ahead of that, so the timetables are completely out of kilter.

My final point before I come to the specifics of the regulations is on the Amendment (No. 4) regulations, which deal with linked households. I will touch on them only briefly, because they are not the regulations we are debating today. I have read those regulations, and they are quite complicated. There is such a level of detail about family structures and the rules on which households can link to other households, and I am not really sure that trying to put that level of detail into the law makes a lot of sense. That is both because it is complicated—I am not sure how anybody makes head or tail of it—and because realistically I cannot see how anyone can practically enforce the regulations. I do not see how a police officer, without carrying out the most extraordinary amount of

surveillance, can possibly know whether various households are appropriately linking to each other, particularly if one of the households has multiple adults in it.

We may have reached the point where the Government should think—particularly because there has been such high compliance with even the parts of the rules that are guidance only—about whether we want to set out our thinking, publish the advice and guidance to people, and allow them to implement it themselves without having legal sanction underpinning it.

These regulations expire at the back end of September anyway. It may be worth the Minister saying what the Government are doing: whether they are going to keep the legal framework in place until then, or whether, at an earlier point, there may be some sense in moving to a model where we deal with this through guidance and advice, not the power of the criminal law. That would be a tribute to the British people. They have largely followed the rules very, very fully and the evidence is that they can be trusted to follow the guidance pretty comprehensively, even if it is only guidance and not backed by criminal sanction.

On the specifics in the regulations we are debating today—this is my final point, Madam Deputy Speaker—regulation 7 makes it very clear that a gathering of more than six people outdoors is unlawful and that somebody attending such a gathering is committing an offence. I mention that because there is a proposal in my constituency to hold a demonstration this coming weekend on the subject of black lives matter. Now, I am very firm in my view that I abhor racism of any kind. In normal circumstances, I would welcome people demonstrating that they, too, were against racism of any kind. I hear people say we have a right to protest in this country, and normally we do. However, under the regulations, which I suspect the House will approve this evening, we actually do not have a right to protest if there are more than six people—it is an offence. The Home Secretary made it very clear that it is an offence. She was very clear, in her exhortations this past weekend, that people should not come to London and should not protest, because the regulations are in force because we are trying to deal with a pandemic.

That is very much the view of most of my constituents about this particular demonstration. My own view is that I would welcome such a demonstration to take place in the future when the coronavirus regulations are no longer in force and we are no longer trying to deal with the pandemic, but it would be an offence at the moment. There is a decision taking place this evening. The local trust that runs the recreation centre is having to make a decision about whether to approve the demonstration. I have been very clear that people attending the protest would be committing a criminal offence, which is punishable by a fine, and it should not take place. If it were to take place, my advice to people would be not to turn up but to express their views in other ways—there are plenty of ways that people can express their views on social media and so forth—and to hold over a protest until it is lawful.

In any other circumstance, if a Minister proposed abolishing the right to protest, people would be outraged. We would think that this House would absolutely have to vote, debate and decide on such a provision, but that right to protest was effectively extinguished by the stroke of a Minister's pen and has been significantly

changed in the regulations again by the stroke of a Minister's pen. It is only today that the House will take a decision. I would say to Ministers that it is in their interests to bring the measures to the House, have them debated and then have the House give its backing, so that it is Parliament that has approved them and not just them. Until the regulations are approved, the ban on protests is purely on the basis of the signature of the Secretary of State for Health, as the Minister said. I am sure that he does not really want to have all to himself the fact that he personally has abolished the right to protest in England. That is actually what he has done without the sanction, yet, of this House, because the regulations have not yet been approved.

Craig Mackinlay: As ever, my right hon. Friend is making a forensic analysis, particularly of the timeline, to which I think we will all refer over the days ahead. He makes the very good point that we are considering regulations that are backed up by criminal records and fines, and that we are doing that rather rapidly and belatedly. Would he hazard a guess as to how many people will actually be fined for having a barbecue with seven people next week, when they see that there will be no fines or sanctions for big gatherings of people who are passionate about what they stand for? I wonder if he might hazard a guess.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend has a point. The reason why I have been clear in the view that I have expressed in my constituency about these protests is that I fundamentally believe that we live in a country governed by the rule of law, and one thing about the rule of law is that it applies to everybody in the country. Of course, one of the arguments that many of the people attending these protests are making is that they want everyone in our country, whatever their race, to be treated equally under the law. We already have laws in this country that protect the way people are treated and guarantee, under equality legislation, that we treat people of different races the same. It is difficult for someone to argue that they want the law to be applied to protect people of different races and guarantee their rights if, at the same time, that person is conducting a protest that in itself breaks the law. It is not a very consistent position to have.

Sir Charles Walker: I understand the point that my right hon. Friend is making, and it is very important that people act safely, but I find it rather wonderful that people in this country believe that the right to protest belongs to them and not Ministers. Whatever the rights and wrongs of protesting while there is a lockdown, looking ahead to the strength of the democratic right in this country, the fact that people believe the right to protest belongs to them and not Ministers should, in future, give us all hope for our democracy.

Mr Harper: I broadly agree with that sentiment, but I have a concern, for this reason. I think that we live in a country governed by law and I want the law to be respected, so the difficulty, if we get large-scale breaches of that law—particularly if there is no sanction—is that all the millions of people in our country who, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) said, have been faithfully obeying the law, following the rules, not meeting members of their family and putting themselves through considerable hardship and difficulty

[Mr Harper]

then think it has all been rather pointless, and they do not quite understand why there appears to be a different set of standards. That is why it is important, if we are going to make rules such as this, that they apply to everybody, and that is very much the sentiment in my constituency. It is also important because if these things are the law, they are presumably the law because Ministers have determined, on advice from the chief medical officer and the chief scientific adviser, that allowing these gatherings would allow the virus to spread more widely than it would otherwise. In that case, allowing such protests to take place is going to put people's lives at risk.

I am very fortunate that in my constituency we have had a relatively low incidence of coronavirus and a relatively low number of people have died, although every death is, for the family and friends of that individual, a tragedy. The incidence has been relatively low and I do not want to see that change, which is why I think it is important that we obey these rules.

In conclusion, although I support the regulations—I am certainly very happy to support them this evening—the Government need to think about the way they bring these sets of regulations in front of the House, the way they are debated and the way they are explained to people. They also need to look, over the coming days and weeks—as we hopefully are able to continually ease the restrictions—at the point at which it makes sense to move from the law and a legislative underpinning of these rules to advice, guidance and trust in the very good sense of the British people to follow the rules and continue driving the virus out of our community, so that we can all get back to as close to normal life as possible until we develop a vaccine or a treatment.

8.29 pm

Jo Churchill: I thank all hon. Members who have spoken. The debate has exemplified quite how challenging and complex this situation is. Throughout it, we have discussed both opening up and not opening up at the same point. The regulations state that the Secretary of State should ensure that restrictions are lifted at the earliest opportunity if no longer necessary for public health. These measures are incredibly restrictive, and we should not leave them in place a moment longer than we need to, but we have to go with caution. Parliamentary scrutiny is essential, but we could not justify to the public keeping the restrictions in place longer while we await a debate.

The changes are broadly consistent with the road map that the Prime Minister laid out to this House on 11 May. Over the coming weeks and months, we will continue slowly to ease the restrictions put on individuals, society and businesses by the regulations, if and when it becomes safe to do so. The amendments debated today play a significant role in that gradual return to normal life. This requires a constant and careful review of the evidence and of the impact both of measures remaining in place and of the amendments we have made to them. We are being guided by the science, and the Government are making changes only where we are confident that it is safe to do so.

Peter Kyle: Let me quickly put on the record my thanks to the Minister. At the very beginning of the outbreak back in February, when the first outbreak was

in my constituency, she briefed me daily and was constantly available as a source of information at that point, so I thank her.

Can the Minister explain to the House why, on issues such as zoos, in the few days it has taken to get this statutory instrument to the Floor of the House, there has already been a U-turn? Why is there so much confusion about this announcement?

Jo Churchill: I would argue that this is a dynamic situation. For example, with zoos, scientific evidence indicates quite clearly that open spaces are much safer for people to be in, so a degree of logic applies. It is very difficult to argue that we do not want things opened, while at the same time requesting that businesses and so on are opened. There has to be a degree of walking slowly, and I hope to come on to that. Several Members raised the fact that there appear to be inconsistencies, but I would argue that the Government are maintaining only the restrictions that are necessary and appropriate at any given time.

Justin Madders: I want to come in on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle). Paragraph 23C of schedule 2 deals with aquariums and zoos, including safari parks, and we just need to be clear about the Government's position on that. Are they now saying that that paragraph is no longer going to be applicable, or are zoos part of this? I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify that, please.

Jo Churchill: Zoos have been closed as a consequence of the restrictions since they came into force on 26 March. Until 1 June, zoos were in effect closed as a consequence of regulation 6, which required people not to be outside their homes other than with a reasonable excuse. I think we would all agree that that does not include visiting a zoo. Aligned with the scientific advice on 12 June, the regulations were signed to permit outdoor areas of zoos to open, but obviously not the inside areas.

The debate today has provided an opportunity for the Government to hear the concerns of a wide range of society through the contributions made by right hon. and hon. Members, and I now turn specifically to the debate. First, I would like to say that I have heard the frustrations. Regulations have to be made urgently, given the impact they have on individual rights and to respond to the latest possible evidence. Debates are organised and scheduled through the usual channels, which, I would just say, are not always as fleet of foot as others.

Let me say in response to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) that the Secretary of State keeps the restrictions and requirements under constant consideration throughout the 28 days. It is a continuous cycle, rather than a fixed point in time for a review. If I understood the argument of my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean correctly and if we took it to a logical conclusion, it would mean that as we lifted restrictions, it would actually take longer were we to be iterative over those 28 days, rather than processing easing as we currently are.

Justin Madders: Will the Minister give way?

Jo Churchill: Yes, finally, although I am sure the House would appreciate it if we just pushed on.

Justin Madders: I appreciate the Minister's tolerance in letting me intervene again. Can we be clear on the reviews? I appreciate why the Secretary of State will be doing that on an ongoing basis, but the Opposition would like to see those reviews in some documented form so that we can understand the basis on which restrictions are eased and implemented.

Jo Churchill: To that point, I will address the comments that the hon. Gentleman made about transparency. In recognition of these unprecedented times, SAGE has been publishing statements and the accompanying evidence it has reviewed to demonstrate how the scientific underpinning and understanding of covid has continued to evolve. As new data emerges, SAGE's advice quickly adapts to new findings and reflects the situations.

I would like to turn to the impact assessments.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): Before the Minister moves on, will she clarify the move from 21 days to 28 days? If the matter is under constant review, which she says it is, I still cannot understand why we have moved from 21 to 28 days. Will she clarify that for me?

Jo Churchill: My understanding is that, as the situation is abating, to push the review out to 28 days while making a constant assessment is deemed the right thing to do to allow a more fluid process.

A full regulatory impact assessment is not required for regulations that last for less than a year. As the regulations are set to expire six months after they come into force, they therefore fit that criterion. However, the Government are considering the economic impact of the regulations on businesses and individuals, as well as the personal impact on those with protected characteristics, on people's mental wellbeing and on religious groups and many others. As I say, this is an extremely testing and complex situation.

On testing, we have delivered a national response and have rapidly scaled up testing. From some 2,000 tests a day only back in March, we now have the capacity to conduct over 200,000 tests a day across the entire testing programme. Increasing our testing capacity is one of the greatest national mobilisations we have ever seen, and I thank the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for his kind words. Back in February, the numbers of cases were such that we could trace at that point.

Moving on, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) said how important it is to get businesses open and to get back to work, and I could not agree more. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) explained the challenges in the tourism industry. The Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), is looking at the unprecedented impact that covid-19 is having on the tourist industry in order to deliver some of the changes that I am sure my constituency of Bury St Edmunds would like to see, as it relies heavily on tourism. I, for one, cannot wait to get back to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale's part of the world. The first walk we ever do when we go there is Swedish Bridge, but to go round the horseshoe or along the coffin trail would be a delight in the current circumstances.

For my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean, I can make clear that Her Majesty's Government have given clarification on exactly what is provided for in the regulations and what we additionally suggest as guidance to come out during the review period. There is a complexity in the guidance, and I take on board his broader points. I agree that everybody has so far followed the guidance in a remarkable way.

I thank all Members for their contributions during the debate and assure them that we have listened and will take the House's views into account as measures are kept under review. As I said when I opened the debate, we are incredibly grateful to the public for their sacrifices and their efforts to follow these tough measures. I also pay a fulsome tribute to our NHS and care workers and all the key workers for their ongoing hard work to keep our vital services running, to save lives and to keep all of us safe. I commend these regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (Amendment) (No.3) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 558), dated 31 May 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 1 June, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): In order to allow the safe exit of hon. Members participating in this item of business and the safe arrival of those participating in the subsequent item of business, I am suspending the House now for three minutes.

8.40 pm

Sitting suspended.

Damages

8.43 pm

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

That the draft Fatal Accidents Act 1976 (Remedial) Order 2020, which was laid before this House on 12 February, be approved.

This draft order seeks to rectify an incompatibility with the European convention on human rights identified by the Court of Appeal in the 2017 case of *Smith v. Lancashire Teaching Hospitals*. It relates to limits on the categories of person eligible to receive an award of bereavement damages under section 1A of the Fatal Accidents Act 1976, as amended in 1982, which excludes a person who has cohabited with the deceased person. The draft order was laid in Parliament on 12 February 2020 and the terms of the Human Rights Act 1998 specify that remedial orders require the order to be strictly focused on rectifying the incompatibility and not on any wider issues, no matter how much merit those wider issues may have.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Some of my constituents have contacted me in relation to this matter, so may I just ask the Minister to confirm that the remedial Act and the SI will protect those cohabiting families who see themselves excluded from insurance pay-outs because they had not taken the legal steps to marry, yet, for all intents and purposes, they are life partners and clearly deserve this recognition?

Chris Philp: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in his assessment. The order will make sure that people who are cohabiting enjoy the same rights to the payments as people who are married or in civil partnerships, provided that that cohabitation has continued for a period of two years or more.

The level of bereavement damages is set by the Lord Chancellor and is currently £15,120, having recently been increased in line with inflation. It is worth saying that those payments are of course not designed to make up for the loss of a loved one—we cannot do that—but they are a token amount payable to that limited category of people. They are also able to claim civil damages in relation to a loss caused by their status as dependants under section 1 of the 1976 Act, but that is a separate matter.

This remedial order, as the hon. Gentleman said, allows people cohabiting for at least two years to enjoy the same eligibility for bereavement damages as those who are in civil partnerships or married, thereby correcting the incompatibility identified by the Court of Appeal. We think it is reasonable to set some kind of test to establish the permanence of the cohabitation arrangement, to ensure that there is a reasonable level of commitment, and we think that two years is the right period. A similar two-year qualifying period is already referenced in section 1 of the 1976 Act in relation to dependency damages claimed by cohabitants so, picking two years, provides a degree of consistency, and it avoids the need for the courts to engage in any rather intrusive and probably distressing inquiries about the nature of the cohabiting relationship.

Occasionally, it may be the case that a cohabiting partner also has a spouse somewhere else, who has not yet been divorced. The question might arise, what happens in those circumstances? Again, with the purpose in mind

of making this as simple and straightforward as possible, the order states that if that is the case, the amount of money, the damages, is simply divided equally between the two. We could make a case to say that the court should determine who is the more deserving person, the more deserving recipient, but, again, that would be intrusive. For the court to try to unpick those sorts of relationships strikes us as inappropriate, hence the simple proposal that has been made.

In closing, I thank the Joint Committee on Human Rights for its scrutiny of the draft order, and for its confirmation that it corrects the incompatibility identified by the Court of Appeal in the case I referred to earlier. We welcome the Committee's recommendation. I touched on one or two of the points that it made in its response, but this remedial order made under section 10 of the Human Rights Act 1998 corrects a deficiency, rights a wrong, and I commend it to the House.

8.47 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Labour supports this remedial order, which amends the Fatal Accidents Act 1976. We believe that it is fair and just to make bereavement damages available to cohabitants, regardless of whether they are married, in a civil partnership or not.

A mark of just how far society has progressed is that, since the Act, two other forms of legal partnership, civil partnership and same-sex marriage, have made their way into statute. However, those living together but not for whatever reason deciding to become civil partners or marry have been left behind. It is time for that to be fixed, and it is long overdue that we did so, not least because the nature of this order concerns the death of a partner in situations that nobody could foresee or make provision for.

Tragically, for most people, the first time they even know that they are being treated differently from any other relationship is upon the death of a partner. Most people rightly assume that the state is there for them at times such as those, and it has been if they are married or in a civil partnership, but it is not if they are in any other equal relationship that is not recognised by law as being equal. The injustice is plain to see. Grief does not discriminate between those who are married and those who are not.

Sadly, this is an injustice that various Governments have been aware of, and yet failed to fix. The Law Commission shone a light on it a long time ago, as far back as 1999, and the previous Labour Government published a draft Bill in 2009 which was not pursued by the subsequent coalition Government. As recently as 2017, reports have urged change. It should therefore be a source of regret to Members across the House that it took the efforts of a grieving partner, via the courts, to spur the action that we see today.

Jakki Smith, an NHS worker, and John Bulloch, her prison governor partner, were in a relationship for 16 years before tragedy struck. After a fairly straightforward operation in 2011, doctors failed to register the serious infection to which John lost his life. Had they been spouses or civil partners, Jakki would have received a fixed sum of £12,980. Instead, she received nothing.

The simple but brutal unfairness of this policy is best explained by Jakki Smith herself, in an interview she gave to *The Guardian* three years ago. She said:

“If you are living together the government classes you as a couple for the purpose of payments like council tax and jobseeker’s allowance, so why not when it comes to this?”

She took this argument to the High Court and lost, despite Mr Justice Edis calling for a change to the law in his ruling. A year later, in 2017, the Court of Appeal found in her favour. The Court considered that, as Parliament treated cohabitantes of two or more years as being in a stable and long-term relationship comparable to that of spouses and civil partners for the purposes of the dependency damages, there was no justification for treating cohabiting couples differently for the purpose of bereavement damages.

Parliament owes a debt of gratitude to Jakki Smith, for without her tenacity it is fair to assume that the changes to the law would not be happening today. The fact that she persevered to the extent that she did, in the full knowledge that a ruling in her favour would not deliver any financial benefit but instead save future generations of grieving partners the same injustice she endured, is a testament to her. It is also a poignant legacy to her partner John.

The Opposition recognise that the method of updating the law presented to the House today has undergone scrutiny by the Joint Committee on Human Rights. It concluded that the remedial order before us today adequately addresses the judgment of the Court of Appeal. It does so by extending the bereavement damages scheme to cohabiting couples who had been living together for at least two years prior to death. This thereby removes the unlawful discrimination in section 1A of the Fatal Accidents Act 1976, identified by the Court of Appeal.

We agree with the Joint Committee’s conclusion and therefore support this remedial action. However, we also support the Committee’s call for a wider review of bereavement damages. The language used to describe cohabiting couples still intimates married or civil partnered couples. The Joint Committee suggested an alternative way of describing these relationships—namely, as

“two people living as partners in an enduring relationship”.

Why did the Government decide against that description, which better reflects cohabitantes and honours the status they have in a valued partnership, on its own terms?

The Committee highlighted concerns that the death of a partner of more than two years who was still married leads to the splitting of compensation. Even despite the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill, currently going through Parliament, some divorces take a very long time to complete. This could lead to unfairness and compound the grief of a surviving partner. Can the Minister reassure the House that this was given due consideration?

Section 1A of the Fatal Accidents Act still refers to children of cohabitantes as “illegitimate”. Government should use every opportunity to remove such stigmatising language from statute as they update legislation. Why was this straightforward recommendation not acted on? Other recommendations were made on the impact that the death of a cohabiting partner has not just on the remaining partner but on the broader family, too.

Bereavement and grief are profound moments that impact on us all, yet we discuss and debate this too little. Taken in isolation, this remedial order is necessary,

but sadly it is also a missed opportunity for a more comprehensive assessment of the bereavement damages scheme and broader issues relating to bereavement in the 21st century. I hope we can address that at a different time.

8.54 pm

Chris Philp: I should have started my remarks earlier by welcoming the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) to his place on the Front Bench. This is well deserved and long overdue, and I look forward to having many exchanges like this in the months, and I hope, for both of us, years ahead. I welcome his support for this remedial order, and I add my thanks to Jakki Smith for her tenacity and bravery in bringing forward the court case as she did. I am sure that the whole House is grateful to her for the courage that she showed, and I concur with the hon. Gentleman’s remarks a little earlier.

The hon. Gentleman made one or two points on the remedial order, including on the description of cohabiting partners. The language has been kept as it is for reasons of consistency with section 1. We thought it would be potentially confusing and inconsistent if we adopted different definitions in section 1(a) as compared with section 1. There is a more general point that touches on that issue and on others that he raised in his remarks, relating, for example, to the stigmatising language that he mentioned. The remedial orders are strictly designed to remedy the deficiency. We did not want to stray more widely beyond that, but as he said, opportunities will arise no doubt to debate these important issues about bereavement and loss. Those are topics on which the whole House will often agree. I commend this order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I could suspend the House, but I really do not think it is necessary if Members promise me that they will swiftly exit without stopping near any other Members. Let us proceed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CIVIL AVIATION)

That the draft Air Traffic Management (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 3 March, be approved.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

PUBLIC HEALTH

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 500), dated 12 May 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 13 May, be approved.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, (1) at the sitting on Tuesday 16 June, notwithstanding paragraph (2)(c) of Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business), business in the name of the Leader of the Opposition may be entered upon at any hour and may be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours; proceedings shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply; and (2) at the sitting on Thursday 18 June, the business determined by the Backbench Business Committee may continue until 5.00pm or for one and a half hours after its commencement, whichever is the later, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

PROCEDURE COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Kate Hollern and Alex Norris be discharged from the Procedure Committee and Ms Angela Eagle and Mr Kevan Jones be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

SCOTTISH AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That David Duguid be discharged from the Scottish Affairs Committee and Douglas Ross be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

8.58 pm

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) for moving the motion on behalf of the Committee, of which I am a member, but I cannot allow this moment to pass without making a few comments. I emphasise that it will be just a few comments. Back in March, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) rose in this Chamber to speak on the appointment of the full membership of the Scottish Affairs Committee. He raised a number of important points regarding the outcome of the December election in Scotland and the fact that the membership of the Scottish Affairs Committee was in no way reflective of that. That situation continues. I had certainly hoped that when we saw a change of membership coming forward at this time, there might have been an opportunity to rectify that.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Just to clarify, is my hon. Friend telling the House that, despite the fact that the Tories lost half their seats in Scotland at the general election, they now control and indeed dominate the Scottish Affairs Committee—the Committee that deals with an electorate that has rejected them?

Owen Thompson: That is most certainly one way that my hon. Friend could put it. It will be a shock to her that I agree. I emphasise that this is absolutely nothing about the individual Member being nominated for the Committee. [*Interruption.*] I give way to the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie).

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I was not asking whether the hon. Gentleman would give way, but I would like to put on the record that nobody who sits under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) could ever claim, no matter what party they come from, to try to dominate the debate. I think the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) would agree with me on that point.

Owen Thompson: I absolutely agree with that, and I certainly am delighted to see the Committee under the excellent stewardship of my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). However, I want it recorded that my colleagues and I are disappointed that the opportunity has been missed for a change to the Committee's membership to better reflect the outcome of the election in Scotland. I hope that, moving forward, the Government will consider that.

The Committee does much important work for Scotland. It is critical that it reflects the views of Scotland and is able to hear the views of Scotland. On that basis, another SNP Member on the Committee would certainly be a far fairer outcome. I emphasise again that this is absolutely nothing to do with the individual being nominated to the Committee; it is about the make-up of the Committee itself, which needs to be rectified.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I take it that the hon. Gentleman is not actually objecting or calling for a Division.

Owen Thompson indicated dissent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: But he has used the opportunity to make his point. I am grateful to him for clarifying that.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

Ordered,

That Anna McMorrin be discharged from the Welsh Affairs Committee and Ruth Jones be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITION

Extension to maternity and paternity leave due to COVID-19

9.2 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Covid-19 has left new parents feeling isolated without the wider network of support that could ordinarily be expected. As maternity leave ends and the prospect of returning to work approaches, many new parents have found themselves unable to visit or decide upon suitable nursery placements. That, added to the loss of sharing the momentous experience of an addition to their family with other relatives, not least grandparents, has been a real anxiety for new parents.

Most new parents are simply not in a position to take unpaid leave to salvage some of the missed early life experiences their babies have missed due to the global health pandemic. That matters because early life experiences can potentially have a significant impact on a child's later development, as can parental anxiety. This is a matter about which many of my constituents are concerned, so I rise to present this petition on an extension to maternity and paternity leave due to covid-19.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that pregnancy and giving birth during a global pandemic and national lockdown is extremely stressful for new and expectant parents; notes that the UK Government has categorised pregnant woman as "extremely vulnerable" and advised them to observe particularly stringent measures to protect themselves and

their unborn babies; further notes that new research is actively being undertaken regarding raised levels of mental health problems for expectant and new mothers and fathers during the COVID-19 pandemic; notes that early experiences of a baby are critical for their future development and future outcomes, and that new parents need time to “socialise” with their babies and introduce them to nursery or other childcare provision; declares that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a hugely adverse effect on early life experiences for new babies in that it has deprived them of their parents’ opportunities to expose their babies to wider developmental experiences outside the home, including experience with wider family such as grandparents; and further notes that the Government has made specific arrangements to protect workers with its Job Retention Scheme but has not made additional arrangements to offer further support to workers on maternity and paternity leave during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the UK Government to immediately institute extended maternity and paternity leave for new and expectant parents.

And the petitioners remain etc.

[P002575]

Caravan Industry: Hull and East Riding

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Michael Tomlinson.*)

9.4 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): As many Members will know, Hull is the capital of caravan manufacturing in the UK, and the Hull MPs have a strong tradition of standing up for the sector. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) was instrumental in protecting the industry after the global financial crash in 2008. She was joined by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) in the fight against the caravan tax under the coalition Government. I take up the baton with my Hull colleagues today to ask the Government to act to protect this vital industry.

I first wrote to the Government about the challenges facing the caravan industry in a letter addressed to the Prime Minister on 20 May, jointly with my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull North and for Kingston upon Hull East. In it, we asked that caravan dealerships be opened at the same time as car dealerships and that, in line with the then current guidance for estate agents and house viewings, caravan parks should also be allowed to open for sales and meetings. I am happy to say that those asks were met by the Government, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for heeding the calls from the industry and acting upon them.

Like other businesses across the country, caravan manufacturers have benefited from the Government’s economic support measures, including the job retention scheme and the business interruption loan scheme. Unfortunately, all those measures have not been enough to alleviate sufficiently the pressure on the industry, and without further intervention, the future is stark. The position of caravan manufacturers sets them apart from others in the manufacturing sector, as they are entirely dependent on trade in the leisure and tourism sector.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. She is making a very good point. Does she agree that there is a need to consider the whole caravan industry supply chain, from the manufacturing that takes place in Hull and East Riding right through to coastal communities like my constituency? When you sneeze, we get a cold as well.

Emma Hardy: The hon. Member is quite right. Hull is the capital of caravan manufacturing in the UK, but that is not to say that it is not a vital industry in other areas of the country as well.

Because caravan manufacturers are not officially part of the leisure and tourism sector, they are not eligible for the extra Government support that leisure and tourism enjoy, so I am here to speak up for an industry which faces unique challenges and plays a pivotal role in the prosperity of a region that has no capacity to withstand its loss. The caravan industry is a great British manufacturing success story. The industry’s supply chain comprises caravan manufacturers and their suppliers, which feed into the UK retail network of caravan parks, dealerships and distributors. The industry contributes £9 billion a year to the UK economy and is a growing

[Emma Hardy]

exporter. Employment within the supply chain stands at 207,580, and I understand that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has the third largest caravan site in Northern Ireland in his constituency.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady has highlighted the importance of the caravan manufacturing industry, but it also depends on the people buying caravans and the caravan season. In Northern Ireland, we have announced that the caravan sector will reopen on 26 June. Would she love to see that happen for the caravan sector in England, so that the tourism sector can progress from that?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman has made his point well, but I must point out that this is a very narrow debate, and we will stick to the rules. We are talking about the caravan industry in Hull and East Riding.

Emma Hardy: I am happy to support caravan manufacturing everywhere.

When lockdown began on 24 March, 3,361 caravan parks closed, along with 381 caravan dealerships. Restrictions on travel were introduced, and the public were ordered to stay at home. At a stroke, 2.4 million people were denied the use of their caravans, either static or towed. The result was that the entire caravan manufacturing industry came to an abrupt halt. Notwithstanding the requirements for effective social distancing and hygiene in workplaces, as no more orders were arriving on the companies' books, 208 caravan manufacturers and 647 suppliers closed, and 90% of the workforce is currently furloughed. The manufacturers have been working hard, ensuring that their factories can reopen safely for their workers, and respecting the relevant distancing and hygiene guidance. However, the caravan industry is a seasonal business, with the prime selling and order period occurring between March and September. This lockdown could not have come at a worse time; it came right at the start of a crucial period.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I am aware of the Deputy Speaker's insistence that we bring this debate back to the issue of Hull. One great thing about Hull is that it produces this great British manufacturing that trundles down the motorways to places such as North Cornwall. Will the hon. Lady join me in not only supporting this great British manufacturing industry, but calling for the safe reopening of tourism, so that many of the tours can then take place in the south-west?

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Of course, wherever we can prove and make the case for safe reopening, I urge the Government to consider that.

The longer the closures have continued, the greater the losses have become. As I speak here, in mid-June, with possibly the entire season in jeopardy, business failures and substantial redundancies in the winter look inevitable without further Government intervention. The tourer and motorhome industry has lost its income from seasonal sales, and the lack of orders taken will leave it unable to sustain itself over winter. The unsold stock in the supply chain will depress whatever demand

there is. The static caravan manufacturers face the prospect that whenever caravan parks and holiday parks reopen, there will be little demand for the production of new units over the winter for the yearly refreshing of rental units. Those businesses will be either unable or extremely reluctant to spend money, because of the loss of revenue, and will choose instead to make do with last year's model. That is borne out by independent forecasts for 2020, with sales predicted to be worse than those experienced in the global financial crisis of 2008. Compared with 2019, touring caravans face a market decline of 49%, holiday or static caravans face a decline of 56% and motorhomes face a decline of 55%. Thousands of employees are currently furloughed. They will be made redundant—current estimates are for about 40% of the entire workforce—or they will lose their jobs through company failure. The economic and social impact will be directly felt in areas already under tremendous economic pressure and with high levels of deprivation.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a powerful case for a very competitive sector, in which her constituents are competing with some of my constituents in Delves Lane in Consett who make the Elddis caravans. As she says, we are talking about a competitive sector, and the Government support is to prop up not a dying industry, but a thriving industry, in order to allow it to survive and succeed into the future.

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and he is right to say that this is a thriving industry—or at least it was until covid-19. With the right support, it can be a thriving industry once again. The Hull and East Riding caravan industry originally developed in the 1950s, taking advantage of the plentiful imports of timber through the ports of Hull and Goole. Leading companies in the area now include Swift, Willerby, ABI, Atlas, Delta, Coachman, Europa and Victory Leisure Homes. We are proud that they represent the largest caravan manufacturers in the UK and in 2019 produced 50% of the national total of touring caravans, 30% of the motorhomes and a staggering 90% of the holiday caravans. As I mentioned, we are the caravan building capital of the UK. In addition, the wider industry that has developed around this skill base produces park lodges, modular homes and relocatable buildings. These companies and other smaller manufacturers support many others as part of their supply chain. For example, a typical static caravan requires 2,500 parts and requires to be hand-finished by skilled craftspeople. In our area, 20,000 jobs rely directly or indirectly on the manufacture and sale of caravans and motorhomes.

As the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) mentioned, prior to this crisis these companies' order books were full, and at least one of the major manufacturers was planning to expand its facilities. In the medium to long term, it is anticipated that demand for static caravans and lodges, based on bulk orders emanating from lodge and caravan parks, as well as demand for touring caravan and camper vans, will be significant.

I understand that 2021 bookings for holiday parks are extremely high already. It is entirely plausible that in our altered circumstances they will see an increase in demand beyond that anticipated as people prefer to

holiday in the UK on sites where social distancing can be achieved. Static and mobile caravan sites are well placed to meet those requirements. The question will be, who will meet that demand? Will another once-proud British industry be allowed to go to the wall and see demand filled by imports, with jobs and money flowing out of the country? This is surely not what is meant by the Government's aspiration to be a global Britain.

As I said, caravan and motorhome manufacturers have benefited from the Government's economic support measures: most staff are furloughed and they are able to access the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme. However, the industry is entirely dependent on trade in the leisure and tourism sector, which was rightly identified by the Government at the start of their pandemic response as uniquely impacted by the requirements of the lockdown, with the new rules on social distancing and the initial restrictions on even small gatherings. The Government introduced extra support for the sector. However, the caravan industry has not been made eligible for this support, despite the fact that it is totally reliant on the sector. Because of the destruction of the 2020 selling and order season, even as the restrictions on the leisure sector are eased and caravan parks and campsites reopen, the caravan manufacturing industry will see very few new orders. As things stand, it can only hope to struggle on until winter before the crushing economic realities can no longer be avoided.

Some 95% of caravans are privately owned. They are self-contained, and the generous separation distance between units is actually far greater than the spacing of many new detached homes. As such, they offer perhaps the safest form of leisure and holiday accommodation. Now that the restrictions due to the covid-19 pandemic have been imposed on us, and are set to be with us for quite some time, the demand and opportunities for overseas travel are likely to be reduced, while the demand for safe domestic holidays will increase, without doubt. A caravan-based holiday could soon register towards the top of the list of holiday accommodation choices. I speak as someone who has been taking my children—my two daughters—on caravan holidays every year to various Haven sites up and down the country since they were born, so I can personally vouch for the enjoyment of a static caravan holiday.

But that demand will not be fully realised until the summer of 2021, at the very least, and whether it is met by British manufacturers or their overseas competitors will depend entirely on the actions that the Government take right now. On 5 June, the Labour leader of Hull City Council and the Conservative leader of East Riding of Yorkshire Council jointly wrote to the Chancellor asking for clarification on whether the caravan industry is eligible for the business rate relief funded by the Government. As the fortunes of the industry are tied directly to the holiday and leisure sector, it would seem to be wholly reasonable for the Government to extend to it the same facilities. The council leaders' position, and that of the industry, is that granting such access would allow the local authorities to offer significant support and be invaluable in preventing further job losses while retaining the capacity to respond immediately to any eventual upturn in the market. I ask the Minister to urge his colleagues at the Treasury to make this relief available.

Currently the furlough scheme is proposed to start to be reduced in August, concluding in October, but this coincides with what is normally the last part of the industry's sales season. As I said, the majority of that season has already been lost. Existing surplus stock is likely to cover any pick-up in demand before the winter, when sales and consumer orders are normally low, and there is no reason to believe that this winter would be any different. As already mentioned, at the same time holiday parks, which would normally be looking to replace old units and consider expansions, are probably going to make do because of a lack of funds and confidence. Therefore, while the rest of the economy might be expecting to show signs of recovery as activity and demand begin to grow, caravan manufacturers will remain in the doldrums, with little or no work available until the new cycle begins in spring 2021.

I therefore ask that consideration be given to a flexible, sector-focused approach to ending the furlough scheme that would allow its extension in the case of the caravan manufacturing industry so that companies are able to retain staff through an extended period of inactivity. The caravan manufacturing industry is the neck of the supply chain funnel and it is vital that the Government support it through autumn and winter until spring 2021. That would avoid job losses, safeguard capacity and enable it to respond quickly to improvements in market conditions when they arrive. May I ask that the Minister impress on his colleagues at the Treasury the exceptional circumstances of this industry, circumstances that set it at odds with what may be happening with the economy as a whole?

The people of Hull and East Riding, and no doubt the rest of the country, want to work. They do not want to sit at home. Far better than furlough would be orders. As a way of stimulating demand, I urge the Government to consider mechanisms such as allowing static caravan site owners to be able to accelerate capital write-offs or other value added tax measures. The French Government have moved to protect their own caravan manufacturing industry with a special loan scheme for their tourism and leisure sector, which specifically allows the purchase of holiday caravans with no capital payback for the first two years. I bring that to the Minister's attention not only because it is worthy of consideration, but to underline the fact that the Government cannot assume that foreign competition will be as badly affected as the UK industry currently stands to be. I should also note that France already has a flexible furlough scheme in place for the tourism and leisure industry. The National Caravan Council and its members have lobbied hard for the supply chain to be unlocked. It is now vital that the reopening of caravan parks begins as soon as is safe to do so. I urge the Government to give clarity to the sector, so it can start to make critical preparations.

Following the 2008 financial crash, three out of every 10 caravan manufacturers in Hull closed their doors. The workforce of the manufacturing sector and industry was reduced by 55%. That was a body blow to the city and the surrounding area. Thousands of families were affected and the effects can still be felt. Hull remains one of the most deprived local authority areas in the country on every metric. The last two years have seen the unemployment rate actually rise in Hull. It now faces a round of closures and redundancies that are set to eclipse even the disaster of 2008. If the Government's stated intention is truly to level up the country, Hull and

[Emma Hardy]

the areas that accompany it at the top of those lists must be the places where they begin the process. Those within the industry assure me that without further intervention from the Government the impact of covid-19 is likely to hit the industry twice as hard as 2008. I cannot bring myself to contemplate the devastation that that would bring. It simply cannot be allowed to happen.

I remind the Minister that before the pandemic enveloped us this was a healthy and growing industry. It can be again, so long as it is given the support it needs now. I urge him to consider its unique circumstances and its vital contribution to some of the most deprived areas in the UK. I once again ask him to consider the specific calls for support that I have made here today: the inclusion of the caravan sector in the business rates relief available to the leisure and tourism sector; a flexible sector-specific extension to the furlough scheme; and a package of measures designed to stimulate the leisure and tourism sector to purchase new and replacement stock, as it would under normal circumstances.

The Minister must engage with the industry and the National Caravan Council and take their case to the Treasury to avoid the destruction of thousands of jobs, and the families and communities those jobs support. The Government were elected with a promise to level up. It is now time to prove that that is more than just a slogan by supporting the Hull MPs' call to protect the caravan industry. The Government cannot once again be too slow to act. Along with the 207,580 people employed in the caravan supply sector, I look forward to the Minister's response.

9.23 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing this incredibly important debate. I want to reiterate some of the points she made.

We are incredibly proud of the caravan manufacturing industry in our neck of the woods. Those jobs are incredibly good jobs and they pay very well. In 2008-09, despite the previous Labour Government's interventions to mitigate the damage from the economic crash, we saw tens of thousands of job losses in our region. The reality is this: most of those jobs have not been replaced. We have had investment from Siemens, and a massive £350 million investment in offshore wind turbine manufacturing, which we are incredibly grateful for as well, but the reality is that once those jobs are lost, we often never see them replaced. The frank truth is that we simply cannot afford to lose these incredibly good, well-paid, skilled manufacturing jobs in our region. As my hon. Friend has said, 90% of all static caravans are manufactured in Hull and the East Riding, 50% of all tourer caravans are manufactured in our area, and 30% of all motor homes as well.

We have got not much of an ask for the Minister. We need support, and we are very grateful to the Government for the support and the interventions they have made already, but we need that flexibility in the job retention scheme to be extended for this unique and specific industry, and we need the Government to think carefully about the business rate relief grants as well.

We will get over this, with support from the Government. We only need to get into next year and then the industry will absolutely be booming once again. My wife mentioned to me earlier today that she does not intend going abroad on holiday for quite some time, and it is true that staycations are going to be the thing in the next year or two. So, Minister, I finish with a plea—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman must not say, "So, Minister"; the hon. Gentleman has to say, through the Chair, "Will the Minister". I am sorry to stop the hon. Gentleman in his tracks just as he was about to make his plea, but if I do not get this right from Members with experience in this Chamber, we will lose the rules whereby we keep order here, and it is very important that that should be done, especially for new Members to understand how things are done properly. I would be grateful if the hon. Gentleman would just address the Chair.

Karl Turner: Madam Deputy Speaker, you are absolutely right of course, and I take your advice on board, and apologise indeed.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I finish, as I was saying, on a plea to the Minister: if the Government support us now, that will be repaid tenfold in this manufacturing industry. Thank you very much indeed, Madam Deputy Speaker.

9.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Nadhim Zahawi): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing this evening's debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) on his passionate speech. A number of colleagues were ingenious in their interventions, certainly my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), because of Elddis in his constituency, but also the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friends the Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for North Cornwall (Scott Mann). There is also, however, one Member present who cannot speak as he is the Whip in charge, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), who has Regal in his constituency. As we can imagine, my constituency of Stratford-on-Avon has some wonderful caravan parks and caravan holidays, and I urge anyone looking for a staycation, which the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East rightly reminded us about, to visit Stratford, or at least have it on their schedule.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle for her work, but also those in the public, private, community and voluntary sectors, and partners across Hull and East Yorkshire, for all their outstanding work and support during this difficult time. Hull and East Yorkshire, along with north Lincolnshire on the Humber south bank, is one of the UK's most significant industrial and manufacturing clusters.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East rightly reminded us of the capabilities of Siemens Gamesa. Of course, there are Ørsted in the offshore wind sector, RB in health and Wren Kitchens in manufacturing,

together with a strong small and medium-sized business base in the region. That has enabled the area to make real strides in improving economic performance.

Since 2010, the employment rate in the Humber has increased by 4.7%. There is undoubtedly a bright and optimistic future for Hull and East Yorkshire and the wider Humber economy. The caravan manufacturing industry, with its long and proud history in Hull and east Yorkshire, can be an important part of that future. That is certainly how the Department sees it.

Thousands of people are employed directly in the caravan manufacturing industry and its associated supply chain, as we heard from the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle. Theirs are important, skilled jobs, which make a significant contribution to the local and national economy. There is no doubt in my mind that the medium to long-term prospects for the industry are strong. The British public have a long-standing love affair with their caravans, which transformed the holiday habits of generations of families following the post-war boom in the 1950s and up to the present day.

I believe that there are exciting new opportunities for the industry, with the prospect of more families holidaying in the UK. The industry has shown that it can diversify its products to meet the changing demands of a new generation that wants to have that wonderful caravan holiday. There are new, modern luxury caravans and mobile homes that can provide higher-quality, safe-distancing accommodation as we transition out of the current crisis. They can also provide flexible and environmentally friendly leisure experiences, tailored to different tastes and pockets for decades ahead.

The industry is also a major exporter, as we heard from the hon. Lady, and it is well placed to exploit new potential overseas markets. However, I recognise that it faces challenges in the immediate future. I am well aware that large parts of the caravan sector have been furloughed and, regrettably, some people have been forced into redundancies. For caravan workers and their families, along with many others throughout the country who may have been furloughed or made redundant, I recognise that that must be deeply unsettling and worrying. The hon. Lady made a powerful point about the interventions that we are making in the economy.

However, in 2008, the caravan industry in Hull and the East Riding of Yorkshire was severely impacted by the financial crisis, as the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East said. It bounced back. Backed by the Government's determination to do all we can to support the industry and its workers, it can bounce back again. There are early positive signs. Coachman Caravans in Hull recently reopened its factory following a temporary closure due to covid-19. It has followed the Government's guidelines to restart production while keeping its staff safe. It is not alone. East Yorkshire-based Victory Leisure Homes is investing in immersive visitor experiences as it looks to capitalise on the future staycation.

We are listening to the industry, too. The Chancellor's decision to take action on the rise in vehicle excise duty on new motor homes in the Budget demonstrated that the Government are determined to maintain a vibrant caravan and motor home industry in the UK. Members of Parliament, including the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle, should be congratulated on highlighting the impact the proposed increase would have had on the industry.

I would like briefly to set out the Government's business support package, which already supports the caravan industry and its workers. The Government are committed to doing all we can to support UK business through the current crisis. The Chancellor has announced an unprecedented package of support. To help firms continue to keep people on the payroll, the Government introduced the job retention scheme, more commonly referred to as the furlough scheme. Since it opened on 20 April, it has protected nearly 9 million workers and 1.1 million businesses, including in the caravan industry, through the crisis. On 12 May, the Chancellor announced that the scheme will continue until the end of October. It will continue in its current form until the end of July, and then changes to allow more flexibility, which many colleagues appreciate, to come in from the start of August. That flexibility will help to support furloughed workers as they return to work.

Emma Hardy: As I said in my speech, I am aware of and grateful for the furlough scheme that the Government introduced, but I would really like to know from the Minister whether he will go to the Treasury and ask for the flexible furlough scheme that I mentioned in my speech, with the ability to continue to furlough workers right through until spring 2021 so that the industry can be ready to take off again with the new summer orders.

Nadhim Zahawi: The Chancellor has already announced the plans for the furlough scheme to come to an end in October, but we have designed all our interventions to wrap our arms around the economy and jobs. As we come out of this crisis, the interventions have to be reviewed, which is why the Chancellor reviewed the furlough scheme and why we review the other schemes—whether the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme, the coronavirus large business interruption loan scheme or the bounce-back loans scheme—to make sure that the recovery is as robust and dynamic as we can make it.

The Government have also provided extensive financial support to small and medium-sized enterprises through the bounce-back loans scheme that I just mentioned. More than 830,000 loans worth £35 billion have gone out of the door and into the bank accounts of the smallest businesses in our country. We have provided significant grant support to small businesses through the small business grant fund and the retail, hospitality and leisure grant fund. Since the launch of those grant schemes, more than £10 billion has been paid out to businesses throughout the country, and there is more to come. Small businesses across Hull and East Riding have to date benefited from nearly £180 million of grant investment.

On flexible furloughing, I am aware that the hon. Lady, together with her fellow Hull MPs, has written to the Chancellor, as she rightly highlighted in her speech. She is rightly pushing for a sector-focused approach to the job retention scheme; she will be aware that, as I have mentioned already, the Chancellor has extended the furlough scheme until the end of October and it is being made more flexible. From 1 July, employers will be able to bring back to work employees who have previously been furloughed for an amount of time and on any shift pattern that they like, who will still be able to claim the JRS grant for their normal hours not

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

worked. After July, we will introduce more flexibility to the furlough scheme so that we move out of it in a measured and orderly way to protect people's incomes.

Emma Hardy: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being very generous—as I remember he was on the Education Committee. I just want him to fully recognise the specifics of the caravan industry. The point at which the furlough scheme is going to end is the point when the caravan manufacturing industry normally goes into a slower period, because it is a seasonally based manufacturing industry. The industry has more orders and does more business through the summer months; the winter months have always been quieter and slower. The reason why we are asking for sector-specific support is that, as things currently stand, the furlough scheme will end just as the caravan manufacturing industry enters its usual period of low orders and less production. That is why it needs to be sector-specific and why the caravan industry needs to be looked at separately from other industries: it is seasonally based.

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Lady repeats powerfully the point that she made in her excellent speech, but the furlough scheme is only one of the interventions that we are making across the economy. As I said, we review all our interventions because, as she will know, the profile of interventions is very different when we are asking people to stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives, and therefore businesses are closing and furloughing people. The profile of interventions as we come out will be different, which is why we have reviewed them all and continue to do so, and why we continue to stay close to the industry as well. I reassure her of that.

On dealerships, which the hon. Lady mentioned in her speech, the House will know that we reopened them on 1 June to support them to get back on their feet. While residential caravan parks have remained open throughout the lockdown period, holiday parks have been closed in line with the wider restrictions on overnight stays for leisure purposes. Our ambition is to reopen caravan parks in step 3 of the Government's recovery strategy. All decisions on reopening will, of course, be based on the latest scientific evidence and public health assessment. The Government have engaged very closely with the holiday and home parks sector to prepare guidance, as we have done with all other sectors. It was great to see non-essential retail open today, with so many wonderful stores in Stratford-on-Avon and around the country having such wonderful vibrant window displays and, of course, applying all the safe working practices. Hopefully, this will allow the sector to reopen safely and as quickly as possible.

On business rates relief, an important point, the Government have provided enhanced support to the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors through the rate relief system given that covid had such a direct and acute impact on them. It is worth reminding colleagues that it is up to the local authority to determine eligibility for relief, having regard to guidance issued by the Government. Local authorities have the power, therefore, to offer business rates discounts beyond the pre-defined reliefs

at their discretion. I have spoken to, I think, 69 chief executives of local authorities. Many of my colleagues in the Department have been making phone calls to talk directly to them about the discretionary funds available to them. Other businesses affected by covid-19 that are not eligible for business rate relief, such as caravan and leisure vehicle manufacturers, will benefit from the wider business and employment support packages that I have set out.

Karl Turner: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. I do not expect an answer on the two chief asks immediately, because the Minister will, of course, have to make representations to the Treasury. None the less, will he be prepared to meet the National Caravan Council and perhaps some of the manufacturers to discuss those specific asks?

Nadhim Zahawi: I would be delighted to meet them. I am happy to arrange it as soon as possible. After the debate, I will ask my officials to reach out to the hon. Gentleman to make sure that we get that done. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle is equally welcome to join the meeting, as are all colleagues here.

The Government have introduced the business rates holiday for businesses in the retail and leisure sector, irrespective of rateable value, which means that all eligible businesses will pay no business rates for 12 months. That means that properties used by caravan parks and sites are eligible for that relief. This support is worth almost £10 billion to business, and an estimated 350,000 businesses have benefited from it. For the billing authority of Hull and East Riding, this support is worth £82 million to business, and about 3,500 businesses have benefited. I must pay tribute to the leadership of the local authority for getting that money out of the door. They have done a phenomenal job, and I thank all those in the authority for it.

The hon. Lady mentioned a range of other stimuli, and we can look at what is happening in other parts of the world, including perhaps a caravan scrappage scheme, the accelerated capital write-down and the value added tax measures that she mentioned. Those are all interesting proposals, but the hon. Lady will understand that I cannot give any policy commitments now, or indeed speculate on or prejudge any further Budget announcement by the Chancellor. She will, I am sure, agree that that is way above my pay grade.

As we come through the current crisis, as we will, I have no doubt that the caravan industry in Hull and East Yorkshire, and the rest of the United Kingdom, can look to a bright future. It will be important that the sector innovates and responds to customers' high standards and aspirations, as it has done in the past. It will do so again to fully exploit that market potential. I have no doubt that the industry will rise to that challenge.

Finally, I thank the hon. Lady and other colleagues for engaging in this very important debate on a very important sector.

Question put and agreed to.

9.44 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 15 June 2020

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Coronavirus Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): I am tabling this statement for the benefit of hon. and right hon. Members to bring to their attention the details of changes we have made to the coronavirus large business interruption loan scheme (CLBILS).

CLBILS is facilitated by the Government-owned British Business Bank and delivered through its delivery partners. Lenders have until now offered loans from £30,000 up to £50 million to support viable businesses with a turnover of £45 million and above that are affected by the coronavirus outbreak. It is designed to ensure businesses that have been adversely impacted by the coronavirus outbreak can access the finance they need, even if they are too large to access CLBILS but unable to access the Bank of England's covid corporate financing facility. There is no limit on the number and aggregate value of loans that can be made under the scheme.

Despite this, some businesses have not been able to address cashflow issues due to caps on maximum loan sizes permissible under the scheme. Businesses with turnover up to £250 million have been unable to borrow more than £25 million, and no business, regardless of turnover, has been permitted to borrow more than £50 million. On 26 May, we therefore made the following changes to the scheme:

an increase in the maximum loan size available under CLBILS: loans are now available from £50,000 to £200 million;

the replacement of the £25 million loan size cap for firms with a turnover of up to £250 million with a new cap on maximum loan size at 25% of turnover for all borrowers through CLBILS; and

tighter restrictions on company activities for the duration of the facility for loans above £50 million: borrowers cannot make any dividend payments other than those that have already been declared, may not make any share buybacks on dividend payments, may not pay any cash bonuses, or award any pay rises to senior management (including the board) except where they were declared before the CLBILS loan was taken out, are in keeping with similar payments made in the preceding 12 months, and do not have a material negative impact on the borrower's ability to repay the loan.

for loans up to £50 million, the existing restrictions on dividends continue to apply: only dividends declared before the CLBILS loan was taken out, are in keeping with those made in the previous 12 months, and which would not have a material negative impact on the ability to repay the loan are permitted

Further detailed technical changes to the scheme, including the approach to restructuring events and new provisions on seniority of CLBILS facilities, are detailed on the British Business Bank's website.

There remains no limit on the number or aggregate value of loans issued under CLBILS. The Government remain subject to a statutory contingent liability arising from CLBILS, and I will be laying a revised departmental minute today containing a description of the liability undertaken.

[HCWS292]

CABINET OFFICE

Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee: Second Meeting

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): The second meeting of the withdrawal agreement Joint Committee took place by video conference on 12 June 2020. It was co-chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), and Vice President of the European Commission, Maroš Šefčovič.

The Committee was updated on progress of the specialised committees and withdrawal agreement implementation. The Committee adopted one decision on correcting errors and omissions in the withdrawal agreement relating to financial provisions and citizens' rights.

The UK emphasised its decision not to extend the transition period.

The UK also announced that it would introduce new border controls on imports coming into Great Britain from the EU in three stages up until 1 July 2021. The UK stated that it was taking a flexible and pragmatic approach that will give industry extra time to be ready for the new procedures, recognising the impact of covid-19 on businesses' ability to prepare.

[HCWS291]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Prüm: Data Sharing

The Minister for Security (James Brokenshire): Following a review of the policy of limiting data sharing via Prüm to the DNA profiles of convicted criminals and excluding data which relates to those suspected but not convicted of a crime, it is the Government's intention to begin exchanging suspects' data held in England and Wales and Northern Ireland with connected EU member states through Prüm. Consultation will continue with the Scottish Government, where policing matters are devolved, in respect of the implications for the implementation of the policy in Scotland.

EU Council implementing decision 2019/968 required the UK to "review its policy on the exchange of suspects' profiles" and set a deadline of the 15 June 2020 to notify the Council of that outcome. The implementing decision makes clear the Council should "re-evaluate the situation with a view to the continuation or termination of DNA Prüm automated exchange" should the notification not be made. In order to meet that deadline, Sir Tim Barrow will shortly be instructed to notify the European institutions that it is the Government's intention to begin exchanging suspects' data held in England and Wales and Northern Ireland with connected EU member states through Prüm and that consultation will continue with the Scottish Government.

The UK has been exchanging DNA data via Prüm since July 2019. During that period searches of historic data held on the UK's national DNA database have been made against the data held by the nine EU countries to whom we have connected. Around 12,000 initial hits

have been identified relating to UK investigations. EU member states have received approximately 41,000 initial hits from matching their data with that held by the UK. These hits have already delivered public protection benefits. For example, an unidentified crime stain from a sexual assault in Glasgow in 2012 was identified as a subject convicted for theft offences in Austria and that investigation is now being progressed in way that would not have been possible were it not for the Prüm exchange.

Sharing suspects' data would mean that more UK data stores would be checked across the EU, supplementing intelligence for investigations, including in relation to serious organised crime, terrorism and cross-border crime. Law enforcement agencies have identified that there are risks and missed opportunities associated with not sharing suspects' data. For example, the inclusion of UK data taken from a person suspected of rape—where the conviction rates are disappointingly low—could allow a match to be made with data held in the EU where that person may have been previously suspected or convicted of a sexual offence.

This exchange involves a two-step process. Step one is to send anonymised biometric data to the connected partner for it to be searched against their database, providing a “hit/no hit” result. Where there is a match against the anonymised data, step two applies during which the relevant demographic data is shared, i.e. name, and date of birth. A series of stringent checks are carried out by UK law enforcement agencies before any demographic or identifying data is provided and only if the member state submits a separate request for this data.

The Government have considered the impact of sharing suspects' data as it concerns individual freedoms. However, I am reassured by protections applicable to England and Wales which carefully govern the retention of biometric data, and which confer protections to data from individuals who have not been convicted. The Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) as amended by the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 creates a strict retention regime which sets out that data must be deleted within a set period, depending on the circumstances under which it was collected. This regime considers factors such as the

age of the individual at the time of the offence, the seriousness of the offence, and ensures that suspects' data constitutes only around 2% of the profiles in the DNA and fingerprint databases at any one time.

In addition, a number of safeguards introduced when Parliament voted in favour of joining Prüm in 2015 have been in place since we started exchanging DNA data. They include: the introduction of an independent oversight board; the requirement that low-quality matches be excluded from Prüm searching; the introduction of an additional step where a “hit” involves data which relates to a minor; and the exclusion of data held for only a short period in relation to vulnerable persons. These all work together to protect against innocent UK citizens being caught up inappropriately in overseas criminal investigations. The Government consider these safeguards to be working well. Ensuring continued adherence to the UK's scientific standards means that there is a one in a billion chance that a UK DNA sample would be falsely matched with an overseas criminal investigation. Moreover, the two-step Prüm process means that a law enforcement officer in the UK checks the data against set criteria before providing any identifying data to the requesting state. These checks ensure that the information is lawfully retained and that providing the information would not endanger any UK investigation.

In considering whether to include suspects' data, the Government have carefully balanced the potential public protection benefits against concerns that a UK citizen could be caught up inappropriately in criminal investigations in EU member states and have considered the effectiveness of the safeguards put in place to prevent such instances occurring. In light of the benefits reaped from exchanging DNA since July 2019 and the way in which the safeguards have been applied, the Government have concluded that the important public safety benefits in exchanging suspects' data outweigh the risks associating with sharing it.

As we made clear in the “UK Approach” published on 27 February, the Government are discussing a possible agreement on law enforcement with the EU, which could include arrangements providing similar capabilities to those currently delivered through the Prüm system.

[HCWS290]

Ministerial Correction

Monday 15 June 2020

EDUCATION

Education Settings: Wider Opening

The following is an extract from the statement made by the Secretary of State for Education on 9 June 2020.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con) [V]: Many children commute into the Hendon constituency to access the high-quality education provided by the London Borough of Barnet. As those children travel by public transport, they will be required to wear masks and take other precautions. Will the Secretary of State outline what precautions he believes there should be for children who use school transport provided by the local authority? Will they be required to take the same precautions as others by wearing masks on their journeys? When they get to school, will they simply disregard those masks?

Gavin Williamson: People will be required to follow the same regulations on both home-to-school transport and general public transport. The approach we have taken to bringing schools back has had safety at its very heart, making sure that classes are in small bubbles to ensure that we reduce the chances of transmission. We believe that such a cautious, phased approach is the right one.

[Official Report, 9 June 2020, Vol. 677, c. 184.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord).

The correct response should have been:

Gavin Williamson: Those travelling on home-to-school transport are not required to wear a face covering, but can do so if they wish. The approach we have taken to bringing schools back has had safety at its very heart, making sure that classes are in small bubbles to ensure that we reduce the chances of transmission. We believe that such a cautious, phased approach is the right one.

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