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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 16 June 2020

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Today marks the fourth anniversary of the death of our friend and colleague Jo Cox, who was murdered on her way to meet constituents in her Batley and Spen constituency. She was doing what so many of us do as constituency MPs, which made her death all the more shocking. May I express on behalf of the whole House our sympathy with her family, friends and colleagues on this sad anniversary? We will never forget Jo or her legacy. We remember her wise words: we have far more in common than that which divides us.

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

The Secretary of State was asked—
Insolvency

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses facing insolvency. [903254]

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses facing insolvency. [903281]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): Mr Speaker, may I join you in your words about our former colleague, Jo Cox?

We have introduced the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill to help companies maximise their chances of survival. The Bill introduces new corporate restructuring tools and temporarily suspends part of insolvency law to help businesses keep trading.

Chris Clarkson: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. I was proud to make my maiden speech on Second Reading of that very important Bill, which will provide vital safeguards during the coronavirus pandemic. Can he tell me what benefits it will have for businesses, not just in my constituency of Heywood and Middleton and across the north-west but in the wider country?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is proving to be a real champion for businesses in his constituency, and he raises an incredibly important point. The impact assessment of the Bill's measures suggests that the three permanent

changes to the UK insolvency framework will result in net benefits to business of over £1.9 billion in today's prices, which is a much needed boost for businesses at this uncertain time.

Aaron Bell: I welcome the Secretary of State back to the Dispatch Box after his recent illness. Businesses in Newcastle-under-Lyme and across the country face the risk of insolvency, especially those with business models that are dependent on socialising. In addition to what he has set out, which I welcome, can he tell us what Companies House proposes to do to support businesses at threat of insolvency?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and this is part of the Bill. While Companies House has extended the period for filing accounts, we will give businesses the maximum period available under the powers in the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill for filing their accounts, confirmation statements and event-driven updates. At a time when many companies are focused on surviving, that will be very welcome respite.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Mr Speaker, may I echo your sentiments on the tragic loss of Jo Cox?

Businesses facing insolvency will be under further pressure with the premature end to the furlough and self-employed schemes, and loan schemes are of little help, because they simply add to a pile of debt. Does the Secretary of State agree that the sectors hit hardest by covid-19 need long-term support to survive and rebuild, which means extending the furlough scheme and support loans being written off or converted to equity?

Alok Sharma: The level of support we have provided across the economy is incredibly favourable by any international comparison. The furlough scheme will be in place for a full eight months. That is precisely the support that we have been very keen to give to businesses.

Drew Hendry: Tourism is worth £10.5 billion to the Scottish economy, and before the pandemic it provided 8% of jobs. While some businesses will soon be able to reopen outside areas, vital public health rules and consumer sentiment will mean that most activity is subdued. Will the Secretary of State follow the Scottish Government by setting up a tourism taskforce and use his Government's reserve powers to cut VAT for tourism and other sectors, to help firms that are at risk of insolvency?

Alok Sharma: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman will know, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is working with the tourism sector, and there is regular dialogue with it. I recognise the concerns that he has raised about this sector, which is closed, but that is why we have provided particular support through a rates holiday for hospitality businesses.

Hydrogen Technology

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): What steps he is taking to develop hydrogen technology in the UK. [903255]

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Kwasi Kwarteng): We are investing up to £121 million between 2015 and 2021 in hydrogen innovation, supporting the application of new low-carbon hydrogen technologies across the value chain. I have had valuable discussions with businesses on the importance of scaling up hydrogen supply, including with Wrightbus, in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Ian Paisley: I echo the sentiments expressed about our late colleague, Jo Cox.

The Minister will be aware that Germany announced in the last number of weeks that it is investing £5 billion in hydrogen technology. It joins the long list of countries investing billions of pounds, which includes Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia, as well as the EU. The £121 million to which he referred is very welcome, but it will never make us the leader of the pack in this industry. Let us move on from trials, Minister. Let us move on to real investment in this technology and become the world leader that Britain and the United Kingdom can be in this wonderful technology, which will create jobs and provide more employment across the whole UK.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for that technology. The countries that he describes have announced commitments to spending the money; they have not spent the money yet. We will be following and pursuing that technology very rigorously, with full Government backing, in due course.

Climate Change

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle climate change. [903256]

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Kwasi Kwarteng): Since 1990 we have grown the economy by 75% while cutting emissions by 43%, and in June 2019, we became the first major economy to legislate for a net zero carbon emissions target.

We are hosting the COP26 climate negotiations next year. Along with our G7 presidency, we are determined to use our international leadership to drive global climate ambition.

Virginia Crosbie: What assessment has my right hon. Friend's Department made of the potentially significant role that nuclear power can play, in the hydrogen production from both large and small reactors? Does he agree that Wylfa Newydd, in my constituency of Ynys Môn, is the jewel in the crown of new nuclear sites?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. New nuclear obviously has an important part to play in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. We are investing in new nuclear. On Wylfa, I am afraid, I cannot comment on the merits of the site, given that the Secretary of State is currently considering a development consent application. That said, there are a number of potentially good sites around the entire United Kingdom.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The COP26 summit, now rescheduled for November 2021, will be a critical moment in a fight against runaway global heating. We all have a stake in ensuring that it is a

success. Building momentum for that summit and establishing our credibility as its host is dependent on demonstrable leadership at home. In that regard, does the Minister agree that there is a strong case for publishing our nationally determined contribution before the end of 2020, and an arguable case for basing that NDC on a significantly enhanced 2030 target that puts us on the path to achieving net zero?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is, of course, president of the COP26. He is committed to publishing very rigorous and ambitious targets for ourselves. As I responded to my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie), we are second to none in our commitment—our legislation—in terms of dealing with climate change. We have legislation that is very clear and sets the path.

Post Office Network

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What steps he is taking to support the sustainability of the post office network. [903257]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): The Government recognise the critical role that post offices play in communities across the UK. This is why the Government have committed to safeguard the post office network by investing over £2 billion between 2010 and 2018, and a further £370 million from April 2018 to March 2021. I regularly meet with the Post Office to find innovative steps to secure network sustainability and the continuity of services across the UK.

Marion Fellows [V]: I thank the Minister for his answer, but during the covid-19 pandemic, when sub-postmasters have proved just how essential they are to our communities, many are handing in their keys as they struggle to make a living, leaving communities without vital services. Pre-covid Post Office figures show that Scotland is still being hardest-hit by the postmaster crisis, with the highest number of closed branches in the UK, increasing by 17% since last year. Notwithstanding what the Minister has just said, in the 2020 spending review, will Ministers agree to maintain or increase the Government subsidy to post offices, to ensure that communities can access a post office branch, or will they continue putting the Post Office on a pathway to privatisation?

Paul Scully: The Post Office is obviously made up of small businesses, which are subject to the same problems as any, and Scotland, with its rural nature, has been affected. That is why we look to temporary post offices and outreach. But clearly, going forward, the Government will reflect the value of postmasters and the post office network in all their deliberations.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Last week, the House united in calling for a judge-led inquiry into the Post Office Horizon scandal—hundreds of lives ruined and innocent people imprisoned by a trusted public institution—except the Minister, who proposes a forward-looking independent review, which will not mention managerial or ministerial accountability, Fujitsu's responsibility or the key question of compensation.

Now the Justice For Subpostmasters Alliance is refusing to co-operate, saying it does not believe that the review will get to the bottom of one of the greatest miscarriages of justice of our times. After all that those people have endured, will the Minister not listen to them and commit to a judge-led inquiry?

Paul Scully: The hon. Lady is mistaken if she believes that the review does not look at the managerial responsibility of all the people responsible for what has happened, and we need to listen to the postmasters' rebuke. Indeed, yesterday I discussed the matter in a meeting with chief executive Nick Read and Calum Greenhow, chief exec of the National Federation of Subpostmasters. Nick Read committed fully to the review, leaving no stone unturned, which is why I hope that with everyone coming together I can encourage postmasters to engage in the review so that we can get the answers they and the hon. Lady are looking for, to secure the redress and the answers that they need.

Covid-19: Support for Businesses

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses during the covid-19 outbreak. [903258]

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What steps he is taking to support the business economy during the covid-19 outbreak. [903260]

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses during the covid-19 outbreak. [903264]

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What steps he is taking to support the business economy during the covid-19 outbreak. [903265]

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses during the covid-19 outbreak. [903268]

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses during the covid-19 outbreak. [903271]

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support businesses during the covid-19 outbreak. [903275]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): The Government have introduced an unprecedented package of support. This includes grants for small businesses, a rates holiday for businesses operating in the retail, leisure and hospitality sector, a range of loan schemes covering all sides of businesses, the furlough scheme, the self-employment scheme, and a range of tax deferral schemes, all designed to help businesses through this very challenging time.

Chris Green: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. Brian and Karen Tinniswood run the Provenance restaurant in Westhoughton, but they have a deep concern about social distancing, which makes it impossible to

reopen their restaurant. What consideration has my right hon. Friend given to reducing social distancing from 6 feet to 3 feet, then getting rid of it altogether?

Alok Sharma: The issue that my hon. Friend raises is raised with me regularly by businesses, and I completely understand the economic rationale that his constituents have outlined to him. As he will know, a review is taking place, and we will wait to see its results.

Douglas Chapman [V]: The OECD predicts that the UK recession will be the worst in the developed world. The Federation of Small Businesses in Scotland has issued a similarly depressing assessment. In terms of supporting Scottish business, what have been the key asks of the Department from the Secretary of State for Scotland?

Alok Sharma: I have detailed discussions with all Cabinet and ministerial colleagues. I recognise the challenge ahead of us—there is no doubt about that—but we have provided a significant amount of support for the UK economy, and if that had not been put in place a range of independent commentators have made it clear that we would be in a far worse position.

Dr Wallis: The automotive sector is important to my constituency of Bridgend, as it is to the whole UK economy. Will my right hon. Friend outline what the Government are doing to help businesses in that sector recover from the impact of covid-19?

Alok Sharma: I have set out the full range of support available to all sectors across the economy, and the automotive sector can take full advantage of that. I would point out that the job retention scheme has been widely utilised by the automotive sector, with a recent survey by the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders showing that the scheme has been accessed for over 60% of full-time workers in the auto sector.

Alison Thewliss: A number of businesses in my Glasgow Central constituency find themselves blocked from claiming under the job retention scheme as a result of the deficiencies of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs uploading real-time information before the outbreak. Will the Secretary of State take up that matter with HMRC and the Treasury, ask for discretion, and make sure that no business that would otherwise be eligible has to lay off valued staff or, worse, go bust, as businesses in my constituency cannot wait any longer?

Alok Sharma: We want to support businesses, and I have set out a range of measures that we have put in place. The hon. Lady referred to a matter that ultimately is for HMRC and Her Majesty's Treasury, but I am happy to have a discussion with her after questions.

Tom Randall: A few weeks ago, I was pleased to visit Arnold market in my constituency and it was great to see that it was operating very well under the new guidelines. As the wider high street is now beginning to reopen, can my right hon. Friend tell me what support his Department will be giving to shops as they reopen?

Alok Sharma: I thank my hon. Friend for doing his bit to support businesses in his constituency. In coming up with the workplace guidance, which has allowed

businesses to open safely, we have worked closely with businesses, business representative organisations and trade unions. I have already outlined the support that we have provided for the sector, but what we all need to do is to get out there to support businesses that are now opening. We owe that to them and to the economy to get it going again.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What is available for those fast-growing firms that rely on equity finance and for which loans and grants have not been a good fit?

Alok Sharma: What an intelligent question. On 20 April, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced a package of support worth £1.25 billion for fast-growing innovative companies and that, of course, included £750 million in grants and loans delivered through Innovate UK, and a £500 million future fund, through which the Government will invest up to £5 million per company, matched by the private sector.

Jeremy Wright: As my right hon. Friend adapts support for businesses, will he keep very much in mind those important sectors of the economy such as tourism and the creative industries that will need longer to recover and more notice of guidance changes? Will he recognise, as I am sure the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), will have told him, that in places such as Warwickshire those sectors are mutually reinforcing and very important not just to the local economy, but to the income of local authorities?

Alok Sharma: My right hon. Friend, I know, has been engaging with businesses through virtual networks across Warwickshire, and I thank him for the work that he is doing locally. What I would say to him is that, of course, we have ensured that loan schemes are available across the economy. Smaller businesses in hospitality, leisure and retail have been able to access a £25,000 grant. The key issue is to have a safe and phased reopening of the economy to get it going again, which is what we are currently undertaking.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I join you today, Mr Speaker, in both mourning and remembering Jo Cox.

I welcome much of the help that the Government have provided, but, according to Make UK, we could see the loss of 170,000 manufacturing jobs this year. In France, steel got loans within 10 days of applying for them, and aerospace is benefiting from billions of pounds of support, including for low-carbon engines. Here, three months after the crisis began, 60% of companies that have applied for large loans are still waiting and there has been no targeted help for our manufacturers. Will the Secretary of State tell us when specific help will actually materialise for sectors such as steel and aerospace?

Alok Sharma: I do welcome the constructive tone in which we have approached our exchanges over the past few weeks, but what I would just say to the right hon. Gentleman is that if he looks at the sum total of what this Government are providing, he will find that it is significant and incredibly favourable when compared with international comparators. On loans, as he knows,

we have increased the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme to allow up to £200 million to be made available, and we will continue to support businesses. He will also know that in certain cases we do have individual discussions going on with businesses.

Edward Miliband: I urge the right hon. Gentleman to get a move on when it comes to those sectors, because they really need the help. I want to ask him additionally about sectors such as hospitality, tourism and the creative industries, which have just been raised. They will take longer to reopen and recover because of public health measures, and I want to ask him about the impact on them of the one-size-fits-all winding down of the furlough. Can he explain to thousands of pubs across the country how they are supposed to find an employer contribution for furloughed employees from August when they are struggling even to survive? Is not the risk of that approach, and we have seen the jobless figures this morning, that hundreds of thousands more workers will lose their jobs, and all of us will end up paying the costs in higher benefit bills and a weaker economy? Would it not be better to have a different approach for those at-risk sectors?

Alok Sharma: We have taken a whole-economy approach, as he knows, and I have set out the measures that we have put in place. With regard to the retail and hospitality sectors, we have provided specific support for them in the one-year rates holiday, as well as the additional support that is available, but the key issue here is the safe reopening of the economy, and that is what we want to continue with over the coming weeks.

Rural Areas and Market Towns: Support for Businesses

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the recovery of businesses in (a) rural areas and (b) market towns during the covid-19 outbreak. [903259]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Nadhim Zahawi): Our thoughts are indeed with our colleague who was murdered, Jo Cox, and also with the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan); we wish her a safe return to this House.

We have introduced an unprecedented package of support for businesses across the country to get through this incredibly challenging period. More than £10 billion in grants—grants—has been paid to over 830,000 businesses of all sizes, including £100 million to over 8,000 businesses in Dorset. I want to thank the local leadership there for delivering that. This has explicitly been targeted at those in receipt of rural rate relief, as well as small business rate relief.

Chris Loder: Market towns in West Dorset such as Lyme Regis, Sherborne and Dorchester are thinking ahead, and I am supporting them to look at innovations to boost the local economy following coronavirus. These include virtual high streets and collaborating to improve accessibility of local brands to those who may not be able to get to the town. Will the Minister meet me to look at these concepts and determine how we can support these initiatives going forward?

Nadhim Zahawi: I know better than most, with Shipston-on-Stour, Alcester and Bidford—very important market towns—in my constituency, that it is more important than ever at this time to support businesses to adopt innovative business models. I would of course be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss those approaches to reopening our economy in West Dorset and the lessons that this may hold for the rest of the country as well.

Covid-19: High Street Businesses:

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on businesses trading on the high street. [903261]

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on businesses trading on the high street. [903298]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): My Department has regular discussions with Housing, Communities and Local Government colleagues on the impact of covid-19 on high street businesses. We have provided unprecedented support to high street businesses. Pubs, shops, and hotels will pay no business rates for 12 months; eligible retail, hospitality and leisure businesses have received cash grants of up to £25,000; and businesses that cannot pay their rent because of coronavirus will be protected from eviction.

Kate Osborne: Businesses across my constituency continue to report the major challenges that have been present since the start of lockdown, particularly a loss of income, mounting debts, enforced closure, insurance policies not paying out, the need to make redundancies, and an inability to plan for the future given the uncertainty of the current situation. Although many non-essential businesses have reopened this week, it will still be a long road to recovery, so will the Secretary of State review the grant scheme to ensure support for our high street businesses that are doing the right thing but could be decimated by covid-19?

Paul Scully: One of the reasons we launched the £617 million discretionary fund was so that we can reach more businesses, but clearly we need to reopen safely non-essential retail, as started yesterday. We need to monitor that. We need to make sure that opening up our economy is the best way, along with the flexible support that we are giving, to make sure that it can start to bounce back, including in Jarrow.

Mr Dhese: Economically, my constituency has been especially hard hit by the coronavirus crisis, with almost 19,000 employees having been furloughed. But while some businesses have been able to gain access to Government grants and schemes, numerous independent and family-run businesses have not been able to do so and have fallen between the cracks of Government support. Will the Minister urgently review the Government grant and loan schemes, particularly for our high street businesses, so that they too can benefit from them and

our towns do not become ghost towns, or mere carbon copies, because we would then lose our much loved independent businesses?

Paul Scully: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the plight of independent businesses. That is why I was pleased to go to Northcote Road in Clapham to see what they were doing there and the community spirit that brings them together. We always look at the flexibility of support, but we will also make sure, with the safe opening of shops now, that the new normal is coupled with a future view of the high street—the new reality, with changing behaviour of consumers—so that in the years to come independent shopkeepers can sustain and indeed thrive as local businesses on the high street.

Mr Speaker: We now go to marvellous Manchester, with Lucy Powell.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: May I, too, put on the record my remembrance of my good friend Jo Cox?

Pubs, cafés, hairdressers and restaurants are the lifeblood of our high streets. Business-critical guidance about their reopening in just two and a half weeks' time was due yesterday but is nowhere to be seen. Instead, they got another review, making a bad situation much worse. When will they get that guidance? With either 1-metre or 2-metre distancing, most of those businesses still will not be viable, so will the Government finally recognise that vital business support schemes need to follow the public health measures before we see large-scale job losses and the decimation of our high streets?

Paul Scully: As you will see from my hairstyle, Mr Speaker, I am desperately awaiting the opening of hairdressers and barbers too. It is key that we get this right, though. The economic impetus from the hospitality sector in particular is made apparent to me every single day that I speak to its representatives; indeed, I will be speaking to a lot of them later this afternoon. We have to make sure we get that right, with the confidence of customers coming back. The Government's first priority is to save lives and to work with the scientific guidance. At the moment, when people go out to shop at the businesses that are open today, 2 metres is still the rule, but we will get further guidance as soon as we practicably can.

Chinese Investment: Intellectual Property

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to ensure that Chinese investment in UK businesses does not undermine UK intellectual property. [903262]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Amanda Solloway): The Government have powers under the Enterprise Act 2002 to intervene in certain transactions on national security grounds. We will bring forward legislation to strengthen our existing powers in this area, including enabling Government intervention in acquisitions of assets such as sensitive intellectual property.

Mr Sheerman [V]: First, may I associate myself with our memories of Jo Cox? She was my close friend, neighbour and great comrade and colleague.

Why cannot this Government and Prime Minister wake up to the threat from China, which wants to be the dominant world economic superpower? Does the Minister not realise that China cannot be trusted? It has been stealing our intellectual property from universities, businesses and Government for years. How could we possibly want it to be involved in our telecommunications industry through Huawei, and will we please put a stop to the partnership on developing nuclear power in our country?

Amanda Solloway: We welcome inward investment in the UK's civil nuclear sector. All investment involving critical infrastructure is subject to thorough scrutiny. Foreign investment and an active competitive economy are key to the UK's growth. The UK wants a modern and mature relationship with China based on mutual respect and trust.

Life Sciences Sector: Vaccine Manufacturing

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support vaccine manufacturing and the UK life sciences sector. [903263]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): We have set up a vaccines taskforce to lead and co-ordinate all the Government's activities to develop and manufacture a coronavirus vaccine. As part of that, we are investing £93 million in a vaccine manufacturing innovation centre, which will be completed 12 months ahead of schedule, by summer 2021. We are also funding a rapid deployment facility, which will be able to begin manufacturing vaccines at scale from August this year.

Scott Mann: Ultimately, throughout this process, we are in the hands of our brilliant scientists. I welcome the Secretary of State's statement on what he is doing to accelerate opening the vaccine manufacturing innovation centre by next summer, but what more can be done to ensure that we get on top of this disease and address it as early as we possibly can?

Alok Sharma: Of course, my hon. Friend will know that we are providing direct support to the vaccines being developed at Oxford University and Imperial College London. He may also be aware that the Imperial vaccine is now set to enter clinical human trials. We are also leading international efforts to support vaccine discovery and deployment.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, Darren Jones.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): UK-EU research collaboration contributes £2 billion to British research and development and accounts for at least 5,000 researchers in British universities, as well as its contributions to covid research and vaccination research. Will the Secretary of State make a commitment that, irrespective of the free trade agreement negotiations

with the EU, the UK will seek third country full associate membership of Horizon Europe to keep that money coming into British R&D?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Gentleman will know that we are committed to being a science and R&D superpower, which is why we have committed to spending £22 billion a year by 2024-25 and to reaching 2.4% of GDP by 2027. The discussions with the EU are ongoing, and we will see what they lead to.

Hospitality Sector: Covid-19

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with representatives from the hospitality sector on the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on that sector. [903267]

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with representatives from the hospitality sector on the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on that sector. [903278]

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with representatives from the hospitality sector on the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on that sector. [903296]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): I have met regularly with a large number of representatives of hospitality organisations to discuss the issues that they are experiencing, including through the BEIS ministerial taskforce on pubs and restaurants and my own weekly call with sector representatives, the next of which is this afternoon.

Gill Furniss [V]: I, too, record that my thoughts are with Jo Cox's family today.

The hospitality sector has faced an unprecedented challenge due to coronavirus, which has had an impact on many businesses in my constituency of Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough. At the start of the outbreak, the Prime Minister said that he would do whatever it takes to support individuals and businesses. Will the Government therefore extend the full furlough scheme to ensure that the hospitality sector survives and workers in the industry do not add to the shocking unemployment figures released today, and, ultimately, to protect our communities from a further spike of this terrible virus?

Paul Scully: Indeed, Sheffield City Council has paid £87 million to 7,329 business premises. We have provided an unprecedented package of financial support to businesses in the hospitality sector. We continue to work with them. We continue to extend the furlough system and make it flexible, in order to have part-time furloughing, so that people can start to come back to work. It is important, however, that we get the guidance out so that we can work with the hospitality sector to get it reopened, so that it can start to bounce back.

Jeff Smith: Rumours are swirling about whether, how and which pubs will be able to reopen on 4 July. The brewing industry urgently needs clarity on whether it will be all pubs or just those with gardens. The Minister just said that the guidance will be available as soon as

possible, but that is not good enough. We are two and a bit weeks away. Beer needs to be brewed. Some of us need a pint. When will that guidance be available? The brewing industry and pubs need that clarity urgently.

Paul Scully: It is not only that we need a pint. For pubs, it is about not just coming back for the opening, but making sure that it is an enjoyable experience for people, so they keep on coming back. That is what will allow them to survive and thrive, so it is important that we get the guidance out. I am trying to work with the hospitality sector and pubs to make sure that there are as few surprises as possible, but we need to make sure that we are weighing that up with the scientific guidance so that pub people, clients and people who want a pint know that they can go into a pub safely.

Kim Johnson: I send my condolences to the family of Jo Cox.

Workers in the hospitality industry are heading for a crisis. It has been one of the worst-hit sectors by the virus, with a disproportionate number of young, low-paid and insecure workers. My constituency of Liverpool, Riverside has an estimated 11,700 employees furloughed who are employed by small family-run businesses, many of which do not qualify for grant support because they are outside the £51,000 rateable value. Will the Secretary of State fix the loans, extend the grants and plan for recovery to ensure that support for the hospitality sector?

Paul Scully: It is time for me to add my voice to that of Members across the House expressing their condolences to the loved ones of Jo Cox and, indeed, wishing a swift recovery to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan). That was horrific news, and I hope that she is back on her feet as soon as possible.

Liverpool City Council, which I have spoken to, has handed out £87,885,000 to businesses, including small businesses and those in the retail and hospitality sector. That is why I was pleased to be able to extend the discretionary scheme to capture more of the businesses that fell short. I know that Liverpool City Council has an economic recovery plan, in addition to “Liverpool Without Walls”, to encourage pubs and restaurants to open safely. That will help young people especially to get back into employment and get our economy up and running.

Start-Up Businesses

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support start-up businesses. [903270]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): We want to make the UK the best place to start and grow a business, and it should not matter where in the UK that is. The start-up loans programme has helped more people to realise their dream of starting a business, with more than 72,000 loans, worth £591 million, since 2012. During 2018-19, our growth hubs helped more than 9,500 business starts in England, and through programmes operated by the Government-backed British Business Bank we are currently supporting more than £7.7 billion of finance to more than 94,900 small and medium-sized enterprises.

Sir David Evennett [V]: Start-up businesses are vital to our economic recovery. What more can the Government do to help the very smallest businesses access the right finance quickly to survive during and post covid-19?

Paul Scully: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for the work that he has done with small businesses for many years, including when we were working with businesses together. I know that he continues that work. As part of the package of covid-19 recovery measures we created the bounce-back loans scheme, which targets small and microbusinesses in all sectors, providing loans from £2,000 up to 25% of the business’s turnover, with a maximum loan of £50,000. Applications are done via a simple online form. As of 7 June, 782,246 loans, worth £23.78 billion, have been approved.

Independent Pubs: Covid-19

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): What steps he is taking to support independent pubs during the covid-19 outbreak. [903272]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Amanda Solloway): We have provided a significant package of support to pubs—including a one-year business rates holiday and access to grants of up to £25,000 per qualifying property—through a number of schemes. That is alongside the business support available to all sectors, including access to the coronavirus job retention scheme and various Government-backed loan schemes.

Stuart Anderson: Pubs in Wolverhampton such as the Merry Hill, Oddfellows and the Mount Tavern will have been impacted by covid-19. I welcome the measures the Minister outlined, but what is the longer-term strategy to help pubs to return to a profitable state and to become the vital community hubs that they were before?

Amanda Solloway: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, because it is vital that we recognise how important such businesses are as community hubs. We recognise that trading conditions may be challenging for many businesses for some time to come. We will continue to work with the sector, both to prepare for reopening and afterwards. I understand that the Minister responsible for small business—the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully)—plans to continue to meet representatives of the sector regularly.

Manufacturing Sector: Covid-19

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): What support he is providing to the manufacturing sector during the covid-19 outbreak. [903273]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Nadhim Zahawi): We are committed to ongoing engagement with industry to ensure that our manufacturers have the support that they need. That includes a roundtable that I am holding tomorrow for north-east businesses, which the hon.

Gentleman will be interested in. Our support for the industry includes the unprecedented £330 billion package of business continuity support.

Ian Lavery [V]: I send my condolences to the family of my dear friend and colleague Jo Cox.

UK workers are much more vulnerable to redundancy than French and German workers because the UK Government have announced that they are already winding down their job retention scheme. That is not my view, but the view expressed this weekend by the chief executive of leading aerospace manufacturer Airbus. In France and Germany, the subsidy schemes are set to last for up to two years. Does the Minister not agree that UK workers deserve at least the same job protections and guarantees as have been introduced in other countries? What more can be done to save these vital UK jobs?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Member mentions the aerospace sector, into which the Government have put around £6.5 billion between the Bank of England corporate finance scheme and UK Export Finance, with an additional half a billion pounds of support. We have also put £3.4 billion into the growth deal across the northern powerhouse, with almost £380 million of that going to the north-east local enterprise partnership area, including his constituency of Wansbeck, which is benefiting from that to the tune of around £2.25 million in a science, technology, engineering and maths building at Northumberland College's Ashington campus. A lot of work is going into this unprecedented package, but we continue to review all our interventions to make sure that UK workers get the benefit of a dynamic recovery.

Post Office IT System (Review)

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): What progress his Department has made on undertaking a review of the Post Office IT system. [903274]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): On 10 June, the Government announced an independent review to consider whether the Post Office has learned the necessary lessons from the Horizon trial judgments and to provide an independent and external assessment of its work to rebuild its relationship with its postmasters. We are keen to see the review launch as soon as possible, and we are in the process of identifying a chair to lead the work of the review in order to get the answers that we need and to hear those voices.

Holly Mumby-Croft: I welcome that answer and the Government's commitment to the review. Is the Minister aware of any support for postmasters and postmistresses while the situation is ongoing?

Paul Scully: The December 2019 settlement comprised a comprehensive settlement of £57.75 million. The Post Office has opened a historical shortfall scheme for postmasters who were not part of the group litigation and who want shortfall issues recorded in Horizon to be investigated and addressed. Many convicted claimants are going through a further process with the Criminal Cases Review Commission, with 47 referred to the Court of Appeal. Where convictions are overturned, processes are in place for them to receive compensation if appropriate.

Topical Questions

[903314] **Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): My Department, together with Her Majesty's Treasury, is at the forefront of supporting businesses during these unprecedented times. More than £10.3 billion has been paid out to businesses to date by direct grant and an additional £38.2 billion through the major loan schemes. The Government have supported 9.1 million jobs through the coronavirus job retention scheme and 2.6 million claims have been made through the self-employed income support scheme.

In the past week, I have led five businesses taskforces to listen to and work with the business community and academic experts as we consider the measures needed to support our economy bouncing back. We want to create a cleaner, greener and more resilient economy and the output from those taskforces will feed directly into the Government's work on the economic recovery.

Alexander Stafford: The Secretary of State will know that the UK has an opportunity to lead the world in hydrogen technology, which will create thousands of green jobs, cut emissions, unlock private investment and increase our energy security. Just as we lagged behind with battery technology, we risk missing the boat on hydrogen as other nations set multibillion-pound hydrogen strategies. The UK needs a hydrogen strategy. Will the Secretary of State meet me and other colleagues from across the House who share my belief in hydrogen to discuss how we can place hydrogen at the forefront of our green recovery?

Alok Sharma: As my hon. Friend will have heard in the earlier answer from the Energy Minister, we are committed to developing hydrogen as a strategic decarbonised energy carrier. We are investing in the value chain and both the Energy Minister and I will be happy to meet him.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab) [V]: I associate myself with your remarks, Mr Speaker, and those of other Members, about our much-missed colleague, Jo Cox.

There is a clear racial and class dynamic in the covid-19 death rate, with those in working-class jobs, such as carers, taxi drivers, security guards and retail assistants, who are disproportionately black, Asian or minority ethnic, more likely to die from the virus. Throughout the pandemic, insecure employment practices have left millions without protections at work or the financial support they need to safeguard their income and allow them to self-isolate. Will the Secretary of State as a first step recognise that insecure employment practices are directly responsible for worsening inequalities, including structural racism and discrimination?

Alok Sharma: I add my deepest condolences to the families and loved ones of everyone who has lost their lives in this pandemic.

We are providing support across the piece for all individuals. The hon. Gentleman talks about people from ethnic minority backgrounds. He will know that

we hold regular roundtables to ensure that we are addressing individuals in all sorts of groups that have protected characteristics.

[903316] **Mark Jenkinson** (Workington) (Con): My constituency has nearly 30 miles of coastline from Workington to Bowness-on-Solway, with some of the highest tidal ranges in the UK. What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the potential benefits of tidal range barrages along the Cumbrian coast—not only the benefits to energy production security but the wider socioeconomic benefits that integrated infrastructure might bring?

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Kwasi Kwarteng): The Department is aware of several projects being considered on rivers and estuaries such as the Wyre, the Duddon, Morecambe bay and the Solway firth, and we have had frequent contacts with developers. We remain open to considering well-developed, well-considered projects that can demonstrate strong value for money alongside other renewable generation.

[903320] **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): The coronavirus business interruption loan scheme—CBILS—was supposed to offer a lifeline of support to struggling businesses, but it is not reaching those who need it the most. Sky-high interest rates are now being offered by some lenders, and that is making it less of a lifeline and more like picking the bones off desperate smaller firms. Will the Secretary of State press the Chancellor to take action now to stop this unfair profiteering and ensure that businesses pay no more than 2.5% interest, in line with the bounce-back scheme?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Member will know, the latest figures show that over 49,000 loans have been approved, to the value of more than £10 billion. There is a significant number of lenders attached to the CBIL scheme, but if he has specific cases, he should definitely come and talk to me.

[903322] **Ms Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): I would like to put on record my remembrance of my good friend, Jo Cox.

In the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, we are undertaking an inquiry into the impact of covid on our major industries. All of them rely on our maritime and ports sector to keep the supply chain going. Of the £22 billion—a vast sum of money—that is being put together for research and development, how much will be allocated to maritime innovation and tech?

Alok Sharma: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all the work that she did as shipping Minister. We have made the commitment to £22 billion a year by 2025. That is the biggest increase in public funding of R&D, and no doubt, as projects come forward from that sector, we will look at them.

[903325] **Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): I had the pleasure and privilege of sharing an office with Jo Cox for almost a year before she was so brutally taken from us, and our thoughts are with Brendan and the family today.

On the issue of steel, the Secretary of State will be aware that the French and German steel industries received vital Government-backed loans within 10 days of their respective lockdowns starting. Here, months since the start of ours, the British steel industry has yet to receive a penny. Does the Secretary of State think that that is acceptable?

Alok Sharma: We are working with the steel sector, as the hon. Member will know, and we continue to work closely with it. Of course I absolutely remain committed to supporting a sustainable UK steel sector. We have increased the amount of borrowing that can take place under the larger CBIL scheme but, as I said to the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) in answer to an earlier question, when individual companies approach us, we will of course enter into direct discussions with them.

[903323] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): It is good news that our shops are gradually reopening across England, but they are in a delicate economic position. The good old British compromise of our Sunday trading laws allows a balance between the larger stores, the smaller shops, the interests of consumers and the interests of staff working in those shops. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the very last thing we should be doing is disturbing that compromise and potentially placing at risk the jobs and economic capabilities of our small shopkeepers across England?

Alok Sharma: Of course we keep all these matters under review, and I know that there is a range of views on this matter. I would just point out that we did temporarily relax Sunday trading during the London Olympics. That was to support consumers and, of course, the economy as well.

[903328] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: As businesses go back to work, what support are the Government giving to disabled people to ensure that they are able to return safely or to continue to work from home? Will the Secretary of State consider a tailored furlough scheme for disabled and shielded people who cannot return to their workplace?

Alok Sharma: The obligations on employers to take care of disabled employees have not changed. In the guidance that we have provided we make reference to the fact that employers need to take particular care of employees with particular protected characteristics.

[903324] **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): Yesterday morning, I had the pleasure of visiting the excellent Lexicon shopping centre in Bracknell, where I saw busy shops, happy shoppers and dedicated staff who had done everything possible to keep customers safe. Does the Minister agree that it is now time to revise social distancing measures to below 2 metres, not least to give our high streets a big boost?

Alok Sharma: I again thank my hon. Friend for all he is doing to support local businesses in Bracknell—more power to his elbow. I am sure all of us will do the same in our constituencies over the coming days and weeks. As I said in response to an earlier question, we are reviewing the social distancing rule.

[903329] **Mr Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): One in four pubs do not have enough space to reopen and comply with the 2 metre rule and 82% of those that could reopen would have to operate at less than half capacity, putting pubs including many in Portsmouth at risk. With reopening fast looming, on what specific date will the Minister provide guidance to British pubs?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Gentleman will know that we have worked collaboratively with employers, employee representative organisations and trade unions in producing the guidance that we have put out so far. We continue to have a good dialogue with individual sectors, and once we have concluded that, we will of course make that guidance available.

[903326] **David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): May I begin by saying that my thoughts and prayers are with the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) and her family at this time? Although a political opponent, she is, like Jo Cox was, a lovely person.

Will the Minister, given the recent major policy change, ensure that contracts for difference—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are going to have to clear Members away from the entrance. There are some seats. You will have to sit down. You just cannot gather.

David Mundell: I will begin the question again, Mr Speaker. Will the Minister ensure that contracts for difference funding will only be made available to onshore wind farms in Scotland that have local community support?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for the question. He will know that local consent and local support are absolutely key to the pot one auction, but he will also be aware that planning policy is a devolved matter in Scotland, and it is therefore for the Scottish Government to set up national planning policies and the approach to declining planning applications. He is well aware that this Government have been very focused on local consent right through this process.

[903330] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I also concur with the remarks made about my friend and colleague Jo Cox. We remember her today and what she stood for.

As a member of the Transport Committee, I stand by our description of British Airways as a “national disgrace” for the way it has effectively fired most of its staff and will rehire some of them on vastly cut pay and conditions. BA has done that under the cloak of the pandemic and gone way beyond any other major employer. The aviation sector will take longer to recover. When that does happen, I hope the Government will step in to support the sector. When they do so, will they ensure that employers cannot get away with the tactics of British Airways and also commit to delivering on climate change?

Alok Sharma: We appreciate that announcements about redundancies for British Airways staff have been incredibly distressing for the employees and their families. At the end of the day, the use of the Government’s job retention schemes is preferable to making redundancies.

That is why we made them available. What I would say in this case is that it is a commercial decision. We expect British Airways and, indeed, all employers to treat employees fairly and in the spirit of partnership.

[903336] **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. It is right that the Government are requiring landlords to show forbearance to commercial tenants, but that is shifting some of the burden from the tenants to the landlords, many of whom are small and medium-sized enterprises, yet the banks are not providing a full payment holiday as they are for residential and buy-to-let. It is simply a capital repayment holiday, which is a small part of the payment. Will my right hon. Friend see what he can do about that?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend, as ever, raises an important issue. It is why both the CBILS and the bounce-back loans have a 12-month period during which interest is paid on behalf of the business. I would expect lenders to apply similar forbearance where needed in the case of existing commercial loans.

[903337] **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): My thoughts are also with Jo’s family. Let me acknowledge the basic decency of the furlough scheme. However, with vacancies plunging and the spectre of unemployment rising—youth unemployment in Birmingham is now at 18%—is it time for a jobs and training package, so that we avoid a return to 1980s unemployment levels for young people, when many from black and minority ethnic backgrounds simply felt written off?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. As we look to see how we can restart the economy and the whole process of recovery, we will, of course, look at skills as well.

[903340] **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): Many constituents, from right across Ashfield, have been in touch with me as they are very concerned that they will be made redundant by Rolls-Royce. With Rolls-Royce announcing last week the locations of its first 3,000 redundancies in the UK, what more can my right hon. Friend say to reassure my constituents that the Government are doing everything they can to ensure that they are supporting the employees affected, as these are the people who have worked so hard to establish the company’s world-leading position? If any of these highly-skilled and professional workers are made redundant, what are the Government’s plans to ensure that their skills are repurposed to other projects?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend raises a hugely important issue. Employment and the possibilities and opportunities for people are something we are absolutely focused on. I assure him that we will do all we can to help those who will be affected by this announcement to get back into work as quickly as possible. This will include working with the Department for Work and Pensions, Jobcentre Plus and Rolls-Royce itself to make sure that economic opportunities and jobs are freely available to those who might be affected.

[903339] **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (SNP) [V]: My constituency stands to benefit from offshore energy coming ashore, yet it is hampered by prejudicial grid charges and investment in infrastructure going elsewhere.

Will the Minister end the discriminatory charging regime and support Scottish Government schemes seeking to ensure that Scotland benefits from its natural resource off its shore and does not lose out, as it did with oil and gas?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I do not think that is a fair characterisation of the situation. We have huge offshore capacity; 35% of the global offshore wind capacity is in the UK, with much of it sited in Scotland. Scottish firms

are extremely capable of competing in the auctions, and I do not think it is fair to characterise our position in the way that the hon. Gentleman has.

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 five minutes.

12.32 pm

Sitting suspended.

Speaker's Statement

12.37 pm

Mr Speaker: I have a short statement to make about the new Division procedure and proxy voting. Details of the new arrangements were in the email sent to all colleagues this morning. Members should record their names using their security passes at one of the pass readers in each Lobby. The queuing arrangements are largely unchanged, although there will be two queues and Members may join either one.

I also want to mention proxy voting. I remind colleagues that the expanded proxy voting scheme applies to Members who are unable to attend Westminster for medical or public health reasons relating to the pandemic. If an hon. Member applies for a proxy vote, this means that they have given me and the House a commitment that they are not able to attend Westminster. It is therefore important that colleagues with proxies do not take part in any physical proceedings or come on to the Estate while they have a proxy vote in operation.

Economic Outlook and Furlough Scheme Changes

12.39 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, if he will make a statement on the economic outlook for the UK and the Government's strategy to protect jobs and the economy in light of upcoming changes to the furlough scheme.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): Before I start, may I join with all the words that have been said in praise of Jo Cox during the proceedings so far? I know that many more such words will be said today. One thing that colleagues may not know, amid all the many things that they have been told about her, is that she was very fond of visiting Symonds Yat in my constituency in Herefordshire. I look forward to the day when many other people can do that, following lockdown.

From the onset of this pandemic, the Government's top priority has been to protect the NHS and to save lives, but we have also made it clear that we will do whatever is needed to support people, jobs and businesses through the present period of disruption, and that is what we have done. On Friday, the Office for National Statistics published its first estimate of April GDP and showed the economy contracting sharply by a record 20.4% on the month. It is clear that restrictions introduced during the lockdown, while necessary, have had a severe impact on output.

However, it is important to note that the OECD, the Office for Budget Responsibility and other external forecasters have all highlighted that the cost to the economy would have been significantly higher were it not for the swift and decisive action that the Government have taken. Measures such as the coronavirus job retention scheme—the CJRS—which has protected almost 9 million jobs and more than 1 million businesses, have helped to limit the adverse impact of the crisis. It is also important to note that the OECD forecast the UK to have the strongest recovery of all the large countries that it looked at, with an unemployment rate projected to be lower than that in France and Italy by the end of 2021.

As we are reopening the economy, the Government are supporting putting people back into work. Last month, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced that the CJRS would be extended for four months, until the end of October. From July to October, employers currently using the scheme will be able to bring furloughed employees back part-time. That will ensure that the CJRS will continue to support all firms so that no employer faces a cliff edge.

This remains a very uncertain and worrying time for businesses and employees alike. The Government have set out separately the five principles that must be satisfied before we make further changes to the lockdown rules, which we based on advice received from Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies. However, I can assure the House that the thoughts, energies and resources of the Government are focused increasingly on planning for the recovery. We will develop new measures to grow our economy, to back businesses and to boost skills. I am confident that the United Kingdom can continue to thrive in a post-covid world.

Anneliese Dodds: The OECD's global outlook suggested that the reduction in GDP in the UK due to the current hit of coronavirus will have been the largest out of all developed economies. The enormity of the economic impact appears confirmed by the claimant count and other unemployment data out today. It seems that the slow and confused health response is being followed by a slow and confused response to saving jobs, despite the huge long-term costs of unemployment. Labour has called for an exit strategy, but what we seem to have is an exit without a strategy, including on jobs.

Will the Treasury change its one-size-fits-all approach to the furlough and self-employed schemes, which risks additional waves of unemployment? Will it act to encourage young people to stay in education and training, and out of unemployment? Will it build on previous schemes such as the future jobs fund to support the young unemployed, and provide tailored help for other hard-hit groups such as older workers?

Although more support for apprenticeships is desperately needed, it will not be enough. Will the Treasury act now to create the extra support that cannot currently be delivered by Department for Work and Pensions staff, who are occupied with huge numbers of extra claims? Will the Government catch up with other countries that have already announced their stimulus packages, given that many employers are deciding now on whether to retain staff? Will they apply conditions to Government investment to include requirements to promote upskilling and re-employment? Above all, rather than a limited Budget statement in July, will the Government set out the back-to-work Budget that we need, with a focus on jobs, jobs, jobs?

Jesse Norman: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions and comments. Of course, the issues that she highlights are of great importance and receive an enormous amount of attention in the Government and in the Treasury, but I am a little surprised by some of the things that she said. I remind her that the OECD report, in addition to forecasting the strongest recovery, also highlighted the quick and comprehensive response that the Government put in place to deal with covid. It also noted the relative robustness of the UK's public finances relative to those of other countries. Colleagues are entitled to decide whether they accept what the OECD says, but they cannot discount the bits they do not like and accept the bits that they do.

The hon. Lady refers to the Government's response as "slow and confused", but I find that very odd. She said to the CBI in April that "this scheme was about preventing mass unemployment", and "undoubtedly it has prevented a worse situation, there's no question about that". She congratulated the Government, business and trade unions, and said that we saw with the job retention scheme "an excellent example of tripartite working". I think she is right about that, but I do not think she can take the line she takes now and disavow those other things that she said, when Labour was being a bit more bipartisan than it is at the moment, in praise of the Government's schemes.

Finally, the hon. Lady talks about the Government adopting a one-size-fits-all approach, but I would remind her of what she said in *The Guardian* on 20 May 2020:

"A more differentiated approach"—

that is, not a one-size-fits-all approach—

"would, admittedly, pose challenges for the government. Hard choices would need to be made, including how to deal with difficult boundary issues".

She is right. It is also true that the Government have adopted a more differentiated approach than she gives us credit for, as witness all the work we have done with the hospitality and leisure industries.

So I am a little confused, but I do think it is important to focus on the positive achievements of the job retention scheme and the self-employment scheme, which, as the hon. Lady rightly notes, have prevented a much worse alternative and have been brought into place with great speed and ability by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con) [V]: My right hon. Friend will be aware that, yesterday, the Treasury Committee published its report into the gaps that there are in the Government's support for the self-employed and those employed up and down our country. I do recognise the very considerable approach that the Government have taken to support people through these difficult times. However, there remain over 1 million people who should qualify for furlough or self-employed support who are not receiving it. Could I ask my right hon. Friend to look very closely at the recommendations of the Select Committee report, and to take action so that these hard-working self-employed and employed people up and down our country can get the support not just that they desperately need, but that they deserve?

Jesse Norman: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend the Chairman of the Treasury Committee both for what he says today and for his report. He will know, and he took considerable evidence on, the constraints that the Government were under in bringing the different schemes into play. I am the last person to decry the energy and the effectiveness either of the businesses that have been supported by the job retention scheme or the self-employed people and businesses that have been supported by the self-employed scheme. Of course, we will take very carefully into consideration the report that he gives, and any positive and constructive suggestions that are contained in that report about how we can improve matters, and we continue to review the situation within the Treasury.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the SNP spokesperson, Alison Thewliss, with one minute.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the Minister for the comments he has made. While the support under the schemes, including the coronavirus job retention scheme, is welcome, many of the comments I made on 17 March and 27 April about those who have not been supported still stand. The Treasury Committee would agree that the 1 million who have been left out of this support have been left out of support because of the Government's own choice—the Government have decided not to support these people—and further issues remain about maternity, the derisory 26p extra given to refugees and those with no recourse to public funds.

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture, Fiona Hyslop, has written to the Government, identifying tourism, arts and culture, oil and gas, childcare, retail, and rural and island communities as being particularly at risk, so will the Minister now accept that winding up

[Alison Thewliss]

the furlough scheme and putting the costs on to employers is a significant risk and will put people out of jobs? Will he extend it beyond October for sectors that are particularly pressed? Will he look at extending the self-employed support scheme, as many of those people will still require support on an ongoing basis because the work they did is no longer there? Will he look at VAT cuts to tourism and hospitality, which will support those sectors that have seen so much pressure and get them back on their feet at a time when they are really struggling? Lastly, does he agree with Lord Forsyth that there will be a tsunami of job losses, with 3 million people left without work?

Jesse Norman: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. In the middle of a crisis, with emergency responses being brought out almost every other week, it would be a brave person who could commit to any sensible forecast with a degree of accuracy of what the future may bring. We have already seen astonishing changes to levels of GDP even in a month.

On the points the hon. Lady raises, I just remind her that the job retention scheme has so far supported nearly 9 million people—8.9 million people—and 1.1 million businesses. The self-employed scheme has supported 2.3 million individuals at a cost of £6.8 billion. Both schemes were brought in at record speed precisely to address the critical need to get the vast majority of people the support they would need, and to target that, wherever possible, on the most vulnerable. I do not think that those were mistakes. I do not think it would have been right to delay the process. I think it has been recognised by Opposition Members across the piece that a delayed response—which, on advice received from experts within HMRC and elsewhere, would have been the inevitable result—would have been a mistake and we took the view that we should proceed. I put it to the hon. Lady that the two schemes in question, together with a plethora of other support, have been extremely effective.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Getting skills is the key to employment opportunities for the young. Both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have made encouraging noises about recognising the importance of apprenticeships. I propose that the Government shoulder the entire costs of the first year of all new apprenticeships awarded this autumn—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The two Members—the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) and the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty)—cannot stand together. Richard Graham, please start again.

Richard Graham: I will start again. Skills are the key to employment opportunities for the young. Both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have made encouraging noises about recognising the role that apprenticeships can play in that. My proposal is that the Government shoulder the entire first-year costs of all new apprenticeships awarded this autumn. The key point is that further education colleges, other trainers and businesses need to be able to plan ahead so that they can market those apprenticeships. Will my right hon. Friend today give some reassurance and commitment on the support the

Government might give apprentices, so that bounce-back Britain's new apprentices know there are lots of opportunities ahead?

Jesse Norman: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I am in awe of his ability, without notes, to recall exactly the same wording of his question when asked to give it a second time. That is magnificent. He was obviously an actor in a previous life.

Let me respond to the point my hon. Friend made. He is absolutely right about apprenticeships. He will know that, because he will know of all the work we are doing in Hereford to set up a new model in technology and engineering; a university combining higher education and further education specifically in order, in due course, to be able to extend to degree and degree apprenticeships. He will also know that the Budget—people have forgotten this—and the spending round before it have been very supportive of further education. That is a commitment of this Government. As he will know, the Education and Skills Funding Agency published guidance in this area, and the job retention scheme provides funding for businesses. We will continue to look closely at the issue he describes, and I thank him for his question.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): May I, like others, pay tribute to and remember our much-missed colleague Jo Cox?

Ministers hint that their recovery plan will at last see real climate action. Liberal Democrats advocate a massive green economic recovery plan and I hope the Government will match it. Will the Treasury Minister confirm that the Government are considering reversing their previous opposition to onshore wind farms in England and Wales, tidal power investment, zero-carbon homes regulation and the many other green economic policies advocated by my party and opposed, abolished and voted against by this Prime Minister and the Conservative party?

Jesse Norman: I do not agree with that characterisation of the Government at all. We have done an enormous amount to support the green economy, but I do agree with the right hon. Gentleman that this provides an opportunity for a big recalibration—a big opportunity for all people across the country to think about whether there is more we can do in terms of green. Those of us with responsibility for the national infrastructure strategy are thinking very hard with colleagues in the Treasury about how we can improve green infrastructure, to go alongside all the measures we have taken to improve and support green businesses.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Some 290,000 people in the theatre and performing arts are really struggling financially at the moment. Will the Treasury look at extending the job retention scheme at least until October, and at extending the self-employed income support scheme, which would particularly help those who have freelance work?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend will be aware that the job retention scheme runs until October and the self-employed scheme covers that period as well. This is a source of great concern to us, and the arts have been well supported by the schemes so far. There has also

been a separate package through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport specifically targeted at supporting arts and other organisations. We have this issue very much in our minds.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): May I first pay tribute to my late friend Jo Cox? We mark today not because of how she was taken and the hate that took her, but to celebrate her life and legacy that we all work towards every day.

May I press the Minister, in that vein, for support for the aviation sector? There will be a £1.6 billion impact on the south Wales economy if British Airways is to keep on cutting jobs across three sites in the region. The Chancellor and the Minister say they will do whatever it takes, so please Minister, for these highly skilled, well-paid jobs across the UK, announce a specific sector deal for the aviation sector, and please do it quickly.

Jesse Norman: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his warm remarks in relation to Jo Cox, which will be shared by everyone.

The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the aviation sector has already received quite a lot of support through the Bank of England's covid corporate financing facility and through the large business loan scheme. Colleagues across the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy continue to engage closely with the sector. I fully understand the hon. Gentleman's concern both in terms of the strategic nature of the industry and also its relevance to his own constituency, and indeed the UK as a whole.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): The Government can rightly be proud of the rapid and effective steps they have taken to save so many jobs in constituencies such as Crewe and Nantwich, but there are some sectors and businesses that will not be able to open in the near or even medium term—for example, Good Time Charlies, a children's play centre in my constituency, and Crewe Lyceum theatre. Will my right hon. Friend agree to look at whether some businesses and sectors will need more support in the medium and long term?

Jesse Norman: That may well be true, but I would highlight and remind my hon. Friend that one scheme, the bounce back loan scheme, is specifically targeted at small and medium-sized enterprises, and indeed micro-enterprises. Those loans are on very concessionary terms and do not require personal guarantees up to a threshold, so the organisations that my hon. Friend mentions should be able to benefit.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): May I add my voice to many others in paying tribute to our much-missed colleague, Jo Cox?

The pandemic has further highlighted the deep connection between human health and thriving ecosystems, with the destruction of nature both increasing pandemic risk and driving climate change. With the news of record job losses, will the Minister prioritise the job creation potential of nature restoration at a national level and agree that not one single shovel-ready project will end up indiscriminately destroying nature? Secondly, will his Department establish a new taskforce on jobs

for nature, to maximise the number of people employed in protecting the natural world, rather than destroying it? He says the Treasury will recalibrate whether there is more to be done on the green economy; I assure him that there is, and he just needs to get on and do it.

Jesse Norman: Having been an energy Minister, I am extremely aware of the many good things that we have done and continue to do, but I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution.

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will know, businesses in the hospitality and events sector—including wedding venues, bed and breakfasts and hotels, which are part of the lifeblood of this country and the economy—have been helped tremendously by the Government's support and furlough scheme. As the furlough scheme winds down in the autumn, will he push for those sectors of the economy to be able to open fully as soon as it is safe for both them and their customers, to help us maintain Britain's rightful place as one of the most attractive tourist venues in the world?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend will know that we have put significant support in place already. I share—as the Government do, and as I suspect the entire Chamber does—her desire for us to emerge from lockdown as swiftly and safely as we can, so I certainly support what she said.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I associate myself with the remarks that others have made about our colleague Jo Cox.

The Chairman of the Treasury Committee, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), was right about those people who are missing out on the self-employed scheme. We recognise that the scheme was put together urgently. My hon. Friends and I on the shadow Front Bench were calling for the scheme, so of course we welcomed it. But alongside the 1 million people who are unable to work and are missing out on the scheme, the scheme also means that if people continue to work and are unaffected because of their self-employment, they are benefiting from the scheme, while others who need it are not able to. Would it not be sensible for the Government to accept the comments that have been made and scrutinise the scheme? Let us try to make it better and work together, rather than say that it does not need any improvement at all.

Jesse Norman: Actually, we have not said that. We remain interested in positive, detailed suggestions for improvement of the scheme. We have received some that do not appear workable. I will remind the Chamber of what the problem is. Let us not forget that the £50,000 trading profit margin implies average sales of £200,000, so these are not that small businesses compared with many sole proprietorships around the country. With these businesses, it is impossible to tell by any rule-based system the source of any dividends that they are paying, what may be the pay component of them and what may be simply earned from other sources but routed through the company. It has not been possible to devise a system that could operate on this million-person scale or more in the time available, while meeting our central need to act comprehensively and swiftly.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): The Government have done a huge amount to support jobs in Peterborough, with around one in four workers protected through the furlough scheme. Peterborough remains a city on the up, with a new university, city centre regeneration and new businesses coming to us. With that optimism in the air, will the Minister assure me that he will continue to support businesses and workers in Peterborough as we move beyond the furlough scheme?

Jesse Norman: I can of course give my hon. Friend that assurance. I suspect that there is not a Member of this House who, if they look down the lists, will not see the positive benefits of the CJRS and the self-employment income support scheme in support of employed people on furlough and self-employed people in their constituencies. That is a tremendous thing that we can all be proud of.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): As a Labour member of the class of 2015, may I echo the remarks made about Jo Cox? She is much missed, and was murdered in cold blood while doing an advice surgery, which we all do every week in normal times.

I must say that I am disappointed by the Minister's response. I wrote to the Chancellor on 24 April identifying a number of holes in his safety net, including brand new start-ups, people on dividend pay and the forgotten freelancers in the arts. I have had a make-up artist and a BBC contractor write to me in the last couple of days. Initially, he was thought eligible for furlough pay, but now, as he is not an employee per se, he cannot have it, and he has too many savings to get universal credit. I had no reply—not a sausage. Does the Minister not agree with the OECD's analysis that, with these overly ungenerous levels of social security support, he is just storing up productivity problems and record unemployment for further ahead?

Jesse Norman: I am surprised that the hon. Lady should say that. As I recall, she and I have had two telephone conversations with colleagues in which we have discussed in detail the strengths and weaknesses and the potential to improve both the self-employed scheme and the job scheme. I do not recognise the view that she takes at all. It is in the nature of these schemes to seek to be as comprehensive and swift as possible, which, I think I recall, was exactly the language used by the OECD in describing the Government's response.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Scotland has benefited from the broad shoulders of the United Kingdom, with well over £10 billion of resources coming to Scotland to help fight this pandemic, from the furlough scheme to Barnett consequential. Will the Minister commit to continue a UK-wide approach in tackling the pandemic, which will have to recognise that different parts of the United Kingdom will see recovery on different timescales and, of course, will see different sectors needing different levels of support?

Jesse Norman: My right hon. Friend is right. I defer to no one in my admiration for Scotland as a country and for its history and people. It is true that in this crisis, as in the crisis of 2007-08, there has been enormous benefit to Scotland from being embedded within a wider Union, where the collective security and financial

strength of all can be drawn on. In the case of Scotland, the self-employment scheme alone has 146,000 claims and the job scheme some 628,000 claims, and that amounts to an enormous package of UK Government support for the people in Scotland, and I am very proud of that.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): With more than 600,000 jobs lost between March and May, it would be nothing short of a social catastrophe to end the furlough scheme before businesses start rehiring. France and Germany are continuing their support for as long as it takes. With the right hon. Gentleman's Government denying Scotland the borrowing powers to take her own action—powers that even councils have—can he now see why Scots are concluding that Britain is not working and why support for independence continues to rise and rise?

Jesse Norman: I do not think that the Scots are concluding that at all. Any rational person looking at the position would understand that Scotland had been immensely strengthened by its relationship and its position within the United Kingdom, and rightly so, because of the hundreds of thousands of people who have been supported. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there is a serious concern about the economic effects of the pandemic, but it is a concern, as the OECD and others have recognised, that we are squarely meeting, and Scotland has been a huge beneficiary and I am sure that it will continue to be so.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): I thank the Minister and all his colleagues for protecting 13,400 furloughed jobs in my constituency, as well as for the £27 million in grant funding to 2,261 businesses. Does he agree that the best way of getting the Lincolnshire economy back on track is to reopen as many businesses as possible as quickly and as safely as possible?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is of course absolutely right. The whole point of the strategy that we have adopted is to cushion the immediate shock, protect the vulnerable, and then move as swiftly and safely as we can towards economic growth. As he says, we need businesses flourishing, functioning and working together as effectively as possible. The quicker we get that, the more we can support people back into jobs. The tailored approach that we have taken is designed to help them do that.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one thing all Members of the House could do is to encourage their constituents to support local independent businesses, such as those we have in Wantage, Didcot and everywhere else in the country, to give them the best chance of survival?

Jesse Norman: Of course I agree with my hon. Friend on that. One of the great sadnesses of this has been the extent to which it is often the smallest and most local businesses—the most independent—that are most adversely affected by the coronavirus.

As he will know, between our job retention scheme, bounce back loans and reliefs and tax exemptions, we have given a huge amount of support in that area, and we will continue to do what we can to support it.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): In my constituency, around 25% of the population, aged 16 to 64, are being furloughed or are receiving universal credit. The additional support for people on the self-employment scheme probably takes the figure to 30%. We recognise, therefore, the scale of the Government's intervention, but there are many freelancers on short-term contracts or on different ways of working for freelance industries who are not getting a penny, many of whom have a strong and detailed track record with HMRC, so the reverse engineering that took place with the main scheme could be applied to them. The Minister repeatedly keeps talking about the generosity of the scheme, which suggests no shift I assume. Will he be categorical now and tell us whether there is any hope for these forgotten freelancers?

Jesse Norman: What I have said is simply that international and national bodies recognise the comprehensiveness and the relative generosity of our schemes—[*Interruption.*] They have done that, so that is the fact of the matter. The point that the hon. Lady raises is one on which we continue to reflect. As I have said, we take this very seriously. We want to support all sections of the economy, including self-employed people who have not been able to qualify. There are, of course, other ways in which they may be able to qualify for support within the wide package of support that we have given, but the self-employment scheme at the moment is not one, in some cases, that they are able to use, and that is something on which we will continue to reflect.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): The latest figures show that almost 9 million jobs have been furloughed, including 12,500 in my own constituency—jobs that would undoubtedly have been lost. As we begin to rebuild and reopen our economy, will my right hon. Friend assure me that he will continue to support both businesses and workers as they transition away from Government schemes?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend points out, we are working very hard to protect people in employment. That is what the latest numbers recognise, with the employment number as opposed to the unemployment number. But we must be realistic about this. We are in the middle of a pandemic crisis and there will be further losses; we have to understand that. The key thing is to make sure that we are as robust, energetic and inclusive as we possibly can be in supporting people in employment and supporting them back into employment when they come out of the jobs market.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I thank the Financial Secretary very much for his help on many issues that we have brought to his attention. Will he further outline what steps have been taken to mitigate the scale of redundancies in manufacturing, with special reference to Bombardier and the aerospace industry? Will he agree to meet the working group to discuss this viable industry made up of many local businesses and suppliers, such as Bombardier in my own constituency of Strangford, to save thousands of jobs in the UK in the long term?

Jesse Norman: I fully recognise the strategic importance of Bombardier in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and, indeed, in Northern Ireland. I have visited it myself, and that is well understood. It would not be appropriate for me to talk about specific companies in terms of the support and assistance that we offer. However, as he will know, across Government we are in constant negotiation and discussion with many different sectors on many different concerns that they have, and we will continue to do that.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Like many small and medium-sized enterprises around the country, Copper Rivet Distillery in Medway transformed its business overnight during the crisis, working day and night to help with the provision of personal protective equipment, including sanitiser. Many of these small businesses will face economic hardship as the new normal arrives, with cheap and often subsidised imports. Will the Government be using their substantial buying power to consolidate our procurement spending on Britain's SME sector so that it can invest and compete internationally?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the really heartening things about the early phases of the crisis was precisely the response from distilleries in producing hand sanitiser. I was delighted to be able to make very quickly the changes to the tax regime that supported that. As we go forward, we will continue to review and seek to address the concerns that he raises. It is not by any means a straightforward matter, but the key thing is to continue to push, on a very wide variety of fronts, as rapidly and forcefully as we possibly can.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Many companies have used the job retention scheme to save cash while they planned redundancies, British Airways being one. BA has threatened over 40,000 staff with redundancy but about 30,000 would be rehired on vastly reduced terms and conditions. Last week I introduced a Bill to make that form of employment practice illegal to protect all employees. Does the Minister think it is fair that any employer should be allowed to make employees redundant from roles that are clearly not redundant and then rehire them on reduced pay—yes or no?

Jesse Norman: I will refrain from commenting on a specific situation; the hon. Gentleman has identified one. But I will say, having not been aware of it, that I will look at his Bill with great interest, and I thank him for drawing attention to it.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Bluewater in my constituency reopened its doors yesterday and did so in a cautious and responsible manner. It was fantastic to see so many shops there welcoming back customers for the first time. Does the Minister agree that centres like Bluewater should be praised not only for getting our economy back on track but for allowing us to get back to some form of normality?

Jesse Norman: I absolutely do think that. I pay particular tribute to shops, malls and shopping centres that go the extra mile to be particularly safe and careful, within

[*Jesse Norman*]

more than the spirit of the regulations, in ensuring that people can use them. I congratulate Bluewater on the extent to which it has done that. If that helps to communicate a wider sense of confidence in the ability to shop, then all the better.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Minister is actually giving quite comprehensive answers to most people in this Chamber, which makes it all the more striking how curt he was in replying to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). Let me have another try. Yesterday, 57 charities wrote to the Government urging them to pursue a green recovery, which could support at least 210,000 jobs, while a report from the Office for National Statistics has just said that vacancies are at a record low. I am not interested in hearing what the Minister did when he was an Energy Minister; I want to know what the strategy is now. What will he do now to ensure we build back better and that it is a green recovery?

Jesse Norman: Of course I have no interest in being curt—the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion had discussed green issues and the green recovery just before and we were picking up from that. I and my colleague the Exchequer Secretary, who is the lead Minister on this in the Treasury, remain extremely interested in what we can do to ensure a green recovery. I am obviously not going to announce actions from the Dispatch Box in response to an urgent question, but I can reassure the hon. Lady that I and my colleagues are giving a great deal of attention to these issues.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): My right hon. Friend is correct that the job retention scheme and the self-employed scheme are two of the successes of the Government's response to covid-19. He will also be aware that preserving as many of those jobs as possible when the schemes are withdrawn is a central and difficult economic task for the Government. To that end, can I urge him to put the full weight of the Treasury behind a move, as soon as it is as safe as possible, from a 2-metre to a 1-metre gap, because that is the single most important act we could take to preserve those jobs?

Jesse Norman: My right hon. Friend will be aware that this is a topic of great topicality. The Prime Minister has launched a review of this and within weeks the matter will be decided. I cannot go any further than that, but he will see the direction of travel quite soon.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab) [V]: I add my voice to those who are remembering Jo Cox today and continuing to celebrate her contribution.

I chair one of Britain's precious theatres, the Theatre Royal Stratford East. Like theatres up and down the country, we are only surviving because of the furlough scheme. For as long as any social distancing measures are in place, theatres simply cannot put on performances. Even with a 1-metre distancing rule, only one in four seats can be either marketed or occupied. If we are not allowed to furlough beyond October, our theatres cannot survive and will close forever. What will the Minister do to save our theatres?

Jesse Norman: I massively welcome the right hon. Lady's support for and chairmanship of the Stratford East. It is a phenomenal theatre, as anyone will know who has acted in Joan Littlewood's theatre workshop or "Oh! What a Lovely War". It is a foundational place. She will be aware that many theatre companies have benefited from some of the schemes already launched and that the Government have already made a substantial commitment of support to this sector through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, but of course we continue to look closely at it, and it is right that she raised the issue, on behalf not just of the Stratford East and other theatres but of performing art spaces more widely, because the problem with coronavirus is not just the safety aspect; it is also the fear aspect that goes with a pandemic crisis of this kind.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Because of the UK's support, 11,700 jobs in Moray were furloughed and 2,600 self-employed benefited from a share of £7.8 million, but a Scottish Government report has identified Moray as the area in Scotland potentially at risk of the highest number of job losses following this pandemic. What will the UK Government do with the Scottish Government to help businesses and individuals in Moray in the weeks and months ahead?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will be aware, we have always taken Moray very seriously. We have made a significant investment in the oil and gas sector, from which it is a massive beneficiary, and have supported the city of Aberdeen. We have been very engaged indeed and will continue to look at the sectoral and geographical impacts of the pandemic, but I am grateful to him for highlighting the enormous impact in his constituency of our work so far.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): We remember our dear friend Jo Cox today and deeply miss her voice in this House. She was a powerful voice for those who desperately need our support.

Can the Minister commit urgently to support the 1 million people who have fallen through the gaps in provision? The provision that the Government have made is welcome, but we need a focus and a commitment to support the new starters, self-employed and freelancers, as identified by the Treasury Committee, and we need that commitment today. With the spectre of 9 million people facing unemployment, including 1 million young people, what assessment has the Minister made of the number of additional jobs that are likely to be lost with employers being required to pay 20% of employees' wages?

Jesse Norman: In response to the latter point, we think that a graduated return to employers paying for their own staff and being subject to the usual economic laws of supply and demand is an essential precondition for a proper economic recovery and, therefore, for the sustainability of not just jobs but the economy as a whole. In regard to the wider issues, it would be absurd for me to offer any response from the Dispatch Box to the Treasury Committee report that was filed yesterday, but as I have said to the Chair, we will look very carefully at it and the issues that it raises.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I thank the Jo Cox Foundation for all it does.

My constituency is dependent on tourism and hospitality, a sector that was first to be hit by the crisis and is likely to be last to open up. Will the Minister confirm that his Department is looking at new additional measures to support businesses, such as Church Bay Cottages and Catch 22, that have worked so hard to support their community at this exceptional time?

Jesse Norman: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing to the House's attention and mine the delights of Ynys Môn. As a Herefordian, I am as acutely aware of the importance of tourism to many of our most beautiful areas as she is, but we continue to look at the sectoral inputs, as I have described. In fact, as she will be aware, tourism, hospitality and leisure have already received quite a substantial amount of additional support from the Government. We continue to keep the situation under review.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) [V]: [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately, Jamie Stone is not audible, so I call Sir Graham Brady.

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): As businesses get back to work, there is a cap on the number of employees who can be furloughed. Would it not make more sense to cap the number of hours or the total cost to the Treasury for each firm instead?

Jesse Norman: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Let me reflect upon it.

Mr Speaker: We will try again with Jamie Stone.

Jamie Stone: Further to the previous questions, when the highlands tourism industry eventually reopens, it is likely that very few businesses will make enough money to see them through the dark winter months. In the spirit of the Minister's previous answers, would he agree to meet me to discuss how the furlough scheme and other support schemes can be fine-tuned to make sure that those businesses survive to next year?

Jesse Norman: Nothing could silence the hon. Gentleman's voice; I am glad to have been able to hear his question. I would be very happy to talk to him. I suspect that there are several hundred miles between us, but I will make sure that we find some way to talk to each other.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on getting through the entire UQ without making a single commitment, although he has made many observations. As a member of the Treasury Committee, I look forward to the Government's formal response to our report on the 1 million people who are currently missing out on the Government's schemes. Will he see if he can at least make a commitment before today's UQ ends? What is he doing as a Treasury Minister to ensure that, as we move from the acute stage of the pandemic to furlough schemes beginning to end,

the furlough scheme is not remembered as a waiting room for unemployment rather than the job saving scheme that it should have been?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady will recall that the topic of the UQ is the job retention scheme and the self-employment scheme, and their relation to the UK economy in the face of covid, and that is what I have focused on. Of course, as a former member of the Treasury Committee myself for five years, I will take its report very seriously, as she suggests. In many ways, it may well be that people will look back on the job retention scheme and conclude, as the shadow Chancellor has, not only that it was considerably better than any possible alternative or inaction, but that it saved an enormous number of jobs.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): The figures released last week showed just how much of an impact the Treasury's measures are having. In Hyndburn and Haslingden 11,200 people benefited from the furlough scheme and 3,300 claims were made under the self-employment income support scheme, saving so many jobs and livelihoods in my constituency. As we begin to reopen our economy, will the Minister assure me that he will continue to support both people and businesses in the difficult months ahead?

Jesse Norman: Of course my hon. Friend is right that there will be difficult months ahead. There is no doubt about that. We specifically gave forward guidance on the two schemes in order to give people the reassurance that there would be that tailored support in place for a number of further months, and we will continue to keep the situation under review.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): As we know, regional disparities will occur as a result of this economic downturn. I am proud to say that Labour Mayors and local authorities, in Sheffield and up and down the country, are making regional plans to bring more people out of unemployment. They will not be able to deliver that if they do not have sufficient powers and resources. Has the Minister met local authority leaders, and will he make those powers and resources available?

Jesse Norman: That is a very important question. Of course it is not just Labour Mayors; there are plenty of Conservative Mayors of cities who are—[*Interruption.*] Well, Andy Street for one. They have been taking a lead in this area too. One of the great things of which this Government and their predecessors can be proud is the extent to which devolution permitted those mayoralties to come into being. The hon. Lady is right about that. As she will be aware, we have made a significant amount of support available already to local authorities as spending bodies. It is for Mayors to work with them, as well as with the substantial amount of infrastructure money that was made available through things such as the transforming cities fund, to help to create an integrated response to the coronavirus crisis at local level.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Given the amount of work that continues to take place on making workplaces covid secure, I wonder whether the Minister thinks that we need to revisit the "work from home if you can" message. Is that under review in the context of the

[Steve Brine]

furlough scheme being phased out through its taper? If so, on what sort of timetable does he envisage that being done?

Jesse Norman: As a former Health Minister, my hon. Friend will understand very well the importance of this issue, and I thank him for raising it. This question is very much one that is being discussed across Government at the moment. One of the few silver linings to this crisis has been the understanding that, actually, the nature of work is changing as between home and work. One of the things that has not received much notice but I am intensely proud of is the way in which HMRC has been able to organise itself into much more of a disaggregated place in order to support from home all the services that it continues to deliver.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Government's U-turn a moment ago on school meals and any role the Treasury might have played in that decision. Given its devastating impact on jobs, the wider economy and, indeed, Treasury receipts, and as the rest of Europe is opening up, may we please have a U-turn on the Government's ridiculous quarantine policy?

Jesse Norman: I am afraid I am not qualified to comment on the ridiculousness or no of the quarantine policy. It remains in place in order to protect people, and it will be for colleagues to make a decision about that in due course.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Under this Government we have record numbers of women in work in our country, and under the lockdown around 140,000 women—maybe more—will have become pregnant. We are already hearing that some businesses are routinely making pregnant women redundant, despite the law and the furloughing scheme. What message does the Treasury have for those businesses?

Jesse Norman: Clearly, that is an abhorrent practice. My right hon. Friend is right to highlight it, to the extent that it is going on, and, as she says, it is illegal. I am very proud of the support the Government have given to women, as she has said, including through the national living wage and many other matters. I am also pleased that we have been able to make sure that the structure of the jobs scheme goes over enough years so that any impact on maternity is mitigated, so that those women are not affected, or are affected as little as possible, by the decisions they may have made—

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The economic outlook is predicted to be 10 times worse than the 2008 global financial crash. In this House, we all know the devastating impact that crash had, but this could be 10 times worse. What urgent measures can be taken to protect people in the creative sector, thousands of whom have been in touch with me, as the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green, desperate to save themselves from penury in the coming months?

Jesse Norman: We do not know how much worse this will be than the 2007-08 crash, if indeed it is worse, and over what period of time we are talking about. We can

be more precise about the causation, because the crash was caused by overleveraging in the banking sector and so the UK was hit harder by the crisis than other countries as a result. That was a result of Government inaction. We have touched on the position of people in the creative sectors and there is not much more I can add in the time available, but I am very supportive of the situation and we are trying to assist them.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The Select Committee on Transport's report on aviation has noted that British Airways is looking to make almost a third of its workforce redundant, while taking the job retention scheme for more than half of its employees and at the same time looking to invest £1 billion in a new airline. Will the Minister consider changing the job retention scheme so that companies cannot behave in this manner and rip off the taxpayer at the same time?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend will know that I cannot possibly comment on any specific circumstances, but I recognise the work he has done in putting this so squarely in the public mind.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I thank the Treasury team for the incredibly agile and decisive support they have given to workers and businesses during this pandemic—across my constituency, we are very grateful. As part of the transition to the new covid economy, will the Minister consider supporting a network of innovative technology accelerators, in Telford and across the country, to create jobs and new start-ups? Will he meet me to discuss this further?

Jesse Norman: I am very interested in my hon. Friend's suggestion. It is not squarely a Treasury matter—it is more an industrial strategy and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy matter—but I would be delighted to meet her on the topic.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: May I associate myself with my many colleagues in remembering our dear lost friend Jo Cox today? On 11 May, the Prime Minister told us:

"If people cannot...get the childcare that they need, plainly they are impeded from going to work, and they must be defended and protected on that basis."—[*Official Report*, 11 May 2020; Vol. 676, c. 29.]

A survey by Pregnant Then Screwed shows that 71% of women trying to return to work in the next three months cannot do so because of childcare. So will the Minister set out exactly what he is going to do to protect and defend those women from redundancy and discrimination in the workplace?

Jesse Norman: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I have not seen the survey that she describes, but I will look at it and discuss it with the Minister for Equalities, my colleague the Exchequer Secretary. Of course there can be no shying away from this issue and if it is as the hon. Lady describes, we will look closely at it. I thank her for that.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con) [V]: I thank the Minister and all his team for the extraordinary work they have done to support our economy during the first phase of this crisis. As we look

towards the future and our recovery, may I ask him to continue to make bold and innovative interventions in our economy to protect as many jobs and businesses as possible, in both Basildon and Thurrock?

Jesse Norman: I almost did not recognise my hon. Friend with his new coronavirus growth, but I very much accept and recognise the point he makes. I thank him for it, and we will continue to work hard in this area.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Aviation and associated businesses create stable jobs and economic growth in Luton. Coronavirus will impact the industry for the foreseeable future and recovery is going to be much longer. Does the Minister recognise that replicating the French Government's commitment to ensuring that short-term work schemes and support are available for longer—for, say, two years—would support those long-term affected sectors, retain key skills in those industries and avoid redundancies?

Jesse Norman: We are of course looking closely at other countries to see if they are doing things from which we can learn and benefit. I would have some doubts about a scheme that went on as long as that precisely because we need to return businesses and people working in them to normality as swiftly and safely as we possibly can. This might have the effect of counteracting that, but the point is well made and we will continue to review these alternative arrangements.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Many of my constituents, such as those working in the creative industries, navigate between self-employment and PAYE—working, yet not qualifying for either scheme. Given that we are extending our support schemes, will the Minister look into how we can support those who, due to nimble working practices as part of a flexible workforce, miss out on both schemes?

Jesse Norman: I recognise that there are some people in that situation, and it is very unfortunate that they may not be able to qualify for either scheme. To be clear, that would mean that they could not have been on a PAYE scheme within the past three years, as described by the rules, or indeed qualify under the self-employment scheme for other reasons. However, we take the point that my hon. Friend makes. We have discussed this in detail and I have explained to the House, again in some detail, why it is hard to reach those people, but we continue to look at that very closely.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: Today's unemployment data shows that 11,400 across Denton and Reddish are furloughed. There are 3,950 claimants—2,000 higher than in March—and 800 of those are now under 24. In Greater Manchester, Diane Modahl has been appointed as chair of the new young persons taskforce, which will help to develop a young persons guarantee, but what more can the Government do nationally to help ensure that our young people are not left behind?

Jesse Norman: Again, I almost did not recognise the hon. Gentleman—I congratulate him on his coronavirus hair growth. I think the point that he raises is absolutely right. We are of course looking at the differential impact

of the pandemic across the age spectrum, as well as regionally and across other dimensions. It has been well recognised and recommended by many that energetic action in the labour market to support young people and those making a transition between one job and another, or going back into work, will be very much something for us to focus on over the next few years.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Tourism businesses have been under immense pressure. In particular, smaller hospitality businesses, as in my constituency, need certainty to be able to survive. While I welcome the introduction of part-time furlough for workers, for these businesses to reopen on 4 July, some staff must be taken off furlough now. With part-time furloughing not starting until July, will my right hon. Friend confirm whether there is to be a phased unlocking of the industry, or can part-time furlough commence sooner?

Jesse Norman: No, the rules are as laid out in the guidance on gov.uk. They have a start date at the end of the month and we are in the final three-week coronavirus job retention scheme period, but as my hon. Friend says, we are very much hoping for and working towards a much wider reopening after or around the first week of July. That will potentially be a critical move forward for the country in its response to the pandemic.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): The Chancellor stated that his priority was

“to support people, protect jobs and businesses through this crisis”,

yet businesses are on a financial cliff edge. Given today's employment and vacancy rates, and the OECD prediction that the UK is likely to suffer one of the worst slumps in the developed world, does the Minister share my concern that ending support schemes too early will simply push many off a precipice?

Jesse Norman: Of course we want to ensure that there is a phased return to normality. That is what the delay and the extension of the two schemes is designed to do, so we do recognise that concern. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the OECD has predicted the strongest bounce back for this country. That may well be because of our extremely flexible labour markets, from which I hope we continue to benefit as we come out of this dreadful situation.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I am sure that the whole House will welcome the remarkably stable unemployment figures this morning, which are testament to the huge amount of support that the Treasury has put into retaining employment. May I urge my right hon. Friend to put the same amount of effort into creating jobs during the recovery, including encouraging inward investment and tech hubs—including some in Sevenoaks?

Jesse Norman: Tech hubs in Sevenoaks are my regular reflection; I thank my hon. Friend very much for her question. Of course, she is absolutely right. As we think about a more sustainable, greener and more productive economy, we need to be thinking about how our whole industrial strategy and posture will change, and I have

[Jesse Norman]

no doubt that it will involve continued investment and support for technology in all its manifestations across the UK.

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 will now suspend the House for five minutes.

1.40 pm

Sitting suspended.

Global Britain

1.46 pm

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): Mr Speaker, before I begin, I am sure the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the memory of Jo Cox, who was cruelly murdered four years ago today. Her sister, Kim Leadbeater, spoke for us all when she urged everyone to remember Jo by pulling together with “compassion and kindness”.

I was concerned to learn that the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) is now in hospital: we all send her our best wishes.

With permission, I will make a statement about the ambitions of a global Britain and the lessons of the covid-19 pandemic. We are living through a daily demonstration of how events on the far side of the world influence not only British security and prosperity, but something as elemental as the state of our health, and whether we can go to work or go shopping. This crisis offers vivid proof of the seminal importance of international engagement and exactly why our country must perform its global role. I have begun the biggest review of our foreign, defence and development policy since the end of the cold war, designed to maximise our influence and integrate all the strands of our international effort. The overriding aim is to bring this country’s strengths and expertise to bear on the world’s biggest problems, seizing the opportunities of Britain’s presidency of the G7 next year and the UN climate change conference—COP26—which we will host in Glasgow.

The UK possesses the third biggest aid budget and diplomatic network in the world: we owe it to our people to make best use of these assets, which scarcely any of our peers can match. The British taxpayer has a right to expect that we will achieve the maximum value for every pound that we spend. One cardinal lesson of the pandemic is that distinctions between diplomacy and overseas development are artificial and outdated. For instance, to protect ourselves against another calamity, the UK will need to work alongside our friends to strengthen international bodies such as the World Health Organisation, and help vulnerable countries to improve their health systems and achieve greater resilience. It makes no sense to ask whether it amounts to aid or foreign policy: they are one and the same endeavour, designed to achieve the same goals, which are right in themselves and serve our national interest.

On 4 June, I chaired a virtual summit of the global vaccine alliance, which raised enough money to immunise 300 million children. I doubt whether any other occasion will save more lives, avoid more suffering, or produce a better example of the good this country can do by its international engagement, in the true and broad sense, alongside our friends. Yet today, as anybody who has any experience of the matter will know, a dividing line between aid and foreign policy runs through our whole system, with our Department for International Development working independently from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and our aid budget parcelled out between different arms of Whitehall.

DFID outspends the Foreign Office more than four times over, yet no single decision maker in either Department is able to unite our efforts or take a comprehensive overview. We give as much aid to Zambia as we do to Ukraine, although the latter is vital for European security,

and we give 10 times as much aid to Tanzania as we do to the six countries of the western Balkans, which are acutely vulnerable to Russian meddling. Regardless of the merits of those decisions, no single Department is currently empowered to judge whether they make sense or not, so we tolerate an inherent risk of our left and right hands working independently.

Faced with the crisis today and the opportunities that lie ahead, we have a responsibility to ask whether our current arrangements, dating back to 1997, still maximise British influence. Those well-intentioned decisions of 23 years ago were right for their time. They paved the way for Britain to meet the UN target of spending 0.7% of national income on aid—a goal that was achieved by the coalition Government in 2013, that has been maintained ever since, including this year, and that remains our commitment. Yet those judgments date from a relatively benign era when China's economy was still much smaller than Italy's and the west was buoyed by victory in the cold war.

We must now strengthen our position in an intensely competitive world by making sensible changes, so I have decided to merge DFID with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to create a new Department: the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. This will unite our aid with our diplomacy and bring them together in our international effort.

DFID has amassed world-class expertise and all of its people can take pride in how they have helped to transform the lives of hundreds of millions of people around the world. To select but a few examples, they have striven to protect millions of children across the world from polio, which is now on the verge of global eradication; they have paved the way for millions of girls to attend school for the first time in countries such as Pakistan, as I have seen for myself; they have done their utmost to ease the suffering in Syria; and in Sierra Leone they were central to the defeat of an outbreak of the Ebola virus. All that amounts to the finest demonstration of British values, following in the great tradition of the country that ended the slave trade and resisted totalitarianism.

It is precisely that ambition, vision and expertise that will now be at the heart of a new Department, taking forward the work of UK aid to reduce poverty, which will remain central to our mission. The Foreign Secretary will be empowered to decide which countries receive or cease to receive British aid, while delivering a single UK strategy for each country, overseen by the National Security Council, which I chair. Those strategies will be implemented on the ground by the relevant UK ambassador, who will lead all the Government's work in the host country. In that, we are following the examples of Australia, Canada and New Zealand, all of which run their development programmes from their Foreign Ministries. We will align other British assets overseas, including our trade commissioners, who will come under the authority of the UK ambassador, bringing more coherence to our international presence.

Amid this pandemic, the House may ask whether this is the right moment to reorganise Whitehall, but I must say that in reality this crisis has already imposed fundamental changes on the way that we operate. If there is one further lesson, it is that a whole-of-Government approach, getting maximum value for the British taxpayer, is just as important abroad as it is at home. This is exactly the moment when we must mobilise every one of

our national assets, including our aid budget and expertise, to safeguard British interests and values overseas. The best possible instrument for doing that will be a new Department charged with using all the tools of British influence to seize the opportunities ahead. I therefore commend this statement to the House.

1.55 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for early sight of his statement and for the telephone call we had earlier today. As he has noted, today is the fourth anniversary of the tragic murder of our friend and colleague Jo Cox. I do not need to remind the House of Jo's commitment and dedication to international aid, or how highly she valued DFID as a power for good. I am sure the whole House will want to send best wishes to Jo's friends and family on this difficult day.

I join the Prime Minister in sending our heartfelt best wishes to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan). To her friends, her family and her colleagues here and in Scotland, it must be very distressing.

We should see this statement for what it is: the tactics of pure distraction. Jo Cox would have seen right through this. A few hours ago, the Office for National Statistics figures showed a fall of 600,000 people on the payroll. The economy contracted by 20% in April, and we could be on the verge of a return to mass unemployment—something we have not seen for a generation. We also have one of the highest death tolls from covid-19 in the world, with at least 41,700 deaths, and the number is likely to be far greater than that. In the last hour, the Government have U-turned on free school meals. I put on record my thanks to Marcus Rashford for the part that he has played in this victory for the 1.3 million children affected. This statement is intended to deflect attention from all of that, and I assure the Prime Minister that it will not work.

The Prime Minister spoke about global Britain, and I want to take that head on. I passionately believe in Britain. I am proud of this country. I want to see it playing a leading global role again—a role that we frankly have not played in the past decade. I want to see Britain as a moral force for good in the world and a force for global justice and co-operation, leading the world on global security, leading the global search for a vaccine and leading the global fight against poverty, climate change and gender inequality. We do not achieve that by abolishing one of the best performing and most important Departments—a Department that has done so much to tackle poverty and injustice.

Labour created DFID, and I am proud of that. Until now, there has been cross-party consensus about DFID. As the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), the former Secretary of State for International Development, said last year:

“DFID is the most effective and respected engine of development anywhere in the world, and a huge soft power asset for Britain.”

Today, he said that the Prime Minister's announcement would mean, in his words,

“at a stroke, destroying a key aspect of Global Britain.”

I have worked with both the FCO and DFID across the world on rule of law projects and anti-corruption projects, and I have seen at first hand the value of DFID's work globally.

[Keir Starmer]

The Prime Minister says that the 0.7% will not be eroded, but he will understand our scepticism. Will he confirm that the full DFID budget will be ring-fenced in the new Department? Will there be no loss of DFID staff numbers and expertise? How much will this reorganisation cost in the middle of this crisis?

Abolishing DFID diminishes Britain's place in the world. There is no rationale for making this statement today. The Prime Minister should stop these distractions and get on with the job of tackling the health and economic crisis we currently face.

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. and learned Gentleman does not want a statement in the House about an important Whitehall reform, then I think he misrepresents the views of the House. It is important that we should make these statements, and I am very proud of what we are doing.

Anybody who has any experience of the matter will know that at the moment, for the UK overseas, we are less than the sum of our parts. If you travel to important foreign capitals, where we need to make our points to our friends and partners, you have UK diplomats saying one thing and then finding that the message from overseas aid—from UK aid and from DFID—is different. That undermines the coherence of our foreign policy, and the right hon. and learned Gentleman will know that very well. It is absolutely vital that we have a coherent, joined-up message for our international partners, and that we speak with one voice.

At a time when the UK is spending £15 billion on overseas aid—0.7% of our GDP—I think the British people will want to know what we are doing right now to make that spending more efficient, and they will want to know what we are doing to ensure that the UK is supporting the campaign to develop a vaccine against coronavirus. I am very proud of what the UK is doing. I think it is fantastic that we secured \$8.8 billion at the recent summit to develop a vaccine, and I am very proud of the work that DFID is doing. And yes of course we will make sure that we guarantee the DFID budget, but what will now happen within the new Department is that every single person working in that new Whitehall super-Department—the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office—will now have all the idealism and sense of mission that comes from DFID, but also the understanding of the need to project UK values, UK policies and UK interests overseas. This is a long overdue reform and the right hon. and learned Gentleman should support it.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I should like to associate myself with the Prime Minister's comments on Jo Cox and our colleague, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan). I very much welcome his statement today. Can he confirm that this is a merger, not a takeover, and that it has the potential to enhance the role of international development in our foreign policy? Will he also confirm that this Government's commitment to invest in and support the poorest parts of our world remains as strong as ever?

The Prime Minister: Yes, it certainly does; I am grateful to my hon. Friend. What is actually happening, of course, is that DFID and the FCO are now joining

together to become a new Whitehall super-Department for international affairs, which will be of huge benefit to our ability to project Britain's sense of mission about overseas aid. For too long, frankly, UK overseas aid has been treated as some giant cashpoint in the sky that arrives without any reference to UK interests, to the values that the UK wishes to express or to the diplomatic, political and commercial priorities of the Government of the UK.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) [V]: I associate myself with the remarks by the Prime Minister and the leader of the Labour party on the murder of Jo Cox four years ago. That was a day that none of us, rightly, will ever forget. I also thank the Prime Minister and the leader of the Labour party for their comments about my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan). I know that she is grateful for all the support that is being shown towards her.

Prior to the Prime Minister coming to the House today, the contents of his statement were shrouded in secrecy. We now know why. Unfortunately, it is now crystal clear what is happening. The Prime Minister and this UK Government are using the cover of a terrible pandemic to rip apart the UK's structures for international development and humanitarian aid. At a time when we should be standing with the world's poorest and acting as a beacon of hope, the Prime Minister is playing politics. Let me be clear: the Government are blatantly using challenging domestic circumstances as an excuse to wind down essential aid for the world's poorest. This is shameful, and it is not in our name. We are talking about people burdened with suffering every single day, and on top of that, they too are dealing with this terrible pandemic. If these are the values of global Britain, they do not represent the values of the vast majority of people in Scotland, and we want no part in it.

In taking this decision on DFID, this UK Government are once again ignoring expert advice. Last December, more than 100 charities specialising in humanitarian relief, girls' education, global health, clean water and sanitation strongly warned against today's announcement. They warned that merging DFID would be "turning our backs on the world's poorest people".

Only last week, an interim report from the International Development Committee said that the merger would erode accountability and shift funds from poverty reduction. Let us start with the most basic question first—and let us not have the usual bluster, Prime Minister: answer the question for once. Will he confirm that he has read the interim report by the International Development Committee on the proposed merger? Will he also confirm which aid charities he consulted before making this statement today?

DFID employs around 600 people in East Kilbride. Will the Prime Minister guarantee that all those jobs are secure and will stay in East Kilbride? On 8 June, my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) wrote to the Secretary of State for International Development asking why the Department was suspending all DFID projects except for a handful of projects that had been identified by the Government as a priority. Will he confirm whether all those suspended projects are now being scrapped?

The Prime Minister: I must respectfully tell the right hon. Gentleman that the policies that we are enacting, for which he expresses such horror—the creation of this new Whitehall super-Department—reflects what the vast majority of the OECD already does. I think I am right in saying that only one in 29 OECD countries does anything different from what we are proposing.

We are integrating our foreign policy and our massive development throw. We are going to increase it. We are going to make sure that we do even more to tackle poverty and deprivation around the world and to tackle the under-education of women and girls around the world, which is an absolute disgrace. We are going to use this powerful new Whitehall Department to do that—to give the UK extra throw weight and megawattage. That is what we need. At the moment, we are less than the sum of our parts.

As for East Kilbride, that was the height of absurdity. The right hon. Gentleman says he wants to break up the United Kingdom, yet he wants us to keep jobs in East Kilbride. Of course we are going to keep those jobs in East Kilbride. Of course we are going to support the work of those fantastic people in East Kilbride. He, by his policies, would throw that away.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am very glad that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has been listening to a few of the things I have said over the last three years. Bringing strategic alignment to foreign policy is something that many of us have been calling for. I welcome the statement. As he has already said, it brings us into line with CANZUK countries. My Australian opposite number, to whom I spoke only an hour or so ago, praised the decision, as did my Canadian opposite number. It also brings us into line with Norway and Denmark—two countries very well-known for delivering effective aid programmes, not just in their own national interests but in the interests of the people they serve. I welcome the decision.

May I ask, however, that the Prime Minister reinforces the commitment that this is to deliver the technical expertise that DFID has demonstrated over 23 years? Just as we would not ask an ambassador to command a battle group, we would not ask somebody untrained to manage the handling or delivery of the millions of pounds that are so well and so effectively spent by people in East Kilbride and around the world on our behalf.

The Prime Minister: Absolutely. I am glad that, with his experience of foreign affairs and development, and all that he has seen around the world, my hon. Friend supports this initiative. It is absolutely vital that, in the new Department, people are multiskilled and, as I said just now to the House, that people in the Department for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs understand how development can be a fantastic tool for the promotion not just of human rights and the tackling of poverty around the world but of the values and interests of this country at the same time. That, I think, is what the people of this country want to see.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab) [V]: Prime Minister, I am incredulous that you are going down this path. With a single stroke, you are getting rid of our soft power and our international standing, at a time when the development world needs us to stand together and

show real leadership. Let me fact-check the Prime Minister's statement. Aid and foreign policy are very different; one is humanitarian, one is political. ODA spend is embedded in four Acts of Parliament specifically to alleviate poverty, not to safeguard British interests.

DFID is the Department with oversight. The International Development Committee's report of last week shows that it is the most effective and transparent at delivering aid, and the FCO has been criticised in that regard. So can the Prime Minister please explain: how will ODA spend now be scrutinised and protected; what is the timetable of this hostile takeover; and can he please detail the costs of this restructure at what must be the most inappropriate time?

The Prime Minister: Parliament will of course have the ability to scrutinise the new Department, and I imagine that Parliament will wish to set up a new Committee to do so. The timing of the change, as I said, is September, when we expect to have it all complete. I think, frankly, the hon. Lady is being, and I think many Opposition Members have been, far too negative about this. This is an opportunity for us to get value from the huge investments that we make in overseas spending; to make sure that that spending continues to tackle poverty and deprivation around the world; and to put the tackling of poverty and deprivation at the very heart—think of that: at the very heart—of UK foreign policy. That is something that I think Opposition Members should rejoice at.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I have long called for Britain to have a stronger, more authoritarian voice on the international stage as a force for good, but I have also called for a grand strategy, linking not only what the Foreign Office does and DFID does, but also Trade and Defence, to create a grand strategy and international outlook. I have also called for better strategic oversight of DFID's spending, moving away from the archaic ODA laws, which are now out of date.

I am concerned about the timing of this, because there is an enduring emergency that must be the Government's priority, and the Prime Minister himself mentioned the defence, security and foreign policy review, which was designed to understand what our Whitehall architecture should be, in understanding what our vision, our outlook, our place in the world should be and aspire to be. Surely, that should come first.

Can the Prime Minister also confirm that, with GDP expected to fall, and the 2% of GDP target for defence now going to be obsolete, there will be no real-terms cuts in the defence budget?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. He and I have discussed these matters many times and I think he is basically right that we do need to have an integrated strategy; we do need to have an integrated approach, and that is why this Government inaugurated the biggest, most fundamental integrated review of our foreign, security and defence policy since the cold war.

We are having this discussion now because we need to get going. Yes, it is absolutely right that we face a crisis now, but we also face a post-covid world, when the UK will need to be able to speak with one, powerful voice on the international stage, in which our idealistic ambitions for development are wholly integrated with our views on foreign policy. The UK will speak therefore all the

[*The Prime Minister*]

more powerfully for that. This is the position adopted by the vast majority of countries in the OECD, as I say—I think all but one of 29 pursue this approach. It is the right reform at the right time; I believe the House should support it.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Here in Britain we have companies with great brands and great products, and there has never been a more important time to promote them overseas and in emerging markets. So can the Prime Minister ensure that the new Department will maintain the same level of global political and economic influence that was developed under DFID, while maximising opportunities for UK exporters?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I will, and I think it is only fair that UK exporters and UK companies should get a proper hearing from this Department. I do not know about hon. Members around the House, but many a time I have been asked why on earth such-and-such a water sanitising product, or whatever it happened to be, did not get a proper hearing—did not get a chance for support from the UK ODA budget. Now, we want to have entirely fair procurement. We do not wish to see taxpayers' money wasted, but it is also vital that where the UK can do great things around the world, whether in clean technology, zero-carbon energy generation or whatever, the UK producers should get a fair crack of the whip.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister on the late Jo Cox and the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan).

Britain's international aid should have one overriding purpose—to help the world's poorest. Confusing that objective for Britain's aid budget with other foreign and security policy objectives is a massive step backwards. When the world's poorest are exposed to the worst pandemic for a century, why has the Prime Minister chosen this moment to step back from Britain's leadership in the fight against global poverty? Is not the Leader of the Opposition right—this is an appalling version of distraction politics?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely not, because now is exactly the moment when we need to intensify and magnify Britain's voice abroad and to make sure that when we make our points in other countries about tackling poverty, Her Majesty's ambassador in that country is listened to with the attention that is due to the person who commands the whole panoply of our foreign policy. That is vital for our success, and that is what we are going to achieve.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on maintaining his reforming agenda. Can he reassure the House that this is an opportunity to drive the UK's interests globally and to protect the most vulnerable around the world? He mentioned the UK's presidency of the G7. Does he agree that this is an opportunity to play a leading role in international organisations such as the OECD, the World Health Organisation and the World Trade Organisation?

The Prime Minister: Yes. Next year, the UK takes up the chairmanship of the G7, and we have the COP26 climate change summit. Our voice in those proceedings will be greatly magnified by having a single, powerful voice for the projection of the UK view overseas. This is a big step forward for global Britain.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): Northern Ireland wants to play its full part with the rest of the United Kingdom in promoting this country overseas, and we are proud of what the United Kingdom has done across the world. As Northern Ireland approaches its centenary next year, will the Prime Minister assure me that whether it is free trade agreements, promoting the United Kingdom as a whole through our diplomatic missions, or drawing on the expertise of people from Northern Ireland in providing UK aid overseas, we will be able to play our full part in these new arrangements?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course, I can give my right hon. Friend that assurance. Northern Ireland will play a full part not just in these arrangements but, as he fought for, in all the free trade deals that we do.

Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and his commitment to our continued effort in terms of international aid. As he may know, just last week the World Bank reported that some 100 million people could be driven into extreme poverty because of the covid-19 crisis. Many developing countries' economies are already being hit hard, with falling remittances and falling investment. I know that many are also concerned about increasing talk of protectionism in advanced economies, including by some people in this country. Will he take this opportunity to commit Britain to fighting protectionism in all its forms, because trade is as important as aid?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely. My right hon. Friend makes a profoundly important point. There is a risk that some countries may seek to return to protectionism—to an autarchic, beggar-my-neighbour approach. That is not the way of the United Kingdom. Of course, we want to build up our own manufacturing capabilities, to make sure that we have the resilience in our economy when crises hit, but we also depend wholly on free and fair trade, and that is what we will fight for.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP) [V]: International aid is about assisting people who are living in unimaginable poverty. The Prime Minister's answers today have been massively concerning. Will the priority of the new Department be to help the most vulnerable people in the world or to increase the UK's voice abroad?

The Prime Minister: It will of course do both. Let me just explain to the hon. Lady: it is no use a British diplomat one day going in to see the leader of a country and urging him not to cut the head off his opponent and to do something for democracy in his country, if the next day another emanation of the British Government is going to arrive with a cheque for £250 million. We have to speak with one voice; we must project the UK overseas in a consistent and powerful way, and that is what we are going to do.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): So long as the kingdom and this House resemble a stunt by the “1984” junior anti-sex league, the recovery necessary to sustain the Prime Minister’s global ambition, and indeed the £15 billion of international development aid, will evade us; surely a yard is more than enough?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend invites me to comment on the social distancing rules, and he is wholly right that we will continue to review those rules. I am determined to make life as easy as possible for our retailers and our hospitality industry, but we must defeat this virus, as I am sure he knows and I am sure the people of this country understand. We are making great progress as a country: the numbers of deaths have massively come down; the number of new hospital admissions has massively come down. We continue to make progress, but we must make sure that we get the virus fully under control before we make the change my right hon. Friend wants.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): In his statement, the Prime Minister said that

“a dividing line between aid and foreign policy runs through our whole system,”

but back in 1994, when that dividing line did not exist, we ended up with the Pergau dam scandal, when we poured billions of pounds of taxpayers’ money into a scheme to win a foreign trade deal on arms. That led to the introduction of the International Development Act 2002, to outlaw linking aid to foreign policy. Can the Prime Minister give us a guarantee that that is not his objective?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right; there was a scandal involving the Pergau dam, and he and I remember it vividly. It was wrong that huge sums were given in aid for a project that did not have a good business case, but the International Development Act protects us from that kind of mistake and that kind of approach, and we will not take that approach. Let me stress: this is not a return to the idea of tied aid. It is very important that the House understands that. This is about coherence and projecting our mission abroad; it about projecting the UK abroad.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): In combining these two Departments, does my right hon. Friend share my ambition that global Britain can be a world leader in new clean technologies such as fusion and quantum and hydrogen technology in the life sciences—and, as today we celebrate Sussex Day, also the export of English sparkling wine, creating thousands of high-quality, well-paid jobs in growth industries?

The Prime Minister: Yes. My hon. Friend is absolutely right in what he says about fusion research, where we lead the world at Culham, and he is right in what he says about vaccines and about hydrogen, and indeed we also lead the world in satellite technology, and of course he is completely correct in what he says about Sussex wines, which are the world’s—or among the world’s—finest.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is the captain of the ship of state as we navigate the perilous waters of Brexit, of covid and of civil unrest, and his priority is to rearrange the deckchairs of Whitehall. If this really is a merger, presumably—

[*Interruption.*] I will allow him to chunter, and then I will ask my question. If this really is a merger, will the Secretary of State for International Development and the Foreign Secretary, both of whom are sitting on his Front Bench now, be applying equally for the new job of Colonial Secretary?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman spoke of the post of Colonial Secretary; I do not know quite what planet he is on. We are going forward with a single new Whitehall Department for international affairs, which I believe will add greatly to this country’s global throw-weight. [*Interruption.*] Opposition Members should applaud this change. It reflects what is done by the overwhelming majority of countries in the OECD—most of our friends and partners; indeed, all our friends and partners I can think of. We should get with the programme and support it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Hon. Members must not shout at the Prime Minister. We are here to ask questions, not make long preambles to questions. If we do not have shorter questions, I am afraid that not everyone will get the chance to ask their question. And if the questions are shorter, I know the Prime Minister will thus be able to give shorter answers.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I welcome this change. The logic of it is overwhelming and it will be a great day for our diplomatic clout. However, that depends on the values that underpin global Britain. Our ability to exercise leadership in the relief of poverty, justice and the international rule of law will depend on those values. They will get an immediate test. In two weeks’ time, our ally Israel will annex elements of the Occupied Palestinian Territories. That will be a grave breach of international law. Surely we must try to divert Israel from that prospect with real sanctions if it breaches international law?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the Prime Minister even answers that question, nobody was listening: short questions and then the Prime Minister can give short answers.

The Prime Minister: Yes, I believe that what is proposed by Israel would amount to a breach of international law. We have strongly objected. We believe profoundly in a two-state solution and we will continue to make that case.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: If the Prime Minister is serious about global Britain, why has he left our world-leading aerospace and defence industry in a downward holding pattern? We have already seen thousands of job losses in communities that can ill afford to lose them. With the right action now, the UK could lead the global race in a green revolution in defence and aerospace. Will he make that his vision of global Britain, rather than another unnecessary Whitehall reorganisation?

The Prime Minister: That is indeed what we are doing. I have spoken to the head of Rolls-Royce and other companies about exactly the vision for aerospace that the hon. Lady describes. There is a big opportunity for this country to lead the world in low-carbon aerospace technologies and that is what this Government are going to do.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that global Britain is not just about pursuing an ambitious independent trade policy, but that at its heart it is about championing values? Does he further agree that to make that a reality we must strengthen our voice on the world stage and be unafraid to call out countries that threaten those values and the rules-based international order?

The Prime Minister: I believe that this will be a profoundly beneficial change for both the FCO and DFID. It will infuse the whole of our foreign policy with the missionary zeal and sense of idealism that characterises the very best of our aid experts. They are the best in the world, and they will now be at the absolute heart of UK foreign policy. That is the right place for them to be.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): All I am hearing from today's exchanges is that we will only help the poorest in the world if they are buying British goods. Words fail me at the cowardly abdication of Britain's global responsibility to the poorest in the world. We are shooting ourselves in the foot. The covid crisis can only be resolved if the poorest countries get rid of the virus or control it. Will the Prime Minister reconsider this globally illiterate and morally reprehensible move?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady should look at what this country is actually doing to tackle coronavirus around the world, giving more than any other country to the search for a virus. I do not know if she saw what happened at the recent Gavi summit, but she should be proud of what this country is doing to tackle the virus around the world.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): As someone who started their career in emerging markets, may I roundly welcome this move? Does the Prime Minister agree that as the world changes it speaks to how developing countries want to receive aid: not in isolation, but as part of a comprehensive dialogue across trade, investment, technology, diplomacy and defence so that they can achieve their own goals?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The confusion one finds in the capitals of our partners around the world must end. They must understand that the UK Government speak with a single voice and a powerful, clear message from a new international Department that I think will do a power of good around the world. We already punch above our weight; this will help us to punch even harder.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that one of the areas of his missionary zeal for this Department should be tackling corruption? If we could make progress there, it would help the stability of regimes around the world.

The Prime Minister: Yes, indeed. The UK leads the world in tackling corruption and money laundering, and once again that agenda will have far more heft after the integration of the two Departments.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): It is hard to see this decision as anything but a populist stunt that flies in the face of what the coronavirus pandemic tells us: that we are all interconnected in this world. What

consultation did the Government carry out with humanitarian and development experts, as well as leading aid organisations, before the decision was made?

The Prime Minister: I can assure the hon. Lady that there has been massive consultation over a long period. It is my own personal and direct experience that the UK, although it does a fantastic job with development aid, could do even better with a powerful, single, integrated voice of the kind I am describing and which we will bring into existence in September.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's decision. I know from my work with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy when I was the Vice-Chairman (International) of the Conservative Party that often there are tensions between DFID and the Foreign Office over its funding. Furthermore, as he will know, our friends and allies in the Caribbean felt very let down after the hurricanes when they could not get the support they needed. He will also be aware of the money we have put into the refugee camps for the Syria crisis and other things. Can he confirm, therefore, that this decision is not a watering down but will result in a stronger and more efficient approach and that the most vulnerable people in society and the programmes we have to do will get an enhanced service from the UK?

The Prime Minister: That is right. It was one of the absurdities of the rules of the Disasters Emergency Committee that vulnerable island states in the Caribbean were not eligible for ODA, and we had to fight to get that change. Now with this new super-Department we will be able to argue as one across our friends and partners around the world for new perspectives on those problems, and work together to tackle them.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): At this time of national crisis, would it not be better if the Prime Minister used what he described as our megawattage to sort out some of our domestic problems, such as the 20,000 job losses in the caravan industry around Hull, the threat to Hull Trains' open access service—130 jobs—or getting a grip of the education shambles that his Education Secretary has been leading on so that we can get our kids back to school safely?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the hon. Lady would want to join me in encouraging all parents to send their kids back to the schools that are open and waiting to receive them. I am sure that she and the Leader of the Opposition will want to join everybody in saying it is safe to go back to school.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): The Prime Minister has done exactly the right thing to ensure there is a Foreign Office with a laser-like focus on aid and diplomacy, but what involvement will trade have in this mix so that compassionate aid and international trade work hand in glove?

The Prime Minister: We are keeping the Department for International Trade separate, and it is working hard on free trade deals, as it must for the moment, but it is very important that in post—in missions around the world—there will be a single point of reference for Governments who need to understand the UK position.

It is a powerful change. The ambassadors around the world will be newly empowered and authorised to project the UK's point of view.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): How is it compatible with global Britain to be the only country in the world at this stage of the covid pandemic, and as the rest of Europe opens up, to be putting up a great, big “closed for business” sign in the form the Prime Minister's quarantine policy?

The Prime Minister: It is curious that the right hon. Member says that because, as far as I know, the quarantine policy is actively supported by the shadow Foreign Secretary at the very least, and indeed supported by the Labour party. If he is dissenting from his own party, I perfectly understand that, but the reason for our policy is of course to prevent the reinfection of this country, as we drive the virus down, by people coming back from countries where it is out of control.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree with me that it is in Britain's interests to have a poverty reduction programme across the world? Will he guarantee, after this change, that the Government will still continue to concentrate on education and health, particularly the education of girls, across the world and that—not only for the benefit of Britain, but for humanitarian purposes—we carry on the poverty reduction programmes?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and at the heart of the mission of the new Department will be 12 years of quality education for every girl in the world, which I think is probably the single best thing you could do for the future of our planet.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: We are in the midst of a pandemic crisis, a trade agreement crisis and an economic crisis. While the Prime Minister is struggling to respond to each of these, why has he decided that now is the time to distract his attention with this internal reorganisation to water down aid, as opposed to addressing the crises sitting on his desk?

The Prime Minister: We are getting on with the business of governing this country, improving our international performance and making sure that the UK is able to speak with a single, powerful voice overseas. That is vital now in this crisis, and it is going to be vital as the crisis comes to an end.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): I fully welcome this change. We are reassessing our role in the world, and this is the perfect time for it. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that, as we take this bold step as a new global Britain, we have a lot to learn from our CANZUK—Canada, Australia, New Zealand and United Kingdom—partners?

The Prime Minister: Yes, we do. I thank my hon. Friend, and he is bang on the money. We are simply coming in line, as I say, not just with what Australia, Canada and New Zealand already do, but with 28 out of 29 OECD countries.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: DFID has funded outstanding research projects with partners in the developing world. The Prime Minister has a keen eye for detail, so he will be well aware that all too often the Home Office applies a colonial mindset to prevent these very same partners from travelling to the UK. The Prime Minister talks of coherence and value for money, so will we now see Departments working in collaboration, or will everyone's work and money still be wasted by the whims of the Home Office?

The Prime Minister: The Home Office is doing an outstanding job in containing illegal immigration in small boats, working very closely, I might say, with our friends and partners in France.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I wrestled with this issue when I was Foreign Secretary, but I think it is the right thing to do. In Africa today, there is competition—intense competition—between countries such as China that do not promote democracy and human rights as part of their aid agenda, and countries such as Britain that do, and if we are going to support those British values, we need to speak with one voice. Given that one of those values is eradicating extreme poverty, would the Prime Minister consider allowing the junior Minister who will be responsible for DFID to attend Cabinet, so that people can see that the commitment to eradicating poverty is undiminished?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's support. I know that he wrestled with the issue when he was doing the job that I once did as well. I think that he has come to the right conclusion. As for his suggestion on how we will work it in government, I listened carefully to what he had to say.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The world increasingly thinks that this country under this Prime Minister is a basket case—the highest excess death rates in the world, the deepest economic collapse, schools returning in complete and utter chaos, and a quarantine introduced after the horse has bolted. At a moment of international crisis, the biggest idea that the Prime Minister has is that he should change the Foreign Office letterhead. This is a nonsense. Does he not realise that this is not a statement on global Britain; it is a statement from little England?

The Prime Minister: I was saddened and disappointed to hear the hon. Gentleman's remarks. We are making an important change to how we work our foreign policy. He should applaud and welcome that, and, by the way, he should also not run this country down.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP) [V]: Prime Minister, whatever you think about the removal of statues and whatever it is that you are trying to signal with what looks like a very regressive move, there is a clear desire among many people, including in Britain, in the context of the Black Lives Matter campaign, to examine the ambiguous legacy of the British empire. Given the vital work of DFID in addressing inequalities and underdevelopment, some of which I must say are a legacy of the British empire, is this not a particularly shameful moment for you to abolish the very Department that is trying to address those inequalities?

The Prime Minister: We are not abolishing the role of the International Development team; we are exalting them. We are enhancing them and making them part of one of the senior Departments in this country, able to project British views overseas. Yes, of course, we will continue to tackle injustice around the world, but we will be able to do it with a more powerful voice than ever before.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con) [V]: I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement on global Britain and strongly endorse the merger of DFID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to put aid, development and diplomacy at the centre of our foreign policy. Does he agree that the Commonwealth is a power for good in the world and that global Britain should embrace and work strategically with Commonwealth countries in leadership, aid and trade issues?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend very much. He is entirely right. The Commonwealth is a massive and powerful force for good: 53 nations united with a shared tradition and a shared ambition to encourage free trade around the world. We will develop that and many other important causes, which we will address at the Kigali summit when we can hold it next year.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) [V]: Many of my constituents care passionately about fair trade, because it has the potential to lift millions of people across the world out of poverty. Will the Prime Minister give me a cast-iron guarantee that the plans he has announced today will not result in any diminution of the UK Government's previous commitment to support fair trade across the world, from Palestine to the Ivory Coast?

The Prime Minister: Of course.

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Today's statement is a hugely positive opportunity for the UK to truly lead the world in tackling climate change and decarbonisation and to help some of the poorest in the world to protect and preserve their livelihoods. But will my right hon. Friend reassure us that he will use brilliant UK science and green technology to create and support new jobs here in the UK and to level up right across our country?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right with regard to the development in this country of green finance and green technology, whether it is from wind turbines or new battery technology, and we are proceeding apace with those investments.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) [V]: I wonder when the Prime Minister will give the votes back to those who cannot attend Parliament. Let me turn, though, to the matter at hand.

The Prime Minister is, of course, famous in his approach to detail. I notice that, in his statement today, he said that the trade commissioner will be under the authority of UK ambassadors. In Latin America, there are 12 ambassadors and one trade commissioner so, Prime Minister, how will that work then?

The Prime Minister: The obvious answer is that, in country, there is a single head of mission—

Chris Bryant: The ambassador.

The Prime Minister: Thank you. That is the ambassador. That is how it works. It is very important that everybody understands that. I repeat what I said to my friend, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), which is that we will ensure that we keep that investment in East Kilbride and keep supporting East Kilbride, which, of course, the hon. Gentleman, through his desire to break up the United Kingdom, would be throwing away.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I always remember Malcolm Bruce, the former Chair of the International Development Committee, saying, "The thing about DFID is that it's not as good as it thinks it is, but it's nowhere near as bad as its critics say." I am concerned that we should not lose some of the expertise that has accumulated in the Department. One area where there has been big improvements in recent years, which I hope the Prime Minister would agree with and give a commitment to protecting, is the scrutiny and accountability of every single pound of aid money that is spent. Will he give a commitment today that there will be no diminution in the quality of the scrutiny of the money spent in our name?

The Prime Minister: Yes, absolutely. We can be very proud of the scrupulousness with which UK aid is spent, and I am in no doubt that the parliamentary oversight will continue in the current way.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): In a sudden change of plan, I am wondering about the Prime Minister's thoughts on former Prime Minister David Cameron's comments that "the decision to merge the departments is a mistake" and that the end of DFID

"will mean less expertise, less voice for development at the top table and ultimately less respect for the UK overseas."

Does the Prime Minister agree with the former Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: No, I profoundly disagree with those comments. All my experience is that, alas, there is an incoherence in UK foreign policy. We can now rectify that and have a better, more powerful and more positive voice for this country overseas that puts the idealism of development aid professionals at the heart of our foreign policy, and that is what we are going to do.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Having worked at the Foreign Office, at the coalface, I welcome this decision, which will end bureaucratic wrangling, hopefully end the disparity between the treatment of our FCO and DFID staff, and ensure that all overseas postings work as one team because that is how we support allies and those in need. Will he confirm that those raging that this will bring back tied aid and that it is a retreat from the world stage are actually doing a disservice to our FCO and DFID staff, and are wrong?

The Prime Minister: Of course, they are completely wrong. This is a massive opportunity for this country to project itself more powerfully abroad. What we want to

see, and what I know we are going to achieve, is a union of the idealism, passion and commitment of DFID with the diplomatic and political skills of the Foreign Office, to make sure that we intensify our mission as one of the great development powers on the planet. That is what we are going to do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): In order to allow Members to leave safely and others to arrive safely, I will suspend the House for three minutes.

2.47 pm

Sitting suspended.

UK-EU Negotiations

2.50 pm

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Government's negotiations on our future relationship with the European Union.

Yesterday the Prime Minister met the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, via video conference. The purpose of this high-level meeting, as the political declaration puts it, was to take stock of progress on the negotiations and to agree actions to move forward. All parties agreed that now was the moment to accelerate the pace of these negotiations—in the Prime Minister's words, to “put a tiger in the tank”.

The three Presidents welcomed the Prime Minister's call for greater pace, focus and flexibility in the negotiations, and the tempo of the talks process has now been escalated.

I am pleased to say that both sides pledged yesterday, in a joint statement that was made public immediately afterwards, that they would intensify the talks in July and, if possible, seek to find an early understanding on the principles underlying any agreement. Our respective chief negotiators and their teams will therefore intensify talks from the end of this month, starting on 29 June. I also welcome the Commission President's statement yesterday that the EU is available 24/7, and we will be too. Meetings will take place every week in July, with a keen focus on finding an early understanding on the principles that will underpin a broad agreement. As the Prime Minister said yesterday, the faster we can do this, the better. We are looking to get things done in July. We do not want to see this process going on into the autumn and then the winter. We all need certainty, and that is what we are aiming to provide.

Yesterday's high-level meeting followed the second meeting of the withdrawal agreement Joint Committee, which took place on Friday 12 June, again via video conference. I am grateful to the Vice-President of the European Commission, Maroš Šefčovič, for the very constructive way in which progress was made under his chairmanship. In that meeting, I set out our plans to implement the protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland, and updated the EU on our ongoing work to protect the rights of EU citizens in the UK. This is a priority for the UK Government. I also sought assurance, for our part, that the EU intended to meet its obligations under the withdrawal agreement around the protection of the rights of our nationals currently living in the EU. We have concerns in this area, and we will continue to press the EU to ensure that our citizens' rights are properly protected.

If we are to make the progress that we all want to see in our negotiations on the future relationship, we all need to be both clear-eyed and constructive. Our EU partners agreed yesterday that during the four full negotiating rounds completed to date, we have all gained greater clarity and understanding of our respective positions. Discussions have been productive and legal texts have been exchanged, even as both sides have had to deal with uniquely difficult challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

[Michael Gove]

But as my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General advised the House last week, following the fourth round of negotiations it is still the case that there has been insufficient movement on the most difficult areas where differences of principle remain. We are committed, in line with the political declaration, to securing a comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU built on the precedents of the agreements that the EU has reached with other sovereign states such as Canada, Japan and South Korea—and we are ready to be flexible about how we secure an FTA that works for both sides. The UK, however, has been clear throughout that the new relationship we seek with the EU must fully reflect our regained sovereignty, independence and autonomy. We did not vote in June 2016 to leave the EU but still to be run by the EU. We cannot agree to a deal that gives the EU Court of Justice a role in our future relationship, we cannot accept restrictions on our legislative and economic freedom—unprecedented in any other free trade agreement—and we cannot agree to the EU's demand that we stick to the status quo on its access to British fishing waters.

There must be movement, and the clock is ticking. The transition period ends on 31 December. That was a manifesto pledge on which the Government were elected, and it was the instruction from the electorate in the 2016 referendum: to leave the single market and the customs union and to grant the opportunities of full and economic and political independence. Four years on from the referendum result, no one can argue that this is a rushed or precipitate step. It is delivering at last on democracy. We will manage the adjustment required at the end of the transition period in a flexible and pragmatic way to minimise any challenges and to maximise all opportunities, but the call from Opposition politicians to extend the transition period is not in the national interest.

Staying under the EU's control after this December would mean paying money into EU budgets that we could spend on our NHS, accepting new laws over which we would have no say—laws shaped in the interests of others—and being prevented from taking the actions that we need to supercharge our economic recovery. That would clearly not be in our national interest. There is no intrinsic reason why a deal cannot be concluded in good time. As Roberto Azevêdo, the director general of the World Trade Organisation, confirmed at the weekend, a deal between the UK and the EU can be reached in a timely way if the political will is there.

The UK's political will is there. Our position is reasonable, based on precedent, and we still have the time to bring a deal home. That is why the Prime Minister has led the drive to accelerate these talks, to reach agreement, and to ensure that next January, we leave the regulatory reach of the EU and embrace the new opportunities that our independence will bring. I commend the statement to the House.

2.56 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Four years ago today, I was at Leeds General Infirmary with Jo Cox's parents and her sister. I will never forget that day and all that we lost. Today we remember Jo and remind ourselves of her values and all that she stood for.

I thank the Minister for an advance copy of his statement today. Following the meeting on Friday, both the UK and the EU confirmed that there is not going to

be an extension of negotiations beyond the end of this year, which puts the focus firmly on both sides to secure the deal that they describe in the political declaration. The right hon. Gentleman knows full well what a calamity leaving only on World Trade Organisation terms would be for our country. Last year, the Minister told the Oxford farming conference that small farms would be hardest hit by the barriers and tariffs of trading on WTO terms. That is on top of what many farmers fear from a lack of safeguards from cheap imports with lower environmental and animal welfare standards.

This is not an isolated incident of uncertainty. In the automotive industry, Nissan says:

“We've modelled every possible ramification of Brexit and the fact remains that our entire business...is not sustainable in the event of WTO tariffs”.

Similar warnings have been issued by Vauxhall's owners about their future presence in Ellesmere Port. The Minister has made clear in the past why it is important to secure a deal, so will he explain again today why a deal is better than leaving on WTO terms?

The Prime Minister has staked his own authority on having an “oven-ready” deal, but in his statement the Minister said that we wanted to intensify talks in July and find, if possible, an early understanding of principles underlying any agreement. That does not sound like an oven-ready deal to me, and is a cause of great concern for all of us. The ingredients of such a deal were published, and the country expects them to be delivered.

The Minister has referred today to his manifesto pledges to end the transition period at the end of this year, so may I remind him of some other pledges in that manifesto? First,

“no tariffs, fees, charges or quantitative restrictions”

across all sectors. Will the Government give UK industries and workforces peace of mind and prevent their business models from rupturing in the coming months? Late on Thursday, the Government published a written statement indicating a U-turn on border controls, perhaps recognising that they simply have not done enough to prepare for new rules that they wanted to introduce. That does nothing, however, to help British businesses that export to the UK. The Minister said in his statement that the Government would manage the commitments required, but he cannot make that pledge unilaterally. How will the Government help exporters, who will face those rules from day one?

Secondly, the Conservative manifesto told voters that the Brexit deal would safeguard workers' rights, consumer and environmental protections. Does the Minister agree that it is essential that the UK defends those standards in all trade negotiations with other countries? People want to see the UK win a race to the top, not be forced into a race to the bottom, overseen by an overseas president.

Thirdly, we were promised a

“broad, comprehensive and balanced security partnership.”

There is no greater priority than keeping the British people safe and secure. On 3 June, with regard to European criminal records data, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) asked for

“reassurance that as from 1 January 2021, the UK will have access to the quantity and quality of data that it currently has”. —[*Official Report*, 3 June 2020; Vol. 676, c. 846.]

Will the Minister provide an answer? Two weeks ago, the Prime Minister was unable to do so.

Fourthly, we were told that whatever happens, the UK will respect the Good Friday agreement. Many Northern Irish businesses, including manufacturing firms, have integrated supply chains across the United Kingdom. Unite and GMB members working at Bombardier in Belfast are reeling from the prospect of more redundancies following the covid-19 crisis. We need to stem the tide of job losses, not exacerbate them. Firms in Northern Ireland need to know the real-world detail of the business environment in which they will be operating, the precise checks and controls that they need to implement, and the operational readiness of the systems that they will be using in just 29 weeks' time. It is far from reassuring that according to paragraph 28 of the UK Command Paper, the Government have so far committed to "produce full guidance to business...before the end of the transition period."

That could be December. That simply is not good enough for British businesses.

Finally, on the same day that the Prime Minister claimed that the impasse can be resolved and a deal achieved in July, the Government signed up to two further negotiating rounds, concluding on 21 August. Is July a serious proposal, or is it one of those over-promises to which we have become accustomed from the Prime Minister, agreed in haste to win a headline only to fall by the wayside when reality bites?

With that in mind, and thinking firmly about what is best for the United Kingdom, Labour wants the Government to succeed in achieving the deal that they promised and to avoid the perils of the alternative. The Government must fulfil their pledges to the British people in order to protect jobs, secure our food and medical supplies, and protect our citizens' safety and security. We urge both sides to show the flexibility required to achieve a deal in our national interest.

Michael Gove: I thank the hon. Lady for her response, her questions and her support for a united effort to secure a good deal in the interests of the United Kingdom and the European Union. May I also once again extend my sympathy to her and others who were close friends of Jo Cox? Her death four years ago was an unimaginable tragedy, and I cannot begin to imagine what it must have been like for those who were so close to Jo.

The hon. Lady asked about an oven-ready deal; of course, that oven-ready deal was cooked before 31 January, which is why we left the European Union. The withdrawal agreement, which we are now faithfully implementing and which includes the Northern Ireland protocol, was a deal that secured support across this House of Commons. We are now taking all the steps necessary to ensure that that deal can be effectively implemented. Of course, we also seek a future trading relationship with the European Union but, if the European Union is incapable of concluding that relationship, we are ready to trade successfully on our own terms. That is why the steps with respect to the border that she mentioned were taken and confirmed last Friday and universally welcomed by business as a pragmatic and flexible way of providing both certainty and the flexibility that is required for business to continue.

The hon. Lady mentioned a variety of sectors that will obviously be affected by our relationship with the European Union. She mentioned agriculture; it is naturally the case that, of course, we want to maintain tariff-free

access to European markets for our farmers, but it is also the case, as she knows, that we run a deficit in agri-food goods with the EU, so if there were to be no deal, European producers would be adversely affected to a greater extent than UK producers. But that would be in nobody's interests.

The hon. Lady mentioned the importance of manufacturing. I agree with her—it is important that we secure a deal that works in manufacturing's interests—but it is also important that we all recognise that before we left the European Union there was speculation that we would see a flight of manufacturing jobs from the UK to other countries. It is instructive to see the way in which Nissan, to which the hon. Lady referred, has reshored production to the UK, and how Unilever, after thinking about whether or not it should relocate its headquarters to the Netherlands, decided to keep its headquarters in the UK—all, as the BBC might put it, despite Brexit.

The hon. Lady asked about workers' rights, environmental rights and consumers' rights. The UK has a proud record in all those areas. Governments both Labour and Conservative, and politicians from Barbara Castle to Margaret Thatcher, have been in the van of ensuring that, whether it is equal pay or the fight against climate change, the UK has led and will continue to lead the world. In any trade or other agreements that we sign, our commitment to the rights of our citizens, to protection for workers and to putting the future of the planet first is absolutely non-negotiable.

The hon. Lady asked about security and the tools and instruments available. We do believe that it is possible to make progress on a suite of arrangements to safeguard the security of British citizens, but one thing that we cannot do is accept the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. We voted to be an independent nation and we must honour that decision. Democracy is more important than any other principle.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Good Friday agreement. Of course, the Northern Ireland protocol is there and is being implemented by this Government in order to ensure that the principles of the Good Friday agreement are upheld. One of those is unfettered access for Northern Ireland businesses to the rest of the United Kingdom, and I hope that she and her party will support any legislation that may be required in order to ensure that we have unfettered access for goods across the whole United Kingdom.

The hon. Lady ended by saying that the Prime Minister was showing haste. Indeed, the Prime Minister is determined that we should conclude a deal. It is in the interests of everyone that we have certainty. As long as the Labour party is silent on whether it would seek an extension, uncertainty will still hover over this process.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Regardless of any mixed metaphors, the EU and the UK have both committed not to extend the transition period beyond December, meaning that time is of the essence and must surely focus minds. Can my right hon Friend assure me that the Cabinet Office has sufficient capacity to work intensively to strike a deal, notwithstanding other pressing matters?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Taskforce Europe, the team that is engaged in making sure that we secure a good deal with the EU, has drawn on resources from across Government, including from

[*Michael Gove*]

the Cabinet Office—it is led, of course, by the Prime Minister's sherpa, David Frost—but I believe we have an excellent team well capable of taking forward all strands in this negotiation.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: May I start by thanking the right hon. Gentleman? He, more than any other senior Tory, has made the single biggest contribution to the cause of independence in Scotland. It is his supreme efforts around Brexit that have pushed support for Scottish independence to sustained majority support. All of us who support an independent Scotland salute him today, and the statue will soon be commissioned in Aberdeen harbour.

I am sure all that nonsense and Euro-blaming he just spouted looks like progress to him, but for us in Scotland it just confirms why we want to get out of their dysfunctional Union. Just look at last week. The right hon. Gentleman totally and contemptuously ignored the representations from all the devolved Administrations about Brexit extension. He treated them with such disdain that they felt there was no point engaging with him any longer. They decided they would be better off washing their overabundant collective hair than listening to this Government again tell them what they should do and what to think about their chaotic Brexit plans. So I ask the Secretary of State: what is the point? What is the point of devolved Administrations engaging with him and his Government anymore? A tiger has been put in the tank. That tank is labelled “Scottish independence”.

Michael Gove: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that gallimaufry of not so much mixed as entangled metaphors. May I first of all congratulate him on wishing to erect statues rather than pull them down? I would be delighted to be carved in marble, bronze or whatever is the appropriate material, anywhere in Scotland, but I have to say that I do not deserve it. May I also say that as long as his smiling features gaze down on us, we know that the Union is safe. We know that the cause of Scottish nationalism, despite the ardour with which he puts his case, sadly will not prevail intellectually, morally, economically or politically.

The hon. Gentleman makes the point, of course, that there has been a difference of opinion between the Scottish Government and the UK Government on the question of extension, but there has been extensive engagement between the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government, the Northern Ireland Executive and our Government. Of course, even if we have taken different views, we have also worked together in order to safeguard the interests of our United Kingdom.

The hon. Gentleman made the point that some politicians would have been washing their hair instead of engaging in serious negotiations. All I can say is that rather than washing their hair, they were washing their hands of their responsibility to the people of this country. I hope that his colleagues in the Scottish Government will continue, as they have for most of this year, to engage in the constructive fashion for which they are well known in making sure that the interest of every citizen of the United Kingdom is protected.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): On 1 January, the UK will emerge as a sovereign trading nation, and it is clear from my right hon. Friend's statement that with

good will on both sides and a recognition of this sovereignty there is a deal to be done. Will he confirm that if a deal is not done, the UK stands ready and able to trade with the world?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is right; should we not secure a comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU, we will be free to trade, not just with the EU, but with other nations, to our advantage.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Government's decision to abandon the introduction of full customs checks and controls on EU imports from 1 January is a recognition that firms are simply not ready, yet the right hon. Gentleman knows that, regardless of whether an agreement is reached with the EU or not, British businesses will face checks, controls and red tape on exports to the EU from January. Given his decision, and given coronavirus, why does he think British businesses will be able to cope with that?

Michael Gove: British businesses responded warmly to the announcement we made on Friday as a pragmatic and flexible approach. The only alternative to the approach we outlined would be to extend the transition period. I know that is the position of the Labour party in London and in Wales, but we do not know what the position of the Labour party in London and in Leeds is. [HON. MEMBERS: “What?”] We do not know the position of the Labour Front-Bench and the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Minister promise that any fisheries agreement made with the EU will provide for annual negotiations and reflect the UK's status as an independent coastal state, and that we will not see a repeat of the betrayal we saw in 1972?

Michael Gove: I am very conscious of the mistakes made during our accession and the damage that the common fisheries policy has done, not just to our coastal communities, but to the husbanding of a very valuable marine resource. We have certainly made it clear to the EU that we will be an independent coastal state and we will have annual negotiations.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman has come here throwing out phrases such as “tiger in the tank” and is trying to gear up on the optimism, but last week the EU's chief negotiator said that “progress remains limited”. What makes the right hon. Gentleman think that progress, which has been so limited in the past, will all miraculously resolve itself by the end of July?

Michael Gove: It is the case that progress has been limited, but the impetus that was lent to the talks not just by the Prime Minister but by the three European Presidents yesterday was a clear signal of intent, and we will work with good will with our European partners in order to conclude an agreement as quickly as possible.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Our two French-speaking dogs cross the channel several times a year, Mr Minister, on a pet passport. On their behalf and on behalf of all other dog owners—

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What kind of dogs?

Bob Stewart: Labradors. On behalf of all pet owners who take their dogs abroad on a pet passport, may I ask my right hon. Friend whether similar arrangements will be in place after 31 December?

Michael Gove: Yes, I completely sympathise with my hon. Friend and many other responsible pet owners. In my previous role as Secretary of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, we worked on arrangements in order to ensure that travellers could take their pets abroad when they are visiting the EU and vice versa. If I may, let me say this: nous défendrons toujours les droits des chiens.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I can see why, with everything else going wrong for them, the Government want to rehash their greatest hits, but the right hon. Gentleman seems to have missed a fundamental 80% of our GDP, which is services, and financial passporting, in particular. Will he guarantee a financial equivalence regime at the end of all this or is it just blue passports that playing to the gallery allows him?

Michael Gove: I did not mention the colour of passports in my statement, but I am grateful to the hon. Lady for reminding the House that this is one of the many new freedoms we will enjoy outside the EU. I pledged, as did the Prime Minister, always to report back to this House on the progress of negotiations, which is why I am here. On the substantive question, the question of equivalence is one the EU will grant on the basis of an objective rules-based process; it is not a matter for negotiations. Equivalence on both financial services and data adequacy flows as a result of the EU's internal processes, rather than an external negotiation.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I welcome the statement. From speaking to businesses in my constituency, it is clear that they have gone through an unprecedented time of uncertainty with not only the current pandemic, but the prolonged Brexit saga. What we need to do now is give them clarity, so does my right hon. Friend agree that by rejecting calls to extend the transition period, we will give businesses right across the UK the certainty that they need to successfully plan for life outside the EU and get themselves ready for the many opportunities as part of a more globalised economy?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very, very good point. He echoes the words of Carolyn Fairbairn of the Confederation of British Industry, who said:

“We have left the EU politically. We do now need to leave the EU economically. Business does not have any interest in delaying that because that is uncertainty magnified” —

I agree.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP) [V]: The Prime Minister once famously observed that “there are no disasters, only opportunities” —

and indeed, opportunities for fresh disasters. While it is hard to negotiate any deal worse than no deal, it is clearly not beyond the modest abilities of even this Government to do exactly that, so why not limit the opportunity for fresh disasters by seeking an extension

and taking as long as is necessary to establish a coherent negotiating position and to then negotiate the least harmful version of Brexit that they are capable of?

Michael Gove: It is the case that we have a clear negotiating position—one that was supported in the general election last year—and it will be the case that the hon. Member's constituents will benefit from the new opportunities that being outside the European Union will bring—being outside the common fisheries policy, having access so that Scots farmers can secure new markets for their high-quality produce, and, at the same time, safeguarding the high-quality standards on environment and animal welfare that are at the heart of the UK's world brand.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The Government were elected with a substantial majority and a clear mandate: to get Brexit done, without delay or extension to the negotiations. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those who are calling for an extension, although it might enhance their standing in their party leadership campaign, are doing no favours for our country? All they are doing is prolonging the agony and deepening divisions when we all need to unite together, get through our current challenges and grasp the opportunities that Brexit brings.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is clarity and certainty from some parties in this House. The Scottish National party wants an extension, as do the Social Democratic and Labour party, the Alliance party and the Liberal Democrats. The Democratic Unionist party, like us, does not want one, but there is still uncertainty about what the Labour party wants. As long as that uncertainty lasts, business will want answers.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Over the past few weeks, I have often thought of our friend, Jo Cox, and her call that we concentrate on what unites us. She is much missed.

The north-east is a great trading region. It is part of integrated supply chains—pan-European, just-in-time supply chains—which drive prosperity, jobs and economic growth. Previous Government modelling said that a no-deal Brexit would hit our economy by 10%. Talk of a no-deal Brexit may just be a negotiating position, but will the Minister promise to publish regional economic assessments so that we know who will pay the price for failed negotiations?

Michael Gove: As the hon. Lady knows, my professional career started in the north-east of England, and I have enormous affection and respect for the way in which she champions the interests of her constituents. She is right that part of the north-east's economic success depends on manufacturing and supply chains. That is why we will ensure that the north-east of England not just is safeguarded, but has its economic prospects enhanced, not least by the establishment—we hope—when we are outside the UK, of a free port in the north-east.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that every time Opposition Members seek to find yet another way to keep us locked into EU bureaucracy to achieve their policy aims, they

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

are actually saying, in a very clear sense, that they do not trust British voters to make those policy decisions for our country?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is right, and he reinforces the observation that I have come to: the louder the Opposition heckle, the truer the question from a Government Back Bencher.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The parent company of Vauxhall Motors in Ellesmere Port is waiting for the outcome of these negotiations before it makes any investment decisions. To get a favourable decision, we need a guarantee that there will be no tariffs, fees, charges or quantitative restrictions in the automotive sector. Can the right hon. Gentleman give that guarantee?

Michael Gove: That is the commitment to which the European Union has aligned itself in the political declaration, and we will hold it to that.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): Without repeating what many of my colleagues have said, businesses in the Black Country have one simple ask: they want clarity, and they want us to get this done. Will my right hon. Friend give a message to my businesses in Wednesbury, Oldbury and Tipton that rejecting an extension and getting this done, with the simple ask of a free trade agreement in line with what the EU has with every other country, will give them the clarity they deserve as we come out of these unprecedented times?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is right that in Wednesbury, Oldbury, Tipton and across the west midlands, businesses want certainty. That is what our announcements provide.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Two industries in Wales are particularly interested in what will happen in relation to any trade agreement. The first is Welsh lamb, because there is a real danger that the Welsh lamb industry will collapse if we do not have a completely tariff-free arrangement with the EU. We hardly sell any Welsh lamb outside Europe. The second is the avionics industry, which is so important in my patch and across the whole of south Wales, where thousands of people are already in great uncertainty about whether their job will still be there later this year. They need to know whether BA, GE and many other companies will be able to flourish in the new environment.

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes two important points. He is right that the avionics industry is a jewel in Wales's and the United Kingdom's crown, and everything we do in these trade negotiations will be intended to support it. He is also right that Welsh lamb is second to none—well, apart from Scottish lamb.

Chris Bryant: Is it second to none or not?

Michael Gove: It is second to Scottish lamb; that is my view, purely as a consumer.

Chris Bryant: You are not winning here.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. That is not fair.

Michael Gove: You don't know who my relatives are, Chris. All UK lamb is excellent, and we need to ensure that the Welsh lamb industry secures access to not only the European market but new markets as well. In the United States and, indeed, in the middle and near east, there is growing demand for excellent Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish and English lamb. Access to those markets will make our farmers more secure financially and better able to steward the environment.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I want to pass on to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster the thanks of the 72% of people in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke who overwhelmingly voted to leave and are delighted that we are not extending the transition period. I am sure that he has a fine collection of ceramics from Stoke-on-Trent in his home and office. Ceramics manufacturers such as Churchill China in my constituency are keen to see us get a really good free trade deal. Ceramics has been put at the heart of the international trade agenda of the Secretary of State for International Trade. I am sure that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will confirm that ceramics is at the heart of the free trade negotiation on manufacturing and will happily meet me and members of the British Ceramic Confederation.

Michael Gove: I certainly will. Only last night, I was talking to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade about what more we can do to support the ceramics industry, which is so vital to the economic health of Staffordshire and is a source of pride for all of us across the United Kingdom. Whether it is Churchill China, Royal Doulton, Emma Bridgewater or others, we should do everything we can to ensure that there are new markets for UK ceramics. I know my right hon. Friend will also ensure that we have an appropriate trade remedies authority in the UK, so that inappropriate dumping of ceramics does not undermine UK production.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The joint statement from the Scottish and Welsh Governments said that meetings including the right hon. Gentleman have

“simply been an opportunity for the UK Government to inform us of their views, not to listen or respond to ours.”

I am sure that that sounds familiar to many Members in the Chamber. His reckless decision not to extend the transition period will cost thousands of jobs at precisely the worst point. Scotland did not vote for this. How many Scottish job losses will he see as a fair price to deliver Brexit on his timetable?

Michael Gove: I and the Paymaster General have enjoyed long conversations with representatives of the Scottish Government. Mike Russell and other Ministers, including Fergus Ewing, are always a pleasure to engage with. They bring a wealth of experience and a light touch to our conversations, which I always enjoy, appreciate, am better informed by and benefit from. The real threat to jobs in Scotland would be a reckless decision to smash the United Kingdom after 300 years of shared prosperity.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We cannot see Robert Halfon, but we can hear him.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: I am glad that you are able to hear me, Madam Deputy Speaker. Given that leaving the EU means that we can control our VAT rates and cut VAT, what progress has been made in taking back control of VAT rates so that we can cut our energy bills and the cost of living for hard-working residents in Harlow and across the country?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is an indefatigable campaigner not just for Harlow but for the hard-pressed citizens of this country. He is right that outside the European Union, once we have left the transition period, we will have full control of VAT rates. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is dedicated to making sure that we can use that new-found independence to help precisely the constituents for whom my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow fights so brilliantly.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I am sure that the Minister agrees that all common-sense people now know that we want a deal and we want a good deal, because the health, wealth and prosperity of our constituents depend on it. Can he assure me that we will put real energy into that? It is all right to dig out a campaign for Esso petrol back in 1959, but we need some serious leadership. He must admit, surely, that the breakthrough came only when Prime Ministers at the top level talked about moving it forward. Can we make sure that we take it seriously and that the Prime Minister comes regularly to the House to report on future progress? We need a good deal and we need it soon, because turbulence lies ahead whatever deal we get.

Michael Gove: I am amazed that the hon. Gentleman can recall an advertising campaign from 1959, because it must have occurred before either of us was born. Nevertheless, he makes an important point, which is that we need to accelerate progress in the talks. That is the Prime Minister's aim and the EU's aim. I look forward to updating him on our progress in weeks to come.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): If hon. Members wish to be kind to their colleagues, I implore them to ask short questions, so the Minister can also give short answers. That way, everyone who has the opportunity to speak will be able to do so. If not, some people will be left out, which is not fair.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): The last round of talks finished with Michel Barnier waving around the declaration from last year. Does the Minister agree that he should wave it towards EU leaders and ask them to refine his mandate so that he has more chance of making a deal on state aid and fishing?

Michael Gove: Yes.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Can the Minister outline what further progress has been secured to ensure that no additional declaration forms will need to be completed when sending goods from Northern Ireland to Great Britain? Will the Government guarantee that, in all circumstances, no business will be required to fill out such paperwork, as set out in their recently published Command Paper? Will he commit to visit firms in my constituency that have concerns in that regard?

Michael Gove: I would be delighted to visit Craigavon, Lisburn or anywhere in the hon. Lady's beautiful constituency to reassure her that Northern Ireland will have unfettered access to the rest of the UK.

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Does the Minister agree that if the Government accepted the EU proposal of a skewed definition of a level playing field, the UK would be bound to questionable European courts indefinitely, which would be simply unacceptable to the British people, who voted again last year to restore British sovereignty?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. Of course we are not going to resile from our high standards; our standards will be higher than ever before when it comes to consumer protection, workers' rights and the environment. What we can never accept—what no independent sovereign nation could ever accept—is the jurisdiction of a foreign court on those matters.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): For years, the directors of Orkney Creamery have built an export market for a high-quality product, which they have improved, with Government encouragement. Will the Minister explain to them what he means when he says that if we do not get a deal, we will be trading on our own terms, because they tell me that if they have to pay tariffs on their exports, they will not be able to compete? If they go, we lose the market for the milk for the dairy farmers. The dairy farmers will then not need the services of the vets or the agricultural merchants or all the other businesses that rely on them. Will the Minister explain to these people exactly what trading on our own terms mean?

Michael Gove: The right hon. Gentleman is an effective advocate for his constituency, not least for the agricultural interests of fellow Orcadians. He is absolutely right; it is a high-quality product and it is always better when we have tariff-free access, not just to the European Union but to other markets. The political declaration requires that the EU should use its best endeavours to get a zero-tariff and zero-quota agreement and that is what we are all working hard to secure.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): At present, the UK is offering EU citizens visa-free travel for six months out of 12. The EU is only offering 90 days in 180, which is the same as the standard Schengen agreement. That would be an unwelcome restriction to sailors, travellers and those who have homes in EU countries. Will my right hon. Friend update us on the negotiations in that area?

Michael Gove: Yes. My hon. Friend makes a good point. We want to make sure that we have reciprocity in the way in which UK and EU citizens can enjoy sport, leisure and other activities, including business activities, in the future. I also take this opportunity to wish my hon. Friend a very happy birthday.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The covid crisis has demonstrated the need for international co-operation. Is it correct that the Department of Health and Social Care argued that we should remain part of the pandemic warning and response system of the European Union and, if so, why did the Government not listen?

Michael Gove: I had not heard that. I have not heard any such submission from the Department of Health, but I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue and I will ask my good friend the Health Secretary about it.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend assure my fantastic business community in Watford and the chamber of commerce, which I speak with regularly, that we are trying to get the best deal we possibly can, that it is not the case that we are trying to chase no deal and that we are working incredibly hard to make sure that we get the best deal for this country?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the reasons why the Prime Minister wanted to have the high-level meeting yesterday—one of the reasons why the three presidents wanted it as well—was precisely in order to accelerate progress towards securing a deal. We are ready for life outside the single market and the customs union, come what may, but it is our devout intent to secure a deal. I hope my hon. Friend can tell businesses in Watford, whom he represents so effectively, that their voices are heard loud and clear in Downing Street and the Cabinet Office.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): At the general election, the Tories promised

“no tariffs, fees, charges or quantitative restrictions across all sectors”.

Does that commitment still stand?

Michael Gove: That is the commitment in the political declaration, to which both the UK and the EU are working.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con) [V]: I and my constituents were pleased to hear that there will be no extension, but some of my constituents, particularly the businesses in Bosworth, are rightly concerned about how to prepare for the future. What steps are the Government taking to keep businesses in Hinckley and Bosworth and across the UK updated on the progress of EU negotiations, so that they can plan strategically for the future?

Michael Gove: Businesses in Leicestershire and elsewhere will have the opportunity to secure access to an additional £50 million of Government support in order to ensure that they can export effectively not just into the EU but beyond. It is also the case that intense engagement with businesses is being conducted by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and others.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): The Northern Ireland protocol is there to protect the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts, but it is right that we do all we can to minimise the impact down the Irish sea. Does the Minister recognise that in the event that we fail to secure a deal with the European Union and the Government opt to trade on their own terms, the impact of that border down the Irish sea will be more severe, with businesses and households facing more costs?

Michael Gove: It is the case of course that we wish to secure a deal, and a deal would be in everyone’s interests, but the purpose of the Northern Ireland protocol, as the hon. Gentleman rightly reminds us, is to uphold the

Belfast/Good Friday agreement in all its elements. Critical to that is that we all recognise that under the protocol, Northern Ireland remains not only part of the UK politically, but also part of the UK customs territory. Unfettered access is a right that all parties agree should be maintained.

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. As negotiations continue, to put minds at rest in the aviation sector and especially among my South Derbyshire constituents who work at Rolls-Royce in Derby, will he confirm that after 31 December the skies will still be open, our planes will still be flying and our world-class aviation companies will not be excluded from international work in Europe or elsewhere?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I take this opportunity to say that whether it is the superb workforce at Rolls-Royce or others in aerospace, their technical expertise and manufacturing skill will be central to the future of Britain’s success. We need to make sure that we promote their expertise not just in our relationship with the European Union, but in our relationship with other countries. They are the best of British.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Last week, the Paymaster General admitted that the Government are making preparations for a no-deal Brexit, and we have seen the spectre of panic buying and stockpiling at the start of the coronavirus pandemic. What preparations has the Minister made to prevent stockpiling and panic buying by worried consumers in the event of the disruption and chaos that a no-deal Brexit would cause to the supply chain?

Michael Gove: It is the case that if we leave without a specific free trade agreement, certain steps will need to be taken by Government and by others to make sure not only that we can meet the challenges, but that we can take the opportunities. The Cabinet Office and others constantly review at all points what we need to do, but I think the spectre that the hon. Lady invokes is not one that should bother her or others.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Leader of Her Majesty’s Opposition is beginning to develop a reputation for going to ground on the most contentious issues, such as whether his party supports an extension of the transition period or whether he continues to think backing freedom of movement is democratically acceptable after the 2016 referendum and the general election—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Mr Hunt, resume your seat for just a second, and I will explain that the Minister is not responsible for the policy of Opposition Members. Please could you get to the question for which the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is responsible.

Tom Hunt: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, by contrast, those on this side of the House will be resolute and determined in ending the transition period on 31 December and freedom of movement along with it?

Michael Gove: I can absolutely confirm to my hon. Friend that we have informed the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee that we will not extend. That is the position. That is settled. That is decided. As for his reference to the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), on this question we do not know whether he is the Scarlet Pimpernel or the invisible man.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP) [V]: There is a deep and growing unease in Northern Ireland and, indeed, across the island of Ireland, at the prospect of a no trade deal exit in six months. I will not rehearse now the profound damage that would do to the economy, society and the political structures here, but specifically within the no-deal preparations, what measures are the Government taking to protect covid-19 contact tracing across these islands in the absence of a data equivalence regime after a no trade deal?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue. Data equivalence, as I mentioned in response to a previous question from the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), is separate from these negotiations, but it is important on the island of Ireland that we continue to share information. We have had a very good working relationship with the Government. I congratulate Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green party on agreeing a programme for government. I wish the new Taoiseach-elect Micheál Martin all the very best in the shared work that we will engage in to deal with coronavirus.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): Fisheries seem to be a major stumbling block in the negotiations, with the EU seeking to uniquely link fishing rights to a wider free trade agreement. This is not necessarily a position of cherry-picking, but perhaps one of having their hake and eating it. Does my right hon. Friend agree that unless the EU position changes and it recognises that we are sovereign coastal nation, these talks might flounder?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend tempts me. The truth, however, is absolutely as she depicts it. We will leave and be an independent coastal state, and the EU will negotiate on an annual basis for access for its fishers.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: As we know, serious crime knows no borders and we will still need to co-operate on these issues once the transition period ends, so will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster give the House an assurance today that, as

from 1 January next year, the UK will still have access to both the quantity and the quality of data through passenger name records, the European Criminal Records Information System and SIS II—the Schengen Information System?

Michael Gove: We are negotiating to achieve precisely that goal.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): If the tiger turns out to be a pussycat and we do not end up with a deal in a few short weeks, when will the right hon. Gentleman be providing advice and guidance to the heavily regulated industries and, indeed, farmers in mainland Britain that supply Northern Ireland, so that the people of Northern Ireland can continue to legally receive medicines, for example, from 1 January next year?

Michael Gove: There will be no question, no impediment and nothing to prevent the citizens of Northern Ireland—whose rights I know the hon. Lady has taken a keen interest in upholding—from securing access to vital medicines or any other goods after we leave the European Union.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): First, I commend my right hon. Friend and our chief negotiator, David Frost, for their resolve in ensuring that we deliver our promise to end the transition period at the end of this year. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that it remains the intention of the Government to negotiate a security arrangement outside the ambit of the European Court of Justice that will ensure that we remain protected from foreign criminals coming into Britain and that we stop criminals escaping the jurisdiction of our courts so that we can bring them to justice?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend was a very effective Home Office Minister, and he speaks with great authority on these questions. He is absolutely right. We need to be outside the ambit of the ECJ, but we need to ensure that we have security, criminal justice and other forms of co-operation, precisely in order to ensure that we keep our citizens safe and work with the EU to keep its citizens safe.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. Please be aware of social distancing as you leave the Chamber. We will suspend for three minutes.

3.42 pm

Sitting suspended.

Automatic Electoral Registration

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

3.46 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to impose certain duties upon Her Majesty's Government to ensure the accuracy, completeness and utility of electoral registers; to make provision for the sharing of data for the purposes of electoral registration; and for connected purposes.

This Bill has a very simple aim: to ensure that everyone who is entitled to vote in this country is able to do so. It does that by moving away from the current system of electoral registration—one that is complicated, fragmentary and, crucially, incomplete—to a new system where individuals are automatically added to the register using the data the Government already hold. In the current context, as we face a global pandemic that is disrupting every aspect of our lives and society, this is more important than ever. The problems the upcoming boundary review is likely to face as a result of this crisis make it abundantly clear that we urgently need a new approach to electoral registration.

I begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), who introduced a similar Bill in 2017, and Baroness McDonagh, who did so in the other place. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who introduced a Bill on automatic electoral registration in 2016.

I will shortly speak about how an automatic electoral registration system could work—indeed, how it does work in many countries around the world—but first I would like to say something about the problems with the current registration system and why the pandemic makes this proposal more relevant than ever.

The right to vote is an essential and fundamental democratic right. Under the current system of individual electoral registration, individuals are solely responsible for registering and ensuring their details are up to date, yet research by the Electoral Commission in 2019 showed that more than 9.4 million people eligible to vote in the UK were either incorrectly registered or not registered at all. It also found that these missing voters were far more likely to be from lower-income backgrounds and black and minority ethnic communities or to be young people or renters. In many cases, these are groups that feel increasingly marginalised and disenfranchised from and through the political process. Indeed, a survey of poll workers at recent elections found that the most common problem they encountered was having to turn people away who wrongly believed they were registered. Not only are they then denied their right to vote, but they are not counted for the critically important purpose of determining constituency boundaries.

Hon. Members will be keenly aware, given the recent Second Reading of the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill, of the importance of the electoral register in determining new boundaries. Operating with an incomplete register risks cementing unfairness into the system for at least eight years. The current crisis makes the situation even more stark. As the Minister acknowledged in the Second Reading debate, the Government now face a very challenging situation. Under legislation, the upcoming

2021 boundary review will be based on this year's electoral register. Given the cancellation of local elections, the logistical difficulties in the usual door-to-door collection of data and all that that entails, and the significant pressures that local authorities are facing, it is clear that that is not going to be possible. The Government have said that they will consider using a register from a different year, but if we had an automatic registration system that continually updated the electoral roll using digital data from across Government, we would be in a much better place to deal with this situation.

We cannot know what the crises of the future will be, but we can prepare by building a robust registration system that is fit for the 21st century. Individual electoral registration is failing and it is time to seriously consider the alternatives. I believe my Bill improves the resilience and reliability of the electoral system, as well as making it fairer and ensuring that every single person eligible to vote is able to do so. Automatic electoral registration is common sense and current circumstances have shown that it is long overdue. Its fundamental principle is that the state should do all it can to ensure the electoral roll is as comprehensive and accurate as possible.

My Bill would place a duty on the Secretary of State to ensure that all electoral registers in the UK are accurate and complete. It requires public bodies, including Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, the NHS, the Passport Office and local authorities to work together and share information for the purposes of registering voters. It proposes taking data sets from across government and public services, and using them to collect information for the electoral register. For example, someone could be automatically added to the electoral register when they are issued with a national insurance number or when they update their passport, pay tax or claim benefits. A new integrated digital system would ensure that the register is continually updated to be as accurate and as up to date as possible. I believe that this is one of the great strengths of the system and one the Government surely welcome given their consistent focus on ensuring accuracy and reducing fraud. Finally, the Bill would require institutions such as universities to collect the relevant information and register students living in halls of residence.

Taken together, I believe these measures represent a straightforward and cost-effective way to modernise our electoral registration system. We would, of course, need safeguards to protect privacy and to ensure the security of the data collected. No one should be added to the open register without their explicit consent, for example.

Automatic registration has received support from a wide range of relevant organisations. The former Political and Constitutional Reform Committee backed automatic voter registration in a 2014 report on voter engagement, while the Electoral Reform Society suggests allowing citizens to register to vote whenever they come into contact with the Government. A report by the Democracy Forum found that implementing a form of automatic registration would lead to considerable improvements in the completeness and accuracy of the register. It outlined various options for exactly how that could be done. The Electoral Commission has carried out extensive feasibility work on automatic electoral registration. It found that digital data sharing, including more automated forms of registration, could be implemented by building

on the existing IER—individual electoral registration—infrastructure, and that the reforms were feasible from a technical and operational perspective.

If we look around the world, we find that Britain is actually something of an exception; almost all democratic systems use some form of automatic or automated registration processes. Australia and Canada have both recently implemented schemes of this nature.

A few months ago, none of us here could have imagined the situation that we are now facing. The coronavirus pandemic is making us look again at many aspects of our society and our politics. I firmly believe that the current crisis shows the importance of reforming and modernising our electoral registration system to make it resilient for the challenges of the future that we cannot imagine now, and to guarantee everyone the right to vote and be counted. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Judith Cummins, Siobhain McDonagh, Jessica Morden, Carolyn Harris, Nick Smith, Karyn Smith, Mike Amesbury, Chris Elmore, Chris Matheson, Martyn Day, Peter Dowd and Tracy Brabin present the Bill.

Judith Cummins accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 30 October and to be printed (Bill 139).

Opposition Day

[8TH ALLOTTED DAY—FIRST PART]

Free School Meals: Summer Holidays

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The amendment is not being moved, so we move straight into the debate. A lot of Members have shown interest in this particular debate, so please can I ask, in both the opening and the response to this motion, please be mindful that so many people wish to participate?

3.56 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the Government's decision to provide schools with their expected funding to cover benefits-related free school meals including the national voucher scheme over the Easter and May half-term holidays; notes the decision of the Welsh Government to guarantee each eligible child the equivalent of £19.50 a week up until the end of August to cover their meals over the summer holidays; and calls on the Government to continue to directly fund provision of free school meals, including the free school meal voucher scheme for eligible children over the summer holidays to stop children going hungry during this crisis.

It is a pleasure to open today's debate on such an important motion—Labour's call on the Government to provide free school meals over the summer holidays, so that all children can have a holiday without hunger. This is an issue that has gained significant traction over the past few days, with a chorus of charities, legal campaigners, Sustain and Good Law Project, Members across the House, good people tweeting all over the country and, of course, Manchester United star, Marcus Rashford. I am not only proud to be a Man United fan—that one of our own in Greater Manchester never forgot where he came from and used his profile to help those without a voice—but I am proud that he and those who have joined him have shown the very best that our country can be. I am delighted to say that the Government seem to have heard the cries and they appear to have done a U-turn on their decision to end the free school meal voucher scheme over the summer holidays.

I do have questions for the Secretary of State to address—not least, we need confirmation that the guarantee that free school meals vouchers will be provided over the summer holidays is concrete. However, as he will appreciate, this small win will be bittersweet overall if we do not now set about tackling the root cause of why many children are forced to rely on free school meals in the first place—poverty. Marcus, in his heartfelt letter, asked one important question yesterday:

“Can we not all agree that no child should be going to bed hungry?”

If we could all agree on that principle, there would be no debate to be had today.

I know that there are Members on the Government Benches—and, of course, on the Opposition Benches—who agree. They will tell stories of the horrific hardship that families in their constituencies have had to suffer daily. They will illustrate that to succeed in life, a child must have a bedrock of security, love and a full belly. They will transcend party lines to unify together in support of our children, showing the very best side of Parliament today.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I agree with the hon. Lady about the importance of this debate and of working across the House. I am sorry that this topic has become such a political football because it is one that unites the House, but surely the question is not whether to support the most vulnerable children in our society, but how we do that. Will she acknowledge that the Government are working hard with councils, with schools, with businesses and, crucially, with civil society to put in place a system of support and activity through this summer to ensure that children get the support they need?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the hon. Member for his comments. I await with bated breath the details of the Secretary of State's summer scheme—I have some ideas to suggest to him for how it might be rolled out. Indeed, there is a wider suite of support that our children will need throughout the pandemic and as we exit lockdown. Tackling poverty is just one element.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend as surprised as I am, if the Government always intended to do this, that they sent out the Transport Secretary and the Work and Pensions Secretary to embarrass themselves defending the indefensible?

Rebecca Long Bailey: All I will say is that I am happy we have reached the point we have today, although it should not have taken a public campaign from a well-known national hero to push the Government into making this decision. That said, they have made that decision and we take these small wins where we can find them.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I completely agree with the hon. Lady. It is really good news that the Government, as we understand it, are changing their position on the provision of free school meal vouchers over the summer, but does she agree that, to date, the system has been far from perfect? The contractor that has taken on this job has failed, for example, to provide children with vouchers for supermarkets in the villages or towns where they live. Does that not need to be fixed before the summer?

Rebecca Long Bailey: The Secretary of State will be well aware of the issues with the Edenred voucher scheme—the fact that many families have arrived at supermarkets and been turned away, that many schools have had to step in when vouchers have not been readily available and fund school meals themselves, and that in many cases they have not received assurances from the Government that they will be recompensed for that monetary expenditure. Perhaps he can provide those assurances today.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): So far, the Welsh Government and Assembly have agreed to do it, the Scottish Parliament has agreed to do it, the Northern Ireland Assembly has within the last three or four hours agreed to do it, and at long last the Government here have agreed to do it. Society is measured by its attitude to those who are less well off. I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this forward and look forward to the Government's participation and making this a success.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the hon. Member for his comments.

These children are not just statistics. The vast majority are children in working families, where parents are working around the clock to cover bills but where there is never enough. They are the children of parents who perhaps cannot work, through no fault of their own, for reasons such as chronic ill health. They may be the children of communities that have suffered from generations of unemployment and who feel their hopes and dreams are unachievable, no matter how hard they try, because the jobs simply are not there.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am sure the hon. Lady will agree that it is quite distasteful that the Government have had to be dragged kicking and screaming to this point. I note she said earlier that it is ultimately about not just holiday hunger but the ingrained childhood poverty we see all around us. She talked about other measures being needed. Does she agree that one thing the Government might consider is replicating in England the Scottish child payment, whereby lower income families are given extra help and additional funds to pull them up so there is less need in the household?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I welcome the hon. Lady's comments. We take these small wins where we find them, but this campaign has demonstrated how the Government can be encouraged to change their position when we bring together our communities and key figures in sport, entertainment and so on, around an issue that our communities are passionate about. Let us move on as a House, tackle the root cause and move on together, united, to make lives better for these children.

Marcus was right in his letter yesterday. He spoke emotionally about his own story. He stated:

“My story to get here is all-too-familiar for families in England: my mum worked full-time, earning minimum wage to make sure we always had a good evening meal on the table. But it was not enough. The system was not built for families like mine to succeed, regardless of how hard my mum worked.”

He is right. The shameful reality is that for so many people in Britain today, no matter how hard they try, they cannot make ends meet. Opportunities are too few, wages are too low and bills are too high. Before the pandemic, more than 4 million children in the UK were living in poverty—that is nine out of every class of 30—and that is expected to rise to 5.2 million by 2022. Child poverty is a pandemic of its own in this country and one that has got far worse, unfortunately, over the last few years. Child poverty reduced by 800,000 under the last Labour Government, but the TUC found that, in 2019, that progress had been completely reversed, with the number of children growing up in in-work poverty alone having risen by 800,000 since 2010. Some 47% of children living in lone-parent families are in poverty, 45% of children from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds are in poverty and 72% of children growing up in poverty live in a household where at least one person works.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The Food Foundation has found that food insecurity has increased by almost 250% since lockdown began, affecting 5 million adults and 2.5 million children. While the free school meals U-turn is welcome, it is not enough. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that we need the Government to raise their game fast to protect the millions of people who are now going to face even more hardship?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments, and I completely agree. While today's U-turn is welcome, it is merely a sticking plaster.

Work is often not a route out of poverty any more. Living in poverty does not mean people do not work or work hard, as some would have us believe. Shamefully, children go hungry every year, but this summer will be especially difficult for many families, as job losses and reduced incomes hit household budgets. Research from the Food Foundation shows that more than 200,000 children have had to skip meals because their family could not access the food they need during lockdown. The Institute for Public Policy Research has found that 200,000 more children are among those expected to be below the pre-virus poverty line at the end of the year.

It is very likely that, since the latest data became available, more than the 1.3 million children already eligible for free school meals will become eligible, with 2.1 million people claiming unemployment-related benefits in April alone, an increase of over 850,000 on the previous month. Indeed, in its coronavirus reference scenario, the Office for Budget Responsibility has predicted that the unemployment rate may rise to 10%.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree with me that no Government in history have created more jobs than this Government over the last five years, yet every single Labour Government have left power with higher unemployment than when they got into power? Should she not be grateful for the fact that we have a Conservative Government that will actually create more jobs than any Labour Government have ever managed to achieve?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the hon. Member for his comment, but I think he must have been asleep when I outlined the scale of child poverty, particularly the point I made about many children living in working households. A job might be a job, but it is not good enough if that job does not provide enough for people to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads. That is what many families are going through across the country at the moment, so let us up our game on this.

Not only is it simply wrong for children to be going to bed hungry, but it is likely to heighten the already substantial gap in attainment between the poorest and their peers. "Newsnight" reported last week that the poorest children usually end up five weeks behind where they were at the end of term because of the usual six-week summer break. With potentially six months away from school, I dread to think what the impact of this period will be on the education of the most disadvantaged children this year, without urgent help.

The Government are said to be planning a big catch-up programme for the summer holidays, which will of course be welcome and I wait to see the detail. However, I would be grateful if the Secretary of State agreed today to ensure that, as part of this, he will develop a national plan for education, where local authorities are funded to make a summer holiday local offer to children and young people; where schools are provided with additional resources, such as an enhanced pupil premium to help disadvantaged children; and where public buildings such as libraries and sports centres are used to expand the space available to schools to ensure safe social distancing.

Tim Farron: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for being so generous in giving way. She makes a really important point. Of course, if there are 30 kids in a class, to do this carefully and safely may mean having to split it three ways. Does she agree with me that it is right that the Government fund not only the additional space that will be needed, but the additional teaching assistants we need to make sure that those children are properly looked after and taught?

Rebecca Long Bailey: Indeed. The hon. Member makes an important point. Certainly, I would like the Government to look at sourcing these additional teachers, and encouraging qualified teachers who have left the profession to return to support pupils is certainly one such avenue.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): As a qualified teacher before entering this House, I would be more than delighted to return to the frontline and help in any way I can. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) made a point about schools looking to expand. Rather than spend more money on portakabins and using other buildings, would it not be better—given that the science shows that children are more likely to be hit by lightning than tragically pass away from covid-19—to get all children back into the classroom in September in their school buildings, where we know they are safest?

Rebecca Long Bailey: The Secretary of State has his first volunteer to provide targeted tuition for pupils come September. I look forward to seeing the hon. Gentleman in the classroom once again. I am sure that Members across the House agree that safety has to be the No. 1 priority, and I know that that view is shared by the Secretary of State. We have to work across the House, and the Government really need to start pushing the boundaries and creating a taskforce, with experts, teaching unions and school leaders, to look at how we can safely get children back into school. That will be the best place for them—emotionally and academically—but it is not a trade-off between safety and being back in school. We need to achieve both.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): What we do not need from the Government is another rabbit-out-of-the-hat announcement. My hon. Friend has just set out the sorts of things that we need in place if we are going to reopen schools in September, as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) just suggested. That would require the Government to set out a plan now and to start to engage with teachers' unions, teachers themselves, heads of schools, local authorities and parents to create confidence that it is safe to send children back to school. That is what is lacking from the Government; they need to engage more widely if we are going to create the confidence that children can return safely.

Rebecca Long Bailey: My hon. Friend makes an important point. This is about assuring parents, teachers, school staff, pupils and wider communities about safety, and ensuring that we get children back into school in a very safe way. To do that, we have to have a consensus, which is why I have repeatedly called for the creation of a taskforce to bring together all those in the education sector to come up with the safety principles that need to be put in place in schools to ensure their safe reopening,

[*Rebecca Long Bailey*]

and to produce a national plan for education so that pupils receive the emotional and academic support that they deserve.

Let me turn to additional support measures. I would like the Secretary of State to look at future GCSEs and A-levels, and to have discussions with Ofqual about changes to account for the work that has been lost during this period in order to provide a fair assessment of young people's attainment. We also need provisions in the event that there is a second spike resulting in pupils being sent back home and being unable to take exams in the usual way.

Jonathan Gullis: As the hon. Lady will be fully aware, one of the biggest challenges is that although we have a curriculum, schools teach that curriculum in many different orders. How has she factored that into her suggestion for a potential change in the examination process?

Rebecca Long Bailey: The hon. Gentleman may have missed my first sentence on that point; I think that the Government need to have discussions with Ofqual to look at how changes can be managed properly. He is right that different schools take different modules at different times, and different exam boards have exams set out in different ways, but the challenge is not insurmountable. These discussions need to start now, not at the last minute. We have already lost too much time.

I would also like the Secretary of State to look at blended learning. We do not know how long this pandemic will last and we need to provide for adequate home and school learning. I want him to work with the sector to look at the support that pupils will need both in school and at home, and at how much face-to-face contact can be provided remotely and in person.

On digital provision, we know that free laptops have been promised to year 10s and selected children, but I want to see a guarantee that every single child can access their work online. Will the Secretary of State confirm today that—at the very least—he will start with a commitment to providing devices to all children eligible for free school meals if they do not have access to a digital device?

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): As my hon. Friend may know, only yesterday I presented to the House on a cross-party basis my Internet Access (Children Eligible for Free School Meals) Bill, which asks the Government to look at the means to provide internet access and devices for the 1.3 million children in England entitled to free school meals. Would she urge the Secretary of State to support that Bill?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for her comment. I certainly would urge the Secretary of State to consider the points that have been made. I thank her for all the work that she has done on this vital issue. It is a sensible proposal and hopefully one that the Secretary of State will respond on today.

It is important not to forget that even children who have not been through very difficult circumstances throughout this pandemic will still have been profoundly affected emotionally. That is why we need to have a national plan for children's wellbeing to provide emotional and mental health support when children eventually do

return to the classroom. These are the building blocks of a national academic and emotional programme for children. Failing to provide the most basic support for children will undermine this effort. The fact is that no child can learn if they are hungry. That is why it is so important that this year, especially, the Government have stepped in to ensure that all children have a holiday without hunger and that they are funding free school meals over that period.

But now that there is a consensus emerging on the damage that child poverty does to the outcome of our children's lives, I ask Members to truly address these issues. The two-child cap on child benefit and the five-week delay to the first payment of universal credit are cruelly blighting the lives of children and their families. Will Members now pressure the Government to address decimated school and local authority budgets and the closure of Sure Start centres? Will Members' concerns on these issues be heightened now? Last month, a survey by the National Education Union told harrowing tales of children without coats and with ill-fitting, ripped shoes; children who were tired and thin; children with mental health issues unable to get help; children with bed bug infestations and rats in their homes. It is no surprise that these children often find it more difficult to learn, and no surprise that during lockdown they are likely to have fallen further behind than their peers. It is no surprise that over 1 million of these children do not even have access to a digital device.

Humanity has won a small battle today, but we have not won the war against poverty. I say to every Member here: remember why you are here; remember who put you in this place and why. We are ultimately 650 individual people elected by our communities to protect and improve their lives. We are the voice of the voiceless. That is the moral compass that should guide every one of our days in this place. This summer, when you wander through parks and streets in the place that you call home, with every child that passes you by, innocently unaware of the vast power that you hold over their life, you will wonder, are they hungry, are they suffering—did I speak for them when they had no voice?

We have the power to change those children's lives—to speak up like Marcus Rashford did. We have seen the true power that campaigns can bring in encouraging the Government to change their position. We now have to build a consensus across this House that this country will not tolerate child poverty and that we will encourage the Government to bring forward a raft of economic and social policies with one aim—to eradicate child poverty.

4.18 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): In this House we all understand the profound impact that this pandemic has had on people's lives. Supporting those on lower incomes and vulnerable families is at the heart of everything that we do as a Government. We have taken unprecedented action to support individuals and also to support families. We stepped in to pay the wages of over 9 million people through one of the most generous schemes anywhere in the world. We have launched self-employed income support schemes. We have increased universal credit and working tax credit by over £1,000 a year, injecting more than £6.5 billion into the welfare system. This Government have been firmly and wholeheartedly

on the side of those who need help and support at every stage of this pandemic. We have provided millions of families with the support they need to pay their bills, keep their homes and feed their families. At times of crisis, we must think, above all, about the most vulnerable in our society. No one in this House, on either side of the Chamber, ever wants to see a child go hungry. We are all united in that simple view.

Let me remind hon. Members of the Conservative party's record on free school meals. From 2014, free school meals were offered to further education students for the first time ever in the history of the free school meals programme. We extended free school meals to all infant children in England's state schools, and an extra 1.5 million children are now receiving a healthy school lunch as a result of that decision. In our response to covid-19, we have for the first time provided free school meals for those who are currently at home.

We must remember that free school meals are not about providing financial support for families; they are there to support a child's education. Receiving a healthy, nourishing meal is a critical way of helping a child to focus and to learn in school. It helps to enable a child to fulfil their potential, which is essential if we want to break the cycle of poverty from which far too many children right across the country suffer.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend is correct to say that the will to support these vulnerable children is felt across the House and that it unites us all. I have one concern that I hope he will alleviate. Many of the most vulnerable children do not live in happy, healthy households. We often find that those children—the ones that schools normally look out for—are in a position where their parents are not necessarily going to use those vouchers in the right way, and the current system seems to have no safeguards against that. My constituency has one of the highest levels of domestic abuse and one of the highest levels of addiction anywhere in the country. Can we add, before the summer, a mechanism to ensure that the vouchers are used for healthy meals for vulnerable children?

Gavin Williamson: I can assure my hon. Friend that measures are in place to ensure that the vouchers are not used for things such as alcohol, cigarettes or gambling. That is an important protection. He touches on an important point, because one of the greatest strengths of our free school meals system, where children get a free meal at their school, is ensuring that it is a healthy meal and it is there to support the child.

Tim Farron: I just want to press the Secretary of State on the same point that I asked the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) about. The issue with free school meal vouchers, particularly in rural communities such as mine, is that someone may live in Sedbergh and not have a supermarket for which they have voucher within 10 miles. Can we look again to make sure that this U-turn, which I massively welcome, is valuable to every child, no matter where they live?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman is probably aware that we have already made it clear to schools that they have flexibility on this and that they would be reimbursed any costs if they needed to procure vouchers from a different retailer.

Ms Angela Eagle: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Gavin Williamson: I will make some progress.

It may be that the retailer was in a sparse area and there were no other retailers that the family were able to use, or the family were in an area where there was not a list of available retailers.

Several hon. Members rose—

Gavin Williamson: I ask hon. Members to give me the opportunity to make some progress.

We have understood that, in holiday time, there is a need to offer a wide range of support. This summer, tens of thousands of disadvantaged children will receive additional support through our holiday activities and food programme, which is available thanks to £9 million of Government funding.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): I am incredibly grateful that disadvantaged youngsters in my area will benefit from this support, but my local council was recently unsuccessful in a bid to the holiday activities fund; will my right hon. Friend review that bid and meet me so that we can guarantee that the most disadvantaged youngsters across Stockton benefit from a summer of experiences and opportunities?

Gavin Williamson: I would be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that issue. What we have been doing on the holiday activities programmes is an important step forward. To pick up on something that the shadow Secretary of State mentioned, it is not just about feeding; it is about supporting young people in so many different aspects of their learning and broader health outcomes.

Jonathan Gullis: My right hon. Friend will be well aware that in Stoke-on-Trent we have the wonderful Hubb Foundation, run by Carol Shanahan, the owner of Port Vale football club. Linking with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers), I urge the Secretary of State to look into how we can expand the holiday programmes so that every town, city and village has some access to great programmes that not only help with health and wellbeing but do educational work to help the most disadvantaged in our communities.

Gavin Williamson: I am very familiar with the schemes that have been run in Stoke-on-Trent and have had the opportunity to meet Mrs Shanahan, whom I commend, as well as a Stoke-on-Trent City Council and its leader Councillor Abi Brown, who have played such an important role in the opportunity area that we have established in Stoke-on-Trent, which is making a real difference to so many children's lives. I would be happy to discuss in more detail with my hon. Friend, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers), how we can make sure that, with holiday activity programmes, we can make a difference to children's lives, not just through food but through activities.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): Further to the point made earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), the Government have done

[Aaron Bell]

a huge amount on free school meals over the past 10 years and we should be proud of that. These are unprecedented measures for unprecedented times, but the best place for free school meals is in school, so will the Secretary of State confirm his intention to get all pupils back to school in September?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, as we would always expect from a Staffordshire Member of Parliament. He is right that the best place for free school meals to be delivered is in schools, where we can ensure that the very best is given to the child, and that emotional and educational support is wrapped around that child. That is why we need to ensure that every effort is made to ensure that all schoolchildren are back in schools for September.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that having children in school is essential to closing the inequality gap? I wish to highlight the excellent work of the Lighthouse in Bourne End, which works with children with learning disabilities and helps them with their summer programme. We need more programmes like that to help people to get back on track and to help vulnerable children. We do not need to throw extra things at children so that they can work at home; we need them back in school with their teachers, learning in a secure environment where they can grow and the inequality gap can close.

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is correct in her assessment: the best place to really benefit children is school. She is also right to highlight the amazing work that is done by so many voluntary organisations throughout the country.

Patricia Gibson: The Secretary of State will perhaps recall that last year the Children's Future Food inquiry was published. One of its recommendations was that an independent UK watchdog for children's food should be established immediately, so that we have committed and energetic leadership to deliver for children. Such a watchdog has not been established; are there any plans to establish one? What are the obstacles to doing so?

Gavin Williamson: I will write to the hon. Member with the details on that.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Gavin Williamson: I should make some progress, if my hon. Friend will forgive me, because I am very conscious that Mr Deputy Speaker requested that we keep our speeches short.

Next summer, I want to be looking at how we can do so much more to support our children by making sure that we see a greater and larger roll-out of our holiday activities programme, including through the new £1 billion fund that we pledged in our manifesto to help to create more high-quality childcare, after-school clubs and support during holidays. But I think we all understand that this is not a normal year. Schools have been closed as part of the essential measures that we have taken to defeat this deadly virus. We took that action in order to save lives,

but I knew when we took that decision that our focus had to be on those who were most disadvantaged. That is why we were one of the first countries in the world to keep schools open for children from the most vulnerable backgrounds; it is why we invested more than £100 million in remote education, including delivering laptops and internet access to some of the most disadvantaged children so that they can continue learning—I very much want to look at how we can start to expand that and do more to ensure that all children have the support they need; and it is why we took swift and decisive action to ensure that we could continue free school meals for eligible children who were staying at home.

Jason McCartney: On behalf of the 13,532 vulnerable children on free school meals in Kirklees, I thank my right hon. Friend for his announcement today about continuing free school meals through the summer. As Marcus Rashford said, this is not about politics; it is about doing the right thing for vulnerable children and their families. Will my right hon. Friend continue to focus on doing the right thing for these children?

Gavin Williamson: I assure my hon. Friend that I will continue to focus on doing the right thing. That will be the key aim of all this.

My hon. Friend makes a really important point about the vulnerable children right across society. I would like to take the opportunity to thank the many teachers and teaching assistants, the social workers who have worked so closely with schools, and the police who have identified some of the children who are most vulnerable—those who needed someone to take the opportunity to reach out to them and make sure that they came into school and had a safe place to come. They have done a magnificent job, and I think everyone in the House is deeply grateful for the triumphant and heroic efforts that they have all made.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the support that teachers and schools have offered to vulnerable people goes much further than just a free school meal? Some of the most vulnerable children in schools in Peterborough have received regular phone calls from their teachers making sure that they are okay and they are looked after during this difficult time.

Gavin Williamson: This is where we need to drive things further, to build up layer upon layer of support for children who are not in school to make sure that they are constantly learning, that they do not fall behind and that they constantly move forward in their education and benefit from the world-class education we have in this country.

Many schools have done an amazing job of keeping free school meals going through either food collections or deliveries. Where schools were unable to do that, we set up the national free school meals voucher. That scheme was established at pace, and over £150 million-worth of vouchers have been redeemed through it.

Alongside the voucher scheme, we continue to provide schools with all their expected funding, including funding to cover free school meals, and most schools right across the country have continued provision in school for those children who are most vulnerable. On top of that, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural

Affairs has provided an additional £63 million for local authorities to help those who are struggling financially to pay not just for food but for other necessities at this incredibly difficult time.

Although many children are now returning to school thanks to the outstanding efforts of hard-working teachers and all those who work in schools, we are not yet out of this crisis. In schools, homes, workplaces and, above all, the NHS, people up and down the country are still making extraordinary sacrifices to overcome this deadly disease.

Free school meals have always been a term-time provision, and that is what they should be, but while we are in extraordinary times, we must not be bound by the constraints of what normally happens. A Government should always listen to the people who need them most. I would like to extend my particular thanks to Marcus Rashford for using his public position to amplify the voices of those who must and should be heard. By speaking out for the less fortunate and raising the phenomenal total of over £20 million in just a few days, he represents the best of Britain and is a role model for all the children who look up to him for inspiration.

We should never be ashamed to listen. I am pleased to announce that we will provide additional funding for a covid summer food fund, to enable children who are eligible for free school meals to claim a six-week voucher. As we prepare for schools to reopen fully in September, we will ensure that no child goes hungry. As we move forward, we will continue to do all we can to support disadvantaged children through not just free school meals but a long-term and sustained programme of catch-up activities, to close the educational gap, which has widened during this period, and ensure that every child in this country can achieve their full potential. We are finalising those plans, and I will shortly be in a position to outline them to the House. We will not be moving our amendment, and I commend this motion to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): For the first two speakers—Maria Eagle and Alexander Stafford—there will not be a time limit. Thereafter, the time limit will be five minutes.

4.36 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I am very glad that the Government have reversed their decision not to continue to fund free school meals through the long summer holiday, despite the amendment on the Order Paper, which I am glad they are not moving—we would not have thought that it was even there, listening to some of the interventions from Government Members. That was the least that they could do.

I would like to thank and congratulate Marcus Rashford, the talented young footballer who has spoken so powerfully from his own experience and who has repeatedly put his money where his mouth is, supporting FareShare financially during the covid crisis and writing to all Members of the House to urge them to support reinstating free school meals over the summer. He has just won his first political campaign.

I know how much football fans in my city of Liverpool—through the efforts of Fans Supporting Foodbanks, led, *inter alia*, by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool,

West Derby (Ian Byrne)—have done to support those facing hunger. They have been at the forefront of efforts to alleviate the spiralling increase in hunger and food poverty caused by austerity and the covid crisis. They have been supported financially by players during the covid crisis too, to ensure that they can continue to do their work and be the bulwark against hunger that they are.

Siobhain McDonagh: Is my hon. Friend aware of the great activities of AFC Wimbledon, whose fans stand outside 22 stores a day and deliver 1,300 food parcels each week? They are a small team with an incredibly big heart.

Maria Eagle: They always have been that. I was not aware of those numbers, but I am now.

For many years—from the Front Bench when I was on it, and now from the Back Benches—I have highlighted the ever increasing food poverty crisis that my constituents have been enduring, driven by savage cuts in public spending and support for families. The nature of the job market, which is dominated by insecure work, low pay, short-hours and zero-hours contracts, has been one of the drivers of increasing food poverty, but it has been made much worse by the covid crisis.

Ms Angela Eagle: I thank my honourable and sororal twin for giving way. Does she agree that the state of the labour market and the precarious nature of much work is one of the most shameful legacies of the Conservative party?

Maria Eagle: I do agree with that analysis, as it happens, but I would have to agree in any event in order to keep the peace in the family, even at a distance. My hon. Friend is correct. Precariousness in the labour market—particularly under-employment, as it used to be called, with zero-hours contracts being a prime example—is one of the main causes of the financial instability that leads to the food poverty that I have seen increasing in my constituency over the past 10 years to a remarkable degree. It has been made much worse by the covid crisis. Children are the most innocent victims of that. In the past three Parliaments, I have repeatedly seen incomprehension on the faces of Ministers. They have not seemed to accept that there is a real problem of hunger out there when I and other hon. Members on the Opposition Benches have pointed it out to them, but there is. It was real and growing before covid. It is bigger and starker now.

Free school meals are a direct way to tackle food poverty for children in normal times, but what if the schools are closed or the parents' income has been removed while their bills remain or are at best deferred? That is what the covid crisis has done. Some 18,000 children are eligible for free school meals in Liverpool, including more than 3,500 in my constituency. Some 29%—close to a third—of all children in my constituency live in poverty.

There are two other problems: first, that things are getting worse, and secondly, that the capacity of local authorities to assist has been systematically undermined and is diminishing rapidly because of Government policies. Before the covid crisis, unemployment in my constituency was at 4.5%. Today's figures show that the claimant

[*Maria Eagle*]

count has almost doubled in two months to 7.9%, which is above the national average. A further 11,500 jobs are furloughed, which is some 18% of the working-age population in my constituency, and 2,600 people are taking up support from the self-employment income support scheme.

Those schemes are valued and important, and I congratulate the Government on instituting them, but many of those livelihoods will be severely at risk over the next two to three months as the Government schemes are brought to an end. Liverpool city region research and other research into the job situation in the Merseyside area suggests that up to a quarter of all jobs are at risk as a fallout of the economic consequences that we are suffering because of covid. The reality is that unemployment in my constituency is likely to be even higher soon.

Unemployment over 10% and a quarter of jobs at risk of going—that reminds me of something. It reminds me of the early 1980s in Liverpool, which was truly the worst of times. I remember it; I was there. Many of my constituents are now in desperate need, having found themselves unemployed with bills still to pay and a financial reckoning heading straight towards them.

In many areas, queues formed quickly outside retail outlets yesterday, as non-essential shops began to reopen, but I am told that the longest queue that formed in Knowsley was outside a local pawnbrokers. There has been a 389% increase there in universal credit applications since before covid. As universal credit is a passport benefit to free school meals, the need is obviously increasing hugely.

Meanwhile, the ability of Liverpool City Council and Knowsley Council to respond and provide extra help is being removed by a Government who have not even kept their own promise at the beginning of the crisis to pay councils the full cost of covid. Far from being paid back what they have paid out, both councils in my constituency have received only about half the costs incurred. That is a recipe for removing their ability to further help children in need as the crisis of child hunger worsens.

In Liverpool, the council was spending £108,000 a week funding a £10 voucher for children eligible for free school meals. It is a good job that it did, because the chaos engendered at the beginning of the Government's scheme meant that Government vouchers were not forthcoming for weeks. Last year, the council spent a quarter of a million pounds providing city-wide play schemes that included food for the children using them across the city. It is not clear if it will be able to do that in 2020 because of the financial shortfall. In Knowsley, the council has spent £360,000 funding meal vouchers for children, which it will not get back from the Government.

During the lockdown, local councillors in Knowsley and Liverpool have overwhelmingly used their discretionary funds and their volunteering time to feed people, including children. That is all in addition to the food provided, eventually, by the Government's shielding scheme. The Torrington Drive Community Association in Halewood has delivered more than 2,000 meals and is currently delivering 120 meals, three times a week, including 150 packed lunches for children. In Belle Vale, 2,600 food packs have been given out at three distribution centres, with new families still coming in and asking for help.

In Cressington, local councillors have spent £9,000—all of their discretionary funds—simply feeding people, including children, who need support, with the help of Can Cook kitchen, a food poverty charity, whose work I have highlighted before. Yes, I am glad that the Government have seen sense, and have decided to give help that will feed children over the summer holidays; it will be given directly to their parents in the form of vouchers. The Government should not, as some of their Members were close to doing, equate poverty with fecklessness. It is wrong to do so, and I know that the Secretary of State will not fall into that trap.

The Government need to step up to the challenge of making sure that the next few years in Liverpool are not a rerun of the early 1980s. They could begin by giving Liverpool City Council and Knowsley Borough Council the full costs of covid, as they promised they would. In the longer term, they must address the underlying causes of holiday hunger, child poverty, low wages and insecure work. It is only when they do so that this problem will truly be solved.

4.46 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): It is an incredible honour to speak in this debate and give my maiden speech. Schools and the health and nutrition of our children are of paramount importance. No parent should have to worry about where their child's next meal might come from, so during this crisis it is right that the Government will step in to protect the most vulnerable in our society, just as they have done repeatedly throughout the pandemic. This is conservatism in action. Although these are testing times for the country and our communities, everyone, especially people in Rother Valley, will pull through stronger than ever before.

To many people, the name "Rother Valley" focuses the mind on our beautiful Rother Valley country park, but to me and all who live there it is a selection of beautiful small towns and villages, proudly situated in Yorkshire, that are wrapped up in a love for their country and their home. We have a diverse range of communities, from Bramley to Wickersley, Laughton-en-le-Morthen to Ulley, and we even have our own Wales. There is something for everyone, but it is our industrial heritage that is a great source of pride in Rother Valley.

Coal mining has played an important part in the development of our area, with some of the country's most important mines situated at Maltby, Kiveton, Thurcroft and Treeton. Many areas of Rother Valley have a long history of mining, but in Whiston the mining of whinstone was recorded in the Domesday Book. However, our history boasts more than just our contribution to industry. There have been settlements at Dinnington since neolithic times, and at Anston since the palaeolithic period, and there are other ancient settlements at Aughton, Swallowsnest, Woodsetts and Todwick.

We have also had our share of historic houses at Thorpe Salvin, Hellaby, Aston and Firbeck, with the former owner of Firbeck Hall being a source of inspiration for the novel "Ivanhoe". In more recent times, history was made at Rother Valley outside a coking plant in 1984, when the infamous battle of Orgreave took place. We have strong farming areas around Harthill and Hooton Levitt, not to mention the majestic beauty of Roche abbey, which fell foul of Henry VIII's awful anti-Catholic measures.

It would be remiss of me to give my maiden speech without acknowledging that I would not be standing in the House today were it not for the love and unwavering support of my family and friends: my parents, Theresa and James, who taught me from an early age that it is not where you have come from but where you are going in life that matters; my brother, Gregory, for helping to inspire me to go into politics; my daughter, Persephone, who was an unwitting campaigner during the election; and, of course, my wife, Natalie, to whom I owe this victory and all other successes.

My predecessor, Kevin Barron, formerly “Red Kev” and more recently Sir Kevin, was first elected four years before I was born, and although we would disagree on many things, his love for our area and his championing of anti-smoking measures are to be much applauded. One thing that surely separates me from my predecessors is the collieries. Whereas all of them had close ties to the mining community, either working in the collieries or for those who did, my ties are more with the steel community, which is also key to our local prosperity. Times have changed, and as they have done so, so have the people of Rother Valley. We look to a better, brighter future for our children and our children’s children.

Nevertheless, some things do remain constant, and that is what I espouse. The traditions of the Conservative party—hard work, law and order, family values and Christian morals—are timeless, classless and ageless. Those are the values of Rother Valley and they are ones that inspire me. Those are the common values that bind this great nation together. Love your family, love your friends, love your country, love your Queen and love your God, and you cannot go wrong. That is the contract of those who have gone before us and those who will go after us. These are the values that have spread prosperity, wealth and hope to billions across the globe. Britain, this small island nation, has a great history, and through our values and ideals it has changed the world for the better. It is these universal values that will continue to improve the world.

Rother Valley is not a huge place, but I know that each and every constituent can and will change the world for the better. We have done so before and we will do so again. You will never find a more industrious, hard-working, family-loving, patriotic people than those across Rother Valley. We are rightly proud of our history, heritage and culture. We are not a people to tear things down; we would rather raise them up. It is these attitudes that have driven the wealth of South Yorkshire and, ultimately, the wealth of this great nation.

In this House, we often hear the places that turned blue for the first time being referred to as “left behind”, but I can tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the men and women of Rother Valley do not feel left behind. Instead, they feel empowered. Rather than being told what their lives are going to be like or should be like, we have chosen a different path, one where we will no longer be taken for granted, and where our voices and our votes do matter. We do matter and last December we spoke with one voice. Just like outside Jericho in the days of old, we blew the horn of hope and the red wall came tumbling down. Some voters lent me their vote for the first time. I say to them, “I will not let you down. I will listen. We may have disagreements and different opinions, but the first and foremost job of a Member of this House is to listen and that is what I will do.”

No more will people in Rother Valley be neglected and forgotten. As I look upon this House, whose very walls were crafted from the fine stone of Anston in Rother Valley, I am mindful of the words of that great barbarian King Gelimer as he was paraded in chains through Constantinople by Justinian’s general, Belisarius, following the great liberation of Carthage: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity”. For what matters in this House is not just the pomp and splendour, although these traditions are incredibly important, but the people we represent, the beating heart of our nation who put us here and whose very presence we honour by being here. Come what may, I will always be true to the people of Rother Valley, as I know they will always be true to Britain.

4.53 pm

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I will be brief, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I have no choice. I pay tribute to the maiden speech by the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford). For a moment, I thought I was in The Old Vic towards the end of it, but it was a superb speech and we all look forward to hearing from him repeatedly in the future. I also pay tribute to his predecessor, Kevin Barron, who is a friend of mine and of many people on this side of the House—and, indeed, on the other side of the House. Kevin was a miner for many years at Maltby colliery. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned mining, I should say that Kevin had his arm broken during the miners’ strike, on the picket line at Maltby colliery. The hon. Gentleman did not mention that, but he might be aware of it.

Returning to the subject of the debate, I want to speak entirely about my constituency. In Leyton and Wanstead, just over 2,000 children are entitled to free school meals. They are concentrated in the four or five poorest wards in my constituency, which means they are among the poorest wards in London, which means they are among the poorest in the country.

This is not an area that has been de-industrialised. It is one that is fairly near the heart of one of the richest cities in the world, in one of the biggest economies in the world, yet we have 2,000 children entitled to free school meals. Communities such as the communities I represent will find it inexplicable that the Government had to be dragged kicking and screaming into making a U-turn four hours ago, after days and days and days of pressure from outside this place, from within this place and most notably from Marcus Rashford, as has been mentioned frequently. If Ministers had not finally done the right thing and decided to make this U-turn, that would not have been inconsequential for the people living in Leyton and Wanstead among those poorer communities, because, as my hon. and right Friends have mentioned, it comes on top of a history of deprivation and of working long hours. Many of those children, and many of the children who are not entitled to free school meals but who nevertheless are not among the richest people on the planet, have parents or single parents who work at two or three jobs, who work all the hours that God sends, and who were already facing financial difficulties before the virus struck and before the lockdown.

Leyton and Wanstead is the fifth highest constituency in the country in terms of people furloughed: 33%—one in three—of people living in Leyton and Wanstead are on furlough at the moment. If we put that together with all the other financial constraints, and with zero-hours

[John Cryer]

contracts and with vulnerable working—across the country that runs to about 4 million people at the moment—and if we add on top of that an end to free school meals across the summer holidays, it is clear those families and those children would have been facing a vista that is too appalling for many of us to contemplate.

I will finish on the following comment. The Government should bear this in mind. It is not a direct quote from Winston Churchill, but it certainly paraphrases something he said in the 1930s: no British Government can make a better investment than putting food into British children. Bear that in mind.

4.56 pm

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): I would like to start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) on an excellent maiden speech and his lyrical description of his constituency. I also congratulate him on the arrival of his daughter.

I warmly welcome the Government announcement of the covid summer food fund to provide meals through the school summer holidays, and I am grateful to know that, as a new MP, when I raised my voice, the Government were listening. There are three reasons why I felt this was the right thing to do.

The first is the simplicity of the implementation process. I know there is a convenient narrative that the Conservatives were going to keep children hungry through the summer holidays, and I know that that was not the case. I am grateful to the Minister for taking time with me yesterday to explain what the plan was for families who are facing extreme difficulty during the summer, and I considered very carefully what was suggested—the £63 million that was being made available to local authorities to fund families in need, and the £9 million to fund holiday camps where lunch would also be provided.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is an excellent opportunity here for voluntary sectors to get involved over the summer and beyond? Organisations such as Passion in Shephed look after children on a day-to-day basis, offering them food, but also places to do homework and extra work, and support and assistance in every way. Does she agree that there is an opportunity there?

Laura Farris: There is an opportunity, and in fact an imperative, to involve wider civil society in getting kids back into school.

While I saw the force in the Minister's plans, the simple truth to me was that they introduced a layer of bureaucracy and administration, and I was concerned that there was a risk that some of that funding would be delayed, or it might vary or be uneven between local authorities. The fact of the matter is that 1.3 million children are eligible to receive free school meals. They have been identified; their eligibility has been confirmed. They are already receiving the meal or a voucher if they are not in school at the moment. If we have the capability and the will to help children through this period, it is incumbent upon us to find the most direct and accessible means of doing so.

My second point is that it is absolutely right that 12 weeks into the lockdown, we fix our focus very firmly on children. I have thought about the sequencing of

how we proceeded through this period. The Government's starting point, which was absolutely right, was the extremely clinically vulnerable and their protection, and, in fact, the provision of food was an integral part of that. I think that 2 million food boxes—I may be wrong; it may be more—have been distributed in the last 12 weeks.

We then turned our focus to workers and the unprecedented package of support for the 9 million people benefiting through the furlough scheme and the 2.5 million people benefiting through the self-employed income support scheme. We then looked at charities and businesses across every sector, whether it was in terms of grants, business interruption loans, bounce-back loans, future funds or discretionary loans. There was such an array of options, and yet the category of people that we know the very least about are children, and particularly, disadvantaged children, because the fact is that their emails do not fill our inboxes.

Patricia Gibson: To refer to the points that were made in the previous intervention, we all have very important charitable groups in our constituencies. We could all reel off their names and they do fantastic work, but does the hon. Lady agree that essential services, particularly regarding children's hunger, cannot be contracted out to charitable groups? That is surely the Government's job, and the reason that these charitable groups have grown up is that the Government have failed.

Laura Farris: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution. I do not agree that the Government have failed, but I do agree that it is desirable that we provide free school meals, and I hope that she has understood that that is the tenor of my speech this afternoon.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's Department made arrangements for vulnerable children to attend school, but we know that take-up has been relatively low. Arrangements were made for children to learn from home, but the evidence suggests, certainly from heads in my constituency, that this has been quite patchy. Although the Government took unprecedented steps in relation to domestic abuse, the truth is that we do not really know what happens behind closed doors. None of this is a criticism of the Government. The lockdown was an imperative and it was right that schools closed when they did, but in my view it underscores the urgency of prioritising the needs of particularly vulnerable children going forward, and I see continuing to fund free school meals during the holidays as a fundamental part of this.

To turn to my final point, I think that the provision of free school meals places a value on many of those parents whom, historically, we have not really valued enough. I think of my children's friends at schools they have attended, who have received direct support from the Government, either in the form of the pupil premium or through free school meals. Those children's parents have been cleaners, bus drivers or hospital porters—what we now call frontline staff, but even six months ago we might not have used that term about a cleaner. They are people who have been doing low-paid and sometimes, in the context of covid-19, dangerous work. That is my experience of one school in one city, but I think that we can transpose those families' stories across the country.

I know that when the summer holidays come, they are challenging at the best of times, particularly for families on low incomes, and particularly when you do

not have the resources of perhaps grandparents to pick up the slack of childcare or camps in the usual way. In my view, it is right that we get on the front foot by providing direct support for families like that at this exceptional time.

5.3 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) and to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) on his virtuoso maiden speech, proving that his constituents made an extremely wise choice. I am pleased to be able to speak in today's debate, and congratulate the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) on securing it. Our children have only one chance at childhood and one chance of getting the education they need. Education, as we Government Members know, is the best way out of poverty. It is the best way of levelling up and sometimes, sadly, it is the best escape from a home that lacks the love and support that we all want for our children but is not always available. That means that teaching is among the most important vocations in society. Teachers are the people we trust to bring up our children, to inspire them, to teach them our shared values of tolerance and respect, and for the environment—

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andrew Griffith: I would love to give way to my hon. Friend.

Miriam Cates: As a former teacher, I absolutely agree about the value of teachers. Does my hon. Friend also agree that, while the support for free school meals is extremely welcome, the best thing we can do for the long-term futures of our children is to get them back into school in front of teachers—the professionals who know how to educate our children—and we will close that attainment gap?

Andrew Griffith: My hon. Friend makes, characteristically, the apposite point. I want to thank all the teachers and heads across West Sussex for their huge efforts made all year round, but particularly during the pandemic. I am pleased to report that all schools in my constituency of Arundel and South Downs are open to at least some year groups. In particular, I want to pay tribute to the parents, pupils and staff at Clapham and Patching school in my constituency, who only yesterday learned the wonderful news that they have saved their 200-year-old village school from closure. I congratulate the excellent South Downs Education Trust, which put forward the successful proposal to maintain the school.

As other Members have said, a hungry child is not a learning child, and is a tragedy that we should not accept in our society. I welcome the Government's announcement today adding to their very extensive support in this area. I want to highlight the national school breakfast programme, which gives thousands of children in some of the most deprived areas the opportunity to attend a breakfast club. That programme so far reaches 1,800 schools and serves a free nutritious breakfast every school day to 280,000 children.

It is working. A systematic review of the effects of breakfast carried out by the University of Leeds found a positive correlation between breakfast consumption

and children's cognitive function, including improvements in a child's attention, memory and executive function. In 2016, the Education Endowment Foundation and the Institute for Fiscal Studies carried out a randomised control trial and found that pupils in schools supported by the school breakfast programme made an amazing two months of additional academic progress over the course of a single year. In supporting today's motion, I congratulate the Government on that valuable scheme, as well as thanking the charities Family Action and Magic Breakfast for all that they do to deliver it.

5.7 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): On days like this, I despair of this Government and their complete lack of understanding, care and emotion towards the very real issues in our country. *[Interruption.]* It is not a laughing matter for children to be raised in poverty and not have food. It is not something to laugh at. I am happy to explain what it is like to the Government Members who think it is funny.

What it is like to live in poverty is to be palmed off, like I was as a child, to social services, to go away for a week at a time. I went to Scarborough. The only memories I have of that time are that I went birdwatching and it was awfully cold staying in a dormitory. Only this afternoon, I rang my sister to ask, "Do you remember when we used to go to Scarborough because Mum used to send us there for summer holidays?" That is what poverty is—memories that you do not want to recall as an adult, even in my mid-40s. These are not memories that my constituents' children should have to recall in generations to come.

I despair because today it has taken the experiences of a 22-year-old black man using his social media to get this Government to do the right thing. Our Prime Minister keeps saying, "I am going to take back control." Who actually took control of this debate today? It was not us in this House. We should have been leading on this issue and doing the right thing before it needed a massive campaign by Marcus Rashford. I absolutely appreciate and thank him for taking that leadership, and others for supporting him, and our those on our Front Bench, who lobbied early this week and talked about the issue previously, but the Government should not have had to be dragged here kicking and screaming.

The Government should not need an international debate—just like today on child poverty—on racism for them to realise that they have failed to provide race equality in the UK, even according to their own recommendations. The Government should not need the entire country to scream in their face to act on a lockdown for us to be protected from covid-19. When it comes to saving millions, they are happy to do so for Tory donors. The figure quoted in the press as the saving made by approving a Tory donor's Westferry development is £30 million to £40 million, yet we cannot find £120 million for our children. *[Interruption.]* I will make some progress. When it comes to defending the indefensible with a No. 10 adviser, this Government seem to find their mojo. They do not heed the campaigns that the country is screaming for.

Paul Bristow *rose—*

Naz Shah: I will not be giving way; I will make some progress.

[Naz Shah]

Bradford West has one of the highest rates of child poverty. It is in the top 10 according to the charity End Child Poverty. Its findings show that 50.9% of children in my constituency live in poverty after housing costs. The Government's own statistics show that almost 40,000 children across the Bradford district are living in poverty. Those children are not mere statistics. Each one of them is a Marcus Rashford, except the cycle of deprivation will mean they may never get out of poverty.

Marcus Rashford epitomises what happens in spite of, not because of, poverty. One of the reasons he felt the campaign was needed was that poverty was his experience. One of the reasons my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (James Murray) tweets about it and talks about it is that he also experienced life as a child of a single parent on free school meals, just like I did and just like my siblings did. Will the new yardstick in this place to get the Government to do the right thing be a campaign by a footballer or by somebody who has a social media following? Is that what the yardstick is going to be? That would be a crying shame.

Yes, the Government can say that they are running pilot schemes in constituencies such as mine—

Patricia Gibson: I am thankful that the hon. Lady has shared her experience today with the Chamber. I intervene as someone who grew up benefiting from free school meals. Does she share my real disappointment that a year after the Children's Future Food inquiry, which was about childhood hunger across the UK, the UK Government still have not formally responded to its report?

Naz Shah: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. We need to continually raise those points in the House. The Government can say that they are running a pilot scheme in constituencies such as mine, rolled out by the Department for Education, but such schemes simply do not go far enough.

The fight against child poverty and desperation needs much more intervention. In 2018, the programme reached 2,000 children in Bradford. Although I welcome it reaching every single one of those 2,000 children, what about the other 38,000? Businesses, charities and grassroots organisations in my constituency have been working tirelessly on that, but I am sorry—funding the NHS, protecting our streets and feeding hungry children are not the responsibilities of our charities; they are the responsibilities of democratic Governments of the first world. They are our responsibility. Perhaps those in government do not know how it feels to live in poverty, but they sure know how to make U-turns. For once I can say that I am glad about the U-turn the Government have made today.

5.13 pm

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): It is a pleasure to be able to talk in this debate, which is on such a fundamentally important issue. I thank Ministers for what they have said today. It has helped me to avoid my worst nightmare of having to vote with the Labour party, which I spent the day fearing I might have to do. I am grateful for that, if nothing else. I also put on record my thanks to the hon. Member for South Shields

(Mrs Lewell-Buck) for all she has done over the years on this issue. It has been largely unsung, and she deserves much more praise than she gets.

It is hard not to take an interest in this issue when one represents a town such as Blackpool. We have eight of the 10 most deprived areas in the country. Two of them are in my constituency. No one will know my constituency better than the Secretary of State, given that he preceded me there as a candidate. He will know that we are probably not facing a V-shaped economic recovery in Blackpool, where we have a fragile visitor economy and where the impact of coronavirus will be felt not just this year but for many years to come.

Nor will we see a V-shaped recovery in educational attainment, I fear, having had too many of our pupils away from education for too long. Too many of my primary schools see 50% of their pupils in each class change every year, as families move around the town in insecure, short-term tenancies in poor quality housing where the possibility of proper home education simply does not occur. That is why we see the inevitable spikes in food bank demand every time the summer holiday comes around, despite the very best efforts of so many charitable organisations around the constituency. In this context, I want to name Hannah Boyd, the curate at St Mark's, who has done so much in Grange Park.

This is why I really welcome what Ministers have said today. I think they are doing the right thing. Merely rolling over to yet another programme of free school meals over another school holiday does not tackle the fundamentals of this. We would simply be having this debate every time there was a school holiday, with people asking whether we were going to roll it out again and again. Now, we have a chance to try to tackle some of the more fundamental issues that we face, which I know the hon. Member for South Shields and many others have been focusing on. I want to see a much more decentralised approach to tackling holiday hunger. We do not need yet another overly bureaucratic national attempt that tries to fit our young people and communities into a one-size-fits-all solution. Blackpool's needs are very different from the needs of Staffordshire, Bradford and many other communities.

This represents an opportunity to think a little more deeply about what we want to achieve in relation to holiday hunger, because it is really a symptom of many other issues, not least that of financial insecurity. We still have too many people in absolute poverty. That is when families have been below the poverty line for three years out of four. That is a real concern of mine in Blackpool, and there are so many ways in which it can be tackled that I could easily spend the next 20 minutes talking about them. Tackling financial insecurity is the first step towards tackling food insecurity. We need to address issues such as food deserts, which mean that some of my poorest families cannot access good-value food, and cheap fresh food in particular. We also need to promote ideas such as community shops, which were around a couple of years ago but have now disappeared into nothing again. There is so much that we can do.

It is true that the coronavirus lockdown has acted as an accelerant on the fire of so many of the burning injustices that the last Prime Minister spoke of on the steps of Downing Street. Whether we call it social justice, compassionate Conservatism or levelling up,

I really do not care. I just think this happens to be the right thing to do. Many people across the country in some of the most deprived communities voted for us for the first time last December. That is why we got to hear the maiden speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) today. They did not vote for us for any particular reason. They voted for us because they wanted to see a bit of change, and because they wanted to feel that they were special. We should not see them as pawns to be exploited in pursuit of one particular political objective. We need to ensure that we represent them. They may have lent us their vote, but they deserve our full attention. William Hague said in *The Daily Telegraph* today that the lockdown would cause an era of “inequality” and “social tension”, and we now have an obligation to bring about not just the economic recovery from coronavirus but the social recovery too. What the Secretary of State has put forward today is the first step in that direction.

5.18 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate. I would like to compliment my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) for calling our Opposition day debate on this issue and forcing the Government to confront their inexplicable decision to abandon the programme of food support over the summer. I welcome the U-turn, although it would have been very difficult to learn from the Secretary of State’s contribution that there had been a U-turn at all. It was almost as though the Government were always going to do this. However, it took a huge campaign to achieve it, and I for one welcome the fact that the Government have conceded that the school voucher scheme will go on over this summer. I also agree with the comments that this kind of ad hoc approach is not a good enough way of tackling the issue of holiday hunger.

We know that, as Opposition Members have said, this has been caused by problems in our labour market: low pay, precarious work, and, due to a period of austerity, benefits not being good or generous enough to supply people with the basics. We also know that that hits the most vulnerable. We know that 200,000 children have skipped meals during the lockdown. We know that child poverty has increased since 2010. We know that seven out of 10 of those in poverty are in work. We know from the Trussell Trust that there was an 89% increase in the need for emergency food parcels in April. We know that there has been a 107% increase in parcels given to children. In my own constituency of Wallasey, 3,910 students were eligible for the voucher scheme. Having had a look at the increase in unemployment since March of 1,880, I know that that will be going up. There is extreme pressure.

I talked to a lot of my schools who have been dealing with this issue. Many of them say the same thing: that the food voucher scheme has helped to reduce financial and mental anxiety during the difficult times caused by the lockdown and covid; that vouchers to purchase food at least ensure that people do not have to worry about the basic requirement of being able to feed their families; and that without the Government making this concession children would undoubtedly have gone hungry, resulting in intolerable strain and collapse in our communities.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Does the hon. Lady share my concern that a number of families who are eligible for the scheme may not have even had the vouchers? That could be an administrative issue or that they just do not know about it. That means that this is no silver bullet and that the Government need to continue to introduce schemes that will reach those who are the hardest to reach.

Ms Eagle: Absolutely. I think all of us experienced the chaos that was around when the scheme began. Many teachers who contacted me were pulling their hair out. Many schools spent a lot of money—as did local authorities—to ensure that food parcels were available until the voucher schemes were up and running. There were very many issues with them.

There are those who say that civil society should do this work and that the food bank system is an example of how lucky we are to have an engaged society, but one of the first things that happened when covid struck was that the entire food bank structure in my area had to close down because it was managed mainly by people who are in the older categories who then had to shield for their own wellbeing. The local authority then had to take on a lot of the central distribution of the food bank structures that had grown up to feed thousands of children in Wallasey every summer.

The Government need to pay great attention to how much support they give to the structures that are there to ensure that something as basic as access to food is available for the most vulnerable children. It means, of course, that those children can study and learn, and get a better chance than they would otherwise have had if they were wondering where their next meal would come from. The covid-19 crisis has shone a not very flattering light on the plummeting levels of social justice we have seen in this country throughout the years of austerity. It has shone an unflattering light on the edge that many of our fellow citizens live on, whether they are in zero-hours contracts, in precarious work, only just able to manage, without access to savings, or only one wage away from disaster. It is an issue for all of us to think about how this can be improved, but it is particularly for the Government to ensure that they tackle it, given that they are in power for the next four years.

I welcome the U-turn, and I would welcome it even more if the Government recognised that there was an issue and dealt with it more proactively, rather than being forced, by the fantastic and magnificent campaigning of Marcus Rashford, to U-turn at the last minute.

5.25 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): We all want to do the right thing for struggling families, but we all also want to ensure that there is fairness for the taxpayer, so it is important that the right approach is adopted.

This Government have been financially very generous throughout this outbreak. We have seen the multibillion-pound furloughing scheme, which has saved the livelihoods of millions of people in this country. Assistance has been given for the self-employed, and extra money has been invested in the NHS to help cope with the battle against covid-19. Of course, free school meals have been provided throughout his time in schools, or where schools are not open in the form of vouchers. In addition, they have been provided to children over the Easter and Whitsun periods, and will now cover the summer.

[Gareth Johnson]

Nobody can claim that this Government have not put their hand in their pocket during the outbreak to help the British people. However, it has not stopped there. Universal credit and working tax credits have seen uplifts to the tune of £6.5 billion, and 2 million food packages have been provided. The list of assistance that has been given is extremely lengthy, yet, of course, it is not our money. It is taxpayers' money—money that will have to be paid back not just by this generation of workers, but by their children and quite possibly their grandchildren as well.

Layla Moran: I absolutely take the hon. Member's point, but surely it is a question of priorities. Does he not agree that the taxpayer would much rather that £120 million-odd was given to feed hungry children than, say, to a Brexit festival?

Gareth Johnson: I am quite astonished that Brexit has managed to be shoehorned into this debate; I am quite happy to talk about Brexit and the opportunities it gives us. I do think that what has happened and what the taxpayer wants is fairness. It wants fairness: yes, it does not want children starving, but it also recognises the fact that there are huge burdens now on our economy and that that money needs to be paid back. We should not get ourselves into the situation of trying to pretend that the state can provide everything in every situation. That is simply not affordable.

Assistance for families to provide food for their children through the summer is very important. Where parents are out of work and in need of help, it is right that the Government provide assistance. Nobody has ever disputed that. Our plans were originally to provide support through local authorities, but now a summer food fund will ensure that children will not go without food provision over the summer, and they were never going to.

This Government have spent money to an unprecedented level, and that money has been targeted at those most affected by this outbreak. The furloughing scheme alone will cost up to £100 billion, and the scheme will still be operating during the school summer holidays and well into the autumn. If anybody doubts this Government's commitment to free school meals, I can point out that many Conservative Members, including the Secretary of State—unfortunately, he has just popped out—were the ones that supported four to seven-year-olds getting free school meals for the first time, which did not happen in 13 years of a Labour Government.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Gareth Johnson: I will not give way now.

We believe in assisting families hit hard by the virus not just over the summer, but throughout the entirety of this outbreak. Assistance has been given for children to stay well nourished, and various schemes have and will be implemented. These schemes will provide for children, and ensure that a safety net exists.

Most importantly of all, we have financially been there for people during this outbreak. This Government have not shirked responsibility when it came to giving people in work a helping hand and assisting those who are not in work. This is all going to have to be paid back at some stage, and it is going to hurt, but it is right that we step up to our responsibilities during this dreadful time.

5.29 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I want to speak in this debate today not just as a proud Welsh Labour MP but as a former teacher and a single parent.

We once again find ourselves in a position where a high-profile campaign has forced an embarrassing U-turn from this Government—a U-turn that will benefit thousands of children from some of the most disadvantaged homes. I want to echo the sentiments of my colleagues in recognising the work and dedication of Marcus Rashford in forcing this change of policy. He is exactly the kind of role model I want for my son—even though my son is a Man City fan—and for all the children in my constituency of Gower and in Wales.

I started my teaching career in the autumn of 1997 at Standish Community High School in Wigan. I saw at first hand the impact that a Labour Government had on lifting children out of poverty. When I later returned to teach in Wales, it was obvious that the wellbeing of pupils was at the forefront of the decisions made by the Welsh Government. I am proud that making sure that all children in my school did not start the day hungry was a priority for the headteacher and governing body of Bryngwyn School in Llanelli, where I last taught. They were inclusive, caring, and looking to provide for all pupils who came into their care. This is not something new in Wales. But until today's screeching U-turn from this Government, children in England would have been losing out on support that they desperately needed. I am proud that kids in receipt of free school meals in Wales will always have that support from a Welsh Labour Government.

The challenges faced by these children and their families across the UK during the holidays are many: the cost of extra meals, finding free extra activities, and worrying about not being able to afford the uniform or the right shoes, school bag and equipment. I know that feeling of dread very well. It is not just parents of children on free school meals who need help and support—it is also working parents on low incomes, single parents, and all those recently affected by covid-19.

Since becoming an MP, I have focused in my community on supporting parents and children in Gower over the summer period. My office and I, like many Welsh Labour MPs, have run schemes to recycle uniforms for local schools, put together back-to-school bags, and made and distributed packed lunches over the summer holidays. We work together with the Welsh Labour Government and Labour-led Swansea City Council, who make huge contributions every year to helping families in Gower and across Swansea. We create and give that extra support for those families, and it goes beyond just free school meals. It is also very pertinent to note that the level of support in Wales is significantly higher than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. An allowance of £19.50 per child, per week, is £4.50 more than in England and up to £9.50 more than in some Scottish council areas. This can make a huge difference to these families and to the feeling of worth of these children.

But what message does it give to our children when the Secretary of State for Transport said this morning that there are more important things than feeding schoolchildren, or when the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions tweets Marcus Rashford making a flippant

comment and then attempts to correct it, while other Conservative Members demean Marcus's own personal life experiences and the experiences of others like him? The lack of empathy and inability to relate to the problems families are facing across this country is endemic among Conservative Members. Really, how can a Government be so tone-deaf to an entire country? There are Members in this House who will have known the challenge of putting food on the table. Many of us are driven by our own life experiences to help people—to pull them up the ladder and not to push them down.

I would like the Government to recognise what the Welsh Labour Government have put in place. On that point, I am proud that a Labour Government in Wales are committed to prioritising the wellbeing of our future generations. Although I am pleased that the Government have reversed their position, it does prompt the question, why did they not think our kids were worth it before?

5.35 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): First, may I join colleagues across the House in paying my respects to Jo Cox? I was not fortunate enough to serve in the House while she was a Member, but her reputation and causes live on in this place and she is hugely missed by Members on both sides of the House.

I am extremely fortunate to be a Member representing the beautiful constituency of Hastings and Rye. From our stunning coastline to our historic castle, world-class engineering companies to renowned pubs and restaurants, we have so much to be proud of, but we are also a constituency blighted by poverty and deprivation—ills in our communities that have plagued families for generations. I was elected on a promise to support the most vulnerable in our communities and ensure, as the Prime Minister has said many times, that we level up the area, so that all can benefit from the opportunities of the future. It is because I am acutely aware of these levels of deprivation, which I see every week in Hastings and Rye, that this debate is so important to me.

I am unashamedly committed to the Conservative ideas of a small state, individual responsibility and upholding the value in the institution of family. Yet, at a time of economic and health crises, I see that the most deprived are being punished disproportionately with worse health outcomes, suffering more from the closure of schools and being dependent on institutions like our food banks and charities. So there is clearly a role in these unprecedented times for the state to intervene.

We must recognise that the argument for free school meals to be available during school holidays is not new. A 2016 survey by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds were returning to school after the summer holidays less than healthy because they had gone without food. To assume, though, that people who are less well off will not or cannot feed their children is, I am sure, somewhat insulting to disadvantaged families. In fact, during the coronavirus, many families have not accessed free school meals or the voucher scheme, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), who has left the Chamber, highlighted, we must not shy away from the fact that, unfortunately, some parents just do not or cannot prioritise their children's needs over their own. We must turbo-charge our efforts to

look at the underlying causes of the neglect of some children by their parents, tackling the root cause rather than just allowing the Government to step in and do the easiest thing—throw money at the problem.

This Conservative Government, under our Prime Minister, have committed to combat poverty by improving education, jobs and our economy by levelling up. As I said, as a Conservative I believe in a small state, which protects individual freedoms and allows people to take responsibility for themselves and their families. Small government may sound uncaring, but it is not. A big state is much more callous, as it engenders dependency and therefore ultimately lacks accountability to the electorate. We cannot let the state take over a parent's job—a parent's most basic responsibility to feed and keep their children safe. It cannot be right that Government usurp the domain of the family and the most basic role of parenting. We cannot excuse people from the basic responsibility to their children; it is fundamental to being a good parent. We cannot have a culture that encourages the Government to take over the most basic roles of parenting, and we cannot have a culture where parents expect the Government to feed their children so that they can have money for other things. We cannot take away a parent's opportunity to take responsibility for themselves and their family.

As Conservatives, we have a good track record in government of supporting the most vulnerable through access to work, increasing the tax threshold, free school meals, the living wage and providing more free childcare. We have shown through other policies that we are committed to helping the most vulnerable. We will get our economy back on track following coronavirus and make it strong again, creating more, higher-paid jobs. The values that I spoke of earlier—individual responsibility, a small state—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am afraid the hon. Lady has come to the end of her time.

5.40 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): From one Wythenshawe-born lad to another, thank you Marcus Rashford. As a United fan, it has been a pleasure to see so many people united from across the football family and well beyond, taking a powerful stand for children. Marcus stated passionately that this was about “humanity”, not politics—a humanity shaped by his direct experience of growing up in Wythenshawe, Manchester in child poverty. Actually, I partially disagree with Marcus on that point. Together with campaigners in Parliament and beyond, he has led change. He is a change maker, striking his political goal of feeding 1.3 million children this summer—Marcus Rashford one, Prime Minister Johnson nil.

Paul Bristow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Amesbury: No.

Before the Prime Minister's U-turn, Minister after Minister told us, “We don't normally fund free school meals outside term time.” Well, we do not normally furlough 9 million workers. We do not normally ask people to isolate, distance and bubble. We do not normally close down schools in the middle of the school year.

[Mike Amesbury]

Nothing has been normal since March. This pandemic has required an extraordinary response from the party of small government and an extraordinary response from society.

This enforced U-turn—we remember the Order Paper, just hours ago—is a victory for children and a victory for common sense. But we cannot be in denial about the economic fallout from covid-19. This is only just the beginning, and it comes on top of 10 years of austerity. We cannot be in denial about the impact that this will have on the poorest in our society: the economic effect of the virus is pushing more families into poverty, and more children will go hungry, from Palacefields to Leftwich in my constituency.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) pointed out, the IPPR estimates that 200,000 more children will now fall below the poverty line and are at risk of hunger. This is not the time for a small state—it is the time for Government to get on their side, surely. In the long term, we need to look at the extraordinary number of children who are living in poverty in this country. We need to work hard to stop child poverty at its roots, rather than treating its worst symptoms or coming out with ideological claptrap and stereotypes. Hunger does not understand term dates. It does not understand ideological nonsense. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we all worked together, grew up a little and ended child and food poverty once and for all?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): To try to have any chance of getting everybody in who wishes to speak, I am going to reduce the time limit to three minutes. I have given the hon. Member for Watford (Dean Russell) notice of that.

5.44 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I will now get rid of half my speech—which, thankfully, I had not actually written, so that is all good.

I pay tribute to Jo Cox, as Mr Speaker did this morning. Sadly, I never got to know her or meet her, but we shared a passion for tackling loneliness. I will continue to take that fight on in Parliament, even though she is sadly no longer with us to do so.

I wish to speak about the challenges that all of us in this Chamber face in working together—we have heard a lot about that today. The challenge is that when the Government listen, we get attacked. When I hear the phrase U-turn, as I have in most speeches today, I do not hear U-turn; I hear, “Thank you. You listened.” That is the sentiment that we need in order to work together to tackle the really big issues. Since the start of this this pandemic we have worked together in a really great way, especially in the early days. I would say that Government have been agile in our approach.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): In respect of what the hon. Gentleman has just said, there is an amendment on the Order Paper that the Government will not move; had they moved it, would he have voted for it?

Dean Russell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Thankfully, we were in a position that I knew we would be in and anticipated throughout, because, to be open, I too have been lobbying the Government on this issue. I have used strong words behind the scenes, because it has been very important to make sure that this particular situation was sorted. I want to get on with my speech, but my point is that I feel it would have happened anyway, because that has been the movements and music behind the scenes.

The point is that we have to get away from this football politics—excuse the pun on Marcus Rashford—because we have to make sure that we work together cohesively. Throughout the whole of this pandemic, the Government have adapted. We have listened, changed and improved. We have ensured that the most vulnerable in society are being looked after. Look at how many people have been furloughed, how many businesses have been sorted with bounce-back loans and how many children in the vulnerable category were able to go to school.

I have been going every Saturday with an amazing charity called One Vision and another charity initiative called Sewa Day, along with the Salvation Army and others, to deliver food. At least once every single week, if not more often, I get the opportunity to go and see people face to face and help them where I can, but I have known that that is in addition to all the support that the Government are giving.

Do not get me wrong: the reality is that it is important that children in school are fed. It is absolutely a human right. I am a member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, so I see this and am very passionate about it. We cannot feed a child's mind unless we feed their stomach first. We have to hold that at the core of this. But unless we all spot areas where we can improve and work together to improve those things together, we end up with this political point scoring—a fear of adapting, because if we U-turn, the newspaper front pages will say we have failed. Let us praise the successes we have had and the opportunities to work together, and let us look at moving forward on that so that we can make a real difference.

I have one last point to make. When we have these opportunities to change things and adapt them, let us look at how we move forward in the next six months to a year, and the next two or three years. The voluntary sector absolutely has a part to play, not only to help provide support but to be the eyes and ears. The Government have worked hard to collaborate, not just at a party level but with business, charities and organisations to make sure that we are doing that.

5.49 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Lab): I add my voice to those thanking Marcus Rashford for his inspiring and tireless work against child hunger. I also pay tribute to 15-year-old Dev Sharma, the Member of Youth Parliament for Leicestershire and an ambassador for the Food Foundation, for championing the right to food for all children.

I could not agree more that in 2020, in the sixth richest country in the world, it is appalling that we are even having this debate about how to feed our children. Marcus is brilliant, but it should not be left to pioneering premier league footballers to paper over the cracks created by a decade of cruel austerity. The Government

should be ashamed of their record: 200,000 children going hungry; 45% of African, Asian and minority ethnic children living in poverty; and 1 million more children projected to be in poverty by 2022.

Paul Bristow: The hon. Lady talked about the large number of people from ethnic minority backgrounds—in her constituency, perhaps—living in poverty. Will she congratulate the charities in Peterborough that are working with the Conservative city council there to ensure that people from ethnic minority backgrounds are helped during this difficult time?

Claudia Webbe: Indeed, I praise all the voluntary organisations, particularly in my own constituency, that have stepped up to provide food banks at a time when poverty has been stark, and the many faith organisations that have stepped in to help during these times.

I know from my own experience what it is like to be a child on free school meals despite both parents working, and what that means for survival, progress and opportunity. In communities like mine, this Government have normalised hunger, poverty and hopelessness. Some 42% of children in Leicester East live in poverty. Years of austerity combined with insecure employment means that an estimated 44,000 children in Leicestershire are living below the poverty line, even though the vast majority—31,000—have at least one parent who has a job. The fact that a job no longer provides a route out of poverty, or even guarantees that our children will be fed, represents an unforgivable breakdown of our social contract.

Before covid-19, 51% of children in one area of my constituency were in child poverty—and that was before this unprecedented crisis. Nearly 6,000 households in Leicester East are in fuel poverty, meaning that 14% of schoolchildren in my constituency are living in a situation where parents are forced to make the impossible choice between keeping their family warm or going hungry.

Beyond school meals, this Government have completely failed young people in Leicester in terms of education.

Patricia Gibson: It is clear from the Order Paper that the Government were not intending to support this motion today. We were told that one of the reasons was that the approximate cost would be £120 million and that it might set a precedent. Does the hon. Member agree that feeding hungry children at school is quite a good precedent to set?

Claudia Webbe: I do.

I want to make the link between poverty and achievement. Central Government funding per pupil has dropped by 8.4% since 2013. At the same time, my constituency has a lower than average GCSE attainment level, and only 6% of our students—less than half the national average—achieve AAB at A-level. Do this Government not believe that young people in my constituency deserve the same opportunity to receive a good education? Do they not believe that it is a national scandal for any child to go hungry while billionaires and big corporations make ever-increasing profits? Two thirds of the current Cabinet were privately educated, yet they systematically deny working-class young people the opportunities that they were afforded.

That this Government of the super-rich by the super-rich and for the super-rich could have listened to these figures and still even thought about denying vulnerable

children the security of a daily meal is beyond callous. The Government would have known from their own equality impact assessment that their plans would have impacted black communities worst. Therefore, they would have lent themselves to the charge of institutional racism. They would have known that the right thing to do was to take the data, follow the evidence and change the outcomes towards the transformational change that Black Lives Matter demands. Instead, it was left to Marcus Rashford and young people such as Dev Sharma from Leicester to present the case for humanity.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The point I am trying to make is that if people take interventions, it gives them extra time, but it prevents others from speaking, because we will not be able to get everybody in. That is why people need to think carefully before they take interventions, because it honestly does stop others speaking.

5.55 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North (Lab): The reason the Government are in such a mess on this issue is that they did not put together a strategic plan for education and children at the start of covid-19 in the way that they did for the economy. I recognise the work that they have done on that with furloughing and so on.

I congratulate Marcus Rashford and all those who have campaigned for many years to make sure that during school holidays, children can receive food if they need it. It is rather sad that it has taken the covid pandemic to force the Government to acknowledge that holiday hunger has existed for many years. People such as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on school food, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), and campaigners such as Lindsay Graham have been talking about it for many years. It is also worth the House knowing that in the 1960s and 1970s, provision was made during holidays for children who were on free school meals, so the idea that it has never happened before is not correct.

I care deeply about this issue. Some 24% of children in Hull are on free school meals, against a national average of 15%. In my constituency, at least one in three children live in poverty, with 3,600 children on free school meals. In previous years, under previous Labour Administrations, Hull City Council introduced free school meals for all children in primary and special schools because it recognised that for children to do well academically, they need to have good nutrition. I pay tribute to it for that work.

I also remind the House that in 2009, I was an Education Minister in the last Labour Government. One thing that we did then was to introduce universal free school meal pilots in Durham and Newham. Sadly, when the coalition Government came in, they scrapped those pilots, but they showed a clear link. We all want to see our children do well and grow up healthy with a good education.

I have several questions for the Government. I want to make sure that my local authority gets its fair share of money. When will the allocations be made? Will the schools that found the Edenred system difficult to deal with be reimbursed for the work that they are doing to

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

support children and families? Will the support continue indefinitely now that we recognise that holiday hunger exists? Finally, why has Hull never received a penny from the Government's £9 million scheme for holiday activities, even though it has applied and is the fourth most disadvantaged area in the country? Some £999,000 has gone to Suffolk and £766,000 to Hampshire, but in Yorkshire and the Humber only Leeds has received any money at all.

5.58 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I rise on the fourth anniversary of the death of my friend Jo Cox. We remember her every day.

I want to thank England's—[*Interruption.*] Go on then, Mike—Man United's Marcus Rashford. We are all grateful to him. I thank the Secretary of State for answering his call, which will undoubtedly make a difference, although I suspect he is now having a word with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care for taking a pop at our footballers at the beginning of the covid crisis, which has now come home to roost.

Holiday hunger is not a singular or new problem. It has its roots in insufficient family incomes, the cause of which is labour market fragility, which my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) spoke about. We know that the problems in the job market are about to get much worse. Added to that are rising prices in crucial areas such as childcare and the harm to the power of the welfare state in this country, which will be my focus in the minute I have remaining.

The Conservatives have been in charge for 10 years. They have had enough time to show us their priorities, and here is what those priorities have been. The shutting of Sure Start, the end of the child trust fund and the cancellation of the health in pregnancy grant foreshadowed George Osborne's £12 billion of welfare cuts. The Conservatives ripped the Child Poverty Act 2010 from the statute book, they introduced the two-child policy, which sent a message to children in families of three or four kids that the state does not care, and they introduced the benefits freeze, which sent the same message to families of all sizes. Child benefit has been cut by £350 per year for a family of two kids, and the local housing allowance has simply failed to keep up with rents. The Conservatives demonstrated their priorities by forcing people off tax credits on to universal credit even if that made them worse off. All of that was on top of low wage growth, which is compounded for many—particularly for single parents—by their inability to work ever more hours. For families in this country, there simply are not enough hours in the day.

Those are the choices that have been made. Holiday hunger is simply the consequence of all that. It is the consequence of the Government picking holes in the blanket of the welfare state for 10 years. Each and every one of those policy choices has had consequences, and here we are. At the end of the day, this is about putting money in people's pockets or not. My party has lost four elections in the past 10 years, and that is on us. Meanwhile, four Conservative Chancellors have put 600,000 children in this country into poverty, and that is on them.

6.1 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I am pleased that the Government have scrapped their active pursuit of a policy direction that would have seen 3 million children go hungry this summer, but it should not have had to take the powerful, heartfelt and game-changing intervention of Marcus Rashford to get to this point. The anxiety felt by families over the past few weeks could have been avoided had the Government acted sooner.

Clearly, when cross-party MPs signed my letter to the Secretary of State earlier this month asking for an extension of the voucher scheme, the money was there, so why has it taken until now? Even before coronavirus, children were regularly going without. Ten years of Tory Britain has seen a forceful and deliberate dismantling of the safety net that once existed to support those who, through no fault of their own, were struggling.

It is no secret that I do not trust this Government. We have a populist Prime Minister who has a habit of making sweeping announcements, such as this one today, when he knows his popularity is waning. Many of us have been here before. He lauded the holiday activities and food programme, yet this year it was predicted to reach only 4% of eligible children. He then announced £63 million of local welfare assistance, but that is not ring-fenced, so it will not be spent exclusively on free school meals.

I sincerely hope that the Minister can give us some of the detail we need about today's announcement, because we are heading for a deep recession. This money will help us this summer, but the Government must start being honest about the drivers of food bank use and release the reports they are burying about that, and they must ensure that no child, let alone children in one of the richest countries in the world, goes hungry. Frankly, too many have already. I sincerely hope that today is a serious turning point.

6.3 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I wholeheartedly support the Labour motion and I am glad that the Government now recognise the strength of our case. It is important at this time that children who need help will be fed over the summer.

Let me illustrate my point by referring to a crisis that my sisters and I experienced when we were young. We were children in a single-parent home in the south Wales valleys. We benefited from free school meals and clothing grants through our early years. At those times, those meals were a godsend. When I was 14, our mum had a terrible mental health episode. She moved away and left me and my two younger sisters to fend for ourselves for a few weeks, then my dad came back from being a seafarer to look after us. Mum did leave us with a £10 note, which was a big help, but she was in a terrible state. It was the start of ongoing very poor health for her, and she was to die at 42 years of age.

I vividly remember the day after my mum left. I worked as a paper boy and there was a muesli promotion in one of the women's magazines, so we had packets of muesli for breakfast for the next few days. Over those few weeks alone, we three kids pulled together, relatives stepped in and we managed until my dad came back. At school, we had free school meals. Those meals kept us going. Of course, it was a very unusual situation, but so

is a global pandemic: people are having to feed their families while earning 80% of their normal wages; and people on sick pay are having to survive on £95 a week. This summer, too many families will find themselves in poverty and some will have to deal with a crisis. They may need that school-meal lifeline.

My message is simple. The Government told us at the start of the pandemic that no one would be left behind. We should stand up for children who, through no fault of their own, need our support. I am glad that the Labour motion will now receive all-party support tonight. And finally, I say well done to Marcus Rashford.

6.6 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I add my comments to those that have already been made in the House today regarding the reports of the Government's U-turn, and also pay tribute to Marcus Rashford and his powerful testimony of his own experiences of free school meals growing up in a single-parent household. All of this comes after so much campaigning and arguing for something so simple: making sure that children who need food get it. All of this also comes after years of austerity, which has had a devastating impact on ethnic minorities, with around 45% of black, Asian and ethnic minority children now living in poverty.

It is imperative that we join up the dots. The Public Health England report into the disproportionate impact of the covid-19 crisis on certain groups, which has finally been published, recognises that factors such as racism and social inequality may have contributed to increased risks of those in BAME communities catching and dying from the virus. In truth, it has been clear to anyone who has wanted to know that systemic economic inequalities mean that ethnic minority communities are at higher risk of being in poverty and so are particularly disadvantaged by the health crisis that we have endured.

It has now been weeks since the part-censored review, reluctantly commissioned by the Government, finally officially identified major inequalities, including the alarming statistic that Bangladeshi people face around twice the risk of death. Many of us are very concerned that it has taken months for the Government formally to recognise what has been widely noted and commented on and that action still has not been taken, yet decisions and policies are still going ahead without a clear and transparent examination on how they will affect particular groups and without confirmation that the situation for BAME people will not be made worse.

I was astonished to learn that a full regulatory impact assessment had not been prepared for yesterday's statutory instrument on health regulations, the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2020. This is basic stuff. Let me be clear: this is not about what is technically correct according to bureaucratic rules; it is about what is morally just and correct. This is not about the game of power, but rather it is a question of justice.

Will the Secretary of State clarify what assessment his Department has made of the impact of the original decision not to roll out the national voucher scheme over the summer on black, Asian and minority ethnic children and their families and those with other protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010? Will the Government commit to taking on the message that people across the world are crying out for those in

power to understand, which is that, if black lives matter, every policy should be assessed before it is taken forward on how it will impact on different groups. This should be a meaningful and comprehensive process, and it should be made public.

6.9 pm

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): The idea that children should not go hungry is one that most people would consider an issue of basic morality. I am glad that the Government have now conceded that the free school meals scheme should be extended to cover the summer, but given that the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) was still arguing against this only a few hours ago, it is clear that this is not a moral change of heart, but a result of incredible pressure from campaigners such as Marcus Rashford and the Opposition.

I would like to ask the Minister about one aspect of the policy. There are many children in this country who have committed no crime but the crime of being migrants—an accident of geography—and who therefore have no recourse to public funds. These pupils have been temporarily eligible for free school meals during the pandemic; will the Minister commit to ensuring that that continues, not just this summer, but as a permanent change in policy?

It is telling that the Education Secretary should imply that children need access to nutritious, healthy meals only when they are at school. If it is wrong for children to go hungry, it is always wrong for children to go hungry, not just during a global pandemic and not only while they are at school.

Despite the very welcome U-turn, this Government are by no means let off the hook for their shameful and damning record on child poverty and hunger. In the sixth richest country in the world, there is no excuse for letting a single child go to bed hungry. The fact that 1.3 million children are routinely receiving free school meals shows that something is deeply wrong. We are a wealthy country, but that wealth is not fairly distributed; the wealthiest 10% in our country have about 45% of the wealth. That inequality is only increasing; wages for the majority have been stagnant for the past decade, employment is increasingly insecure and precarious, and we have a standard-of-living slide, all while the rich get richer.

Even though they may be fed this summer, we will still have approximately one third of children living in poverty. The Government typically respond to this by saying that the best route out of poverty is through work, but that is simply a meaningless platitude in light of the fact that most children who live in poverty have at least one parent in work.

The Conservative party is the party of the food bank and zero-hour contracts. The Living Wage Foundation calculates the real living wage—not the Government's made up living wage—based on what people need to get by. It is set at £9.30 per hour outside London and that means that anyone paid below that is on a poverty wage.

6.12 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): The north-east has the highest proportion of children and young people in receipt of free school meals. Indeed, Action for Children

[Mike Hill]

recently calculated that 71% of children in the north-east are living in families with no or little savings to see them through the current pandemic.

In Hartlepool, the numbers were significantly high prior to covid and have risen since the lockdown, while the effects of ending furlough and potential job losses have yet to be calculated. According to the End Child Poverty coalition and research by Loughborough University, Hartlepool is the third worst place for child poverty in the north-east, with more than a quarter of children living below the breadline. Child poverty has increased by 7% since 2015 in Hartlepool, and the situation is being exacerbated by covid and the economic effects of the lockdown on families who are struggling to cope.

That has raised real concerns about holiday hunger, so I am pleased that, despite the heavy financial burdens placed on my local authority, it was prepared to step up to the plate well before the Government changed their position about this motion and run its holiday hunger programme as it has done for years, at a cost of between £50,000 and £60,000 per week.

Councils such as Hartlepool have recognised the problem of child poverty for years. It is wrong and needs to be eradicated. The Government need to do more, and that work must start today.

6.14 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): Having been brought up in a single-parent household, I imagine I am one of a small number of MPs who received free school meals; I know exactly what it is likely to struggle to make ends meet.

No child should have to go without food, and a child's concentration, alertness and energy are greatly improved with a nutritious meal inside them. As we are one of the richest countries in the world, we must question why in 2020 families are struggling to put food on the table, heat their homes or clothe their children. No family should have to deal with this, and no parent should have to choose between feeding themselves and feeding their children. Sadly, that is often the choice parents face, and it is exactly what would have happened right across the country had this Government not made yet another U-turn today.

It is a sad fact that one in three children in my constituency are growing up in poverty, and it is shameful that countless families have to endure this painful struggle, day in, day out. I see that struggle at first hand on a daily basis. My inbox regularly contains heartbreaking emails from families forced to rely on food banks to eat and struggling to pay their rent. Staggeringly, food banks have become normalised in society. I remember being outraged when they first started to pop up, as I could not quite believe people were needing to access charitable donations because they did not have enough money to buy food. Now, we all expect that there will be a donation box in the supermarket for food banks that we can donate to. We need to end the normalisation of food banks and to work towards a society where every family have enough money to live on.

The Welsh Government have already announced that they will provide each eligible child with the equivalent of £19.50 a week over the summer, so it would have

been deeply heartless for the Government not to fund the estimated £120 million, which will now ensure that children in this country, including 2,605 children in the Jarrow constituency, can eat for the summer holiday period. Not for the first time, the Prime Minister and his Government have found themselves on the wrong side of the argument, and I welcome the fact that they have made yet another U-turn.

This issue is not about politics; it is about doing the right thing. Marcus Rashford, in his efforts to persuade the Government to see sense on this issue, should be applauded, and I am glad the Government have listened to him, to MPs on both sides and to the whole of the country, who have called for this. If the Government can find billions of pounds to support businesses during this pandemic, it is only right that £120 million has been found to ensure that families and children are provided with food this summer.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): If hon. Members can speak for slightly less than three minutes, we might be able to get everybody in. If we are thinking of each other, that is the way to do it. As I have said before, having interventions is not a good idea because it will take away the opportunity from others.

6.17 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I congratulate Marcus Rashford on spearheading this campaign. He is an amazing role model, both on the pitch and off it. His speaking out on how his mother struggled to make ends meet and how he would turn up at his friends' houses in the hope of being fed resonated across the country, and there are far too many other young kids like Marcus out there.

Last year, I was one of the MPs who served on the children's future food inquiry, and we heard devastating accounts from children, not just about raw and real hunger, but about living on leftovers, scraps or cheap food with little to no nutritional value. It should not take a famous footballer speaking out about his experiences as a child; the Government should have listened to those children back then in April last year and implemented the children's right to food charter.

Of course I welcome this U-turn, but we need to embed it, so that we do not have to have this argument every time the school holidays come around. This move alone will not be enough. For far too many children, their free school meal is the only decent meal they get, and the under-fives do not even get that.

In Bristol, we will still be running our healthy holidays scheme this year, which is about far more than just providing a meal, but it looks as though we will have to do so without Government support. Feeding Bristol was fortunate enough to be a holiday hunger pilot in 2018, but last year we were not so lucky and we do not know why. We got nothing from the Government, but we raised £100,000 and we did it ourselves, albeit to a more limited degree than we would have liked. In 2020, we again missed out, apparently by just one point, but again we have no idea why. The Mayor of Bristol and I both wrote to the Government asking why some cities and towns were getting six-figure or even seven-figure sums but Bristol was getting nothing. We suggested

spreading the money more evenly so that many more schemes could be pump-primed, but we have not had a response.

We know that covid-19 has made many more families financially vulnerable and those who were already vulnerable even more so. I pay a particular tribute to FareShare, which has been fantastic throughout this crisis. Again, let us congratulate Marcus Rashford on raising £20 million for its national effort. In the past week alone, 80 tonnes of food came to Bristol via FareShare South West, but this is not, as the Government would have it, just about this summer and coping with the fallout from the pandemic. People have been attending food banks in record numbers since the economically illiterate, morally bankrupt policy of austerity was adopted a decade ago. The Government have consistently refused to acknowledge the sheer scale of the problem, to engage with those working on the frontline, or to address the underlying causes of food poverty, and it is time that they did.

6.20 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Holiday hunger is not a new phenomenon, and since the summer of 2017 in Swansea East, I, my team, the Swansea Ospreys, football and rugby clubs, local businesses, community groups, Big Food and Castell Howell, which are members of the wholesale federation, have provided food for local children—not just in the summer but during the Christmas holidays. I have lost count of the families we have supported, but it is easily in excess of 30,000.

This summer, we thought our lunch club would be able to stand down, as the Welsh Labour Government recognised the issue and introduced a continuation of free school meals throughout the holidays. However, my grand, quiet summer has been interrupted by coronavirus and over the past 12 weeks we have been busy preparing and delivering more than 20,000 meals to vulnerable families across Swansea. Again, that was achieved with the support of Swansea Council, wonderful volunteers, Mecca bingo, and huge food donations from members of the wholesale federation—ironically, one of the few sectors not to have received any Government pandemic support.

The Welsh Labour Government's early decision to guarantee funding for free school meals throughout the school holidays is testament to their understanding of real-life issues and their ability to react to this real-life issue. We are hearing more and more harrowing stories of parents going without in order to feed their children—not because they are making thoughtless decisions on what to spend their money but because they do not have the money in the first place.

Almost two months ago, the Welsh Labour Government made an announcement about continued funding for free school meals during the summer holidays. I welcome the fact that today the Prime Minister and the Government have finally, after immense pressure, U-turned on their original decision—again, following Wales's lead—but I question why they did not make the obvious and compassionate decision in the first place, as that would have saved many families a lot of anxiety in recent weeks. Many families were concerned that during the school holidays they would be sending their children to bed with empty bellies. Welsh Labour led the way, and I am proud to be the deputy leader of Welsh Labour. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Thank you. I wonder: without

huge pressure from Labour Members, Conservative Back Benchers and an international football star, and a public outcry, would the Prime Minister ever have reached the right decision and made a U-turn on this policy? That is food for thought, but I am afraid that the jury is out to lunch on the answer.

6.23 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): For some, the free school meal voucher roll-out scheme has been nothing short of a disaster, and I know of 16 schools in my constituency that have reported problems with the system managed by the private company, Edenred. At a time when they had enough on their plate, head teachers were literally pulling their hair out. School after school told me that the system had crashed, with error messages appearing, some parents receiving vouchers but not others, and the impossibility of having a conversation with Edenred. At the height of the problems, staff at the North Cambridge academy were getting up at 6 o'clock in the morning to try to log on before the system was overwhelmed. At that point, they had been waiting two weeks for vouchers. If it takes the intervention of the local MP to make something happen, something has gone wrong.

To add insult to injury, the vouchers do not work in many city shops. My local food hub told me of the despair of a mum of four children from Chesterton. She put credit on her phone to receive the vouchers, then asked a friend to print them, as she does not have a printer at home. She then walked to her local shop with her children in tow, shopped, queued, and finally reached the checkout, only to be told that the national vouchers were not redeemable in the Co-op. She was inconsolable. All the food had to be put back; she had no way of paying for it. Think how that must feel.

Why not use non-Edenred schemes? After all, stores such as the Co-op have alternative food voucher schemes ready to go. Schools are nervous, especially after Government encouragement to use Edenred meant that schools dumped better functioning schemes for the Government's preferred provider. There needs to be clarity about the financial support schools will receive if they choose not to use Edenred.

The Government need to stop penalising well-managed schools. Some do have cash in the bank and in their reserves, but it is for a purpose—investing in buildings and books and computers. The Government guidance that schools with a budget surplus in the current financial year cannot reclaim the cost of providing vouchers needs to be rethought.

Some will say that Cambridge is prosperous and, in many ways, it is, but even before the covid crisis, 1,741 children were already eligible for free school meals and that figure is going up. Since April, an additional 265 children have joined their ranks.

We are fortunate to have the Food Poverty Alliance in Cambridge, backed with funding from the Labour city council. Volunteers cook and deliver meals, including to 70 families, at the kitchens at Cambridge Regional College. They cooked 2,000 meals last week. While we are talking football, although Cambridge United has sadly been forced off the pitch, their "Here for U's" scheme was enough to get me cheering again and I understand that their bread and butter pudding has been a particular hit.

[Daniel Zeichner]

The Government's U-turn is welcome, but until we get through this crisis, have a real living wage and job security, there will continue to be need. At one time, we had a Government who sought to Make Poverty History. Now we have a Government who all too often seem indifferent to growing hunger. At least they have been shamed into doing one thing right today.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am going to have to reduce the limit to two minutes in order to get everybody in.

6.26 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Like so many Members we have heard from today, I was also in receipt of free school meals when I was at school. I remember having to go to reception daily, in the morning, to collect my voucher and hand it over to the dinner ladies. I remember the bullying and the stigma I faced as a child because of that. That was in the late '80s and early '90s and it is shocking that we still need free school meals today.

In my constituency of Vauxhall, there are more than 4,000 children on free school meals. It is unimaginable that their families have to choose between putting food on the table and keeping a roof over their heads. I welcome the Government's U-turn, but the fact that Labour had to table the debate in the first place shows a huge blind spot in the Government when it comes to child poverty.

I would like to highlight the Co-op Group's announcement that it has taken the decision to extend the free school meals scheme over the summer holidays in all Co-op academies, which means that 6,000 students across 25 schools in the Co-op Academies Trust will continue to receive £20 vouchers every week, which is higher than the £15 provided by the Department for Education.

We all know the financial impact of covid on our families and that will have a big hit over the summer holidays. Will the Government reassure families in Vauxhall and across the country that they understand how important free school meals are and what a difference they will make to those families? I also urge the Government to look not just at the symptoms, but at the causes of child poverty.

6.27 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I congratulate the Government on agreeing to free school meals over the summer holidays and I congratulate Marcus Rashford on the best goal of his life so far—I can only say that his mum must be so proud of him today—but please do not let anybody think that this is just about food over the summer.

The average free school meals child starts school behind their contemporaries in class. The average free school meal child at year 6 can be up to 18 months behind the other kids in their class. When they start secondary school in year 7, they go backwards from year 6. Yet these children will have spent six months out of school, with 700,000 of them not doing any work—700,000 of them with no access to the internet and no access to a tablet or a computer to do any work at all. The size of the crisis in our schools is huge.

If we are absolutely honest, many of these children will not be going back to full-time schooling in September and will not get the additional small group classes they need. That is why I am asking everybody in the Chamber today to support our Bill to get every child who is on free school meals access to the internet and access to a device that allows them to do that—to give them a step towards employment in the future and to make sure that their families have access to the same education and the same ledger as everybody else.

6.29 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I would like to take a moment to remember Jo Cox, a fellow Yorkshirewoman. She was such an inspiration and stood up against inequality and the loneliness that often accompanies it.

I welcome the Government U-turn on free school meals over the summer. I pay tribute to Marcus Rashford for his leadership over the past few days. Perhaps Government Members could take some lessons from that.

Since the onset of the covid-19 crisis, 1.5 million people have reported going a whole day without food. The use of food banks has soared. Mutual aid groups, food banks and campaigners in my constituency have struggled to provide the food that the people of Sheffield need. Their work and the work of others is heartening, but it is also a travesty that in the sixth richest country in the world it falls to volunteers and the charity sector to ensure that no one is going hungry.

Over the past few years in Sheffield, we have seen a growth in activities for young people that now must involve the provision of food, whether they are holiday hunger projects or term-time clubs. Children are struggling to get the nutrition they need and rely on such projects, as well as free school meals. The demand is high and it is growing. Communities have identified the need, but it is clear that they do not have the resources to prevent hunger in their neighbourhoods. They cannot solve the structural issues of inequality, low pay, insufficient social security, and rising costs in housing, energy and the basics. Solving that requires action and intervention from this place.

The pandemic has not created this crisis, but it has shone a light on the weaknesses that already exist. According to the Trussell Trust's "State of Hunger" report, 8% to 10% of households in recent years have experienced food insecurity, leading to 1.5 million units of emergency food parcels—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

6.31 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): At the start of this crisis, Ministers said they would do whatever it takes to get the country through this crisis. The reality is that the Government have been dragged to this kicking and screaming because of the heroic campaigning of charities and the amazing Marcus Rashford. What the crisis shows is that this is a Government who are morally bankrupt. The fact that they even considered starving millions of children in this crisis, the fact that they did not have the instinct to protect those children, and that it took those campaigners and

Opposition Members to get them to see sense, shows a moral bankruptcy that beggars belief. I hope that Ministers will reflect on that and learn from this experience.

Two hundred thousand children have had to skip meals during the lockdown. In Tower Hamlets, we face the highest child poverty in the country, with my constituency facing the second highest. My local authority has lost £50 million of income. Some £30 million of that is costs related to covid. That is £30 million of income lost. Local authorities are struggling to make ends meet and protect people.

The Government must take urgent action not just in relation to child poverty and child hunger during the summer, but to deal with the deep-rooted causes. They must, for example, scrap the two-child policy limit and deal with housing costs in cities like London that condemn families to poverty. We need a new settlement post covid to recognise that inequalities are literally killing people. We have seen that with the spectre of high death rates for black, Asian and minority ethnic people, and white disadvantaged people who are twice as likely to die in this crisis than wealthier white people. We need the Government to step up and protect all those who need our help.

6.33 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): We remember Jo Cox today. She would have been speaking with great passion in this debate.

Since the coronavirus crisis began, St Mary's in Pontefract has delivered food parcels to help nearly 250 children. Thank you to David Jones, Denise Pallett and all the volunteers. In Castleford, we have been delivering food parcels and kids activity packs, with great leadership from Kath Scott and Saney Ncube. We have talked to families where children are making do with snacks for lunch—something sweet and cheap to eat, because there is no food in the house. Paul Green and the volunteers at Kellingley club have been doing an amazing job supporting families in Knottingley. In Normanton, Michelle Newton, Ash Samuels and the Well Project have been helping families across the town.

Our councillors and volunteers are the best of Britain, and part of the proud tradition in our towns of people rallying round when things are tough. It has also been the best of Britain that we have seen in this phenomenal personal campaign from Marcus Rashford, but also from hundreds of thousands of people across the country joining the campaign to end holiday hunger. Today's U-turn from the Government is welcome, but we need action all of the time to stop child hunger and poverty, not just when there is a big campaign.

Under the last Labour Government, in the run-up to every Budget—every Budget—we had a big debate on what should be done that year to tackle child poverty and to make progress. We tried to make that pressure permanent 10 years ago by bringing in the Child Poverty Act 2010, which at that time had cross-party support, to keep the pressure up to end child poverty. However, that has been ditched by the Government, and instead we have seen things such as the two-child limit or the five-week wait for universal credit brought in that have caused so much damage. I would urge them to join in that cross-party spirit again to end child hunger and to end child poverty. It is morally wrong that, in the 21st century, any children should go hungry.

6.35 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): On 27 March, at the daily press conference, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said that the coronavirus “does not discriminate”. We know that is not true, with 88% higher mortality rates in deprived communities, and we all see and know in our own constituencies the economic effects that this virus is having in more deprived areas. In my own constituency, 1,570 people have joined the claimant count since March, and that will increase. Their families are made up of hard-working, dedicated individuals who through no fault of their own have found themselves and will find themselves struggling. The hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) is not here, but I am sorry, the state does need to intervene in these situations, because these people pay their tax and are proud individuals, and they need our support now.

Listening to Conservative Members today, it is as though an amendment was not on the Order Paper saying that they were going to oppose free school meals over the summer, but it is there. As I challenged the hon. Member for Watford (Dean Russell), if it had been there tonight and things had not changed, they would all have trooped through the Lobby and voted against giving our children free school meals during the summer holidays. In 2020 in the sixth richest country in the world, if we cannot afford to support and feed children, there is something terribly wrong. That is not the society I came into politics to see. It is one that I and, I know, others on the Labour Benches will continue to fight, and we will fight against the injustice that this Government seem to be completely deaf to.

6.37 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The reliance of many children on free school meals is, sadly, not a new thing, but this is the reality for the 3,231 children across my Luton South constituency. Similarly, holiday hunger is a sustained and severe problem at the heart of many of our communities, and both have been exacerbated by this unprecedented public health crisis. I am glad that, after sustained pressure from Marcus Rashford and the Labour party's Holidays Without Hunger campaign, the Government have decided to U-turn, do the right thing and extend the free school meal voucher scheme over the summer holidays.

Research by End Child Poverty shows that, before the coronavirus crisis, 46% of children in Luton South were living in relative poverty. As I have said before in this House, many are living in families struggling with in-work poverty due to low pay, insecure work and zero-hours contracts. I am very concerned that the financial hardship inflicted by the coronavirus crisis will cause this figure to increase. If the Government had not conceded to public pressure and extended the free school meal voucher scheme, they would have neglected their responsibility to vulnerable children.

Free school meals provide a staple diet and the nutrition that facilitates a child's development. Neglecting a child's development needs can have a tremendous impact on their mental and physical health. In the longer term, adverse childhood experiences—for example, a sustained inability to meet a child's basic needs, such as being fed—can lead, through no fault of their own, to negative outcomes such as low educational and employment

[Rachel Hopkins]

achievements and mental health problems. Today's U-turn is welcome, and I urge the Government to go further to end child poverty.

6.39 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I pay tribute to Marcus Rashford this afternoon. It is not easy to speak about difficult personal experiences, but by doing so in such a powerful way, he helped to force the Government to act to stop 1.3 million children in England who are eligible for free school meals going hungry over the summer holidays. I also pay tribute to my local councils—Lambeth and Southwark councils—and to the many community organisations that have been working so hard since March to address food insecurity during the pandemic. They show the commitment, care and compassion in our local communities of which I could not be more proud.

While the Government's U-turn is welcome, we should not be having this debate today, because coronavirus or not, no child should ever go hungry in the UK. Parents do not want to have to rely on a voucher scheme. They want the dignity and freedom to buy healthy, fresh food to nourish their children. Shamefully, childhood hunger and food insecurity are a huge problem in the UK, exacerbated by coronavirus, but a reality for many families, even without the pandemic. It is hard to understand the mindset of a Prime Minister who does not appear to see this as a top priority and who has to be pushed reluctantly into minimal action.

The voucher scheme is welcome and essential, but it is not a solution to food poverty. It is not reaching the thousands of families who fall just outside the income threshold for free school meals, or those who will not claim because of the stigma. We know that many of these families are also on low incomes, with precarious work, facing high housing costs and forced to rely on a social security system that prefers punishment over support.

The Government have a choice: they can keep lurching forward with disorganisation and wrong-headedness, forced to do the right thing only by intense pressure from our communities; or they can start to engage and plan now for a coronavirus recovery that builds back better, addressing structural inequality, low pay, insecure work, the high cost and insecurity of private renting and the ability of our councils to deliver the public services that we all rely on, and they could make sure that no child in the UK ever has to go to bed hungry again.

6.41 pm

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): I welcome the Government's U-turn on this important issue, and it is incredibly disappointing that it has taken a high-profile intervention—a “Match of the Day”-worthy goal—from Marcus Rashford to get us to this point. I think of my constituents in Ilford South, where we have over 4,000 children who claim free school meal vouchers, and, potentially, with 17,500 people on furlough, that figure could rise to a far worse and frightening level.

Unsurprisingly, I have been inundated with emails from concerned constituents in precarious positions. Andrea, with three children, currently has no income whatever due to the covid crisis, her mental health damaged.

I will quickly mention one young man—a 10-year-old, Muhammad Ameen, who took the time to write to me from my old primary school, Highlands, in Ilford South. He said that some children whose

“parents are poor, have to suffer hunger in this crisis and are not getting the free school meals they need. I must stress this is for the families who desperately need it.”

I know that we are short on time, so I will finish by saying that it does not often happen that someone who is a West Ham supporter will congratulate and thank Marcus Rashford, a Manchester United player, but by highlighting this, he has held a mirror up to the Government. Thankfully, they have responded and are going to help all those people in my constituency to get through this summer—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

6.43 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I will start by saying how pleased I am about the U-turn that the Government have made over free school meals, and what an impact it will have on all the children who are facing a food crisis in this pandemic and all the parents who are worried about the long summer months that are coming up over the holidays. We cannot underestimate the impact that this decision will have.

Today's debate has highlighted how necessary this U-turn was. Forgive me, because I will not be able to mention every single person who has spoken in the debate, but there have been some very powerful speeches from Members on both sides, including the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), who exposed the shocking extent of child poverty in the UK. My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) shared powerful stories of child poverty from her constituency, and my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum), for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome), for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) and for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) talked movingly about their own personal stories when it comes to free school meals.

There have been so many excellent contributions, and I am afraid I cannot go through all of them, but it would be remiss of me not to mention my hon. Friends the Members for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who have been campaigning on this issue for a very long time now—well before the Government decided to do their U-turn. As for Government Members, I want to congratulate the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) on his maiden speech, as well as his new baby.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the brilliant organisations that have been campaigning on food poverty in this crisis and calling on the Government to extend free school meals. No campaign ever happened single-handedly, and I cannot name all of them. I will give a quick mention to School Food Matters, the Child Poverty Action Group, Feeding Britain, the Food Foundation, Sustain, and the Good Law Project—but there are so many more.

If you will indulge me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to thank the Minister for making this U-turn in the knowledge that her big boss in No. 10, Dominic

Cummings, previously said that free school meals were a “gimmick”. We know what happens to Ministers who cross him, so I hope that the hon. Lady is in her position next week.

I pay tribute to the schools, councils, food banks, community groups and others who have been doing everything they can to support children during this pandemic. One of the things I want to highlight is that we heard some very chilling statistics in this debate about food insecurity, but behind every chilling statistic is a personal tragedy. I want to speak about a young woman who lives in a council estate not very far from where I live. I met her during the election, when she told me that she has small children, just like I do. She said that every day when she picks up the children from school, she just wishes and prays that one of their friends would invite them to their house for dinner so that when it comes to dinner time, she does not have to tell them that she does not have enough food to feed them. She told me that that makes her feel inadequate as a mother. When I think about free school meals, I have long thought about Rebecca and how much this will benefit her during the summer holidays. Every story like this is a family’s personal tragedy—and that is before we consider the long-term impact on children going without food.

What I find so scary is that in this crisis we will not know the full impact of rising food poverty on children for some time: the child whose growth was stunted because they were underfed, the child whose mental health was damaged by the experience of poverty, or the child whose education was set back because they could not focus on learning due to hunger. The extent of this harm will not be clear for many, many years. We also know that it will disproportionately impact black and minority ethnic communities, the disabled community, and already disadvantaged children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

For all those reasons, I heartily welcome the fact that free school meals will be funded over the summer, but I cannot help but question why this decision has come so late. Back in April, the Labour Government in Wales committed to £33 million to fund free school meals over the summer, at a much higher level of support than in England. We heard very passionate speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) highlighting the leadership and clear thinking that the Welsh Labour Government have shown on free school meals. I wish the Government had taken a leaf out of their book.

A win is a win, but the debate should not end here, and I would be grateful if the Minister answered a number of questions about this U-turn. How will she ensure that the administrative problems we have seen with the voucher scheme to date will not be replicated over the summer? Will she set out why the same support has not been offered for universal infant free school meals? Will she commit to continuing with the support from September? How will she ensure that the half a million children who qualify for free school meals but are not accessing the support are properly fed at home? What plans do the Government have to get support to the millions of children who do not qualify for free school meals but are none the less facing food insecurity?

You know that I am a London MP, Madam Deputy Speaker, but when it comes to football, my heart and soul rest at Anfield, so normally I would not be echoing the words of a Manchester United player in the Chamber like this, especially when this is a potentially record-breaking championship season for Liverpool. I would have shown him the red card, but I do not need to consult VAR to see that hungry children are more important than club loyalties. I would like to read out a message that Marcus Rashford has sent where he thanks all the MPs in the Chamber for coming together and making sure that we put our loyalties aside and did what was right for hungry children.

6.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): I will start by thanking everybody who has spoken in this debate on an incredibly important issue. I would particularly like to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford). He talked in his maiden speech about the passion of his constituents, who he knows

“can and will change the world for the better.”

I believe that everybody who gets involved in politics wants to do that—they can and will change the world for the better.

At this incredibly difficult time, we need to ensure that we all do everything we can to get support to those who need it most, and that includes getting support to vulnerable children. It is right that we ask schools to keep their kitchens open where possible or to deliver food parcels to those who would normally get a free school meal. It is right that we provided vouchers for children whose schools were not able to provide food parcels. Never before has a system like that been set up in such a short period. Yes, there were technical problems, but as of last Friday, more than £150 million-worth of vouchers had been redeemed by families and schools. It is also right that we will provide additional funding for a covid summer food fund, so that children who are eligible for free school meals receive a six-week voucher this summer. It is right that we listen.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Would it not be better for the Minister to use this opportunity to thank Marcus Rashford for the great campaign he has led and to commit to ensure that this never happens again by putting a line in the Budget papers to ensure that these free school meals are available for the duration of this Government’s lifetime?

Vicky Ford: The hon. Gentleman is right: we must all thank Marcus Rashford for his campaign and his letter, and I will do so.

I want to point out that this is only one piece of a wide network of support that we have ensured is in place for vulnerable children at this time. We have invested in support for adoptive families and foster carers. We have prioritised care leavers and families of children with disabilities. We have supported those who have been excluded from school and kept schools open for those children who need schools to keep them safe. I would like to thank all those who work in schools, the education system and care, our social workers and everyone across the country who works to support vulnerable children.

[Vicky Ford]

As many Members have said, getting all children and young people back into school as quickly as possible is a vital next step because of the important role that education plays in all children's life—especially those children who face disadvantage. It is right that we all thank Marcus Rashford for his letter. I would like to thank him for his letter, and I especially thank him for the work that he has done with FareShare to provide food support. The Government have also invested £16 million in food support through frontline food charities, including FareShare.

Marcus tells a heart-wrenching story of his early childhood. It is right that low-income families should be prioritised for support at a difficult time. He points out in his letter that his experience happened 10 years ago. Since then, the Government have introduced the national living wage, increased wages and reduced taxes for those on the lowest incomes, so that they have more money in their pockets. The lowest-paid working full time could, in real terms, be better off by over £5,000 than they would have been back in 2010.

But we know that this summer is exceptional. It will be a very difficult time for many families. As well as ensuring that vulnerable children are safe at this time and that their learning is supported as much as possible, we have ensured that those who are eligible for free school meals can access food via either local arrangements provided by their schools or our voucher scheme. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), who gave a shout-out to the breakfast clubs Magic Breakfast and Family Action, which have supported so many.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) raised an important point on the attainment gap—the difference between the educational attainment of those from a more disadvantaged background and that of their peers. The good news is that over the past decade, that attainment gap has narrowed at every single stage of education. But we know that it risks widening now, which is why we are committed to a long-term, sustained programme of catch-up, to close that gap again—and we will always focus on the disadvantaged first.

Let me be clear: giving families a voucher—

Mr Nicholas Brown *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question put and agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Government's decision to provide schools with their expected funding to cover benefits-related free school meals including the national voucher scheme over the Easter and May half-term holidays; notes the decision of the Welsh Government to guarantee each eligible child the equivalent of £19.50 a week up until the end of August to cover their meals over the summer holidays; and calls on the Government to continue to directly fund provision of free school meals, including the free school meal voucher scheme for eligible children over the summer holidays to stop children going hungry during this crisis.

6.56 pm

Sitting suspended.

Exiting the European Union: Financial Services and Markets

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I understand it is the will of the House that motions 3 and 4 be taken together. The debate will last up to 90 minutes. When motion 3 has been decided, I will call the Minister to move motion 4 formally. If a Member objects, the motions will be taken separately.

6.58 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I beg to move,

That the draft *Over the Counter Derivatives, Central Counterparties and Trade Repositories (Amendment, etc., and Transitional Provision) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020*, which were laid before this House on 24 March, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following motion:

That the draft *Financial Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020*, which were laid before this House on 6 May, be approved.

John Glen: I welcome my opposite number, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), to his place. He has a distinguished history of public service and I look forward to a constructive dialogue with him today and on future occasions.

As the House will be aware, the Treasury has been undertaking a significant programme of financial services legislation since 2018, introducing almost 60 statutory instruments under the *European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018*. It has been an enormous privilege for me to do the vast majority of those measures. These SIs were made prior to exit day—31 January 2020—and covered all essential legislative changes needed to ensure a coherent and functioning financial services regime at the point of exit, had the UK not entered a transition period.

The *European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020* received Royal Assent in January this year. The 2020 Act contains a general rule that delays those parts of the SIs that would have come into force immediately before, on or after exit day, so that they instead come into force by reference to the end of the transition period, which we leave at the end of this year. Over the course of this year the Treasury will therefore, where necessary, continue to use powers under the *European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018*, as amended by the 2020 Act, to prepare for 1 January 2021. This will involve the Treasury bringing forward a small number of SIs that, in particular, will ensure that recently applicable EU legislation will operate effectively in the UK at the end of the transition period. The SIs before the House today are two such instruments. The approach taken in these SIs is aligned with the general approach established by the *EU (Withdrawal) Act 2018*, providing continuity by retaining existing legislation at the end of the transition period but amending where necessary to ensure effectiveness in the UK-only context.

I turn to the draft *Over the Counter Derivatives, Central Counterparties and Trade Repositories (Amendment, etc., and Transitional Provision) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020*. From now on, I will refer to this instrument as the OTC SI. In preparation for the UK's withdrawal from the EU on 31 January 2020, Parliament approved several

EU exit instruments to ensure that the European market infrastructure regulation would continue to operate effectively in the UK at the point of exit. EMIR was updated on 1 January this year by a regulation known as EMIR 2.2, which now applies in the UK. The OTC SI that we are discussing today address deficiencies in the UK's post-transition framework arising as a result of that update.

EMIR is Europe's response to the G20 Pittsburgh commitment in 2009 to regulate over-the-counter derivative markets in the aftermath of the last financial crisis. EMIR mandates the use of central counterparties, known as CCPs, to manage risk between users of derivative products. EMIR has been effective in increasing the safety and transparency of derivative markets, thereby reducing the associated risks that users may face, and UK CCPs play an essential role in reducing systemic risk and ensuring the efficient functioning of global financial markets.

EMIR 2.2 introduced an updated third country or non-EU CCP supervision framework, including an updated recognition regime. This means that EU authorities can have greater oversight over third country CCPs that are systemically important to the EU. Perhaps the most substantial update in EMIR 2.2 is the ability for the European Securities and Markets Authority to tier third country CCPs according to their systemic importance to the EU as part of the recognition process. ESMA will now take on certain supervisory responsibilities for systemic third country CCPs known as tier 2 CCPs.

This OTC SI updates the UK's recognition framework in line with EMIR 2.2 by transferring ESMA's new powers to the Bank of England after we leave the transition period. That includes the ability to tier non-UK CCPs as part of the recognition process, and to supervise non-UK CCPs that are systemically important to the UK. The Bank of England has already been given the power to recognise non-UK CCPs wishing to operate in the UK in an earlier SI under the *EU (Withdrawal) Act*. EMIR 2.2 also empowers the Commission to adopt delegated Acts setting out the details of how the framework will function in practice. This includes how tiering and deference to the rules of home authorities referred to as "comparable compliance" will function. This instrument transfers the power to establish these frameworks to the Bank of England.

Since the Bank already has responsibility for safeguarding financial stability in general, and managing systemic risk in CCPs in particular, this is an appropriate conferral of functions as it allows the Bank to manage the systemic risk posed by some non-UK CCPs in a way that is appropriate for the UK. The statutory instrument therefore transfers the remaining Commission functions—including the power to deploy the so-called location policy—to Her Majesty's Treasury.

Under EMIR 2.2, ESMA can recommend to the Commission that a third-country CCP that is felt to be substantially systemically important should lose permission to offer some services to EU clearing members, unless those services are offered from inside the EU. This is referred to as the location policy, the inclusion of which in EMIR 2.2 the UK did not support because of concerns that it could lead to market fragmentation and reduce the benefits provided by the global nature of clearing. However, the powers in the *European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018* under which we introduced the SI extend only

[John Glen]

to the addressing of deficiencies arising from withdrawal. During the passage of that legislation, commitments were made that the powers would not be used to make significant policy changes, so I am not going to deviate from that.

The OTC SI transfers the powers to use the location policy to the Treasury, subject to advice from the Bank of England and appropriate procedural safeguards and transitional provisions. I assure the House that because of the very different nature of the UK's clearing markets, it is hard to foresee circumstances in which the Bank would appropriate the use of that tool in practice. EMIR 2.2 also makes changes to internally used supervisory and co-operation mechanisms but, as the UK is no longer part of the EU, those provisions are removed by the SI.

Finally, the OTC SI updates the recognition powers set out in the temporary recognition regime, which was established by a previous SI to enable non-UK CCPs to continue their activities in the UK after exit day, while their recognition applications are assessed. This SI updates the recognition requirements in line with the new EMIR 2.2 provisions. The Treasury has worked closely with the Bank of England to prepare the instrument and has also engaged with the financial services industry, as we have done throughout. The draft legislation has been publicly available on the legislation.gov.uk website since 24 February, and the instrument was laid before Parliament on 25 March.

In summary, the OTC SI is necessary to ensure that existing EMIR legislation will continue to function effectively in the UK from the end of the transition period, following the updates made in EMIR 2.2. In particular, it will ensure that the UK has the tools necessary to manage the financial stability risks posed by some of the largest non-UK CCPs.

Let me turn my attention towards the second of tonight's SIs, the Financial Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020. Although this SI makes amendments to approximately 20 pieces of legislation, the number and nature of the amendments are modest and minor. They act to preserve the effect of recent changes to EU legislation in the UK, and in doing so limit any impact on business that would otherwise arise at the end of the transition period.

Primarily, this SI fixes deficiencies in recently applicable EU legislation, which is congruous with the Treasury's approach to previous financial services EU exit instruments and the approach required by the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. It also revokes pieces of retained EU law and UK domestic law that it would not be appropriate to keep on the statute book at the end of the transition period.

This SI contains a small number of minor clarifications and corrections to previous financial services EU exit instruments. The House will be aware of the unprecedented scale of the legislative programme that the Treasury has undertaken, which has been carried out with rigorous checking procedures. However, errors are unfortunately made on occasion, and when they arise it is important that they are corrected as soon as possible. This has happened previously, and I will continue to be completely transparent when such shortcomings become apparent.

I note that this SI also includes provisions initially included in the Cross-Border Distribution of Funds, Proxy Advisors, Prospectus and Gibraltar (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid using the made affirmative procedure in October 2019, when at the time it was necessary to ensure that the SI was in place prior to the previous exit date of 31 October. That SI subsequently ceased to have effect, but it is important that those provisions, which include amendments to the UK's prospectus regime to ensure it remains operational in a wholly domestic context, are in force before the end of the transition period. Those provisions have therefore been included in this SI.

I would like to say a few words on the amendments that this SI makes to a previous EU exit instrument, the Equivalence Determinations for Financial Services and Miscellaneous Provisions (Amendment etc) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which I shall now refer to as the equivalence SI. The equivalence SI allows the Treasury to make equivalence directions for EEA states during the transition period for specified provisions. Today's SI adds additional equivalence regimes to the scope of the power for the Treasury to make equivalence directions for EEA states during the transition period. This is through the inclusion of provisions relating to central securities depositories, which are entities that hold financial instruments and trade repositories that collect and maintain records of derivative trades.

This SI also amends the existing drafting on the length of the direction power to tie it to the end of the transition period. This will enable Ministers to make directions during the transition period to come into force at the end of the transition period, granting equivalence to the EEA for those regimes. Finally, this SI clarifies that the Treasury can impose limitations on the application of state-level equivalence decisions in granting equivalence to the EEA—for example, in response to EU conditions placed on the UK. As with the OTC SI, the Treasury has been working closely with the financial services regulators in the drafting of this instrument and has engaged with the financial services industry.

In conclusion, the Government believe that these instruments are necessary to ensure that the UK has a coherent and functioning financial services regulatory regime at the end of this year when we leave the transition period, and I hope that the House will join me in supporting them. I commend the regulations to the House.

7.11 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Like many who have spoken in the Chamber today, on the fourth anniversary of her death, my thoughts are very much with our former colleague Jo Cox and her family.

As we heard from the Minister's opening statement, these statutory instruments are quite technical in nature. I would like to thank him for his welcome, and to thank him and his officials for providing some briefing on their meaning and effect. Overall, these instruments seek to replicate at national level the regulatory regime for financial services to which we currently subscribe—and which in many cases the UK designed—at EU level. Until the end of the transition period, we will of course continue to follow the EU's regulatory rulebook. This is about what will happen in January if, as the Government confirmed last week, the end of this year marks the end of the transition period.

As the Minister outlined, the regulations cover areas such as money laundering, supervision, central counterparties, the cross-border distribution of funds and the desire to maintain the pre-Brexit relationship between the UK and Gibraltar on financial services. In most of these cases, they are taking the supervision of the rules governing these areas from EU bodies and transferring them to either the Treasury, the Bank of England or the Financial Conduct Authority.

On the detail, I have a few questions I would like to put to the Minister. On the money laundering provisions, why is the current duty to co-operate with supervisors in other countries being removed and replaced with the weaker power to co-operate if we so choose? In what circumstances would we not want to co-operate to tackle money laundering, which can fund everything from international terrorism to the drugs trade? On cross-border distribution of funds, can the Minister confirm that these statutory instruments enshrine the loss of passporting rights for our financial services that will result from the Government's decision to withdraw from the single market as well as from the EU itself? On equivalence determinations, can he confirm that, although these SIs create a regime for the UK to make decisions on the regulatory regime in other countries, as yet we have no guarantee that our own regulatory regime will be regarded as equivalent by the rest of the EU?

We can only hope that this exercise in taking back control is a little more convincing than last week's decision on border checks from the Cabinet Office. After having four years to prepare, the Government dropped their plans for border checks on goods because we simply could not implement them, even though our own goods will be subject to border checks when we export them overseas.

Paragraph 36 of the political declaration, on which the current negotiation is based, states that the UK should have concluded its equivalence assessments by the end of this month. If we are only now legislating to take the powers to do that, can that exercise possibly be completed in just two weeks' time?

Taken together, these changes and others in similar statutory instruments represent a significant increase in the functions and power of the Treasury, the Bank of England and the Financial Conduct Authority. What accountability arrangements will there be for those bodies in the exercise of their new powers? Alongside the transfer of functions, accountability must surely be enhanced if claims of restoring parliamentary sovereignty are to mean anything in reality.

More broadly, there is an obvious contradiction at the heart of all this. These regulations are intended to ensure continuity for UK financial services at the end of the transition period, yet the Government's stated intention for withdrawal is to erect new trade barriers between our financial services and the rest of the EU, so even as we replicate at UK level the EU regulations that we played such a big part in designing, we are pursuing a course that will be incapable of replicating the market access that we have at the moment.

That is not my judgment; it is the stated aim of Government policy. It is the equivalent of one of the shops reopening this week and putting lots of new stock in its window but telling a substantial proportion of its

previous customers that they are no longer welcome to shop in the store. For all the debate there has been about Brexit, its impact on services has not been debated nearly as much as it should have been.

We are not dealing here with just-in-time supply chains and trucks on ferries; we are dealing with regulations and rules. We are taking the area that makes up 80% of our economy and, in the case of financial services, a sector in which we trade at a substantial surplus with other countries, and inserting new barriers between us and our nearest customers. The fact that the sector is resigned to that and has established alternative bases in Dublin, Luxembourg or wherever does not change the reality of it.

We do not intend to divide the House on these measures, because regulatory continuity is better than not having a regime in place at all, but no amount of duplication can avoid the basic fact that although we can replicate the rules, we cannot replicate the market access to which these rules apply at the moment and for which they were designed in the first place.

7.18 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I welcome the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) to his place, and I concur with the comments he made about Jo Cox. Jo's family are never far from my thoughts in this place, and we do all miss her very much.

As a veteran of many statutory instrument Committees with the Minister, I must say that I have missed them terribly. It has been such a shame not to have been in all those Committees of late, but I suppose what we have in front of us this evening is a smorgasbord of delights—of things that have not gone quite right so far: things that have had to be corrected as things have moved on the EU side and bits, perhaps, that were missed in the shuffle beforehand.

As the Minister said, this is not the first time that corrections have come back before us. It is, I suppose, a symptom of the way the Government have conducted themselves during the whole Brexit shambles that these statutory instruments have come to us with a bunch of corrections and a load of other things squashed into them. It really seems that we are playing a continual game of catch-up with the EU, and even with ourselves, to ensure that the measures the UK has in place meet what the EU has written in our absence. If we want to be part of what the Minister calls a coherent and functioning system—such ambition!—we will have to keep adding on to these rules to meet what the EU has decided. These are decisions that the EU has taken, without us, about things on which it is in its interests to have co-operation. For the Brexiteers in the room, we will continue to be rule-takers in this House if we want to have any say in financial services.

As the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East so eloquently said, this instrument is about services and financial services, which make up a significant amount of our economy. They account for a significant number of jobs in my constituency, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and other places in Scotland besides. Those services and financial services will not have the access to the European market that they had before this Government's reckless Brexit plans, which is very, very upsetting, particularly

[Alison Thewliss]

for Scotland, which did not vote for Brexit. We voted overwhelmingly to remain within the EU and it is deeply regrettable that we are being forced into this situation by the UK Government.

The issues around equivalence and passporting really speak to a situation which is not as good as the one that we had before. The UK Government need to think carefully about how they want to progress, because we will not have equivalence. There are the risks and the balances within equivalence about who decides what is equivalent and then whether that will suddenly stop, and that puts at risk the future of financial services particularly within the UK.

I note that there are some broadly positive things in the regulations. The UK has taken on the benchmarking regulations, adding them to the low-carbon benchmarks—climate transition benchmarks and Paris-aligned benchmarks—that the EU has proposed. It is good that we are picking them up, but all we are really doing is catching up with the EU. The EU has proposed those benchmarks and we are now catching up down the line, rather than being part of forming them in the first place. If the EU continues to develop such benchmarks, and if climate change and green finance continue to be high on the agenda, we will have to change again and think about how we manage to compete if we are not keeping pace.

The regulations mention that they transfer relevant legislative and non-legislative functions from EU bodies to HM Treasury and the Financial Conduct Authority. This speaks to the point mentioned by the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East that these powers are not coming to us as parliamentarians and legislators. These are powers that are being hived off to the FCA, the Bank of England and other regulators and they will be responsible, not us here in this House, for keeping checks. Again, for the Brexiteers, that is not taking back control in this House. That is taking things that were drafted by civil servants somewhere else—some bunker in the EU—in Europe and then moving them to a bunker somewhere in London where we will have very little say on them, which is hugely regrettable and, arguably, does not really help the financial services industry.

All of this is about trying to mend or fix something, patching it up and putting tape around it to try to build something coherent and functioning, when it will be less good and less useful. It will be suboptimal, as Ministers are often wont to say, and it will cost us money in the future as well. There are various figures that I could cite, but I will take, as an example, the Bank of England's analysis, which suggests that the Brexit deal will take as much as 1.25% from GDP relative to the trend before the referendum.

Another warning is that if the Government's proposed Brexit deal is implemented, GDP in the longer term will be around 4% lower than it would have been had the UK stayed in the EU. That will have a disproportionate impact on places such as Scotland. London may be able to insulate itself, but the further away that we get from London and from where these powers will reside in the Bank of England, the more difficult it will be. For me and my colleagues, the only sensible option is to take the matter back into Scotland's hands and for Scotland

to be an independent country and part of the EU. In that way, our financial services industry would continue to have the access that it has had and we would be where the talent and skills of people of Scotland can be best utilised for the future.

7.24 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Before we start, may I say that, on the fourth anniversary of the death of Jo Cox, I associate my party with what has been said and convey to all her family and friends our sincerest thoughts at this present time. She certainly was a wonderful and marvellous voice in this House. Everyone can honestly say from the bottom of their heart that they miss her contributions. Even four years later, that soreness and that sense of missing are still there.

May I say that it is good to see the Minister in his place? There would not be a banking debate where he and I were not involved in some way. I am pleased to see the new shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), in his place, and I wish him all the best in the future as well.

I thank the Minister for bringing this issue forward. Although this measure merely ensures that the protection established under current legislation continues, it gives me the opportunity to highlight the work that must be done for consumers in the financial industry—the Minister will know of that. We are pleased with some of the progress that has been made, but we look for more. He will have listened to me numerous times on the failings of banks, and sometimes on the need for the auditing sector and the financial sector as a whole to do the right thing for the little man. From Lloyds to HBOS, with many in between, it has long been my aim in this House to see the introduction of effective mechanisms to protect those who are not on the level playing field.

The issue of over-the-counter derivatives is another area that needs special consideration, and I hope the Minister will respond on it, as we need enhanced protection. An OTC derivative is a financial contract arranged between two counterparties with minimal intermediation or indeed regulation. OTC derivatives do not have standardised terms and they are not listed on asset exchange, so an inherent aspect of them is the lack of formal regulation. Although the regulation offers lip service to that, as with so many other banking aspects it is my belief that more is needed, and many right hon. and hon. Members agree with that view. Hon. Members already know that some derivative products in the past were the basis of a number of problems during the financial crisis in 2008-09, and we now find ourselves in another crisis, perhaps something equal to that time. As the Minister knows, I have recently written to him about the 200 to 300 legacy cases for the Business Banking Resolution Service. I would like him to respond on that or to indicate when I can expect a response on the way forward. If that is possible, I would appreciate it.

This debate is about our position post-Brexit, and therefore Westminster will have control. It is our responsibility, as elected representatives, and the responsibility of the Government and legislators, to ensure that the FCA and other regulatory bodies have the appropriate regulatory powers in the future for consumer protection. I look forward to the Minister's reply on the BBRS. The legislation is great to continue, but I believe we need more. It is not enough, but it is a giant step in the right direction.

7.27 pm

John Glen: It is a pleasure to be able to respond to the points made by the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), and the hon. Members for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The latter made a number of points about the conduct issues associated with banks and his exchanges with me on the BBRS. I am sensitive to the fact that in the context of the loans and interventions the Government have made there are conduct challenges, but I think it would be appropriate for me to address that on a separate occasion. However, I note his correspondence.

The right hon. Gentleman addressed three clear questions to me, one of which was about the money laundering reference and the language. Just because we do not have an obligation, it does not mean to say that we do not have a desire to co-operate. The bottom line is that if there is not a reciprocal obligation on the other side, it would be perverse for us to insert language creating that obligation. As he made clear, we have consistently been leaders in regulations in financial services, in particular, and we would look to continue to press for ever higher standards in that regard.

The right hon. Gentleman's second point was about the issues of the loss of passporting and the nature of the cross-border dynamics. Clearly, we are working through the equivalence process, which the Government are committed to. We are working closely with the Bank of England, the PRA and the FCA.

The SIs are required to ensure that the UK has a functioning equivalence framework during the transition period, and they are not linked to the ongoing UK-EU negotiations on financial services. I will come to the right hon. Gentleman's further points and those of the hon. Member for Glasgow Central about the bigger picture at the end.

On the right hon. Gentleman's third point about equivalence and the ability for us to make decisions, we have just updated what we had on the basis of changes that have happened since we left. EMIR 2.2, which is the location policy that was introduced, was something that we voted against, but we are now obliged to have it because those are the terms of reference that we adopted through the passage of the legislation. As I said in my earlier remarks, however, I think it is improbable that we would use that. We hold most of the systemic CCPs and we would probably not have a need to use that in an offensive way.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central made some broader points. She pointed out the mistakes that we

have made and that this had happened before. During the 60 SIs—she has participated in the vast majority of them—these have been the exceptions. This legislation was laid out in advance. It was available and accessible to everyone. My officials and officials from the regulators have worked very hard, but I concede that these mistakes need to be rectified.

On the sentiments around the notion that we will not achieve the same level of access, having the freedom to set our rules does not mean that we are automatically predetermined and predisposed to divergence. Indeed, across the globe in financial services regulation, we have taken a leadership role at the Basel Committee and in other regulatory environments. I anticipate that that is the posture that we will wish to take in future. Within the EU, when we were members, we had a leadership role in financial services.

The Government are committed to supporting the growth of financial services not only in the City but outside the south-east. The hon. Lady is correct to say that we wish to see more jobs and financial services across the United Kingdom, including in Glasgow and Edinburgh.

I have addressed the substantive points that have been raised. There was a wider discussion about the nature of the financial services negotiation and the wider negotiation, but I do not think that is in scope tonight. I hope that I have conveyed that the instruments are necessary to ensure that the UK has a coherent and functioning financial services regulatory regime at the end of the transition period, and that hon. Members across the House will join me in supporting the regulations. I commend them to the House and I hope that the conversation has been informative.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Over the Counter Derivatives, Central Counterparties and Trade Repositories (Amendment, etc., and Transitional Provision) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 24 March, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS)

Resolved,

That the draft Financial Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 6 May, be approved.—(*John Glen.*)

7.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

Public Passenger Transport

7.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): I beg to move,

That the draft Public Service Vehicles (Open Data) (England) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 13 May, be approved.

The draft regulations are being made in order to provide new legislation to require bus operators of local bus services across England outside London, including cross-border services, to openly publish data electronically about their services, including timetables, fares and location data.

This is open data that is published electronically. It is publicly discoverable and can be used by those who wish to do so without restrictions on its use and disclosure. Open data has transformed other sectors—for example, rail—with open data feeding customer-facing apps, such as Trainline and National Rail Enquiries, simplifying journey planning and ticket purchase. Bus open data will allow app developers to create applications, products and services for passengers so that they can plan journeys, find best-value tickets and receive real-time service updates. That is absolutely essential if we are to encourage the travelling public to use their local bus services and make the switch to public transport, which is vital to reducing congestion and improving air quality.

Since 2007, Transport for London has made all its bus and transport network data freely available through the London data store. Currently, more than half of these journeys—51%—are in London, with the remaining 49% across the rest of the country. Apps such as Citymapper and Bus Times are together found to be delivering economic benefits of between £90 million and £130 million a year.

Transport for West Midlands has also invested heavily to improve its public transport data in recent years and is one of the few areas to report year-on-year growth—of 7.8 million journeys—against a continuing backdrop of decline in bus passenger journeys elsewhere. Those statistics show that we can change how buses are perceived and attract new customers.

Currently, Citymapper only operates in Birmingham and London, but we need to enable the provision of such apps and services up and down the country. For example, the rules will mean that any operator of a local bus service across England must publish their timetable, fares and location data to the bus open data service before that service comes into operation. The rules will be enforced by the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, which will be able to conduct checks to ensure that the operator is complying.

In domestic law, where a local bus service is being operated across England, operators will be legally required to make the information freely available to comply with the Public Service Vehicles (Open Data) (England) Regulations 2020. Punctuality data will also be legally required and local transport authorities will be legally responsible for maintaining data about bus stops and stations.

It is a civil offence for any operator of a service to be in breach of the requirements in the regulations and the regulations will be commenced in a phased manner, with timetables and stop data requirements being enforceable from 31 December 2020. Basic fares and

location data will be enforceable from 7 January 2021, with complex fares being added from 7 January 2023. Breaches of the requirements by operators can be enforced under existing provisions in section 155 of the Transport Act 2000. The draft instrument ensures that those operators who breach the new requirements may be faced with financial penalties or the removal of their licence. The fines can be up to £550, and that sum might be multiplied by the number of vehicles operating under all the PSV operator licences held. The policy area of public service vehicles open data is devolved, but Scotland and Wales are currently preparing equivalent legislation.

In summary, the regulations are essential for ensuring that the operators of local bus services are compelled to make essential information freely available to help passengers plan their journeys. The rules are at the heart of improving the public transport experience, digitally transforming the bus sector and the levelling-up agenda. I am sure that Members share my desire to ensure the rules can be fully enforced as soon as possible. I commend the regulations to the House.

7.40 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to respond in this debate on behalf of the Opposition. I am grateful to the Minister for the detailed technical briefing she offered me from the Department. We will not be calling for a vote on these proposals. I will respond to the specific measures and new powers set out in the SI, but I also want to comment on how the proposals help to address the wider issue of how we can improve our bus services, which outside of London and a handful of other areas have faced deep cuts in recent years.

Before I respond, I put on record my support for our bus services and the workforce who have been on the frontline during the coronavirus crisis. I pay tribute to our bus drivers and other transport workers. They are key workers who have kept vital public services running during the most serious and sustained crisis this country has faced since the second world war. The public are immensely proud of our key workers, and I hope the House will agree that it is important that bus workers are recognised as key workers and receive the support that they deserve.

It is also important to remember that a number of bus workers and other transport workers have sadly died during the pandemic. I offer my deepest condolences to their families, and I hope Members from all parts of the House will join me in support of those and other key workers who have paid the ultimate price in our struggle with the coronavirus. I urge the Government to look again at health and safety on bus services and the financial support available for the families of those workers who have lost their lives. That is vital in the coming weeks.

I am pleased that the Government have listened to calls from Labour and the unions for passengers to have to wear masks on public transport. I should say I was one of those passengers today. There is more to do to improve health and safety, such as tackling the risk of infection from drivers having to handle cash on buses and providing improved facilities for hand washing, which I know the Minister's colleague in the Lords, Baroness Vere, is interested in supporting. I am also pleased that at a time of national crisis, we have been able, as the official Opposition, to work with the Government,

trade unions and bus operators to consider these important problems, and I look forward to Ministers coming forward with further urgent improvements to health and safety.

Before turning to the regulations, I will mention the significant economic effects of the crisis on bus operators and workers. We welcome the Government's financial support for bus services during the coronavirus crisis and as lockdown eases. However, I underline the importance of that being applied fairly. Support needs to be maintained while demand for bus travel returns to normal, which could take some months.

The current funding package is welcome, but it is offered to bus companies on a flat rate per mile, which is then multiplied by the distance of the routes that they travel. That inadvertently favours some rural routes and areas with lower wage costs, while disadvantaging urban or suburban operators, particularly those in areas where housing costs and costs of living are higher. I hope Ministers will look again at that and offer a fair deal to the whole country. Will the Minister meet me and MPs from all parts of the House who have concerns about this important issue? I note that she is nodding, and I am grateful for her support.

It is also important that the Government review the length of time that support is available to reassure operators about the future of their businesses, as we have seen for other sectors of the economy, and to help them to plan for a gradual increase in passenger numbers. I understand that some operators are now experiencing around 20% of normal demand, up from just 10% during the height of the crisis. However, it is unclear how long it will take for passenger numbers to return to normal, and the current funding package ends during the summer. A further guarantee of funding would be welcome for the industry.

Turning to the substance of the regulations, which are intended to help the bus sector, it is positive to see the Government's interest in our bus services. That has not always been the case in recent years, despite buses being the most common mode of transport for commuters and, indeed, a lifeline for older and vulnerable people. Since 2010, Government funding for bus services has fallen by 45% and hundreds of routes have been lost, largely because of Government cuts to subsidies for socially vital services, as many Members will know. This policy has led to a steep decline in bus use and, I am afraid, increasing isolation, other social problems and, indeed, greater damage to the environment. I should add that things have got so bad that two major bus operators have thought about selling off large parts of their business.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the best way for the Government to address those matters is urgently to introduce a national bus strategy, which would put in place a hydrogen technology programme that would allow the development of a new bus building programme that would be totally free of a carbon footprint?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am anxious that we stick to the substance of the regulations. Matt Rodda.

Matt Rodda: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am going to try to cover the environment and other forms of innovation later in my speech.

Ministers are now trying to find ways to address the need to grow bus use, and the regulations address one small aspect of that, which is to allow greater sharing of bus data on timetables, fares, reliability and, indeed, the location of buses in real time. The Department hopes that making more information available to app developers will lead to more information about bus services being made available to the public, which in turn will increase passenger numbers. There are hopes that those measures could lead to a growth of about 2% in bus use, based on the effect of the policy in London.

I would, however, add a note of caution. First, I would ask the Minister to reassure the House that the Government's intention is not to allow disruptive businesses like Uber to try unfairly to entice passengers away from bus services, which could risk undermining some routes, including those that are a lifeline for older people and many who are vulnerable. I hope that she will address that point when she sums up and offer specific reassurance. Secondly, I urge her to regard the measure as one in a series which, I hope, will support our bus services and allow them to grow, both now and in future.

Going forward, I hope that the Government will offer the same level of interest and support for a series of measures that have been shown to increase bus use and improve services. One of the best known is allowing councils to regulate services, which has been associated with much greater bus use in London, where there is a dramatically different picture of bus patronage. Will the Minister look at that again and allow all councils to explore that option, not just those with elected Mayors?

Another measure that is strongly associated with growing bus use is allowing councils to run their own bus companies, which used to be common in both Labour and Conservative-controlled local authorities. Council-owned companies in my own town of Reading and in Nottingham have experienced strong growth in bus use for many years—something that, outside London, is almost unique in England. Municipal buses offer low fares, frequent services and modern vehicles that are popular in those communities, and I invite the Minister to come to Reading. *[Interruption.]* I understand, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I will proceed rapidly through the rest of my speech.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I simply want to make sure that the hon. Gentleman is addressing the regulations.

Matt Rodda: I will come back to them. This is part of the wider picture of the need for investment as a whole.

There are a range of other measures that I hope Ministers will reconsider, along with the regulations. For example, that could include more bus lanes and other bus priority measures to ensure more reliable services on busy roads and smarter support for innovation, which the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) mentioned, including electrification of buses. The Government's current scheme is welcome, but it could be improved, and I look forward to speaking to the Minister about that.

I hope that Ministers will look at the link between transport and new housing, and do more to develop brownfield sites and other ways of bringing housing close to public transport routes, which will increase bus patronage and protect the environment. Allowing more

[*Matt Rodda*]

investment and such innovation measures would offer the prospect of significant growth in bus use, leading to real environmental and social benefits, far beyond the potential benefits of the app.

To sum up, we are not calling for a vote on these regulations for the reasons I stated earlier. I thank colleagues across the House for their support for bus workers and bus services. I hope the Minister will respond to the risk that these measures could be misused and that the Government will now carry out a wider review of their support for buses, to allow councils more powers to regulate and to provide better services, which have the potential to allow far greater bus use in the future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I just want to emphasise again that it is important when looking at regulations that we actually address the regulations, rather than having a wider debate—and I am sure Tim Farron will do just that.

7.50 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am very grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I support the spirit of these regulations. We must have equity of access to public transport across the country, and the collection of data to build an accurate picture of services is an essential part of that. However, I must warn the Minister that she will have a hard task collecting data on bus services in many towns and villages in Cumbria, because on most days there aren't any, or at least it is so far that it will be a very short job and hardly worth the journey—which, in case I have not already made myself clear, she would not be able to make by bus.

I acknowledge that the Government have gone some way towards recognising the crisis in bus services, such as by laying these regulations, and indeed earlier this year there was an announcement of additional funding and the unveiling of a national bus strategy, of which I am sure this forms a key part. But the new funding turned out to be peanuts, and while having a strategy is definitely better than not having a strategy, it was still a far cry from the claims of the press release and light years off providing the solutions needed in communities like ours, where we would like these regulations to apply in practice.

So, to be clear, the whole of Cumbria received a total of £383,887, which, split roughly six ways between six constituencies, means about £65,000 for my constituency. My constituency could contain geographically every single one of the 73 constituencies in Greater London, and London—where these regulations will definitely apply—sees an annual subsidy to its public transport of around £700 million a year. And we must not forget that our £65,000—just less than a thousandth of 1% of the London subsidy—is just a one-off, and a one-off will not do.

Ministers surely know that research shows that in order for a community to trust a bus service enough to rely on it as part of their regular routines—enough to use it, basically—that service needs to be functioning

reliably and affordably for two to three years. I am sure that the data collected as a consequence of this regulation will show that and prove it, but we know it already.

So this short-term puddle of cash does not even wet the feet of the problem. We will find a way of spending it wisely, and we are not ungrateful, but as we dare to hope for a time beyond the covid crisis, people in my communities want to believe that we have not sacrificed so much, endured such hardship and suffered such shattering loss just to go back to how things were beforehand.

The mission must be to build back better, and that must include a refusal to leave communities behind. Rural, more isolated communities such as ours in Cumbria are at risk. Those communities are also often older, and while the majority of people, even in their 80s and beyond, will make some use of the technology we are talking about here, a higher proportion than in other age groups will not, and they are the people I am most concerned about in terms of the application of these regulations.

The average age of the population in South Lakeland is 10 years above the national average. It cannot be right that we forget the generation that has borne the brunt of this virus, yet we will do that if we acquiesce over the isolation that so many of them endure. Many I know have found themselves alone and disconnected in their later years, with the loss of bus services leaving them stranded in places that are utterly beautiful but utterly isolated. Many in these towns and villages rely on buses for the basic tasks of daily life—shopping, going to the doctors, making appointments, seeing friends or getting to work. Buses, when they exist, provide those people with the ability to look after themselves, be independent, protect their physical and mental health, and stave off the loneliness that isolation can bring. Technology can help to underpin that, but only if there is a service that it can be underpinned by.

There is no doubt that more of us have become acquainted with isolation over the last few months, but what is someone who lives in a small village and is unable to drive supposed to do if their one transport link is removed? At the same time, they witness the closure of accessible services as a consequence of the technology that is available in other parts of the economy. With few neighbours and fewer local services, the loss of buses constitutes the loss of connection, which risks leaving many more people even more isolated and vulnerable.

Building back better must mean that we learn from the improvement in air quality and the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions throughout this time, and public transport is key to preventing a return to pre-covid carbon emissions. Bus services will be central to that, as part of an integrated public transport system. That is why I continue to urge the Minister to double the capacity of the Lakes line by introducing a passing loop, as well as electrifying the line to significantly reduce its carbon footprint.

Many of us are excited for a time when lockdown has eased and we are able to see friends and family and visit the shops without unnecessary restrictions and caution. But the Government must recognise that the end of the lockdown will not bring that relief to everyone. In fact, for many isolated people in Cumbria, the official lockdown has not looked very different from the growing isolation

that they have suffered due to a lack of services and transport links. In the 10 years between 2008 and 2018, the north-west lost 888 separate, distinct services, and that does not include the services we have lost in the last couple of years. We have not taken this lying down. We would love those services to be traced by an app and part of a technological solution, but as I say, there is no point having the technological solution if there is no bus service to underpin it.

It is not only the elderly in our communities who suffer from reduced bus services. Young people's access to public transport is also under threat. Free school transport is provided for young people up to sixth-form age, but after that, the support is not available. It makes no sense for the Government to demand that young people carry on in education until 18 and then deny them the ability to afford to do so—a generation that clearly is technologically competent and able to make use of the apps we are talking about. In places like Sedbergh and Coniston, it is often impossible to gain access to sixth-form provision at schools or colleges by public transport. That is why, alongside these regulations, there needs to be a statutory responsibility for local authorities to guarantee home-to-school transport for 16 to 18-year-old students, in the same way there is for under-16s.

There must also be buses available to deliver that transport in the first place. In many of our towns and villages, if the Minister did agree to subsidise sixth-form bus travel alongside this technological innovation, there just are not any services to be subsidised. That has been emphasised during the covid crisis, as many families with free school meal vouchers have not been able to use them because the vouchers are not for the local supermarket in their town—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman is going way off the scope of the regulations. If we are discussing regulations, that is what we are discussing. We cannot not have a general speech about everything that is happening in his constituency, as important as that is. This debate is about the regulations, and I urge him to return to them ASAP.

Tim Farron: I will do so instantly. I make the point, though, that the whole point of having the technology that is rightly rolled out through this statutory instrument is that it should apply to services that exist, not imaginary ones that we wish existed. My community is suffering under covid like anywhere else, but the hospitality and tourism industry is vital to us. We are the second biggest visitor destination after London, and yet our public transport infrastructure means that this instrument may as well not exist for many of the communities that I represent. While I support the regulations and will not oppose them, I want to send the Government the message that they should ensure that there are sufficient services in rural communities like mine, so that these applications actually have some application in a county like Cumbria.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister, and I ask her to address the points raised about the regulations.

7.59 pm

Rachel Maclean: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I am delighted to abide by your guidance.

First, I very much thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), for his support for the regulations. I associate myself wholeheartedly with his comments thanking all our transport workers and sending our sincere condolences to all the families he spoke of. I assure him that the Government take health and safety on the public transport system incredibly seriously. I remind him that we provided £397 million at the beginning of the crisis to ensure that bus services continued to operate, with a further £254 million as the crisis continued. I would be delighted to meet him to discuss more of these issues either here or in Reading, and I thank him for his kind invitation.

I want to respond specifically to the point the hon. Gentleman made about taxi operators. The purpose of these regulations is to provide better services for people, enabling them to plan their journeys from end to end, and enabling people who rely on technology or who rely on public transport as a lifeline to use public transport better. We believe that that will have the benefit, as we have already seen in London and Birmingham, of driving up the use of buses and enabling people to benefit from better fares and better flexibility. It is part of a modern transport system, and we believe it will be of great benefit to passengers and bus operators. It definitely is not the case that we expect it to entice people away. In fact, I draw his attention to our transport decarbonisation plan, which we released a few short weeks ago, expressly setting out our intention to support a shift to active travel and public transport.

That brings me on to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). I congratulate him on expressing all his concerns and getting them all on the record. I can assure him that they have all been heard in the right quarters. I would like to mention to him that we have provided £220 million to improve rural bus services for constituencies such as his, and this Government are committed to buses. We have started the Parliament with a £5 billion commitment to buses, including funding for an all-electric bus town and many other innovations to improve public transport up and down this country, as well as more money for cycling and walking. I believe that we are absolutely backing the bus industry and going into the future with a dynamic and modern bus industry.

On that note, I thank all Members of the House for their consideration of the regulations. I am certain that, through them, we will ensure the sustainability of the bus industry, helping it to thrive and survive in a new digital era.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

HEALTH AND PERSONAL SOCIAL SERVICES

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

That the Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2020 (S.I. 2020, No. 503), dated 12 May 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 13 May, be approved.—(*James Morris.*)

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 17 June (Standing Order No. 41A).

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. How can we, as individuals in this House and members of the Democratic Unionist party, ensure that right hon. and hon. Members are aware of the poll that took place in Northern Ireland 10 days ago indicating that 74% of the people are opposed to abortion, and of the decision by the Assembly to oppose it as well, which is very important when it comes to voting tomorrow?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order, or I think I thank him, because it is not really a point of order, as he has just done what he wanted to do. He speaks very frequently, so I feel confident that he will find an opportunity to make his points, possibly many times.

I will now suspend the House for just under three minutes before we move on to the next business.

8.4 pm

Sitting suspended.

PETITIONS

Protection of workers in the airline industry

8.6 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Tens—probably hundreds—of thousands of jobs are under threat in aviation. That might not be the case if the Government were to keep their own promise or follow international examples of sector support. Indeed, I have heard tonight that 310 jobs at Menzies Aviation are under threat—160 of them at Glasgow airport in my constituency. This Government have a funny way of showing support. On Sunday a Home Office source said:

“It is no surprise that the airline industry are focusing on their bottom line over public safety. The British public already have a dim view of the aviation sector but putting profit over people’s lives is a new low even for them.”

I think it is safe to say that the aviation sector is not feeling the love right now.

One part of the aviation sector that is absolutely not feeling the love from anyone is British Airways. Its horrendous firing and rehiring plans for tens of thousands of loyal workers drove me to present the Employment (Dismissal and Re-employment) Bill to protect all workers from facing these horrendous practices. Incidentally, that Bill has had support from every party in this House, and I ask the Government to adopt it.

The petition states:

The Petition of the residents of the constituency of Paisley and Renfrewshire North,

Declares that many workers in the airline industry are currently under threat of being dismissed from their posts and then being rehired on lesser terms and conditions and salary; notes that most

other European countries have legislation in place to prevent such mistreatment and to protect workers from management abuse and threats, benefitting both employees and the wider economy; notes the volume of correspondence being received by Members’ offices regarding reports of this practice at British Airways; and notes that the Employment (Dismissal and Re-Employment) Bill, which aims to protect workers from management abuse, has already been presented in the House.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to bring forward legislation to prevent firing and re-hiring practices and protect workers from management abuse.

And the petitioners remain etc.

[P002578]

Conduct of Mr Dominic Cummings during the COVID-19 pandemic

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): In the five years since my election to this place, very little has elicited a stronger constituent reaction than the actions of Dominic Cummings in driving to Durham to self-isolate. In fact, one of the few things to rival it was the Prime Minister’s anaemic, craven and wholly inadequate response to the whole affair; the Prime Minister clearly has an issue telling truth to power. We should be in no doubt that Mr Cummings broke the rules. With regard to his infamous dynamic eyesight test, I have not spoken to anyone, including a good number of Conservatives, who bought the “Going out for a drive to local beauty spots with my entire family in tow to test my eyesight” line. In fact, I think it would be better for him to confirm that this was not true, as the alternative—that the Prime Minister’s most senior adviser decided that this was an appropriate action—speaks to the quality of advice that the Prime Minister is in receipt of. At a time when many of our constituents could not even travel to say their final goodbyes to loved ones, the actions of Mr Cummings, and those of the Government in justifying them, are indefensible.

The petition states:

The Petition of the residents of the constituency of Paisley and Renfrewshire North,

Declares that the conduct of the Prime Minister’s Chief Advisor, Mr Dominic Cummings, driving 260 miles to Durham during lockdown for childcare reasons when he and his wife were displaying symptoms of COVID-19, was against the UK Government advice to “Stay at Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives”; further declares that the consistent support from the Prime Minister and members of the Cabinet for Mr Cummings’ actions have undermined the UK Government’s own public health messaging.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to conduct an inquiry into the conduct of the Prime Minister’s Chief Advisor, and whether his continued employment is beneficial to addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002579]

Transport in Carshalton and Wallington

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

8.10 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the Speaker's Office for granting this Adjournment debate to discuss transport issues in Carshalton and Wallington. Along with St Helier Hospital, education and, more recently, issues relating to coronavirus, transport remains one of the most common issues that appear in my postbag. It is also something that affects me as someone who commutes to this place every day.

Because my constituency sits within a London borough, the borough of Sutton, there is an assumption that we must be well covered by public transport, but the statistics tell a very different story. Sutton has an average public transport accessibility level—PTAL—of just 2, with the majority of Carshalton and Wallington ranking at 2, 1 or even zero in some places. The borough is ranked 29th out the 32 London boroughs and the City of London for connectivity and is the only borough in London that does not have access to an underground, Overground or Crossrail station. We are also not on the map for Crossrail 2. The only reason we are not dead last for connectivity is that technically we have access to a tram within our borders, but I will talk more about that later.

Notwithstanding the ability to walk, cycle or drive, this situation means that Carshalton and Wallington residents have a choice between limited bus and National Rail services when travelling by public transport. One might argue that this reflects the borough's contribution towards the Mayor's council tax precepts, which stands at 28th out of the 32 London boroughs, but this argument immediately falls down because the remaining four boroughs have received higher funding and have greater connectivity than Sutton.

This poor level of access to transport cannot continue. As the population of Sutton continues to grow, our ability to have economic growth, access services and play our part in tackling the climate crisis is severely stunted without better transport connections. Carshalton and Wallington is in a London borough, and that borough is the eighth most economically active in London. It is time we had investment in our transport networks that reflected those realities and allowed us to reach our full potential.

I will turn first to rail connectivity. My constituency is home to Carshalton, Wallington, Hackbridge and Carshalton Beeches stations, providing northbound services to central London and southbound services to Sutton, Epsom and beyond. Of course, reliability is always an issue raised by Members, and it is no different for me. I will be working constructively with Southern and Thameslink, the rail operating companies that serve my constituency, to ensure that improvements continue to be made. I would also be grateful if the Minister could comment on the work the Government are doing to ensure greater reliability on our rail network.

One of the primary issues for my constituents, however, is rail frequency. Prior to lockdown, peak services would be full by the time they reached our local stations, meaning an uncomfortable or even delayed journey for

many and pushing some to reconsider using the rail network or even their employment in order to avoid it. Having met with Govia Thameslink Railway and Network Rail since being elected, I am clear that there are two primary issues preventing additional services from being run on our lines. The first is something I know many colleagues have raised in the House: infrastructure on the railway. Often it is so outdated that it prevents trains from being turned around as quickly as they are on the London Underground, for example, which would allow additional time and space for more trains to be put on the line. I would be grateful if the Minister could comment on updating our rail infrastructure, including things such as digital signalling, electrification and joint command centres between rail operating companies and Network Rail.

Nevertheless, it appears that congestion is the real barrier to running additional services. Many, if not most, of my services run through Selhurst junction, which is currently massively congested, and Network Rail has just launched a consultation on its plans for what it calls the Croydon bottleneck scheme. It is designed primarily to unlock congestion on the Brighton main line but would have the knock-on effect of allowing more frequent services to run through my constituency. I am encouraging constituents to take part to demonstrate the huge support there is for putting on additional services once that is unlocked. Could the Minister comment on whether the Government support the Croydon bottleneck project?

There are things that can be done in the here and now, however, to help commuters once the lockdown measures are eased. First, there is safety. The gap between the train and the platform at Hackbridge and Carshalton Beeches in particular is so high that even the use of ramps is not particularly safe. I have raised this with GTR and Network Rail, and I hope to see the platforms heightened, at least in places, to make it safer to board and depart from trains. Secondly, there is accessibility. The southbound platform at Carshalton Beeches does not have step-free access, so I have submitted a bid in order to help to secure funding to deliver that. I hope that that will be favourably looked on by the Department.

Finally, there is the issue of the platforms themselves, with the platform at Hackbridge, for example, able to accommodate only seven cars. If there could be an extension to allow it to accommodate 10 cars, which it currently runs at peak services, that would reduce congestion on the concourse. These changes, plus a commitment to investment in infrastructure and the Croydon bottleneck project, will help to unlock many of the transport issues of my constituents.

Apart from trains, buses are the only other public transport option for my constituents. It is fair to say that, as we heard in the previous statutory instrument debate, compared with other parts of the country, Carshalton and Wallington does have okay bus services, but they are certainly not perfect. Again, access is an issue for some, particularly those living in Clockhouse and the more rural parts of Carshalton Beeches. It is possible to get around the borough fairly easily by the bus services that operate there. The introduction of the Go Sutton bus, which Transport for London operated on a trial basis as an Uber-style on-demand bus service travelling to more or less every part of the borough, was

[Elliot Colburn]

very welcome. I hope the Minister would agree that TfL should seek to reinstate this service as soon as possible. It is currently suspended due to the coronavirus pandemic.

There are also a number of bus services that go to and from Croydon, but a limited number that go outside the borough to any other destinations such as Merton, Wandsworth or Kingston. There are also very few services that travel southwards outside the Greater London Authority area and into Surrey, with which I share a border. I will say more about this problem later. As Carshalton and Wallington grows, connecting us up to new destinations by bus, as well as increasing the frequency of some routes and making busier services double-decker, would help to connect Sutton with its surrounding areas and make it easier to travel within the borough as well.

However, improvements in the rail and bus networks are only part of the solution, and in order to reach our full potential we need new transport options. Of all the potential options, perhaps none has been discussed for so long as a Sutton extension of the London Tramlink. The long and convoluted history of the Tramlink could be an Adjournment debate in itself, so I will not bore the Minister with too much back story, particularly as discussions about this started as early as 2002, only two years after the Croydon Tramlink was launched. However, I do want to draw to his attention the fact that sadly, if anything demonstrates that the current Mayor of London seems to forget that Sutton exists as a London borough, it is the Croydon Tramlink. When he was a Transport Minister in this place, he said:

“I am not sure what the Mayor’s priorities are, but they are not the Croydon Tramlink”.—[*Official Report*, 28 January 2010; Vol. 504, c. 939.]

How fitting that 10 years on, the same could be said of him.

In a London Assembly report released last year, it was shown that Sutton came dead last for investment from City Hall out of all the London boroughs. Just £16 million has been spent in the borough since the Mayor was elected in 2016, compared with, for example, £2.1 billion of investment for Newham. The previous Labour Mayor of London showed that he was not particularly interested in outer London, and unfortunately the current Mayor seems to be following in his footsteps. Funding was set aside by the previous Conservative Mayor to help to deliver this project, which equated to £100 million. Unfortunately, the current Mayor redistributed that funding. After lobbying from our excellent London Assembly Member, Steve O’Connell, the Mayor has agreed to set aside a smaller figure of £70 million to put towards the project. Sutton Council and Merton Council have also set aside some moneys for it. However, the overall projected cost of delivering the Sutton extension to the Tramlink has been rising considerably since it was first mooted. Perhaps if the Mayor had not driven down TfL’s finances to such a state, particularly in allowing Crossrail to get out of control, we would not be in this position.

As I said at the beginning of my remarks, technically my constituency has two tram stops on the route. However, these are in the far north-east corner of my constituency on the border with Croydon and Merton. They are behind an industrial estate and serve a very, very small number

of residents who live just outside that area. The next residential streets are more than a 30-minute walk away, and they are much closer to other transport options. Extending the tram to Sutton would therefore do wonders for the local economy but also connect Carshalton and Wallington residents up with new destinations.

TfL has now completed a consultation, agreed the route, and agreed, indeed, to go with the tram rather than the alternative bus rapid transit option, but we are now at a standstill. The project is ready to move on to the next stage of official designs and to go into the planning system. Even the Mayor himself has said that he estimates that the first services could be in place in the next few years if there was no delay, but without any additional funding this project will not go anywhere. Local, regional and national Government need to come together on this issue to ensure that the consultation is not allowed to collect dust, become too expensive and ultimately be consigned to the dustbin of history, so can the Minister give me any view on how the Government see the Sutton extension of the Croydon Tramlink?

As we work towards that extension, I hope the House will indulge me if I throw another possibility into the mix. Hackbridge is an important part of my constituency that is currently experiencing considerable growth. The New Mill Quarter development will bring 805 new homes and well over 1,000 new residents to the area, and Hackbridge definitely needs additional transport capacity to be able to cope. Currently, many residents go to Mitcham Junction, which is just one stop up the train line from Hackbridge, to intercept the tram. I wonder whether there is an argument for TfL doing exploratory work and extending the tram down the Network Rail line, perhaps running a single track alongside the Network Rail route, to provide tram services to Hackbridge. I hope that the Minister would agree that is at least worth TfL’s taking a look at such a project.

Next, I wish to draw attention to another potential extension that I believe would benefit Carshalton and Wallington residents: extending the London Overground service to Sutton, via Waddon, Wallington and West Croydon—an idea backed by Neil Garratt, our excellent candidate for the London Assembly. The London Overground could directly connect local residents to destinations that they cannot currently reach without making more than one change. It is my understanding that Sutton was originally mooted as the end point for the London Overground service, but it was decided that it would end at West Croydon instead because the service would be too popular with Sutton residents and therefore too busy by the time it got to Croydon. I hope the Minister agrees that that is a nonsensical argument, because surely that only demonstrates the need for such a service and how much capacity could increase on the line.

Luckily, there is an existing rail line between Sutton and West Croydon, so to make the change, all that would have to happen is that the trains would quite simply have to keep on going and not stop. Of course, I realise that things are never quite as simple as that, and there would be difficulties with congestion and the potential timetable changes needed to deliver it, but I hope that the Minister agrees that the absence of the need for a large infrastructure project to see the idea

through to completion would mean that it would be relatively easy to deliver, so would be worth the work to deliver it.

Finally, I wish to touch on the issue of roads and pavements, because all too often in conversations about transport, roads and pavements are left out. As a borough with one of the highest car ownership rates in London, more than a quarter of journeys are done on foot but more than half are done by car, according to the 2011 census, so conversations about roads and pavements are incredibly important for residents of Carshalton and Wallington. They are also important because just as many—if not more—residents commute south into Surrey by car as commute north into the city by train.

When I talked about buses, I mentioned the difficulties of travelling south, and I wish to outline a problem which I believe many outer-London boroughs suffer: working across the Greater London Authority boundary. The border between the GLA and Surrey County Council is much firmer and more cumbersome than those between the London boroughs, and understandably so for many reasons. However, that presents difficulties when talking about transport, because in essence TfL can look only north and Surrey has no jurisdiction in the area at all. The road network between Sutton and Surrey therefore needs to be strong to allow traffic to flow more easily without causing congestion. Action must also be taken to tackle potholes, and I am grateful for the Government's pothole funding, which has drastically increased the amount of money that Sutton Council has to repair our roads.

It is also important to make sure that our roads and pavements are safe for other road users, particularly pedestrians and cyclists. Again, I thank the Government for the funding to introduce new walking and cycling spaces. I am just sorry that the incompetent Lib Dem council in Sutton did not see fit to work collaboratively to discuss the proposals, despite other councils managing to do so.

The new spaces must be safe and effective; I worry that sometimes cycling routes can be seen as a box-ticking exercise, with a few yards put here and there across boroughs that do not connect up and ultimately lead to nowhere. Any such measures must, though, strike a balance with other road users, such as cars, to ensure that there is no congestion on our roads. As we work towards a greener future, in which safer roads will play an incredibly important part, it is vital to offer incentives to walk or cycle and, indeed, to use electric vehicles. I would be grateful if the Minister could say a little about how the Government are investing in safer streets.

In bringing my remarks to a close, I would just observe that transport is incredibly important for many reasons. It not only connects us but enables us to drive economic growth and it will play a massive part in tackling the climate emergency. Carshalton and Wallington has been left growing without the investment to match it and without reaping much reward from being a London borough. As one of the worst, if not the worst, connected borough in London, it is no longer acceptable to not get our fair share of transport investment. Some changes may take years, but there are those that could be achieved very quickly indeed. I hope the Minister will agree that work should advance on those as soon as possible. We need to unlock the Croydon bottleneck to allow more trains to run through the area and we need to make

better use of bus services to connect with surrounding boroughs. The question mark over the tram needs erasing and replacing with a completion date. The London Overground needs to be extended to connect commuters to new destinations, and our roads and pavements must be safe and well maintained for all users.

8.25 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) on securing this debate on transport in his constituency, and on his enlightening, constructive and extremely wide-ranging speech this evening. As a new Member of Parliament, he has a long list of things that he wants to achieve for his constituents. I very much hope to spend some time guiding him down the right routes this evening, because I think he can achieve a number of his ambitions over his hopefully very long tenure in the seat.

I listened very carefully to my hon. Friend's representations about transport services in Carshalton and Wallington and I will try to address most of them. He represents a fantastic constituency in a borough where I spent my formative political years campaigning. I have very fond memories of those campaigns across the constituencies of my hon. Friend and his neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully). Some of my earliest political friendships were formed in and around my hon. Friend's constituency: Richard and Lesley Barber; Peter Geiringer, a former councillor—

Elliot Colburn: Current.

Chris Heaton-Harris: A current councillor. He has been around a fair bit in his time, campaigning on these sorts of issues. It is really good to be able to have this joyous trip down memory lane and address the content of my hon. Friend's excellent speech.

My hon. Friend talked about the tramlink extension that he would like to see—the Sutton link. As he said, transport in London is devolved to the Mayor of London and delivered by Transport for London, so this matter is not actually within my portfolio. However, my hon. Friend has registered the importance of that extension to his constituents and his very, very strong ambitions in this area. He also talked about various bus routes. Some are currently paused because of the covid crisis, but fortunately many are still going. I know that TfL is listening to this debate tonight and I will ensure that they reply directly to the points he made that are within its auspices.

On rail—as the rail Minister, I can actually make some fairly solid suggestions—I can inform my hon. Friend that the Government's priority is for the country's trains to run on time and to drive growth across the country by giving local leaders a greater say in the running of their railway. That is why we are investing record levels in rail funding—the biggest rail modernisation programme for over a century. In fact, we are spending £48 billion over what is called, in the jargon, control period 6, which runs from 2019 to 2024, to improve rail services for passengers and freight customers, while maintaining current high levels of safety and improving reliability.

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

My hon. Friend mentioned the Brighton main line upgrade programme—or, as we like to call it in the trade, the BMUP. My Department and I recognise the need to upgrade reliability, because we need to improve capacity on the line. It faces major performance challenges due to operational bottlenecks that currently prohibit additional capacity. In view of that, we have now committed over £50 million to improve the services on Brighton main line and its connecting lines, which, if the upgrade scheme goes ahead, will benefit commuters in the region, including my hon. Friend's constituents. Network Rail is currently working on the development of the Brighton main line upgrade programme, in which the main element would be a rebuild of the main line itself through central Croydon, comprising additional tracks, platforms and flyovers to deconflict train movements. A small number of supporting schemes elsewhere on the route are also included in the programme, one of which, the Wallington 12-car turnback, is very important to my hon. Friend. That element of the programme is to assist with the construction staging of Croydon, to facilitate a more frequent service between West Croydon and Wallington in his constituency, to improve performance by decongesting the constrained West Croydon track layout, and to aid Overground growth.

Network Rail is undertaking design work as well as land acquisition and extensive engagement on the Brighton main line upgrade programme, as my hon. Friend mentioned, and his constituents should absolutely get involved in the ongoing consultations. The outline business case is due with the Department next month, and in the subsequent weeks and months a decision will be made on whether to progress and fund the next stage of the rail network enhancements pipeline to the final business case stage—jargon for a very important gateway to investment.

The Department is currently considering whether Wallington, alongside some smaller Brighton main line upgrade programme schemes, should become independent of the Brighton main line upgrade programme in order to complete enabling work quickly. Should that be funded, the work in Wallington is scheduled to be delivered in the next three years.

My hon. Friend talked about Govia Thameslink Railway. In December 2018, the Department announced that GTR would contribute £15 million towards tangible improvements for passengers in reaction to the service disruption following the May 2018 timetable changes, which many hundreds of his constituents will have written to a former Rail Minister to complain about. GTR managed the engagement of passenger groups and stakeholders to determine what improvement schemes the programme would fund. The three-month stakeholder engagement programme ended on 31 July last year, and more than 4,000 responses were received to the surveys.

From that, funding for the following shortlisted schemes will be delivered in my hon. Friend's constituency. At Carshalton Beeches, there will be toilet and waiting room refurbishments and cycle parking facilities—extremely important cycle parking facilities; I am also the Minister with responsibility for cycling. In Carshalton, there will be a new toilet floor, repainting of the waiting rooms, additional platform seating, cycle parking facilities—he might spot a theme—landscaping and new signage.

At Hackbridge, there will be additional platform seating, a canopy over the ticket vending machine—that is actually unbelievably important for many of his constituents—and a new platform waiting shelter and signage. At Wallington, there will be a new platform waiting shelter and additional platform seating.

We expect the work on those schemes to commence in the next couple of months. Those are all stations I used when I lived in and around this area of London. I am not sure they have had much of a refresh since I moved out, so I am pleased that they are getting one now.

My hon. Friend will also be pleased to hear that GTR's operational performance has improved in the past 12 months. Its current public performance measure—the percentage of trains that arrive within five minutes of their scheduled time—has improved by two percentage points to 85.6%, and its on-time performance has also improved. Performance has also improved more specifically in my hon. Friend's constituency. These figures take into account Southern and Thameslink services. During the rail periods in the current pandemic, PPMs have improved even further; they are running at or around 96%, in delivery of a service that has allowed key workers to get to where they need to be—delivered to those places, actually, by key workers in the rail industry—in the last 12 or 13 weeks.

A further theme of my hon. Friend's speech was that of accessibility. Delivering a transport system that is truly accessible to all is of huge importance to the Government, and of personal importance to me. An accessible transport network is central to the Government's wider ambition to build a society that works for all. Many stations date from a time when the needs of disabled customers were simply not considered, and the situation at Carshalton Beeches that my hon. Friend describes is unfortunately far from unique. As he knows, the station was not selected for the last round of access for all funding. That was chiefly because the programme was amazingly heavily oversubscribed and there were many other nominated stations within the London area with higher footfall. I know that that was, and is, disappointing to my hon. Friend, who has actively lobbied me on many occasions about this. I hope he continues to do so in the future, but I would like to assure him that I take improving access seriously.

In 2018, the Government published an inclusive transport strategy setting out what we were doing to improve access across all transport modes, and we will continue to seek further opportunities and funding to make more improvements. Where we can, I am pushing my Department to do more, and more quickly. In addition, wherever infrastructure work is undertaken at a station by the industry, it must also comply with the relevant accessibility standards. My hon. Friend might therefore wish to contact Network Rail—I know that he already has, but it might be worth a further conversation—to see if any work is planned that might trigger these requirements. In the meantime, if a person cannot use the station, they can book alternative transport, which the industry is obliged to provide at no additional cost.

I shall conclude by thanking my hon. Friend for securing this debate. As I am sure he appreciates, rail plays a very important part in people's lives across the country, and especially in his constituency. As I say, I used to commute from stations around there in my time.

Today, he has brought up a huge, wide, diverse range of issues. I want to reassure the House that the Government are investing record levels in rail funding, in buses, in cycling and in a whole host of other areas including pothole filling, in order to deliver the best transport infrastructure we possibly can, and the biggest rail modernisation programme for over a century. As I mentioned earlier, we have committed more than £50 million to improving services on the Brighton main line and its

connecting lines. That is an upgrade that will absolutely improve the lot of commuters across the region, including those in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Question put and agreed to.

8.37 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 16 June 2020

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Coronavirus Impact: BAME Community

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): Today, Public Health England has published the result of ITS work to engage with individuals and organisations within the BAME community, to hear their views, concerns and ideas about the impact of covid-19 on their communities. As the House will know, my hon. Friend the Equalities Minister will be leading on the next steps, working with PHE and others. Copies will be deposited in the Libraries of both houses and are available on PHE's website, <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england>

[HCWS296]

Coronavirus: Easing of Restrictions

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): On 26 March 2020, the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020 came into force, imposing restrictions on people's movements and gatherings, and requiring the closure of certain retail and public premises, in the interest of public health in light of the coronavirus pandemic. On 13 May and 1 June, we introduced some cautious easements of some of the measures in the regulations, in order to begin reopening the economy and returning to normal life, while continuing to protect the NHS and save lives.

Taking into account scientific advice and the Government's assessment against the five conditions required for change, I have now made some further amendments to the regulations to ease the restrictions as has been announced by the Government in recent weeks.

The changes which have come into effect include allowing for adults who live without another adult in their household, including single parents with dependent children under the age of 18, to form a "support bubble" with another household, and allowing individual prayer in places of worship.

The changes also updated the arrangements for businesses. Non-essential retail can open, as can some additional outdoor attractions, including drive-in cinemas and zoos. Libraries will be able to operate an order and collect service. The amendments also expressly provide for people to make visits such as end of life visits where appropriate.

Publicly available Government guidance on gov.uk is being updated to ensure it fully corresponds with the amended regulations. These remain strict measures, but they are measures that we must take in order to protect our NHS and to save lives.

[HCWS295]

PRIME MINISTER

Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (Appointment)

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): The hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) has been appointed as a full member of the United Kingdom Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in place of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) has been appointed as a substitute member.

[HCWS294]

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Covid-19: Disparities in Risk and Outcome

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): On 9 June 2020, the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) made a point of order raising concerns that I misled the House about the role Professor Kevin Fenton had in the Public Health England (PHE) review of disparities in the risk and outcomes of covid-19, and also whether third-party submissions were part of its final report. As I was unable to attend to respond in person, I am writing now to do so.

On 4 June, I stated in the House that Professor Fenton was leading PHE's review. A press release from PHE on the 4 May clearly stated, "Professor Kevin Fenton, Public Health Director for London will lead the review" of how different factors can impact on people's health outcomes from covid-19. In the same press release, Professor Fenton said "We are committed to hearing voices from a variety of perspectives on the impact of covid-19 on people of different ethnicities". Duncan Selbie, the chief executive of PHE, has since written to the hon. Member and me to clarify that the review Professor Fenton led refers to a parallel piece of work to engage with individuals and organisations within the BAME community.

I understand the purpose of this was to gain insights into what communities themselves felt the impacts of covid-19 were. This work was separate to the epidemiological review of the data, which the chief medical officer commissioned. However, they are all part of the work PHE has been doing to investigate this issue. Today, a document summarising this engagement and its findings was formally submitted to me and due to be published by PHE.

In regard to the hon. Member's suggestion that I misled the House about whether third-party submissions were part of PHE's report, my statement as I made it is accurate. Third-party submissions are part of Professor Fenton's extensive stakeholder engagement work as he made clear on 4 May, which will contribute to and inform the next stage of work that I am taking forward.

[HCWS293]

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