

Monday
22 June 2020

Volume 677
No. 73



HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 22 June 2020

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

SELECTION

Ordered,

That Iain Stewart be discharged from the Committee of Selection and James Morris be added.—(*Stuart Andrew.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Educational Disadvantage: Covid-19

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle educational disadvantage. [903509]

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): What plans he has to provide time in schools for pupils to catch up on education missed as a result of the covid-19 lockdown. [903510]

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): What plans he has to help schools deliver programmes to enable pupils to catch up on progress lost as a result of the covid-19 lockdown. [903513]

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): What support his Department will provide to pupils to make up for time spent out of school as a result of the covid-19 lockdown. [903522]

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): What support his Department will provide to pupils to make up for time spent out of school as a result of the covid-19 lockdown. [903528]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): Before I begin, may I take this opportunity to express my deepest condolences to the family of James Furlong and the other victims of the terrorist attack in Reading? We have heard so many young people talk about the amazing impact James had on their lives, the real appreciation they felt and the loss that they now feel. Our hearts go out to all those who have been affected by this most terrible of tragedies. It was an appalling attack, and the Home Secretary will update the House later today.

We are focused on doing whatever we can to ensure that no child falls behind as a result of coronavirus. That is why this Government have announced a package of support worth £1 billion to tackle the impact of lost teaching time due to covid-19.

Wes Streeting: May I associate myself with the condolences expressed by the Secretary of State to the family, friends and pupils of James Furlong? No one who heard the “Today” programme interview this morning with one of his former pupils could fail to be moved. I also express my condolences to the family of Fred Jarvis, the celebrated educationalist and trade unionist, who is sorely missed.

The Secretary of State says that the Government will do whatever they can, which seems some way short of whatever it takes. The Government’s latest Social Mobility Commission report reads like a litany of failures, with references to a lack of “coherent” strategy; “mounting evidence” that welfare changes over the past 10 years have put many more children into poverty; children in disadvantaged areas already facing “limited life prospects” by the age of five; the attainment gap at 16 widening; and further education “underfunded and undervalued”. I do not know whether it was incompetence or a row between the Department for Education and the Treasury, but last Thursday we saw a DFE press release at half-past 6 announcing support, including for early years and post-16 education, and by half-past 8 we saw a support package only for schools. Is it not time for the Secretary of State to get a grip and take the action that we really need?

Mr Speaker: Order. We were very good at the beginning. This is important, but lots of Members want to speak, and it is not fair to take all the time. When I stand up, it means that I want to bring in the Secretary of State.

Gavin Williamson: I would very much like to associate myself with the hon. Member’s comments about the sad passing of Fred Jarvis, and I am sure all Government Members would wish to do the same.

This is the party and the Government that are absolutely committed to closing the gap between those who are most advantaged and those who are most disadvantaged. That is why we are not just talking about it, like the Labour party did—we are driving up standards in education and schools. That is why we are spending an extra £1 billion to raise standards and help those youngsters who have been impacted by this.

Alec Shelbrooke: I fully associate myself with my right hon. Friend’s comments about the tragic events in Reading. He might have heard the suggestion I made about moving the 2021 exam season from May to July, to allow students and teachers more time in the classroom to complete the curriculum. Has he given consideration to that or to other ways of getting extra teaching time in before the exam season?

Gavin Williamson: One key element of the £1 billion package is ensuring that children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have extra support through one-on-one tutoring and tutoring in small groups. My right hon. Friend raises an important point about providing more teaching time. That is why we will consult Ofqual on how we can move exams back, giving children extra time to learn, flourish and do incredibly well.

Sir George Howarth [V]: I welcome the additional £350 million announced last week for catch-up tutoring, but the Secretary of State is aware that schools with already badly overstretched budgets will have to find a

quarter of that cost. Will he give an unequivocal commitment that schools, which are best placed to know their pupils' needs, will be able to target those funds in the most appropriate way for them?

Gavin Williamson: I am pleased to report that Knowsley Council has seen good sense and is working with the Department to ensure that all schools in Knowsley are opening up, which is a welcome development. The whole purpose of our very targeted approach is that it is evidence-based—we know that direct tutoring of children from disadvantaged backgrounds has the single biggest impact on driving their attainment. As I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, the other element of the package—£650 million—gives schools flexibility to look at how they can drive improvement, and I urge him to look at the work done by the Education Endowment Foundation to guide how they spend that money.

Miriam Cates: I welcome the Government's £1 billion support package, which will be essential in helping children catch up on their academic education. However, our children are not just missing out academically; they are suffering emotionally.

Increasingly, I am hearing from parents of children with autism in my constituency, who report that being away from the structure and routine of the school day is having a devastating impact on their children's behaviour and mental health. Some of those children are not being allowed back into school because of concerns about social distancing. What can my right hon. Friend do to get autistic children back to school as quickly as possible to ensure that this crisis does not have a permanent effect on their wellbeing?

Gavin Williamson: The best thing we can do for every child is to welcome them back to school at the earliest possible opportunity, when it is safe. I herald the wonderful work done by the Autism Education Trust, which the Department has decided to give extra funding and resource to this year, so that it can work with more teachers, helping them and training them to create the best environment to welcome all children back into school, where they can develop.

Lee Anderson: I have spoken to many headteachers across Ashfield who want to get back to full service as soon as possible. One way to begin to do that is to encourage all kids who can go back to school to do so, because it is safe. I deeply regret that last week, the Leader of the Opposition refused to say publicly that schools are safe to go back to. Will my right hon. Friend remind colleagues across the House that the education and welfare of our children come before any political point scoring?

Gavin Williamson: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. He will know from his constituency the real benefits that schools are bringing to the children who are going back, and we need to expand that. Schools are a safe environment not just for children, but for those who work in them. It is a shame the Leader of the Opposition does not acknowledge that, but I hope the shadow Secretary of State will acknowledge how important it is to get all children back and what a safe environment schools are.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I share the Secretary of State's comments about James Furlong and send my condolences to his family and to all those who were affected by the horrific events in Reading on Saturday. I also echo the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (West Streeting) about Fred Jarvis, the former general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, who recently passed away at the ripe old age of 95.

Last Thursday evening, the Government issued a press release clearly stating that £700 million would be "shared across early years, schools and 16 to 19 providers".

Of course, it was not the strategic national education plan that I and many across the sector were hoping for, but it was a start none the less and I welcomed it. Less than an hour later, the Government amended the press release: the funding was not for early years and 16 to 19; it was £650 million, not £700 million; and it would not be available until September. Now I hear that schools will need to find 25% of the tuition funding themselves. I ask the Secretary of State: what on earth happened?

Gavin Williamson: I was getting rather optimistic that the hon. Lady would say that she believed it was safe for children to go back to school, but she missed out on the opportunity. The difference between our scheme and the hon. Lady's is that ours will deliver results and make a difference. Our scheme is for £1 billion extra to go to schools and for £350 million to be targeted at children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. It will close the gap in terms of attainment much more effectively than any of the Labour party's proposals. It would be nice if the hon. Lady welcomed such proposals.

Mr Speaker: Can I just say that it is the Opposition who ask the questions, not the other way round?

Rebecca Long Bailey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Secretary of State did not listen to my question—indeed, he does not listen very often at all.

Geoff Barton from the Association of School and College Leaders said:

"It remains frustrating that we haven't had the opportunity to discuss any of this with the government ahead of this announcement and that we once again find ourselves having to guess the detail."

There were no details on resource for early years, 16 to 19, summer provision or emotional and mental health support; there were no plans to source additional school space, to streamline GCSEs and A-levels or to roll out blended learning; and there was no promise to extend free laptops to all children who do not have them, rather than just the groups who have been identified by the Government.

All of this uncertainty could have been avoided if the Secretary of State had chosen to listen to the sector. Will he confirm that he will now formally convene a taskforce of trade unions, education and childcare leaders and staff, local authorities, parents' organisations and health experts to address these issues urgently?

Mr Speaker: Order. It would be easier if we could try to make questions shorter. There are other shadow Ministers to come and we have lots of other Members; I do not want them to miss out, because they blame me.

Gavin Williamson: May I confirm, Mr Speaker, that I would never blame you?

The hon. Lady asked a number of questions. The reality is that Government Members are committed to getting every child back into school. We understand that that is where they are going to benefit. If it was up to the Labour party, we would not see any children going back into the classroom, but what have we already got? We have got nursery back, reception back, year 1 back, year 6 back, and years 10 and 12 as well. We have given schools extra flexibility to get more children in and we have made it clear that next week we will outline plans for the full return of every single child in every year group. We will always listen to the whole sector, whether it is trade unions, those running the schools, or parents and children themselves—

Mr Speaker: I think we have got the rant. Thanks very much.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: I strongly welcome the Government's catch-up announcement, which will make a huge difference to the left-behind children. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that out of that £1 billion, money can be used to set up summer schools or camps? Will the Department for Education work with Essex County Council, which is considering setting up summer camps across the county?

Gavin Williamson: I thank my right hon. Friend for his input, advice and thoughts about how we can make sure that any intervention delivers the very best results. I can confirm that we would be happy to work with Essex County Council. In the Education Endowment Foundation's guidance on how the money can be targeted to deliver the best educational advantage, summer camps are one of the schemes suggested.

Mental Health Support: Covid-19

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support pupils' mental health during the covid-19 outbreak. [903511]

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that pupils are supported (a) academically and (b) emotionally on their return to school after the covid-19 lockdown. [903539]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): We have published guidance and resources for parents and schools on how to support children's mental wellbeing while they are not at school. We have given schools the flexibility to have a face-to-face check-up with all pupils during the summer term. Returning to school is the most vital factor in the wellbeing of pupils and educational progress. We have recently produced new training for teachers on how to teach about mental health issues as pupils go back to school.

James Sunderland: Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the provision of child and adolescent mental health services throughout the UK. Will the Secretary of State please confirm what is happening right now to reduce the backlog?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend champions the mental wellbeing of young people and all his constituents often and regularly. I would be happy to meet him to discuss how we can do more to help. We are working closely with both Public Health England and NHS England on how we can help and support them to reduce CAMHS waiting times. In addition, I will raise the issue with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

Stephen Morgan: Calls to Childline are rising, and YoungMinds has found that around four in five children with pre-existing mental health problems have had those problems worsened in this crisis, yet referrals to CAMHS have been down by as much as 50% in some areas. How do the Government plan to deal with the inevitable rise in demand for mental health services, as identified by teachers in Portsmouth?

Gavin Williamson: There is a great deal of cross-party consensus on this issue and how important it is. Often, people approach schools as almost the first port of call—the easiest way to access services. It is about how we integrate health services with educational services ever more closely. We have put in an additional £5 million-worth of mental health support, but we do recognise that in lot of areas we can make sure that interventions come earlier so it does not get to crisis point.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab) [V]: The first weeks in school are really important for helping four-year-old children settle in and form positive relationships. University College London's study of the Government's pilot of the reception baseline assessment last year found that the test caused anxiety, stress and a sense of failure in many children—and we are talking about four-year-olds here. Will the Government do the right thing and abandon their plans to bring in reception baseline assessments?

Gavin Williamson: No, we will not.

Reopening of Schools

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): What progress he is making on the reopening of schools for eligible year groups. [903512]

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): If he will publish the scientific advice underpinning the announcement by the Prime Minister on 24 May 2020 that primary schools would reopen for reception, year 1 and year 6 pupils on 1 June 2020. [903531]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Since 1 June, we have taken positive steps in welcoming children back to school. Teachers and heads have done an excellent job in opening schools to more pupils, and our latest attendance figures show that approximately 92% of education institutions are open with thousands more children back in classrooms, where they can learn best, reunited with their teachers and friends. SAGE papers are being published in tranches, including those of the Children's Task and Finish Working Group.

Mrs Miller: Let me take this opportunity to associate myself with the comments made earlier about the terror attack in Reading, a near neighbour to my Basingstoke constituency. Our thoughts are with the residents of that town.

There is no substitute for face-to-face learning and thanks must go to the school staff across my own constituency in Basingstoke and, indeed, across Hampshire, who are all working so hard to help ensure that as many eligible children as possible can safely return to school. Parents want to know when all children can be back in school. What advice can my right hon. Friend give to my constituents, who are approaching me on that and who are also asking what organisations are being told to provide summer childcare support for working parents so that we can also support parents to get back to work?

Nick Gibb: We are working towards bringing all children and young people back to school in September. The Government's ambition is that all organisations running holiday clubs and activities for children over the summer holiday will be able to open if, of course, the science allows. The time anticipated for holiday clubs to open is no earlier than 4 July as part of step three of the Government's recovery strategy.

Mr Speaker: Over to the happy Ian Mearns with his supplementary.

Ian Mearns [V]: As the Minister has pointed out, as of 12 days ago, 92% of school settings were open, but only about 9% of children were actually attending. Many parents remain understandably reticent. We all want children to return to full-time education. May I ask the Secretary of State what considerations have influenced the Government's thinking regarding the full reopening of schools, specifically in relation to the potential for child-to-child and child-to-adult transmission of the virus? Most school staff are not as concerned for themselves as they are for the potential implications that could be of particular seriousness for families of black, Asian and minority ethnic children, children living in extended families, or children living in overcrowded conditions or even in poverty. What considerations have been given to that in order to put parents' minds at rest?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about disadvantaged children. Schools have been open to vulnerable children and the children of critical workers since schools closed, and we have encouraged more and more of those children to be in school where it is best for them. The scientific advice indicates that a phased return that limits the number of children in education settings and how much they mix with each other will help to reduce the risk of transmission. We are led by the science but our ambition is that all schools will return in September, but that will, of course, be subject to the science.

Online Protection: Covid-19

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to protect children and young people online during the covid-19 outbreak. [903514]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): At this deeply challenging time, it has been so important that people, especially children, have been able to stay in touch online, but, of course, they should be able to do so safely. We have worked with the National Crime Agency, the UK Safer Internet, Internet Matters, the National Society for the Prevention of

Cruelty to Children and many other experts to provide detailed guidance and support to schools and colleges on keeping children safe online, as well as advice and high-quality resources for parents and carers.

Henry Smith [V]: Does my hon. Friend agree that, although we must be cognisant of the risks on the internet to children and young people, it is very important for their mental health and social wellbeing that they are encouraged to connect via various internet channels with family, friends and others who are part of their support network?

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Being online has had great benefits for children, giving them access to educational resources and entertainment but also enabling them to stay in touch with family and friends, which is vital to their wellbeing. Social media companies have a role in keeping children safe. This Government are committed to creating a statutory duty of care on companies to protect their users, especially children. But they should not wait for us to legislate—they should act.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): Charities such as the NSPCC and Barnardo's have highlighted how children are at increased risk of online harm during this pandemic. It has been over a year since the Government's White Paper on online harms, which set out the need for a duty of care regulator. Every day that this is delayed, more and more children are put at risk. So I ask the Government now: at what point will they stand up to the tech companies, put vulnerable children first, and bring forward a Bill on this?

Vicky Ford: I thank the NSPCC and Barnardo's for the work that they are doing with the Government to help to keep children safe online, but also in the home and outside the home. We are committed to introducing a duty of care on social media companies. We published the initial response to the consultation in February and a full response will be published later this year. We are working with the sector on a detailed code of conduct. But the first thing we must do to keep children safe is to get them back in school, and I would like the hon. Lady to support us in doing that.

International Students

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage international students to study in the UK. [903515]

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): This month I appointed the UK's first international education champion. Together we are working to provide reassurance that our internationally renowned, world-leading universities will be open, flexible and welcoming. We are also communicating the fact that we recently strengthened the UK's offer by announcing the new graduate route.

Greg Smith: International students are extremely important to the University of Buckingham, making up over 40% of all students there. Will my hon. Friend work closely with the University of Buckingham and look at all possible measures to ensure that international students can fully participate as soon as possible in the first-class education the university has to offer?

Michelle Donelan: I certainly will. I am leading a two-tier covid response to attract international students: first, by working across government to remove and reduce the logistical barriers faced by students, including visa issues; and secondly, by communicating that the UK is open for business via advertising and open letters to international students, our embassies, and international media.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): If I may, I would just like to offer a couple of words on Fred Jarvis, who, at 95 years old, was also a friend of mine—a formidable education campaigner. He taught me many, many things, one of them being, “Don’t ever patronise the elderly—they know more than any of the rest of us put together.” Bless you, Fred.

International students bring £20 billion to our economy, and global soft power and influence, the loss of which will not just damage our universities. I do recognise the uphill battle the Minister faces, hindered by a slow and ineffective Home Office and the heartbreaking reality that the UK’s covid-19 death toll is now the third highest in the world. So how will she ensure that our universities maintain capacity and sustain courses if international student numbers decline?

Michelle Donelan: As I have already outlined, we are working to help to mitigate the challenges that universities face, which are faced globally in the higher education sector. In addition, on 4 May we announced a sustainability package on top of the additional support that the Treasury had already announced—£700 million to the sector, including the job retention scheme and access to coronavirus loans. The package that we announced on 4 May also included bringing forward £100 million of quality-related funding for research because, as the hon. Lady will know, international students cross-subsidise research.

Further and Higher Education

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): What steps he is taking to help further education colleges to support students studying vocational and practical subjects during the covid-19 outbreak. [903516]

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on steps to support the further and higher education sectors during the covid-19 outbreak. [903527]

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on steps to support the further and higher education sectors during the covid-19 outbreak. [903532]

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on steps to support the further and higher education sectors during the covid-19 outbreak. [903552]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (**Gillian Keegan**): I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) will join me in thanking all staff in further and higher education for their work in responding to this unprecedented

challenge—they have done a fantastic job. In further education we have introduced flexibilities and encouraged online teaching so that learners can complete their courses as planned. Colleges are open and we want to get all learners back into college as soon as possible.

Dr Hudson [V]: The coronavirus pandemic throws into sharp relief the importance of food production and security, and the critical areas of health and social care. Newton Rigg College in Penrith in my constituency has over 1,000 learners and 130 staff, and trains people in vital areas such as agriculture, land-based studies and health and social care. The college has now been listed for possible closure in July 2021 by its host institution, Askham Bryan College, creating much uncertainty over its future. Does my hon. Friend agree that colleges such as Newton Rigg are vital for our rural communities, and will the Department for Education and other Departments work with me and local stakeholders to try to secure a viable and sustainable future for that prized asset of both Cumbria and, indeed, the wider UK?

Gillian Keegan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our further education colleges are vital for supporting young people in rural communities to get the skills they need. I am aware that the governors at Askham Bryan College have made an in-principle decision to close the Newton Rigg campus from July 2021. Indeed, my hon. Friend and I have now met twice with the Further Education Commissioner to discuss this, at my hon. Friend’s request, so I know he will continue to campaign on this issue. My officials are working with the college and stakeholders to ensure that learners and communities in and around Eden Valley continue to have access to high-quality further education.

Stuart C. McDonald: The reintroduced graduate work visa could indeed help universities and colleges to attract international students and to recover from covid-19: it is just an appalling reflection on Tory Governments that we have been without such a visa for such a long time. Can the Minister say what discussions she has had about extending the graduate visa offered to students who are already here on tier 4 visas, so that both the education sector and the wider economy can use their skills in our recovery?

Gillian Keegan: There is a lot of work going on to ensure that we support the university sector through this crisis. On 20 April, the Home Office updated its visa guidance to provide greater certainty for international higher education students in the UK impacted by coronavirus. On 22 May, the Home Office announced that visas due to expire before 31 May would be extended to 31 July 2020 for those unable to return home. More work will be done in this area.

Kirsten Oswald [V]: Post covid, the stiff competition for international students will intensify. EU students make up a third of the international student body, but any deregulation of fees for EU students will sharply reduce their numbers. Can the Minister confirm that there is no intention to cause such damage, and that EU students in England will retain their home student fees status?

Gillian Keegan: Of course, international students are a key concern for the sector at the moment and, as my hon. Friend the Minister of State for Universities outlined before, work is going on in this area and there is a two-tier system. The Department for International Trade is also working with the Department for Education to encourage students, particularly those in Europe, to come over and continue their international student placements.

Gavin Newlands [V]: I am sure the whole House will want to join me in paying tribute to Fiona, Alexander and Philip, the three young children who died in a tragic house fire in my constituency on Friday. Our thoughts and prayers are with their family and friends.

Many students who normally work over the summer will now, through no fault of their own, be pushed into poverty. The Scottish Government have brought forward earlier access to £11 million to support students, but given the unique circumstances, does the Minister agree that flexibility in universal credit over the summer would help many young people who will otherwise be in an impossible position?

Gillian Keegan: May I associate myself with the hon. Gentleman's comments about the tragedy in his constituency?

Of course, this is a very difficult time. There is massive uncertainty in many of our sectors, and lots of those would have potentially provided short-term work opportunities to students. Obviously, the most important thing we need to do now is reopen our economy, get our economy working and provide those opportunities for young people. In the meantime, there are a number of supports and discretionary grants that are available through the FE sector or the HE sector to support students during this difficult time.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: May I express my condolences, and those of my SNP colleagues, to all those affected by the terrible attacks in Reading, and to the loved ones of the three children who died in the terrible house fire at the weekend?

Scottish schools will officially break up for the summer holidays this week, and I am sure that you, Mr Speaker, will join me in thanking the school staff who have worked so hard to ensure that our children have continued to have educational input over the past few months.

In response to the pandemic, on 4 May, the Government announced a temporary cap on student numbers at English universities, to prevent institutions competing for students. Given that there was no such competition in Scotland, can the Minister explain why the same policy was then applied to Scotland, a month later than England, with no consultation with the Scottish Government and after Scottish universities had sent out entrance offers?

Gillian Keegan: The Government are taking steps to ensure that universities in all four corners of the United Kingdom can continue to deliver the world-class education for which they are renowned. In May, we announced a package of measures to support our universities and safeguard the interests of students. This means that every student who wants to go to university and gets the grades can achieve their ambition. The package includes

new measures to temporarily control student numbers, combined with an enhanced clearing system. That is the right thing to do to ensure a fair and orderly admissions system.

Carol Monaghan: It is notable that Scottish universities found out a month later than their English counterparts—so much for consultation. As we move towards kick-starting the economy post covid, higher education is a potential growth industry. However, a former Universities Minister, Jo Johnson, has said that there must first be a recognition of the lasting reputational damage that has been done to the sector, calling on the Government to end the hostile bureaucracy facing overseas students. Therefore, in order to send a clear signal that the UK is open, what discussions has the Minister had with the Home Office on increasing the graduate work visa from two years to four years, to ensure that the UK has a globally attractive offer?

Gillian Keegan: Clearly, the UK does have a globally attractive offer, given the sheer number of people who want to study here, and the many benefits of doing so. Of course, we are very proud of the sector and will continue to work with it during this difficult time. We will continue to work with the Department for International Trade and the Home Office to ensure that the path for international students wishing to study here is as clear as possible.

Destinations Data

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): What steps he is taking to use destinations data to assess the effectiveness of schools and colleges. [903517]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): My hon. Friend is right to raise the important role of destinations data. It is great to see that King Alfred's Academy in his constituency has seen 91% of 2017 leavers go on to further education, employment or an apprenticeship, which is above the average for England.

David Johnston: Does my right hon. Friend agree that destinations data is particularly important in the light of covid, and that we need our schools focused on helping young people to the destinations to which they were on track before lockdown, and our colleges, universities and employers taking due account of the loss of learning when making their decisions?

Gavin Williamson: We must never lose sight of how important it is to know what youngsters end up going on to do. Yes, we want them to leave school, college or university as well-rounded individuals with all the tools they need to succeed in life, but they have to be tools that lead them into employment so that they can continue to succeed. That is why destinations data is so important, and why it is quite right that Ofsted attaches such high importance to it.

Higher Education Institutions: Covid-19

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support higher education institutions during the covid-19 outbreak. [903518]

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): I recognise that university students and graduates are facing a number of challenges. In May, we announced a package of stabilisation measures, which ensures that we continue to look after the best interests of students as well as support our world-class higher education system. We are also working closely with the sector to support graduates.

Mohammad Yasin [V]: In addition to maintaining current commitments to widen participation and extend bursaries for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, will the Minister make sure that the necessary extra funding is provided so that universities such as the University of Bedfordshire can play a key role in retraining and reskilling young and mature students to meet the serious employment challenges ahead?

Michelle Donelan: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that access and participation are key priorities for this Government, and the Office for Students has launched access and participation measures for every institution. Higher education plays a key role in filling the skills needs of the economy, but so does further education, and our priority is to ensure quality provision and that students can make informed choices that are in the best interests of their career destinations.

Childcare: Social Distancing

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): What support he is providing to help the childcare sector introduce effective social distancing measures. [903519]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): Social distancing is challenging with young children, so we have worked with stakeholders on a detailed planning guide to keep early years settings safe. This includes advice on keeping people, including children, in small, consistent groups and implementing hygiene measures. Thanks to the sector's work in reassuring families, 234,000 children were in childcare on 11 June.

Caroline Nokes: Nursery providers in my constituency are worried that social distancing will result in a reduction in capacity, which for them means a reduction in income. The sector is already at crisis point, so I would like my hon. Friend to reassure me that she is working closely with the sector to ensure that places will be available so that parents—particularly mothers—will be able to go back to work?

Vicky Ford: We all recognise how important early years settings are, both for children and for their parents and carers. Early years settings have been able to open their doors to all children from 1 June. I spoke to sector representative organisations and childcare providers in the first week of wider opening to understand the detailed challenges they face. We know that it is a difficult time for many businesses, and we will continue to ensure that early years providers get the best possible help from all the Government's support schemes.

Teaching Profession: Recruitment

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): What steps he is taking to attract new recruits to the teaching profession in England. [903520]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Our recruitment and retention strategy sets out our plans to attract high-quality recruits to the profession. The "Get into teaching" marketing campaign provides information to trainees, including on the availability of tax-free bursaries and scholarships worth up to £28,000 in certain subjects. We have also set out plans to increase the minimum starting salary for teachers to £30,000 by September 2022.

Sir Christopher Chope: Sadly, many people are losing their jobs or are threatened with redundancy, and we know there is a mass shortage of teachers of physics and maths in particular. Will my right hon. Friend enable schools to second people from industry to fill the vacancies, so that people with talent can fill the vacuum?

Nick Gibb: The organisation Now Teach, which was set up by Lucy Kellaway and which we support, has seen a huge surge of interest from people like the ones my hon. Friend suggests. It helps career changers to come into teaching. We have also seen a 12% increase in applications to teacher training in the last quarter, to the end of May.

Undergraduate Degrees: Lifetime Earnings

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): What steps he is taking in response to the findings of the Institute for Fiscal Studies' report entitled, "The impact of undergraduate degrees on lifetime earnings", published in February 2020. [903523]

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): We are committed to enabling students to make the most informed decisions possible, tackling low-quality courses and ensuring that students and the taxpayer see a return on their investment. We want a high-quality, sustainable model that meets our skills needs and maintains our world-leading reputation.

Neil O'Brien: The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that for 30% of students, the economic return on their degree was negative both for them and for taxpayers. Surely with such clear economic evidence that so many young people would be better off if they took a different route, it is time to rebalance from just higher education to a stronger technical education system?

Michelle Donelan: It is important that students make as informed choices as possible from a range of high-quality courses, and university is not the only or the best route for certain careers. Some students may be better placed if they do higher technical qualifications or apprenticeships. That is why the Secretary of State is spearheading a revolution in further education in this country, including the introduction of T-levels.

Remote Education: Covid-19

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support remote education during the covid-19 outbreak. [903525]

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support remote education during the covid-19 outbreak. [903526]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): The Government have provided a £100 million package of advice and support to enable remote teaching. That has included delivering laptops and tablets to vulnerable and disadvantaged children and working with the new Oak National Academy, the BBC and others to ensure strong national availability of remote educational resources.

Simon Baynes: Does the Minister agree that schools have not only provided imaginative remote online learning during the crisis, as he has just stated, but played a vital role in supporting the frontline through education hubs and related projects, such as the production of personal protective equipment by students at Ysgol Dinas Brân in my constituency?

Nick Gibb: We are very grateful for the hard work and dedication of our teachers during this time and have highlighted the innovative work of schools in a series of recently published case studies. I congratulate those children at Ysgol Dinas Brân on producing more than 800 visitors. It is a prime example of that very innovation.

Julie Marson: I pay tribute to the huge efforts that schools and their staff across Hertford and Stortford have made in supporting the children of key workers and are now making to get more pupils back to school. Does my right hon. Friend agree that schools have an opportunity to continue some of the innovations they have made, such as remote learning?

Nick Gibb: Remote teaching has been a significant challenge for teachers across the sector, and I am grateful to all those who have worked so hard to ensure their pupils' education has continued despite the difficulties of lockdown. Some innovations will no doubt continue to be beneficial, and we are working with organisations such as the Education Endowment Foundation to take an evidence-based approach to establishing how schools can best use remote practices in future.

School Attendance

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): What proportion of children (a) classed as vulnerable and (b) eligible for free school meals are attending school. [903529]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): About 18% of children with an education, health and care plan or a social worker attended an education setting on 11 June. The Department does not collect separate attendance data for those eligible for free school meals.

Jon Trickett [V]: Is the Minister not ashamed that after 10 years of a Tory Government, in West Yorkshire alone there are almost exactly 100,000 children at risk living in families of multiple vulnerabilities? Many of them are still not at school and therefore at risk. What will she do about it?

Vicky Ford: I am enormously proud that after 10 years of a Conservative-led Government the attainment gap between those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from more advantaged backgrounds has narrowed at every stage of children's education. We have kept schools open for vulnerable children, and those children

most at risk have been seen or contacted by their social workers. I thank social workers and schools across the country for doing that. We need to get children back to school, and the Opposition should support us.

Topical Questions

[903569] **Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): I know that every child and young person in this country has experienced unprecedented disruption to their education as a result of coronavirus. The Government are committed to doing everything possible to ensure they have the support they need to make up for that lost time in education. That is why on Friday I announced a £1 billion catch-up plan to lift outcomes for all pupils but with targeted support for those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds who are most at risk.

Kate Osamor [V]: I thank the Government for their recent U-turn on free school meals over the summer months, but what cross-departmental communications has the Secretary of State undertaken with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to clarify whether that will be extended to those children whose parents are newly subjected to the "no recourse to public funds" restriction?

Gavin Williamson: I will take up this matter with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government and write to the hon. Lady in response.

[903570] **Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con):** While last Friday's announcement was welcome, please could the Secretary of State outline how this coming autumn he will support colleges such as East Coast College in Lowestoft as they face the major challenge of supporting those 16 to 19-year-old students whose courses have been badly disrupted? Will he also review the method of funding with regard to capping and lagging payments, which present specific cash-flow difficulties that colleges will have difficulty in overcoming at this time?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): It is our ambition that East Coast College students and all college students will have the opportunity to make up for lost education. Remote learning has been working really well, but we will provide more details soon on how 16-to-19 providers can further support students. Funding allocations for 2020-21 have been guaranteed, and payments will be made in line with the national profile.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I do not know why that answer could not have been given to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), who asked a very similar question but got no sort of answer. The Government must realise that leaving students who have missed level 4 in maths and English out of the catch-up funding is abandoning them at the very time they need such help the most. How can the Government justify leaving them out of that announcement given that a plan for schools was in place last week?

Gillian Keegan: It is clear that the initial focus has been on the school catch-up. There has been a great response from the further education sector, which was quick to move online and to provide a wide range of engaging and innovative classes. We recognise the need for catch-up, particularly for those starting college from school, and we are working to see what more support we can give to make up for the disruption due to covid-19.

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): In Wolverhampton, we have several outstanding special educational needs and disability—SEND—schools, including Penn Hall and Tettenhall Wood. What is my right hon. Friend doing to help vulnerable children to return to education safely in those schools?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is a great champion of those schools. I would like to mention Wightwick Hall, a school on the border between his constituency and mine. We recognise that it is really important to ensure that we get the guidance right, and we have been working closely with the sector to ensure that the specialist needs of many of those children, who sometimes have particularly complex health conditions, are met and that they have the ability to return to school at the very earliest opportunity if that is in line with their health needs as well. I hope to have the opportunity to join my hon. Friend on a visit to one of those schools in the not-too-distant future.

[903571] **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab):** The Minister recently defended a relaxation of visits to children in care throughout this pandemic, claiming that they did not remove any fundamental protections for vulnerable children. She added that she was monitoring their use, yet she cannot tell me how many children have gone missing from care in the same time period. Why is that?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): Due to covid-19, we have made some temporary flexibilities for local authorities. They are temporary, not permanent, and they are to be used only where normal procedures cannot be followed. I am told that the number of missing children at this time has decreased.

[903577] **Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con):** Across Harborough, Oadby and Wigston, teachers have done a wonderful job of looking after children during lockdown. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to get our schools fully reopened in a way that is safe for both pupils and teachers?

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): The Government want all schools to be fully reopened in September. We have produced guidance on protective measures that schools will take, and all staff, children and families will have access to testing if they display symptoms. We are working with local authorities and regional schools commissioners to address any particular local issues, but it is in the interests of all children to be in school with their friends and their teachers.

[903573] **Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab):** My question was to the Minister for Universities, the hon. Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), but in

her absence perhaps I could ask the Secretary of State whether he shares my concern about the recent spate of redundancies in the sector. I have been contacted by many constituents over the past week who are being asked by their employer, Lancaster University, to donate part of their salary back to their employer. Will the Department's structural transformation fund guarantee that no university will fail? Would he like to comment on the appropriateness of higher education institutions asking employees to donate salaries back to their employer?

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): I can assure the hon. Member that I am anything but absent. As we have already announced, we launched a package on 4 May that included re-profiling £2.6 billion of tuition fee funding. We also brought forward £100 million of quality-related research funding, we stabilised the admissions system with student number controls, and we offered more support for students. That was all on top of access to the coronavirus job retention scheme and the business loan support scheme to the value of £700 million. I am more than happy to speak to the university in question directly.

[903581] **Damien Moore (Southport) (Con):** Schools across England, including in my constituency, will benefit from the £1 billion catch-up fund. Will my right hon. Friend commit to ensuring, in that time, that school standards continue to improve, and will he confirm that he will pay another visit to my constituency to see this in action?

Gavin Williamson: I would be absolutely delighted to join my hon. Friend to visit schools in his constituency in the very near future. It is really important that we understand the vital role that Ofsted plays in making sure that we have strong accountability in schools. One of the aspects that I will ask Ofsted to look at as we are making this significant investment of £1 billion to support youngsters to catch up and support schools is how it has been implemented and how children have been supported in their catch-up plans.

[903575] **Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP) [V]:** This week is National School Sport Week, run by the Youth Sport Trust, and this year it is being reinvented at home. Inclusive sport has an important role in young people's mental health, wellbeing and confidence, so will the Secretary of State be engaging in an online sport challenge this week to support National School Sport Week and encourage families to continue with the benefit of school sport?

Gavin Williamson: I feel the answer can only be yes.

[903588] **Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con):** On the same theme, recent data from Sport England suggests that one in three children have been less physically active during lockdown, with one in 10 doing no physical exercise at all. Will my right hon. Friend take the opportunity today, during National School Sport Week, to confirm that the instrumental PE and sport premium for primary schools, which is worth £320 million a year and was introduced by the coalition Government in 2013, will have its funding guaranteed for the next academic year, 2020-21?

Nick Gibb: The Government want to ensure that all children get an active start in life and engage in daily physical activity, which is why we launched the school sport and activity action plan last year. We will confirm arrangements for the primary PE and sport premium in the 2020-21 academic year as soon as possible.

[903578] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: As a condition of its funding support for Transport for London, the Government are requiring TfL to withdraw free school travel for under-18s. That will make it even harder to get children and young people back into education, 60% of whom, in London, are from black and minority ethnic communities. Why are the Government so intent on making life harder for my constituents?

Nick Gibb: The key is to get more children walking and cycling to school, and using other forms of transport other than public transport, but we are working across Government, with the Department for Transport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, to address the necessary transport issues in order to get children back to school in September.

[903590] **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): Last week's announcement of an extra £1 billion will make a real difference by providing additional support to those children who have fallen behind while out of school. It is imperative that this funding is targeted so that it can have the maximum possible impact. Will this additional money be disbursed in a way in which communities with acute educational challenges, such as Blackpool, can benefit the most?

Nick Gibb: The Government will do whatever they can to ensure that no child falls behind as a result of the covid-19 crisis. That is why we have announced a £1 billion package of support, which includes a catch-up premium for schools and a tutoring programme for those in need, including, of course, children in Blackpool.

[903585] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): The covid pandemic has revealed how shockingly dependent this country has become on other countries to train our medical workforce and the previous neglect of training. Will the Minister now prioritise a rapid and substantial increase in training places in our universities and colleges, and capital funding for things such as virtual reality training for doctors, nurses and other medical personnel, not only to staff our NHS, but to provide career opportunities for our youngsters?

Gavin Williamson: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important and very thoughtful point. It is really important that we look at different ways in which we can expand the capacity to train doctors, nurses and all those working in the caring professions. I look forward to working very closely with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to be able to deliver on that.

[903593] **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): It is thanks to the Secretary of State's careful management of this crisis that more children are able to return to school, but as that happens, the 15 pupils per bubble

limit is causing some problems in schools that do not have the resources to split classes. What steps can he take to ensure this is addressed?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there are some natural restrictions on how far schools can go in welcoming children back. Last week, we gave schools added flexibilities to be able to welcome more children back into the classroom. As guidance changes, we will look within Government at how we do everything that needs to be put in place so that every child is back in the classroom in September.

[903596] **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Today is Windrush Day, and I hope the Secretary of State will join me in paying tribute to all those from BAME backgrounds who teach in our schools and are staff in our schools. Has he read the letter I sent him, signed by Members from across this House, asking for a review of the curriculum in the light of the Black Lives Matter movement, so that it better represents all communities across the whole of our country?

Nick Gibb: I have seen the hon. Member's letter. On this anniversary of Windrush, as much on as any day, we need to understand the strong feelings on this issue. People do suffer racial prejudice, and we need to eliminate discrimination and bigotry wherever it occurs in our society. So far as the curriculum is concerned, we give schools the autonomy to decide what and how history is taught, provided it covers a wide range of periods of British and world history, but that very autonomy means that schools can and do teach about black and Asian cultures and history. The citizenship curriculum and the new relationships curriculum teach the importance of respect for other cultures and respect for difference.

Mr Speaker: I call Mark Fletcher—final question.

[903598] **Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker—last and, hopefully, not least. I would like to place on record my thanks to the governors, teachers and headteachers across the Bolsover constituency, who have managed to get our schools up and going again. However, one of the common complaints I have heard from them is that guidance has often been issued quite late or at inconvenient times. Can the Secretary of State make sure that their complaint is heard, and that in future we will issue guidance with plenty of time?

Gavin Williamson: By the nature of the crisis, sadly, guidance, which we always want to get out at the greatest of speed, has always faced quite considerable time pressures, but I can assure my hon. Friend that we very much take his words to heart. As we issue guidance for schools about the full return of all pupils in September, we will ensure that this goes out in plenty of time before schools rise for the summer.

Mr Speaker: 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 suspending the House for three minutes.

3.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

Reading Terrorist Attack

3.38 pm

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Home Secretary to make a statement on the very sad events in Reading in Saturday, I have a short statement to make. As matters stand, no criminal charges have been made, and the case is not yet subject to sub judice resolution. However, it is reasonable to expect charges soon, and I urge all hon. Members to exercise care not to prejudice any future trial by what they say. Hon. Members will also wish to know we will observe a minute's silence tomorrow at 11 am, to remember the victims of this event. I now call the Secretary of State to make a statement.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the senseless terror attack that took place in Reading on Saturday evening. That appalling attack is now subject to an ongoing police investigation, and as such there are limits to what I can say. However, I want to share as much detail as I can with the House this afternoon, on behalf of the police, following my conversations with them over the weekend and my visit to Reading this morning.

Around 7 pm on Saturday evening, a 25-year-old male entered Forbury Gardens in the centre of Reading, and began to viciously attack several groups of people. The outstanding police officers from Thames Valley police responded with great courage and great speed. The armed suspect was tackled to the ground by an unarmed officer and was immediately arrested at the scene. The suspect remains in custody.

After initial investigations, Counter Terrorism Policing declared the attack a terrorist incident and is now leading the investigation. The police have confirmed that the threat is contained, but that, sadly, three innocent members of the public were killed, murdered by a sudden and savage knife attacker as they enjoyed a summer evening with friends. Another three victims were injured and received hospital treatment.

My thoughts and prayers are with the family and friends of everyone who was hurt or killed as a result of this sickening attack. The victims of terrorism unit at the Home Office and family liaison officers are supporting them, and I know Members from across the House will join me in sending our heartfelt condolences.

It was truly humbling to visit Thames Valley police this morning. I had the privilege of meeting the officers who first responded to the incident and who were responsible for apprehending the suspect, as well as trying to prevent the loss of further life. Those officers—a few of whom were student officers—ran towards danger to help those in need without a second thought. A young unarmed police officer took down the suspect without hesitation while another performed emergency first aid on those who were injured. These officers are heroes. They showed courage, bravery and selflessness way beyond their years. They are the very best of us. I would also like to pay tribute to the response of every emergency service that attended the scene, as well as members of the public who stepped in to prevent further loss of life.

The United Kingdom has the best security services and police in the world. Since 2017, they have foiled 25 terrorist plots, including eight driven by right-wing

ideologies. They serve the country with professionalism and courage, embodying what the British public rightly expect from those on the frontline of the battle against violent extremists and terrorists.

The UK's counter-terrorism strategy remains one of the most comprehensive approaches to countering terrorism in the world, but over recent decades we have all too often seen the results of poisonous extremist ideology. The terrorist threat that we face is complex, diverse and rapidly changing. It is clear that the threat posed by lone actors is growing. These terrorists are united by the same vile hate that rejects the values our country holds dear: decency, tolerance and respect.

We are united in our mission to tackle terrorism in all its forms. Since day one, the Government have backed our police and security services, who work around the clock to take down terrorists and violent extremists. On any given day, they make a series of calculated judgments and decisions on how best to protect our citizens and country based upon the intelligence that they gather.

In light of the many complexities across the security, intelligence and policing communities, in January this year I announced increased resources for counter-terrorism policing, resulting in a £90 million increase this year alone. That has taken counter-terrorism policing funding to more than £900 million—the highest ever. That is because we live in a complex world and is against a backdrop of evolving threats and dynamic threats—threats that when they do materialise are worse than shocking when they result, as we have seen again this weekend, in the tragic loss of life.

Bolstering our security and policing network and frontline capability is part of our ambitious programme to strengthen the joint working between the police and security services to leave terrorists with no place to hide. It is also why we are committed to developing a new “protect duty”, so that businesses and owners of public places must take into account the threat of terrorism. It is also why, following the shocking attacks at Fishmongers' Hall and in Streatham, we took strong and decisive action. That action included the introduction of the Terrorist Offenders (Restriction of Early Release) Act 2020, the emergency legislation that retrospectively ended the automatic early release of terrorist offenders serving standard determinate sentences, forcing them to spend a minimum of two thirds of their time behind bars before being considered for release by the Parole Board. Through our Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Bill, which goes into Committee in this House this week, we are introducing much tougher penalties for terrorists to keep the public safe. This is the biggest overhaul of terrorist sentencing and monitoring in decades, strengthening every stage of the process, from introducing a 14-year minimum jail term for the most dangerous offenders to stricter monitoring measures. Jonathan Hall QC is also looking at how different agencies—including the police, probation services and security services—investigate, monitor and manage terrorist offenders.

I totally understand the desire for details and information to enter the public domain, particularly at this time, as people ask what happened and why. However, as you pointed out, Mr Speaker, I would ask everyone, including the media, to be cautious at this stage about reporting on individuals who have not been charged. We must not do anything that could put at risk the victims or their loved ones achieving justice.

[Priti Patel]

The first duty of any Government is to protect the people they serve, so we continue to pursue every option available to tackle the terrorist threat and take dangerous people off our streets. As the Prime Minister reiterated yesterday, the police and security services will continue in their investigations to better understand the circumstances of this tragic incident, and if further action is needed, we will not hesitate. Our world-class CT police and security services have my unequivocal backing as they hunt down hate-filled terrorists and extremists. My message today is clear, simple and strong: swift justice will be done; victims will be supported; and if further action is needed to stop terrorists in their tracks, this Government will not hesitate to act. I commend this statement to the House.

3.46 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement and for her briefing call over the weekend.

Like the whole House, I was shocked and appalled by the scenes we saw in Reading on Saturday evening. While doing no more than visiting a beautiful park, three innocent people were stabbed to death and another three were seriously injured. Today we remember those who have died, and our thoughts and condolences are with their families and friends at this moment of terrible loss. We send best wishes to those who were injured and wish them a swift recovery, and thank our magnificent NHS staff for the care that they are providing.

The incident was one of senseless violence, and, as always, we are indebted to our outstanding police officers and other emergency services personnel for their swift response and work at the scene, helping others by putting themselves in danger. They represent the very best of us. We thank them and the public at the scene who assisted, and recognise their courage and bravery in this most awful of situations.

We now know that this has been declared a terrorist incident, and I know that the whole House will support the police as they carry out the highly detailed and careful investigation that is necessary with an incident such as this. I hope that the Home Secretary can confirm that all necessary resources will be made available to Thames Valley police and to counter-terrorism policing. I am sure she will also agree that although there are, quite understandably, many questions about this specific case, the best thing to do is to give the police the space they need to conduct the investigation and to establish the facts, not to indulge in unhelpful speculation. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) for his calm and measured leadership in such a difficult moment.

It is heartbreaking that we are having this conversation again so soon after the terrible attack at Fishmongers' Hall in November, which tragically took the lives of Jack Merritt and Saskia Jones, and the attack in Streatham in February. As you have said, Mr Speaker, this is a live investigation so we have to ensure that there is due process and that the police can do their job, but the country will want answers about these incidents, which have occurred in such quick succession. Although the priority today must be to ensure that there are no further related threats, and that the victims and families are cared for, it is vital that questions are addressed.

I hope that the Home Secretary will confirm that she will further update the House on this awful incident and the lessons that need to be learned, but there are some matters that I would like her to deal with today.

The Home Secretary mentioned the piece of emergency legislation in February, and there is another Bill on counter-terrorism going through the House at present with cross-party co-operation. I hope that any further legislation will also be on a cross-party basis. But does she agree that legislation alone is not enough? We need a comprehensive look at deradicalisation in our prisons, at how people who pose a threat are risk assessed and how different agencies can work together to safeguard against tragedies.

Community police are the eyes and ears of our society. The intelligence gathering that they do is vital. Can the Home Secretary assure me that the Government will never again cut the numbers of community police and will instead build the capacity that is required for law enforcement? Can she also assure me that the serious violence taskforce, which has not met since 26 June last year, will meet soon and on a regular basis?

The Home Secretary rightly praised the intelligence and security services, but the Intelligence and Security Committee has not met for over six months. Will she confirm when the Committee will have all its members in place and exactly when it will meet next?

Finally, I know there will be many issues in the weeks ahead, but let the message go out from this House today that we stand alongside the wider community in Reading at this dark moment and say that those who have lost their lives will never be forgotten.

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and for his thoughtful remarks about Reading as a community. I met the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) and made exactly the same point. We must be united and work at a community and multi-faith level with all organisations. That is really important, both now and going forward, to ensure that people are remembered in the right and appropriate way, and that we support the community at this difficult time, which we all do.

The hon. Gentleman asked some important questions. He is absolutely right that legislation is never the only solution, not just on issues of this nature but on wider safeguarding, community measures and the responses that are put in place. That brings me on to community responders, police officers, backing our police and resourcing those who keep our communities and the people in our country safe. I met the chief constable of Thames Valley police, John Campbell, this morning. Again, that is a conversation I had. I was in touch with him over the weekend and had the assurance that they are well supported in terms of the resources they need. They are dealing with a live investigation. Obviously, the investigation is now a counter-terrorism investigation, but even so they have given me that assurance.

There are a number of other points to make when it comes to violence of every nature, including serious violence. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the serious violence taskforce. We now have the National Policing Board, which has effectively taken over that remit. The National Policing Board has already met several times, including in recent weeks, to discuss not just policing

but crime and the Government's overall crime strategy from a holistic perspective. That also covers the Ministry of Justice side, the end-to-end aspect of the criminal justice system and how offenders are treated.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the work that is required on deradicalisation in prisons. The work that needs to take place builds on Prevent and on safeguards that exist already, but these are evolving issues in terms of the type of skills and resources that are needed, as well as the types of deradicalisation techniques and Prevent work that have to be invested in. That is continuous. There is never one solution for how to deradicalise individuals. A range of tools, techniques and programmes are in place. It is right that we continue to review and work with that. As the hon. Gentleman will know, a great deal of work has taken place around the review of Prevent.

The hon. Gentleman's final point related to the Intelligence and Security Committee. Appointments to the Committee are taking place and an announcement will be made in due course on when that will be coming forward.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I invite the House to join me in sending our deepest sympathy to the friends and family of James Furlong, and to the staff and pupils at The Holt School, Wokingham, where he taught. He was by all accounts an inspirational teacher who always went the extra distance for his pupils. He was a very kind man and he will be sorely missed. The community is very shaken today by the news. Will the Home Secretary intensify the efforts of the intelligence services, the police, the border forces and the others? We have had too many mass murders in recent years. We want some reassurance that we can get on top of this and save the lives of others for the future.

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I, too, pay tribute to Mr Furlong. What happened was absolutely appalling. All our sympathies and thoughts are with his family and friends.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the intensification of the work that is taking place, cross-party and across Government, covering a range of measures, police, intelligence and security. He also mentioned our borders, and the work we are doing to review those and deal with criminality checks. That is all ongoing work and it will, of course, be intensified.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (SNP) [V]: On behalf of my party, I wish to start by expressing our sorrow at the lives that have tragically been lost and extending our deepest sympathies to the families and friends, and to those who are currently ill and recovering in hospital. It is never easy to lose a loved one, but especially not in these circumstances or in these times. I echo the Secretary of State's comments regarding our gratitude to those who served and showed great courage, and we will continue to prosecute and investigate.

First, let me call for a calm response—to be fair, the Secretary of State has been clear on this. Sadly, we have had previous terrorist atrocities; it is a product of our time. We do not expect and should not have to live with it, but we have to recognise that they do occur and that we have to show calm judgment, not rush to an analysis or make a decision without knowing the full facts.

Obviously, that has been commented on by you, Mr Speaker, as regards this being sub judice. There may very well be mental health or other aspects that we do not know about, and we await the outcome of an investigation. However, what we can be clear about—I seek the Secretary of State's reassurance that we will make this clear—is that terrorist acts are not perpetrated by communities, but are carried out by individuals. They do not represent any faith, constituency or cause other than their own misguided, malevolent and wicked views, and we need to take that into account. We also need to remember that although we have suffered not just this recent tragedy but all too recent ones, including those involving Members very close to this House, what some people view as the epicentre of the areas that perpetrate terrorism suffer far more from it than we have done in our entire history—we need to take that account.

On that issue, I seek reassurance from the Secretary of State that steps will be taken to ensure that reassurance and protection are given to minority communities, because I know from my experience in Scotland that there can be those who rush to judgment and seek to apportion blame, and will, through misguided views, or indeed their prejudice and dogma, seek to carry out attacks against minority groups. Therefore, I ask that steps on that, which are no doubt probably ongoing, are carried out. Equally, I seek reassurance that as well as contest, we will seek to prevent: we need not only to protect our minority communities, but to deal with issues that are bubbling under the surface there, so as well as contesting terrorism and rightly confronting it, we need to protect communities and address injustice, wherever it is.

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about ensuring that communities and, in particular, minority groups within them, are not vilified at this time. This is a moment when we should all be coming together to be supportive across all communities and, in particular, as I discussed with the hon. Member for Reading East this morning, across communities locally and multi-faith groups. Obviously, so much more work needs to take place, but great work is taking place and we should not lose sight of that right now.

Mr Speaker: I call Matt Rodda, whose constituency was affected.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): May I take a moment, Mr Speaker, because it has been a very difficult few days? I wish to thank the Home Secretary for meeting me today. I very much thought that the tone of our discussion was helpful and positive. I look forward to working with her and I appreciate her offer of support for Reading.

Like many other people, I was shocked and deeply upset by the dreadful attack in Forbury Gardens. I offer my deepest condolences to the families of the three people who died—my thoughts are with them. It is impossible to imagine what they are going through at this time, and I am sure all our hearts go out to them. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am also thinking about the injured and their loved ones, and all those who have been affected by this dreadful attack, which, I should emphasise to people, took place in a park when people were trying to enjoy a peaceful weekend. Most of all, I would like to thank the emergency services and the police for their

[*Matt Rodda*]

swift and immediate response, and indeed for the incredible bravery shown by the officers who, as was said earlier, rugby-tackled an armed offender and took that person to the ground.

Reading is a friendly and peaceful town with a diverse and tolerant community. This kind of incident is completely unknown to us. It is something that has never occurred before in our community and as such is deeply upsetting. That community solidarity was demonstrated again today, when a wide range of different faith and community groups came together to lay flowers at the scene of the dreadful incident. Local people also observed a minute's silence. I am very proud of the way in which our community is pulling together at this difficult time and the way in which local people have been supporting one another. We can and we will come through this difficult time.

Priti Patel: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. As we discussed this morning, the way in which the community has come together—the multi-faith groups, as we discussed earlier, the emergency services and the police officers, who both of us have met—is absolutely outstanding. Like him, I pay tribute to the friends and family members of those hurt or killed and, as ever, the police officers and emergency services, who responded with such swiftness and bravery. We will continue our discussions about the support that he needs for his constituents at this very difficult time.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): My constituency borders Reading, and I speak on behalf of everyone in Newbury in sending my deepest sympathies to the families of the victims. I also thank Thames Valley police for an exceptional response on Saturday night. No charging decision has been made, but in the last three years there have been five lone wolf attacks, in Streatham, in Fishmongers' Hall, on the tube at Parsons Green, on Westminster Bridge and at the Manchester Arena. What reassurances can my right hon. Friend give that the counter-terrorism services have sufficiently robust surveillance powers to monitor this most unpredictable of threats?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend raises important questions. Surveillance and monitoring of individual subjects of interest is crucial to how they are managed and watched within our community. She asked specifically about resources. I speak to those services every week, and we have these discussions. However, while resourcing is one thing, this is about access to information and intelligence and how it blends together and is combined. To be specific in answer to her question, the services have the resources that they need. There is always more work to do, and I am sure there is more that can be done in the future. I have already said in my statement that we need to listen and to learn from what has happened—that will evolve over time, as the investigation proceeds—and if we need to do more, that is exactly what we will do.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I join those from all parts of the House who have paid tribute to those who lost their lives in this awful attack and also to the emergency services, which responded so fast. Our thoughts will be with those who have lost loved ones, but also with everyone in the community in Reading, who will be dealing with the shock and trauma of this attack, as my hon. Friend for Reading East (*Matt Rodda*) so powerfully expressed.

The Home Secretary will know that this is the most recent in a series of attacks by lone individuals, which are harder for the police and security services to anticipate. That emphasises the importance of tackling some of the vile extremism and radicalisation that can lead to attacks, including online, in the community and in prison. Can she confirm that each of those will be included in the Government's new counter-extremism strategy and tell us when she expects to publish that?

Priti Patel: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. In fact, she raised a similar point last week, and I am writing to her outlining the details of what we will be doing with the counter-extremism strategy. She is right, however, to point to online activities and the vile hatred that is spread online, but also on other forms of the web, the dark web in particular. There is a great deal of work being done, and I pay tribute to the many organisations and individuals, some of whom we have not even referenced today, who work to close down sites and track these individuals and some of the organisations they are networked with. That work will always continue, but I will share the details with the right hon. Lady shortly.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): In the face of great adversity, we often witness the very best of public spirit, selflessness and bravery from our fellow citizens—those who sacrifice concern of their own safety in the interest of others—and none more so than the first responders during the terrorist attack in Reading, to whom I pay tribute. A member of our parliamentary family was, by chance, at Forbury Gardens on Saturday and, in the same way that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (*Mr Ellwood*) did in March 2017, ran courageously towards danger; his only focus was to help the injured. I would like to pay particular tribute to *James Antell*, a member of my own staff who not only used his own shirt to stem the bleeding of one victim but continued resuscitation on a second victim until the paramedics arrived. This was indeed a remarkable and extraordinary effort from a young man who has been with us in Parliament for a little over four months and whom I am extremely proud—I hope the whole House is—to have as part of the West Dorset parliamentary team.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Priti Patel: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to his assistant and to all other first responders, who showed great humility and that sense of duty in coming together on Saturday in Forbury Gardens to respond and prevent further loss of life. As I said, they are the very best of all of us, and I pay tribute to everyone who was part of the emergency response, because, frankly, the resilience, courage and bravery they have shown is to be commended.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Coming from the Province, as I do, we have been subject to many terrorist attacks over the years, as the Home Secretary and others in the House will be aware. On behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party, may I offer my sincere condolences to the families of the victims? We understand your loss and will be praying for you in the days ahead.

Will the Home Secretary outline what steps the Government will take to ensure that the families will see justice for their loved ones and, more than that, see

lessons learned within the MI5 system, with improvements made? While no one can accurately predict the future, we must ask whether we can do better with these persons of interest to prevent any future tragedies and violence.

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Member for his comments and understanding. He asked about support for the families. The Home Office, along with Thames Valley police, is providing all the necessary support, particularly through family liaison officers but also through the victims of terrorism unit at the Home Office. He referred to one particular agency, but of course many other agencies work across the intelligence and security spectrum. We work with all of them, because they are part of that integrated network along with policing, frontline policing and counter-terrorism policing. That work will continue and, as I have already said to the House, if there are any issues, lessons or lines of inquiry to be followed up which we can proactively address and deal with, either in this House or through my actions as Home Secretary, I will absolutely follow them up.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): As a Berkshire MP, I place on record my personal sympathies to all those affected so gravely in neighbouring Reading. In the past 24 hours we have seen media speculation about the immigration status of the alleged perpetrator. Will the Home Secretary please reassure me that it remains her priority to return people who come to the UK and are proven to commit crime?

Priti Patel: First, I will not get into any speculation or commentary, but I could not be any clearer about the Government's position on foreign national offenders. Our policy is as stated: we will do everything in our power to remove those who abuse our hospitality and commit crimes in the UK. That has been the Government's focus. I am also clear that tougher action is needed to speed up removals, to deter foreign criminals from entering the UK. It is not always easy, because there are barriers to overcome. That is something we will look at through other legislative means.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I add my voice and that of my party to the expressions of sympathy for all those whose lives were touched by this dreadful incident and condolences to all those who mourn the loss of a loved one? Three months after I was first elected to this House in 2001, we saw the horrific events in New York and Washington on 9/11. That was followed by emergency anti-terror legislation. I struggle to think of a year since in which we have not had anti-terror legislation of some sort, but still the problem continues. I think we can be fairly certain that, if the answer to this problem were to be found in a formulation of the law, we would have found it by now. As the Home Secretary considers the formulation of a new counter-terror and counter-extremism strategy, we need the involvement of people who do not have any skin in the game—who, in the nicest way possible, have not been part of the failure that has taken us to this place. In particular, can that strategy be informed by an honest assessment of what it will do to end the radicalisation of those in prison?

Priti Patel: The right hon. Gentleman is right about the need for objectivity and understanding in how we formulate these strategies, which are often evolving and

dynamic, looking at individuals' behaviours, many of which we simply do not understand. Deradicalisation is a complicated issue. In terms of not only what happened in Reading over the weekend but more broadly, it is right that we look at the whole approach, understand the failures of the past and what has worked in the past, and ensure that we have a comprehensive approach which builds on constructive insights and learnings. He is right in his assessment.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): Yet another terrorist attack. I join the Home Secretary in praising the first responders and the individuals who had no concern for their own lives in closing this incident down. I am pleased to hear about the initiatives in our probation service, our communities and our prisons, but we need to understand the wider picture: terrorism is increasing. At the time of the Bali bombing, there were 26 organisations proscribed by the Home Office. That number has risen to 86. I concede that this is not just a problem for the UK, but we need to look more widely. These things are happening because there are fanatics working in ungoverned spaces, preying on vulnerable individuals and promoting a false interpretation of Islam. We pat ourselves on the back and say that we defeated Daesh, but that is only territorially—the ideology lives on and continues to grow. The threat is there, and until we address the wider picture, the threat of terrorism in the UK will continue.

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is right about the real threat and the present danger of extremist ideologies. Of course, extremist ideologies manifest themselves in many forms—we all recognise that—and we see that internationally. As I said, we see that online and through individuals who are networked. We cannot tackle these issues on our own. That is why our work with the Five Eyes community and many other international partners is so valid. We have to continue to grow the work that we do, learn from each other, grow our own intelligence networks and, importantly, understand the tactics and techniques that can make a difference in this space.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) [V]: With 30,000 people of interest to the security services at any one time, it is obvious that they cannot all be under constant surveillance, but this is the fourth terrorist attack in seven months where the potential suspect was known to the authorities. What lessons can be learned about surveillance and the management of these people known to the authorities?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman asks important questions about surveillance techniques. There are always lessons learned about surveillance techniques and how people are monitored. As I mentioned in my statement, the intelligence and security services have to make calculated judgments based on the threat and the information that they have. They will continue to do that, and they are constantly reviewing many of their own techniques.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): May I extend my deepest sympathies to the family and friends of those who lost someone, and commend Thames Valley police and the other emergency services? My constituency is in the Thames valley and I know how good they are. Does my right hon. Friend think that when the police do have

[David Johnston]

the person they think committed this crime, the media attention should focus on the victims and not on the beliefs and backstory of the people who perpetrate such attacks, thereby denying them the attention they crave?

Priti Patel: There is merit in my hon. Friend's point. The spotlight should not be on the individual, the organisation or those who promote terror, hate and fear. We must always be respectful to and mindful of the victims. Of course, at times like this, we have to give the police the time and space they need to get on with their investigations.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give an update on the progress of the Prevent review? In particular, will she take steps to make Prevent more effective and a bit more attractive to the people it is supposed to reach?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Work is taking place on the Prevent review and more details will be forthcoming shortly. The fact of the matter is that we need to work harder at a community level to avoid any stigmatisation and to encourage people to engage and participate. We must also understand the types of techniques and tactics that make a difference. That is something I will be very happy to discuss further with him.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): The person who has been arrested on suspicion of committing these offences is reported to have been of interest to the security services as a potential terrorist sympathiser and was released from prison well before the end of his sentence, a mere 16 days before this murderous rampage took place. There have been newspaper reports about his engaging in alarming behaviour ahead of the incident. Given those serious concerns, will the Home Secretary confirm that he was being supervised when he left prison under multi-agency arrangements for public protection, as would seem appropriate? If so, at what level was that?

Priti Patel: As I have said, there is an investigation under way in relation to this incident and it would be thoroughly inappropriate for me to comment any further.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): On behalf of the people of Meriden, I join the whole House in conveying my condolences to the loved ones of the victims of this heinous attack. I commend the police force and other emergency services, who once again acted heroically and put the safety of others before their own. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must never weaken in our resolve to win the battle against terrorism, and that those who seek to divide us will never be allowed to succeed?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our objective is to ensure that those people are never successful and that our values of tolerance and respect prevail. At a time like this, of course we support our police, we respect and support our emergency workers, we think about the families of the victims and those who have been hurt, but ultimately our collective role has to be to unite as a country and stand against the type of hate and terrorism that are being perpetrated.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Of course, we join all the tributes that have been paid to everybody affected by this terrible attack. It is the third terrorist attack since the UK terror threat level was reduced in November. Is the Home Secretary considering the use of the terror threat scale and whether the criteria and circumstances around the raising and lowering of the threat level should be reviewed?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman will know that the terror threat level is independent of the Home Secretary and the Home Office. It is set by a joint terrorism analysis centre assessment. The threat level is substantial. On that basis, we all continue to be vigilant, to monitor the situation and to engage with our intelligence and security services and take the relevant advice.

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): On behalf of the Derbyshire Dales constituency, I offer my deep condolences to the families and friends of those who lost their lives at the weekend. The terrorist attack over the weekend was a callous and senseless act of terrorism, apparently fuelled by hatred of and disdain for our society. Will my right hon. Friend commit to look further at not only the management of these types of individuals, but the laws that underpin their sentences, their possible early release and their possible removal from these shores?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend has raised a number of issues in relation to our laws—laws that are being discussed in the House of Commons this week in particular; I refer to the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Bill. She is right, of course, that we review and update our laws. At times such as this, first and foremost, we have to come together to look at any lessons, any issues and any challenges. It is too early to do that—there is a live investigation under way. As ever, it is important that we continue to review our legislation, but also the type of tactics and resources that are required at times like this.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Of course, we must always look at what more we can do to prevent such an absolutely horrendous crime, but will the Home Secretary agree with her predecessor as Home Secretary, Lord Howard, that what we need is a “measured” response and not a “knee-jerk reaction”? Will she make sure to engage with the Scottish Government and the other devolved Governments before bringing back any measures that she thinks may be necessary?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. This is not about knee-jerk reactions at all. Importantly, there is a live police investigation under way, and it is wrong for anybody to comment or speculate around the individual and what next steps need to be taken. As ever in this House, when it comes to legislation, reforms or changes, they are all discussed in the right way—not just on the Floor of the House, but across parties.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): My constituents in Ashfield stand together, united in grief over this cowardly attack on innocent individuals. We are a peaceful and tolerant nation with a proud record of welcoming refugees and asylum seekers, the vast majority of whom have come to the UK and contributed positively to society, such as the men I used to work with down the pits in the '80s.

These were displaced people. At the end of world war two, they had no country and no home to go to. We gave them a home and, in return, they grafted down the pits to raise good, decent families and made our country a better place. However, there is something wrong if an individual has entered this country illegally, been granted asylum and then goes on to be a security risk. Could my right hon. Friend please tell me what steps her Department will take to ensure that we do not have another instance of a potential terrorist slipping through the net of the security services?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes some important points about the contribution of those refugees who come to our country because they are being persecuted elsewhere. We rightly give them a home and they establish their lives in our country. We are a free, open and tolerant country and as I have said before on the Floor of the House, we are one of the greatest countries in the world when it comes to giving people the freedom to succeed and to get on and live their lives. We offer that opportunity. I will not comment on anything to do with the individual. There is a live investigation under way, but I do want to reiterate that, when it comes to offenders, and foreign national offenders in particular, this Government are absolutely clear about our approach, which is to speed up the removal of individuals within the law. Naturally, there are complexities in some cases—in fact in many cases—which is why we are pursuing measures that we outlined in the Queen's Speech earlier this year, and we will continue with our policies and legislation going forward.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP) [V]: Words cannot express the horror of an attack such as this, and I certainly add my condolences to the families and friends of all the victims. It has been reported that the intelligence services believe that mental health was an issue in this incident, but can the Home Secretary comment further on what further support could be offered to individuals who may be known to mental health services, especially where there is an interest from intelligence services?

Priti Patel: Again, I will not comment on the investigation, the individuals and the reports in the newspapers. The Solicitor General has also issued warnings to the media this afternoon on that, so that there is nobody prejudiced in the case, which is absolutely vital. But the hon. Gentleman makes an important point about individuals who are known. Of course, as has already been said this afternoon, if those individuals are in prison and if they are known to probation services, work takes place through the probation services, the multi-agency public protection arrangements and various risk assessments around the individuals. Of course, that will continue and the Ministry of Justice is constantly reviewing not just its own policies but practices. That is very much standard for all the individuals who need bespoke support not just now, but throughout their development, whether they are in prison or have been released from prison.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): My thoughts, along with those of my constituents, are with the victims and their families. We pay tribute to the brave police who ran towards danger. On the Home Affairs Committee, we tackled radicalisation and the tipping point. Does my

right hon. Friend agree that two rules apply, regardless of whether someone is a far-right extremist or an Islamic extremist: the conscious role of social media companies that spread propaganda and groom, and the importance of community projects such as Prevent?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right in terms of the role of network providers, but also programmes such as Prevent. There is much more that we can do, and of course work is constantly under way.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) [V]: My heart breaks, as I know is the case for my constituents across Airdrie and Shotts, for those who lost their lives and their families and loved ones. I echo the sentiments that have already been expressed. Following on from the previous question, it would be wrong to speculate on motive, but can the Home Secretary update the House in more detail on what she is doing to break up online grooming campaigns to prevent young individuals from being radicalised?

Priti Patel: A great deal of work is taking place on the particular issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. I am very happy, in the interests of time, to write to him and outline more on that.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): While the police and security services continue in their vital work to track down and prevent lone actors tempted to carry out an attack, does my right hon. Friend agree that there is no community in the UK that even tacitly condones an outrage such as this—that the perpetrators are typically loners and misfits who are mentally unstable and socially inadequate, and in no way representative of any community view?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes important points. He is right that these individuals do not represent any community or community group.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): In January this year, the Government said that they would follow through in conducting a review of their Prevent strategy. However, six months on, there is still no chair for the review committee. Although I understand that the deadline for applications was extended due to covid—the applications close today—the progress of this review must be a priority. Will the Secretary of State update the House on when the Government expect to appoint a reviewer and when they plan to conclude the review, given that the expectation was that the committee would report in August?

Priti Patel: I will do so in due course. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that the deadline has been extended—today is the closing date—so the information will be shared in due course.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con) [V]: Given that most of these awful tragedies tend to be in cities and this one was in a town, has my right hon. Friend made an assessment of terrorist activities in towns across the United Kingdom? Will she do everything possible to support Essex police in the work they do to keep Harlow town safe from crime and from terrorism?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Assessments of this nature take place constantly through our security and intelligence services, and also with our police forces. He will naturally know that I will do everything that I can to ensure that our brilliant police officers in Essex, and our great chief constable BJ Harrington, are supported in terms of resources for Harlow town but also, obviously, across the whole county of Essex.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I join hon. Members across the House in sending my condolences to the families of those who were killed in this horrendous attack. The Home Secretary has recognised that terrorists are increasingly acting alone, and we need to do everything we can to protect communities from this growing threat. What assurances can she give that the Home Office is adapting its counter-terrorism response to the use of low-tech weapons by terrorists acting in isolation?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is right to point out the low sophistication of many of these lone actors. There is constant work and it is not just in the Home Office—it is based on intelligence, working with our partners and working with agencies. That informs our collective approach to the strategies that we develop with our partner organisations.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the measures that my right hon. Friend has introduced since she took office, but time and again my constituents contact me and say, “We read of these individuals who pose a threat to our values, our democracy and the safety of our citizens, yet we still allow them into the country and we do not remove them.” May I add my support and that of my constituents to the appeals made earlier to remove more of these people, and will she redouble her efforts to achieve that?

Priti Patel: The answer to my hon. Friend’s question is absolutely yes. I have already pointed to some of the legislation that will be forthcoming, and that work will obviously be accelerated.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her statement today and wish to extend my condolences and sympathy to everyone affected by this appalling attack. The Prevent strategy is a key element of the counter-terrorism strategy, but the intended review has been impacted by the reviewer stepping down over concerns about impartiality. Can the Secretary of State inform us what lessons regarding the appointment have been learned, and when will the next reviewer be in place?

Priti Patel: As I have already said to the House this afternoon, the recruitment process is under way. The deadline is today. More information will be forthcoming once the reviewer has been appointed. Of course, it is important that there is an objective process around the appointment, and that is something that I completely support.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): The right to life is the greatest right of all, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is doing everything she

can to protect British citizens under current legal frameworks. Can she confirm how Brexit will enable our Government to better protect our citizens from potential terrorists whom we might not be allowed to deport or detain under current transnational legal obligations?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend points to some important changes that will be forthcoming, including further and greater criminality checks at our borders through our future borders and immigration work, through our points-based system and many of the changes that we will be bringing forward. That also touches on the Foreign National Offenders Bill, as highlighted in the Humble Address earlier this year. These are important pieces of legislation which will signal major changes for Britain post Brexit—how we will keep our country and our citizens safe and also have greater control of our borders.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Today is clearly a day for us to think of the families affected and to thank those officers who ran there on Saturday night, but the Home Secretary has said repeatedly that lessons will have to be learned from the incident. An element of that is scrutiny, so can the Home Secretary put on record when the Intelligence and Security Committee will reconvene? I understand it has not been convened since the election last year.

Priti Patel: What I can say is that I understand that the appointments to the Committee are under way and, when that selection has been completed, all Members of the House will be notified through the usual channels.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): My right hon. Friend has announced an additional £90 million for counter-terrorism policing. Can she reassure me that that money will be ring-fenced?

Priti Patel: That money was the increase for this year alone, which has taken funding for counter-terrorism policing to £900 million. We have other reforms and initiatives under way when it comes to counter-terrorism policing, but it is important to reflect that of course counter-terrorism police do not work on their own: they are part of the wider UK policing network. They are plugged into our intelligence services and our community, and that integrated approach is vital when it comes to keeping our people, the citizens of our country, our communities and our country safe.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: This is a day when we come together to show our abhorrence of those terrible deeds. May I give my sympathies to all concerned who have been so badly affected?

In 2015, the then Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), asked Ian Acheson, a former prison governor, to review how extremism was being handled. Mr Acheson concluded that the system was full of flaws. What steps has the Home Secretary taken to address the concerns outlined in that report?

Priti Patel: The Acheson report made various recommendations, and that is something that the Lord Chancellor and I, and across Government, are constantly reviewing and working on. I have already mentioned

the Prevent strategy and the work that is taking place on counter-extremism. We must look at all of this collectively and together, rather than creating strategies in isolation.

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con) [V]: Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) about the £900 million, on behalf of the residents of South Derbyshire, can I tell my right hon. Friend that cracking down on terrorist atrocities must be a key priority of her Department?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right, and of course we do it collectively, not in isolation, working with our police, our counter-terrorism policing—the whole policing family across the country—and with our security and intelligence networks. We base everything on their work, on the threats and on the judgments they make. The £900 million for counter-terrorism policing is vital, on top of the funding and resources for our intelligence and security networks. It is what keeps our nation safe, as we have seen from the number of threats they have foiled.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I echo the condolences expressed across the House.

The UK only recently began operating so-called separation units for the highest-risk detainees in prison, but concerns have been expressed across the Prison Service about whether they are being properly used. Can the Home Secretary update the House on how many of these units are in use across the prison estate in the UK and if they are being used effectively?

Priti Patel: On the specifics, I will consult the Ministry of Justice, which will know the details, and happily ask its officials to write to the hon. Lady.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Out of the blue, with no intelligence or prior information, three terrorists once came to my house to kill me. They were stopped by my 11-year-old son, Alexander, in the front garden. They asked him if his daddy was home. I was home, but he felt something was wrong. By good luck and chance, they got into their car and disappeared and killed someone else—lucky for me, not them. My point is it is almost impossible for the police and the security services to identify people who decide on their own with a knife to go out and do great harm. That said, will my right hon. Friend commend the bystanders and policemen who, with huge courage, tackle these people, bring them down and prevent far more innocents from being killed?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right. We saw at the weekend the unarmed police officer who apprehended the suspect, and we have seen it in many other cases. At such times, these individuals are the very best of us and will have done a great deal to keep other people protected and out of danger.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Yet again, we have a terrorist attack aimed at the wholly innocent. This was an act of pure hatred. Does the Home Secretary agree

that it highlights the difficulties that security forces have to contend with when trying to monitor 30,000 to 40,000 individuals who at any stage could decide to attack people? The challenges they face are huge, so we should be swift to support them, rather than swift to judge them.

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The work they do is vast and complicated and based on intelligence at home and sometimes abroad. We must all reflect on the way they work. They make difficult decisions and judgments based on the information they have. I commend and pay tribute to them in every way for the work they do and the way they do it.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): My thoughts and condolences are with the victims, their friends and their families. I take my right hon. Friend's point about media reports and will be careful about what I say, but I will ask one quite direct question. Does she agree that our legal system has become a roadblock preventing the elected Government of the day from being able to take decisions on the basis of what is in the best interests of the law-abiding majority, by inhibiting our ability both to deal with illegal immigration and to deport those we know pose a risk to our country?

Priti Patel: I have spoken previously on the Floor of the House about the complexities of immigration, the immigration system and immigration law, and I have touched on the difficulty of deporting foreign national offenders. There are many challenges in the system, and we intend to overcome them and to reform the system in any way we can.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): First, I would like to send my condolences to the family and friends of those who lost their lives in this terrible attack. It is a duty of this Government to do everything in their power to prevent families from having to go through what those families are going through now. Does my right hon. Friend agree that action must now be taken to strengthen public confidence in the criminal justice system, and that terrorist offenders should spend more time in prison, to match the severity of their crimes?

Priti Patel: On this, my hon. Friend speaks for the silent majority across our country. She is right and we are right in our assessment that the highest-harm offenders should be in prison, and in prison for longer. We are clear that that is the purpose of the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Bill, which is being debated this week in Committee.

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

Mr Speaker: 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 suspend the House for three minutes.

4.41 pm

Sitting suspended.

Personal Statement

4.43 pm

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Following a report issued last Thursday by the Committee on Standards, I would like to take this opportunity to apologise to the House for not registering and not declaring unremunerated directorships of companies in my wholly owned investment group Samfire Proprietary Ltd, namely of that company, of Alibante Developments Ltd, of Makoonor Holdings Ltd and of West Sea Investments Ltd; and for my late updating of the register for company name changes in 2018.

The financial interests in ownership were registered and declared, and there was no conflict of interest. My judgment was that, as unremunerated directorships did not have any bearing on my work as a Member of this House and could not, in my view, reasonably be thought to do so, it was not required that I should declare them. The relevant rule states that non-financial interests should be registered and declared, if the Member considers that those interests might reasonably be thought by others to influence them in their activities as a Member. The Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards took a different view, the Committee supported her, and I accept its findings.

I apologise to the House for this situation, which was born of a misunderstanding about what is required, and I will update my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests accordingly. The Committee's report also asked me to apologise to the Commissioner and the Registrar of Members' Financial Interests, and I will write and agree the text of that apology in advance with the Chair of the Committee. I wish to put on the record my thanks to the commissioner, the registrar, and the Committee for their time in this matter.

BILL PRESENTED

EUROPEAN UNION (WITHDRAWAL AGREEMENT) (EXTENSION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Layla Moran, supported by Clive Lewis, Caroline Lucas, Tommy Sheppard, Liz Saville-Roberts, Stephen Farry, Claire Hanna, Allan Dorans, Colum Eastwood, Kenny MacAskill, Ben Lake, and Hywel Williams, presented a Bill to repeal section 15A of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 10 July, and to be printed (Bill 143).

Extradition (Provisional Arrest) Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

4.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): I beg to move, that the Bill be now read a Second time.

I will start by making clear what the Bill does not do. It does not change our extradition process or any safeguards that already exist in extradition proceedings. It does not make it more or less likely that a person will be extradited, and it does not in any way affect the current judicial oversight of the extradition process, or the character of court proceedings. Nor is the Bill concerned with the UK's extradition relationships with other countries, or the criminal behaviours for which extradition can be sought from the United Kingdom. The Bill is concerned only with how persons who are wanted for crimes enter the UK's court system. It changes when and how a fugitive who is wanted for a serious offence by a trusted country is brought before a UK court.

Currently, when UK police have a chance encounter with a person who is wanted by a non-EU country, they cannot arrest them. The officer is required to walk away, obtain a warrant from a judge, and then try to relocate the individual later to make the necessary arrest. That means that fugitives who are known to the police to be wanted for serious offences remain free on our streets and are able simply to abscond or, worst of all, to offend again, thereby creating further victims.

Let me give you a shocking example, Madam Deputy Speaker. In 2017, an individual who was wanted by one of the countries within the scope of this Bill for the rape of a child was identified during a routine traffic stop. Without the power to arrest, the police could do nothing to detain that individual there and then, and he is still at large. The Bill will change that and ensure that fugitives who are wanted by specified countries, and then identified by the police or at the UK border, can be arrested immediately. They can be taken off the streets and brought before a judge as soon as it is practicable to do so.

The usual way that police officers become aware of an international fugitive is after a circulation of alerts through Interpol channels. Interpol alerts from all countries are now routinely available to UK police and Border Force officers. Access to that information by frontline officers has created a situation whereby a police or Border Force officer might encounter an individual who they can see, by performing a simple database check, is wanted by another country for a serious offence. Many countries, including most EU member states, afford their police the power of immediate arrest on the basis of Interpol alerts, and this Bill will create a similar power with appropriate safeguards. That power will apply only to alerts from countries with which we already have effective extradition relationships, and—crucially—when we have confidence in their use of Interpol.

The warrant-based system in part 1 of the Extradition Act 2003 carries an immediate power of arrest for individuals who are wanted by EU member states. Last year, more than 60% of arrests made under part 1 of that Act by the Metropolitan police were the result of a chance encounter. Without a similar immediate power of arrest for people wanted by our key international partners, known fugitives will walk free.

Let me turn to the specific provisions in the Bill. It proposes a power for UK law enforcement officers to arrest an individual on the basis of an international arrest request—typically an Interpol alert—without a UK warrant having first been issued. The new power will apply only when the request has been issued by specified countries with which we already have effective extradition relationships and in whose use of Interpol and the alerts that they issue we have confidence. Initially, the power will apply to requests from the United States of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Liechtenstein and Switzerland.

Members will appreciate that we have taken care to tune the application of the powers to strike the right balance between ease of use by our law enforcement agencies and the provision of proper safeguards for those who might be arrested. The Bill will identify a designated authority, which will have the power to create an alert—typically an Interpol notice—only when it relates to a serious extradition offence. In practice, that will mean three things: first, the offence for which the person is wanted must be an offence in one of the United Kingdom’s jurisdictions; secondly, the offence must be able to attract a period of imprisonment of at least three years; and finally, the offence must be a serious one—that is, the seriousness of the conduct constituting the offence makes the certification appropriate.

What is intended by “serious” in this context is reflected by the proportionality assessment in section 21A of the Extradition Act 2003, which similarly refers to

“the seriousness of the conduct alleged to constitute the extradition offence”.

Operational bodies are well versed in applying the test in their consideration of other cases, and they can bring to bear considerable expertise in exercising the new power.

It is not frontline police officers who will have to decide whether an Interpol alert is from a specified country or for a sufficiently serious offence. The National Crime Agency receives Interpol requests and, as the designated authority, it will identify which alerts have been issued by a specified country and for a sufficiently serious offence. Arrangements are in place to ensure that, when the agency is satisfied, the request is underpinned by a warrant for arrest or conviction in the requesting country. The NCA will then certify that those alerts, including the immediate power of arrest, will apply. Certified alerts will be clearly distinguishable on the databases available to police and Border Force officers. Following arrest, the individual must be brought before a UK judge as soon as practical.

The Bill does not change any other part of the subsequent extradition process, and all the safeguards that currently exist in extradition proceedings, as set out under part 2 of the Extradition Act, will continue to apply. The courts will have the same powers and protections they have now—including the fact that they must ensure that a person will not be extradited if it would breach their human rights, if the request is politically motivated, or if they would be at risk of facing the death penalty.

The need for the power has been expressed by the law enforcement community. Members will be interested to know that the Director of Public Prosecutions, Max Hill, QC, wrote to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security on 2 March to explain why the power is needed;

I will place his letter in the Library of the House. We will continue to strengthen our security with like-minded security partners across the globe. In future, additional countries could be specified if we have effective extradition relationships with them; if—crucially—we have confidence in their use of Interpol alerts; and if Parliament agrees to the extension of the arrangements to those countries.

Scrutiny of the Bill in the other place has served to improve it; however, two amendments were made on Third Reading that the Government have considered carefully but do not support. The first requires the Government to consult on the merits of adding, removing or varying a territory in the Bill with the devolved Administrations and relevant interested stakeholders; requires the Government to lay a statement before Parliament on the risks of adding, varying or removing a territory; and requires the Government, when a territory is to be added to the Bill, to lay a statement before the House to confirm that that territory does not abuse the Interpol system.

That amendment is not necessary. The Bill mirrors the existing provisions in the Extradition Act 2003 in respect of the designation of any additional countries, and the Government are committed to ensuring that Parliament has the ability to question and have the final say on whether any new territory should come within the scope of the legislation. Also, although extradition is a reserved matter, relevant officials are engaged in regular discussions with their counterparts in the devolved Administrations about how it should operate in practice.

The second amendment specifies that if a Government want to add territories to the legislation in future, they would not be able to add more than one country in a single statutory instrument. Similarly, we consider that that is not required and is unnecessarily burdensome. Again, the Bill already mirrors the existing provisions in the Extradition Act 2003 in respect of the designation of any additional countries. Including any additional countries in the Extradition Act is subject to a high level of parliamentary scrutiny and, similarly, there would be the opportunity for both Houses to debate and scrutinise proposals in relation to any new territory to which the provisions in this Bill might be extended. If the Government of the day were minded to make the case to Parliament that this legislation should be extended to six new countries, what specific value is added by considering six separate statutory instruments to do so? For those reasons, the Government do not feel these amendments will add further scrutiny to the legislation than is already in place, and therefore believe they should be reviewed during its passage through this House.

To conclude, I would like to reiterate the point I have made throughout my remarks. The Bill is first and foremost about protecting the UK public. Any individual arrested under the powers contained in it would be in front of a UK judge as soon as reasonably practicable, and the existing safeguards afforded to every person before the UK courts for extradition would remain as now. As a global leader in security, we want to make the best use of our overseas networks and international tools to protect our nation from those who would do it harm. The Government are committed to doing all we can to protect the public. This Bill is directed to that end, and I commend the Bill to the House.

4.56 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his opening remarks, and I pass on my thanks to my Labour colleagues in the other place who took the Bill first, and who have worked hard to scrutinise and amend the Bill we see today. May I outline from the outset that the Opposition are not seeking to divide the House this evening on this Bill?

This extradition Bill seeks to fill a gap—the situation where police become aware of someone wanted by a non-EU territory, usually via the system of Interpol alerts, as the Minister has set out, but are unable to arrest them without a warrant from a court. The risk that the Bill seeks to address is that a wanted person may abscond or even reoffend before they can be detained. Thus the Bill seeks to give a power to UK law enforcement officers to arrest, without the need for such a warrant, for the purposes of extradition. Such a power already exists in relation to the European arrest warrant mechanism, which remains available to us until the end of the transition period at the end of this year.

At present, the Bill applies to extradition requests from only the following non-EU countries: Australia, Canada, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, Switzerland and the USA. The Government position is that there is a high level of confidence in these countries' criminal justice systems and their use of extradition.

Max Hill, the current Director of Public Prosecutions, stated in a letter to the Security Minister that

“this Bill strikes the right balance between ensuring sufficient human rights safeguards and delivering the capabilities that the police and CPS require in order to safeguard the public...

The Bill does not...make it more or less likely someone will be extradited, but it does increase the chances that persons wanted for serious offences by some of our closest and most trusted partners will enter, with all existing safeguards, the extradition process.”

I of course note his comments very carefully.

Turning to the contents of the Bill itself, it is a very short Bill with only two clauses. Clause 1 gives effect to the schedule, which creates the new power to arrest, and clause 2 outlines the extent and commencement of the Bill. The schedule amends the Extradition Act 2003, and inserts several new sections. Once the arrest has taken place, the individual must be brought before a judge “as soon as practicable”, which is in proposed new section 74A(3).

The noble Baroness Williams of Trafford said about this in the other place:

“I have listened carefully to the concerns raised at Second Reading and in Committee and have concluded that the new power of arrest in the Bill should be consistent in this respect with existing law and practice in relation to Part 2 of the 2003 Act, and that it should therefore mirror the wording ‘as soon as practicable’. That will ensure that individuals are not detained for any longer than is strictly necessary before being put before a judge. If, for example, an individual was arrested in central London, ‘as soon as practicable’ would in all probability be considerably less than 24 hours. Our operational partners have already proved themselves very effective at producing wanted persons before courts within strict timeframes, and the three UK extradition courts have proved strict arbiters of police actions under the ‘as soon as practicable’ requirement.

Additionally, if an individual is arrested and for legitimate reasons it is not possible to get them to court within 24 hours—for example, if they are arrested in a remote part of the UK or in an

area affected by an extreme event—this change in wording will make the legislation operable across all parts of the UK in all circumstances.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 15 June 2020; Vol. 803, c. 1950.]

I am grateful for that explanation, which we will scrutinise carefully during the Bill's passage through this House. We will be looking for assurances from the Government that “as soon as practicable” does not allow for individuals to be detained longer than is absolutely and strictly necessary.

Let me turn to the trusted partner countries listed in schedule A1 and the two amendments made in the other place, to which the Minister has already referred. The Government's impact assessment states:

“Under the proposed new power, the police could arrest a suspect who was wanted for extradition by a trusted partner country (those who respect the international rules based system and whose Red Notices and Criminal Justice Systems the UK trusts) for a serious offence if that information has been properly certified.”

I believe that the Government's hope is that more territories will be added to the partner list in future.

My Labour colleagues in the other place tabled an amendment, which was then made to the Bill, specifying that in allowing further territories to be added to the list, the following requirements must be met: that the Home Secretary has consulted with each devolved Administration and with non-governmental organisations; that a risk assessment has been laid before each House on the risk of the change; and that a statement has been laid before each House outlining that the territory to be added does not abuse Interpol's red notice system. The inclusion of these safeguards is a perfectly sensible change that we will support in this House.

My Labour colleagues in the other place also supported a Cross-Bench amendment, which was then made to the Bill, which means that the Government can list only one territory to be added to the trusted partner list at a time. The Minister asked what the purpose was of having separate consideration of each territory. Quite simply, we would not want a situation to arise in which a future Government—this Government or another—listed, say, five territories, with differing standards of criminal justice systems and differing human rights records, to be offered to the House on a “take it or leave it” basis. Each territory should be considered individually on its own merits. We will seek to uphold that amendment during the Bill's passage through this House. That is the most effective way to uphold the values of human rights around the world. I hope that the Government will listen. We will also be insisting that the Government regularly update the House on Interpol and on how effectively countries are working within the system.

What we must not do is close one gap in our security arrangements through the Bill, only then to open up another one that is much wider by not negotiating the effective security arrangement that we need with the European Union. In February the Government published their negotiating mandate. I was a little concerned by point 51, which states:

“The UK is not seeking to participate in the European Arrest Warrant as part of the future relationship. The agreement should instead provide for fast-track extradition arrangements, based on the EU's Surrender Agreement with Norway and Iceland which came into force in 2019, but with appropriate further safeguards for individuals beyond those in the European Arrest Warrant.”

In my previous role as shadow Security Minister, I argued for the Government to give priority to the future security partnership, because the European arrest warrant has proved to be an incredibly useful tool for fighting and preventing crime. In 2018-19, 15,540 requests were made by UK-EU law enforcement using the European arrest warrant—1,412 arrests related to the EAW and 919 related to surrenders. I hope that during our consideration of the Bill the Minister will set out how the Government will provide for the replacement fast-track extradition arrangements by the end of the year, and whether this House will have the opportunity to scrutinise them in advance at the end of the transition period.

When the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), sought reassurance at Prime Minister's questions on 3 June that

"from 1 January 2021, the UK will have access to the quantity and quality of data that it currently has through Prüm, passenger name records, the European Criminal Records Information System and SIS—Schengen Information System—II", the current Prime Minister said:

"That depends, I am afraid, on the outcome of our negotiations".—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2020; Vol. 676, c. 846.]

But that the Government's first priority is to keep people safe is not negotiable, and should be the Prime Minister's first duty.

The Minister for Security last week gave evidence to the Lords EU Security and Justice Sub-Committee about the future security partnership with the European Union, saying that if an agreement could not be reached there would be

"some mutual loss of capability...there are alternatives and well-rehearsed plans".

I hope that the Minister will enlighten us as to what exactly those well-rehearsed plans are.

It is in the public interest to have appropriate extradition arrangements in place with as many countries as possible, as that reduces the number of safe spaces in the world where those who could do us harm can go to hide, escape and get beyond the reach of our law enforcement, but as we have now left the European Union and as we move out of the transition period, it is vital that our future security relationship is given priority, and the Government must listen to the concerns of EU law enforcement on this in order for our streets to be kept safe.

The role that all our frontline policing plays in this is vital. We cannot legislate our way to safety and we cannot see issues in isolation. The Government must keep to their promise of delivering 20,000 additional police officers. The cuts to policing and preventive services have had a devastating impact over the past 10 years. There has been a sharp decline in certain types of crime during the lockdown, and, sadly, a rise in others, but none of the underlying factors that drive it have been addressed and there are real concerns that crime overall will rise rapidly as lockdown restrictions are lifted. It is vital that the Government plan for that in the coming weeks and months. Labour Members take our role in helping to keep people safe very seriously, so we will be closely scrutinising the Bill as well as the Home Office's wider work against the central and vital test of keeping the public safe.

5.7 pm

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I agree with the shadow Home Secretary that this legislation fills a gap. It is a really important, sensible, sound and

sober piece of legislation that meets a need and builds on our existing tried and tested relationships with valued partners across the globe. It is limited in scope and tightly focused, and the amendments passed in the other place to ensure that people should be brought to a judge as soon as possible are incredibly sensible, understanding the geographical nature of our country and addressing clause 39 of Magna Carta—no imprisonment without due legal process.

The Bill addresses a real need to get people off the streets as quickly as possible. The most interesting part of the Bill has been that most extradition seems to revolve around chance encounters; as the Minister said, 60% of people just happen to be stopped in traffic incidents or other minor legal infractions. I am particularly glad that this legislation will enable us to get those people to speedy justice, rather than allowing them to slip through the net for something that might not have been a crime that they would otherwise be arrested for. I am also glad that it does not change any safeguards in our extradition practices; that is a fundamental underlying principle of this legislation. As the legislation only applies to people whose crimes would lead to a sentence of over three years, and is considered a serious offence in the UK, there are quite clearly sensible safeguards in place to protect people.

This legislation is not before time, and I welcome the fact that speedy extensions can be made to new countries via statutory instrument with the appropriate safeguards in place, rather than having to go back to primary legislation. I support the Bill and look forward to its speedy passage through the House.

5.9 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I want to address the question of whether and how the Bill could be used after the end of the Brexit transition period. For 16 years, the European arrest warrant has been Britain's best crime-fighting tool. It is significantly faster and cheaper than its predecessor arrangements, and it may well be faster and cheaper than what might replace it. The Minister was at pains to highlight the limited scope of the Bill, but the Government themselves have suggested that the Bill could be used to extend extradition arrangements to other countries, including EU countries after transition ends and our membership of the European arrest warrant ceases. The Bill focuses only on extraditing criminals from the UK, but it is clear that this could be used as a basis for striking bilateral deals in the future.

The Government will know that Germany, Slovenia and Austria do not extradite their own citizens to other countries, with the sole exception of its being done under the European arrest warrant. What kind of arrangements do the UK Government hope to operate in those cases? If EU countries do not want to sign bilateral extradition deals, the UK could become a haven for criminals. The former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), herself warned in 2014 that leaving the European arrest warrant made the UK potentially a "honeypot" for all of Europe's criminals on the run from justice. Similar concerns were raised in the House of Lords just last week in the context of this Bill.

The Government have said that they are committed to the European convention on human rights, yet they are refusing to formalise that commitment, even though that jeopardises our chances of agreeing a deal on extradition

[Daisy Cooper]

and other security issues. If the Government are genuinely committed to keeping the European convention on human rights, why not put us in a stronger negotiating position by making that commitment clear? We are four years on from the Brexit vote, with no agreed plans on what will replace our best crime-fighting tool, which we are due to lose in less than six months.

When the UK was a member of the EU, we participated in about 40 free trade agreements with more than 70 countries. We are now about to embark on renegotiating some of those from scratch. If the UK seeks to do valuable trade deals with a country that has a poor human rights record, to what extent will the Government be prepared to soften their extradition arrangements in favour of that country in order to secure that deal? What mechanisms will the UK put in place to ensure that that does not happen, so that we do not make ourselves vulnerable to the possibility of having to extradite people to countries with poor human rights records, where we do not have confidence in their justice system? I agree with the shadow Home Secretary, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), who said that the amendments passed in the House of Lords were the most effective way to uphold our commitment to human rights, and the Liberal Democrats support them.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I have listened carefully to what the hon. Lady has said, and I have to tell her that I do not have much confidence in the justice system in Romania, bearing in mind the Adamescu case. Surely she must appreciate that within the EU there are severe shortcomings with the European arrest warrant scheme.

Daisy Cooper: That is one example that backs up the justification from the shadow Home Secretary earlier about why we should be dealing with individual applications from individual countries, so I see the hon. Member's point as an argument in favour of the amendments that the Lords brought forward last week.

But we are discussing this Bill, which on paper is very limited in scope but which we know could be used more widely at the start of next year to create extradition arrangements with EU countries if those other fast-track deals are not done. Given the sombre statement that we have just had from the Home Secretary about a suspected terrorist act on our own soil, and the importance of ensuring justice for all those affected by that incident, it seems barely believable that we are now discussing an incredibly limited Bill that might, albeit not by design, become a poor and incomplete replacement for the European arrest warrant, our best crime-fighting tool, which we might lose in just six months, putting the UK at risk of becoming a "honeypot" for Europe's criminals.

5.14 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have spoken on the issue of extradition on a number of occasions in the House, as I seek to ensure that we have in place understandings to allow the extradition of terrorists to our shores, as well as reciprocal arrangements. I commend the Minister and our Government for presenting the Bill—well done to him for introducing it. He outlined an example of something that will not be able to happen again, and that is why it is good to have this extradition legislation in place.

I am grateful to the Lords for their amendments that introduce additional safeguards to the process of adding further territories in future. I have no doubt that there will be a need to do just that. This accurately reflects the concern about the possibility of countries with poor human rights records abusing the extradition system. We simply cannot allow that to take place, and the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) outlined that well in his intervention.

It is clear that these initial countries—Australia, Canada, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, Switzerland and the USA, along with some other EU countries—will not abuse human rights, and we can be content to allow them to be included. However, the Lords amendments look to the future to ensure that, for example, while we might have trading deals with China, we would not be comfortable extraditing political prisoners there. The same can be said for many countries, and for many reasons, such as freedom of religion or belief. I chair the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, and I think of China's human rights abuses of many people—of Christians, in particular, and of the Uyghur Muslims and Falun Gong. It is really a despicable country when it comes to human rights. This is an issue of grave concern to me, and we must ensure that we offer protections for those who face losing their life simply because they chose to follow Christ.

I further agree with the terms for the Brexit negotiations and I welcome a withdrawal based largely on the EAW, but including further grounds on which extradition can be refused. These include the right for parties to refuse to surrender their nationals, as well as a requirement of double criminality. The act for which the individual is sought must constitute an offence in both jurisdictions, but the parties can waive this requirement on a reciprocal basis for certain serious offences, and that has to be good news. Unlike the EAW, this waiver will be optional.

The Bill also provides for parties to refuse on a reciprocal basis to surrender individuals sought for political offences, with an exception of certain specified terrorist offences. I agree on all these matters. In Northern Ireland, we saw many years of terrorists fleeing from their crime and finding refuge in the Republic of Ireland, only to return to carry out further crimes. I have spoken in the House before about my cousin, Kenneth Smyth, who was a sergeant in the Ulster Defence Regiment, and his comrade, Daniel McCormick. Both were murdered on 10 December 1971. Those responsible escaped across the border and nobody ever made them accountable for their crimes. It is absolutely despicable and wrong. They may not have been made accountable in this world, but they will certainly be accountable in the next, and I look forward to that. Acts of terrorism cannot be excluded from any extradition policy. Indeed, they must be the foundation for it and that is why I look to Government for leadership and commitment, which clearly will be there.

I welcome the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), to his place. He and I have been good friends over the last few years and I am very pleased to see him there. Extradition is an essential part of any civilised country, and I believe that the foundations contained in the Bill allow effective extradition in all good conscience. I welcome the Bill.

5.18 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close this debate for the Opposition with you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to follow my good friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

This has been an insightful and productive—albeit brief—exchange on a Bill that is short and technical, but which contains important new provisions on very important matters. As the shadow Home Secretary said, the Opposition are committed to keeping the British people safe, and that includes making sure that serious criminals who make their way into our country or commit offences in other countries cannot rest easy, freely walk our streets or evade the law’s full force, and we fully endorse the UK working within an international framework to ensure that. That is why we broadly support the Bill and will not seek to divide the House this evening. We hope to work genuinely with the Government and Members from all parts of the House to improve the Bill as it progresses.

As has been said, the Bill aims to fill a gap that currently exists for UK law enforcement and allows a police constable, customs officer or service policeman to arrest without warrant a suspect wanted for serious offences in certain countries upon the basis of a certified extradition request, typically an Interpol red alert. As the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) said, many encounters with such suspects take place by chance or due to other infractions, so it is good that the power will exist to deal immediately with other more serious issues on the basis of an extradition request. As such, the Bill will enable a similar process to that currently in place with the European arrest warrant for countries external to that mechanism, but with which the United Kingdom has formal extradition arrangements.

We understand the need for this change to expedite the proceedings through which suspects enter the criminal justice system, so we broadly support the Bill’s ambitions. It is of critical importance that we ensure that serious criminals—let us not forget that in some cases, they are wanted abroad for the most heinous crimes—are arrested and swiftly brought to justice before the opportunity arises for them to reoffend or to abscond. In carrying out our overriding priority to keep the British public safe, we fully accept that, in a world where criminals increasingly respect no national borders or boundaries, we must work to achieve that in collaboration with our international partners and their criminal justice systems.

As the Government take the legislation forward, we will press them to ensure that reasonable and proportionate safeguards, such as those won in the other place, are addressed. While we agree with legislating on the basis of those currently specified as trusted partners in the Bill, we should not and must not leave the door open for any future addition of countries that shamefully fail to uphold human rights and liberties or that frequently abuse the Interpol red alert system for nefarious ends by targeting political opponents, journalists, peaceful protesters, refugees, human rights defenders or people on the basis, as the hon. Member for Strangford said, of their religious faith.

I welcome the specific mention by the Minister of the role of the National Crime Agency in helping to adjudicate. We believe it requires a thorough process of consultation and assessment before a territory is added, varied or

removed. Issues such as the use of the death penalty should be a factor in the decisions we make. Consultation—first with the devolved Administrations, who can bring valuable expertise and so often have powers relating to justice and, secondly, with relevant non-governmental organisations and experts—is at the heart of the amendment made in the other place. There should then be an assessment made on the risks of the proposed changes and, where the proposal is to add a territory, on the basis of evidence and judgment.

We also believe it sensible to ensure that key criteria are met for grouping countries, where more than one country is specified at any one time, allowing for proper parliamentary oversight of any territory taken on the merit of its respective case. It is for the Government to provide those assurances, otherwise we see no other way to add countries but individually.

We believe those to be reasonable, proportionate and practical suggestions that will improve the quality of the Bill, as well as any prospective changes to it in the future. That is why we urge the Government to engage with us on the changes as the Bill proceeds.

There are, however, several critical points that the Bill does not address, including the Government’s woeful lack of progress on future security and criminal justice arrangements with the European Union. Any loss of capability, regardless of whether it is mutual, would have a disastrous implication for UK law enforcement’s ability to identify and question suspected criminals and thus keep our country and its citizens safe.

Specifically on extradition, for example, we know that the UK and EU falling back on to prior arrangements—specifically the 1957 Council of Europe convention on extradition—would add delay, complexity and difficulty to proceedings.

That is not my assessment but that of the previous Conservative Government and the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), the former Prime Minister and Home Secretary. Time and time again, the Government say they are optimistic that a full and comprehensive arrangement can be agreed before the transition period ends on 31 December, but frankly time is running out. We and the men and women who work every day in our law enforcement agencies need to see progress on this. Although I entirely accept, too, that the Bill relates solely to powers conferred on UK law enforcement, we need to understand what exactly the Government are doing to ensure adequate reciprocity in future extradition arrangements, particularly if we lose the powers we currently enjoy under the European arrest warrant and other such mechanisms—a point made forcefully by the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper).

Legal experts with specialisms in extradition have been clear that the loss of the European arrest warrant is of far greater concern than the current capability gap addressed by the Bill. Although the measures in the Bill are welcome, the countries it identifies represent only a tiny proportion of those subject to a European arrest warrant request in recent years. The assumption is that the provisions in the Bill could be applied to EU countries in due course, but the Government seem a little confused on that point. In the explanatory notes to the Bill they suggest that they would do precisely that through statutory instruments, but the Minister in the other place said the Bill was not an attempt to replicate the capability of the European arrest warrant. Will the Solicitor General

[Conor McGinn]

clarify what exactly the Government's approach to this is? It simply cannot be the case for our country going forward that we are unable to bring to justice criminals wanted for serious offences here in the UK because they are elsewhere, while the reverse is perfectly possible. That imbalance has occurred even in our relationship with our closest ally, the United States of America.

The Government must reassure the public that their priority is protecting British interests and British citizens, and upholding the international rules-based order in this process. We must do all we can to ensure that robust mechanisms are in place so that suspects wanted here in the UK who have made their way abroad can face justice. That has been articulated most ably in recent months by the family of Harry Dunn. I reiterate our support for them and our call for the Government to engage fully with them and provide the answers they are demanding.

In conclusion, we fully accept the need for comprehensive legislation to address the gap that currently exists for UK law enforcement prior to extradition proceedings. In a constructive spirit, the Opposition will work with the Government on the Bill, seeking to fully scrutinise it in Committee and ensure that reasonable protections remain in place. I am sure the Solicitor General will agree that it is important that we get this right, and I know that Labour Members, and Members across the House, will do our best to assist the Government in ensuring that we do.

5.27 pm

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): I am hopeful that all Members can unite in a common commitment to protect the British public, and I am pleased to have the shadow Ministers, Labour Members and, indeed, other Opposition Members' support in that.

This is about helping UK policing. I am sure we can all recognise without hesitation the increasingly global society in which we live, and we are sadly all well aware of the threats we face from cross-border criminality. I am confident that this legislation will make the United Kingdom safer. The Bill will ensure that where a person is wanted for a serious offence by a trusted country—I repeat, because those are operative terms: a serious offence by a trusted country—our police have the power, then and there, to get them off our streets, into the court system and before a judge here in the United Kingdom.

Mr Steve Baker: I am sorry that I missed the opening speech. Will my right hon. and learned Friend assure me that, as a country outside the European Union, we will not repeat the error forced on us as a member state of thinking that the integrity of the justice systems in all EU member state countries are of an equally high standard? We might, for example, recognise that the Adamescu case in Romania, which I mentioned earlier to the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), demonstrates that some countries are not fit to be included in the list.

The Solicitor General: As my hon. Friend knows very well, changed arrangements now with the European Union allow this country to conduct itself with fresh ideas and fresh considerations. But it is important to recognise that the Bill applies to a limited number of countries, with which we have an extremely good relationship, and

in which we have considerable trust. Indeed we have considerable experience of their processes and judicial systems.

I just want to touch on a couple of remarks made in this brief debate by hon. Members from across the House. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden) talked about the Bill being not before time. He is right to say that. He supports the mechanisms, including the statutory instrument mechanisms, which will allow an ease of process for the Bill going forward.

The hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) talked about the Bill not being about the European arrest warrant and she is right. This is a matter of supporting our police here in the United Kingdom. Clearly, we are involved in negotiations, but nothing is more important, as she will recognise, than the safety of our people. The Bill is limited in scope, but it is important.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), whose interventions in this House are always very welcome, mentioned, rightly, that the countries in the Bill are trusted partners. I am very pleased that he welcomes it.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), spoke in similar terms. It is important that on these measures, especially in times like these, we can speak as one about the security of the people of this country and recognise that the legislation does not change any other part of the subsequent extradition process. All the safeguards that currently exist in extradition proceedings in this country, set out under part 2 of the Extradition Act 2003, will continue to apply. The Bill does not do anything to change that. The courts will have the same powers and protections as they do now, including the fact that they must ensure that a person will not be extradited if doing so would breach their human rights in any way; if the request is politically motivated; or if they would risk facing the penalty of death. Our courts can be trusted—the examples are legion—to make sure that the provisions are adhered to.

The Bill seeks to deal with a very simple issue. Currently, as the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), mentioned in opening the debate, a potentially dangerous wanted individual who is known to the police can potentially remain at liberty on the streets of this country, able to offend, able to reoffend and able to abscond. Examples exist where that has happened. The new power will see people who are wanted by a trusted country for a serious crime, and who may be a danger to the public, off our streets as soon as they are encountered.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): In short, it will extradite them more quickly.

The Solicitor General: It will not change the process of extradition, but it will mean that police officers will potentially be able to arrest more quickly because they will be able to act when they have cause to do so.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am grateful to the Solicitor General for giving way. I am also grateful to him for recognising the position of my colleagues on the Labour Front Bench. He is absolutely right to say that we are united in this House. There is no difference in this House when it comes to the safety of the British

people and the extradition of those who need to be extradited. We may disagree on the best way to achieve that, but we are united in that aim.

The Solicitor General: I am very pleased to hear the hon. Gentleman say that and it does not come as any surprise to me.

The Government are steadfast in their determination to ensure that officers, upon whom we rely to keep us safe, have the powers they need to do just that. The Bill will provide a small, but important part of that armoury. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

EXTRADITION (PROVISIONAL ARREST) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Extradition (Provisional Arrest) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee, on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(2) Proceedings in Committee, any proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings in Committee are commenced.

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to other proceedings up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(Tom Pursglove.)

Question agreed to.

ENVIRONMENT BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the Order of 26 February 2020 (Environment Bill: Programme), as varied by the Order of 4 May 2020 (Environment Bill: Programme (No. 2)), be further varied as follows:

In paragraph (2) of the Order (conclusion of proceedings in Public Bill Committee), for “Thursday 25 June” substitute “Tuesday 29 September”.—(Tom Pursglove.)

Question agreed to.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Resolved,

That the draft Greater Manchester Combined Authority (Fire and Rescue Functions) (Amendment) Order 2020, which was laid before this House on 4 June, be approved.—(Stuart Andrew.)

PETITION

Extension to maternity and paternity leave due to COVID-19

5.35 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I rise to present a petition from my constituency to extend maternity and paternity leave during the covid-19 pandemic. You will be aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, that 226,000 people in the UK have signed an online petition, 342 of whom are from the east end of Glasgow. The arguments have been set out about parents and families needing extra time to be with their children.

The petition states:

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

And the petitioners remain etc.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

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

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

And the petitioners remain etc.]

[P002580]

BBC Regional Politics Coverage

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Tom Pursglove.)

5.36 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting this debate tonight. I think we have five hours for the debate, so I feel a speech coming on, but I promise you I will try not to go on for more than 4 and a half hours. I called for the debate because BBC regional programmes could well be under threat. MPs across the House will be alarmed at the direction of travel.

During covid-19, valued programmes such as “Inside Out” and the regional “Sunday Politics” shows have had to be taken off air, with no return date as such at the moment, although I just learnt today that ITV’s programmes are returning by September. BBC executives have said that the cuts are to do with safety, but a review of English programming is taking place, which is looking to save costs. Many regional journalists fear that they will be cut and never return to work on those vital programmes. If that were the case, that would be a great loss to all of us and our constituents.

The “Sunday Politics” show covers 11 regions of England, from the south-west to the north-east and Cumbria. Those shows are a crucial part of our local and national democracy, holding us all to account throughout the year. All our regions have their identities. This is essential. With the Government looking towards more regional representation, such a step by the BBC would be a retrograde one.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on bringing the debate to the Chamber. The number of right hon. and hon. Members present illustrates how deeply interested we are in it. Does he not agree that the boost that regional TV provides to communities, and the information it contains, is essential to addressing regional issues? While the BBC must cut its cloth to suit, perhaps it should look at renegotiating contracts with some of its higher paid broadcasting staff as well as its directors, which would easily pay for regional programming.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I got the constituency right—makes a really good point. Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland have quite a lot of regional coverage, and rightly so. They could do with more, but so could the rest of the regions.

The merging of those 11 shows into one “Politics England” programme deprives local communities of properly funded regional and relevant politics.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): My hon. Friend is also from the fantastic south-west of England. He has touched on the BBC’s discussion about costs. Is he, as I am, struck by the fact that when we visit Broadcasting House we see lots of costs having been spread about, but when we visit our regional centres, be it BBC Gloucestershire or the BBC’s headquarters in Bristol, we see a very cost-effective organisation—far more cost-effective, dare I say it, than BBC HQ?

Neil Parish: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. We have BBC Gloucester, BBC Bristol, the BBC in Exeter and the BBC down in Plymouth. Even in our region, there is a massive difference between Devon and Cornwall, and Gloucester and Wiltshire. Having, at one time, as an MEP, represented the whole of the south-west, I can assure Members that it is a massive region. We could probably do with a regions cut up, rather than cutting the regions—I hope that makes sense.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman was starting to make an important point about the fact that the work done in the regions is very local. Does he agree that one great value of the work done on those regional political programmes is that it is done by local reporters who live and work in the communities themselves? Therefore, they can bring greater insight and analysis than would be the case if we had a single programme produced in Salford. No matter how good the reporters based in Salford may be, they do not have that same level of knowledge that local reporters have.

Neil Parish: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. Whether we are talking about a steelworks in Scunthorpe, a farm in Devon or a fisherman in Cornwall, all these people have a particular link to those particular areas. That is why, especially with regional newspapers now getting less and less all the time—they are cutting their numbers, the number of journalists and offices—we need the BBC programmes to really focus on our local issues, so that not only we, politicians, but constituents and business can also be represented in the media.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): As a former BBC editor and journalist, I am acutely aware of the fantastic opportunity the BBC has to super-serve our communities, and it only does so through programmes such as “Inside Out”, “Politics South West” and “Spotlight. My hon. Friend was mentioning local newspapers, whose demise we have seen in the past 10 years. In my area, I am lucky to have the *Sidmouth Herald*, the *Exmouth Journal*, the *Express & Echo*, and other great newspapers, and an independent local radio station in Radio Exe. But without the BBC providing real investigative journalism, journalism in our region will be eroded greatly. It is about time the axe fell somewhere else in the BBC.

Neil Parish: I thank my hon. Friend for that. He is my neighbour and it is great to have him here in this debate. I will forgive him for the fact that he has been part of the BBC; we will allow him that much. He raises an incredibly good point. Although we have got regional newspapers, all the time they are getting less. The *Western Morning News* is not a fraction of the size it was and the *Western Daily Press* is not what it was. When it comes to representing not only a given area, but a region, those newspapers are very weak compared with what they were.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): In addition, BBC local radio feeds into local television. As much of our media is London-centric, it does not always pick up what is going on out and about in the country. We have high-quality journalism and it picks up stories from the counties that otherwise would not be picked up.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Without being too controversial and repeating the debate we had for three years over Brexit, it could be argued that the

BBC and the media generally were very London-centric, and that is why the result was different from the one expected here in London. It is not only its representing views but its representing political views that is sometimes found wanting.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate, which is incredibly important. I am a great defender of the BBC and will happily defend the licence fee. I feel strongly that one of the things the BBC gives us that would be lost in its absence is regional accountability—the ability for people to find out what is happening in their local area, so that they can hold their politicians to account. The BBC risks losing that if it carries on in this way, so I support the hon. Gentleman's argument. Does he think we should say to the BBC that if it wants to continue to justify the licence fee, it needs to protect the things that are precious about the BBC?

Neil Parish: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. Most of us—especially as we represent an area over the years—have a very good rapport with our regional BBCs. Not only do they hold us to account, but we can feed stories and things that matter to our constituents into them. These regional programmes would therefore be a great loss. Let us imagine trying to achieve that in a London-centric system—it is bad enough feeding in what we want from our given areas with our political parties sometimes, and it would be even more difficult with the BBC. It would be a huge loss, and once it is lost, it will be very difficult to regain.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my good and hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene. As a London-centric Member of Parliament, may I point out to colleagues that we who live in London very much appreciate having a London programme that is not just London-centric—it is about London? We want to know what is going on in London and outer London too.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend is right. We from the provinces and the sticks—not all Members present are, but I am—want those different types of flavour, and London wants its flavour as well. That is the whole argument for regionally based programmes. London is a very large region with a lot of people, so it is right that it has not just the national news but London-based news.

Jim Shannon: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise the importance of local, regional opportunities so that people can shine and then move on to bigger jobs elsewhere—for instance, in the London circle? Many people in my constituency and in Northern Ireland as a whole have had opportunities in the regional BBC and then progressed. Does he recognise that that progress is very important to bring us all together? This is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, all together.

Neil Parish: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. Sometimes when we publish a Select Committee report, I do regional radio across the whole country, and I often have to ask which radio station someone is from because their accent is not from the region. It just shows that, through radio and television, people move around the whole country, and that is really good.

My hon. Friend and neighbour, the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp), is a case in point: not only did he do well in the BBC, but he is now here in Parliament. That is probably a retrograde step—I did not say that, did I?

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has touched on an important point. In many parts of the media—this also applies to ITN—the reporters stay for a long time, and they become fixtures for the public as, basically, the people who give them the truth. That is one reason why there is now far more cut-through from regional programmes to the public than anything they are seeing on the national news or, indeed, in national newspapers. A lot of that is about continuity, but it is also about relevance.

Neil Parish: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman too; I am agreeing with everybody tonight—it is very dangerous. He raises a really good point. People recognise the local face on the television and have seen them for a long time, so they trust them. I expect that he and all hon. Members usually find it much easier dealing with our regional BBC colleagues; we have much more rapport with them than with the national journalists and BBC presenters. That, too, is very useful.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): As someone who is pro scrapping the licence fee, I put it on the record that while the licence fee and the BBC are in place, we have superb local and regional reporters—Sophie Calvert was on the phone harassing me to make sure I was here for this evening's debate. The fear is that if we lose the BBC's regional media, there will be an impact on ITV and it will also be likely to remove its regional media. Therefore, we will have no regional outlets at all.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend is exactly right. I do not know what ITV has done in his region, but in my region it has had to consolidate, so it does not have as many offices across the region. The south-west is more than 250 miles from top to bottom, so it is a massive region in length. It is therefore split up by the BBC. We would not want to lose that, and the trouble is that ITV has already done it.

The BBC bosses need to be aware that if they were to lose this regional base, regional coverage and regional support, they would weaken the BBC terribly. Therefore, it is not only in our interests and the interests of our constituents that it is maintained; I would argue that it is in the interests of the BBC.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I hope I will not break the sequence of the hon. Gentleman agreeing with all hon. Members who have intervened. Like me, he must have received a letter from the BBC this morning, proudly saying that it spent two thirds of its money in the regions and other nations. Of course, London is not a third of the economy. That shows that there have already been cuts to the regional broadcasting service, and we are suffering from them. We do not want any further cuts.

While I do not want to be a little Englander or a little UK-er, does the hon. Gentleman also agree with me that there is an imbalance in the obsession the BBC has with Donald Trump? It is more likely that we get reports from Washington DC than from Washington in the north-east.

Neil Parish: Again, the hon. Gentleman—he is also my hon. Friend—makes a very good point. We are, by our very nature in this country, London-centric, for obvious reasons to do with Government and so on. Therefore, in order to try to dissipate that across the whole country, we need the regional strength of the BBC. The hon. Gentleman also makes a point about spending. The funding is not spent equally now. He made the point that London already gets more than its fair share.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It would be remiss of me not to join colleagues in praising our local newspapers—a useful thing for any politician to do. As my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici) will know, we are served by the daily *Grimsby Telegraph*, which is magnificent. We are never, ever critical of it.

Over the years, I have regarded myself as a critical friend of the BBC, although in the last year or two that has been strained somewhat. Does my hon. Friend agree that the one thing we should expect from the national publicly funded broadcaster is regional news, and that regional political news is a vital part of that?

Neil Parish: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am sure he is now guaranteed the front page of his local newspaper, at the very least. Again, he raises the point about keeping these regional identities. We still have many regional accents. As far as I am concerned, speaking with a Somerset accent, I would like to keep some of those accents. There are lots of accents heard in this Chamber, and that is absolutely excellent. They link in very much to what we want to see in our regions as well. We all have different types of business interests in our regions, and they must be focused on.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I do not want to upset the consensus too much, but far be it from a Scottish nationalist to say that we are far too London-centric and the money should be going elsewhere. While it is good that we are having this debate about regional programming, it would be remiss of me not to introduce the issue of funding for the likes of BBC Alba, which is the Gaelic language service. There is an absolutely massive imbalance between funding for the Welsh language services, for example, and funding for BBC Alba. I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying and congratulate him on securing this debate, but we have to look at that again as well. If we are talking about preserving the Gaelic language in Scotland—many of us are trying to do our bit on that—we have to get the funding for it.

Neil Parish: I am not an expert on the Gaelic language, but I can understand the hon. Gentleman wanting to make sure that there is enough coverage. I think it is about the number of people who speak a language at a given time, and there is an argument as to how much coverage there is, but he has certainly put a good point on the record.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I can see how much my hon. Friend is enjoying this four-hour Adjournment debate. There are presenters on the BBC's "Newsnight" who earn more than the entire BBC South politics team put together, but the show they put out in our patch achieves a bigger audience than Andy Marr. May I disagree somewhat with his thoughts on regional coverage? Yes, there might be regional parts of local broadcasting, but in the digital age we should be able to achieve more

local television broadcasting, because, with the greatest respect to what goes on in East Sussex, it is not of huge interest to my constituents in Winchester and Hampshire. We should really be seeing investment in localised broadcasting by the BBC, not disinvestment.

Neil Parish: Yes, my hon. Friend makes a really good point. As I said, the south-west region is split up by the BBC, so we could get even more local. He is saying quite clearly that in the digital age we can break it down much more, almost by county or even town. That is a very interesting point.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. I apologise for arriving slightly late, but I was at the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, where we were talking about devolution and regional accountability and democracy, which is absolutely relevant to this debate.

On the point about the digital age and local reporting, "Look East" in the eastern region goes all the way out to the coastal regions, and someone might say, "What's that got to do with Luton?" I would say, look east and west, my friend, because we can take it right down to the issues that impact Luton but do not impact the coastal regions of Norfolk. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the ability to focus on the local is absolutely vital to the future of our scrutiny of politicians?

Neil Parish: The hon. Lady is echoing so much of what has been said in this debate. The message we need to send to the BBC is that we not only want the regional BBC to be saved—we want it to be broadened and made even more local in this digital age.

We have all got much more used—certainly I have got much more used—to using the computer for the Zoom, the Microsoft Teams and all these things, and being able to link in wherever. We sometimes almost spend too much time on creating the best-quality television—not the quality of the programme but the quality of the production and the science behind it—rather than making it as broad as possible. If there is anything we can learn from this epidemic, it is that we can probably widen things by doing more Zoom stuff and getting people in from all over the place—we can do that much quicker and more easily and get a better message. Quite a lot could be learned. I hope the BBC is listening to this debate and that by the time we finish, it will be open to many more ideas than it was before we started.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend and congratulate him on securing this Adjournment debate. Does he agree that programmes such as "Inside Out" are incredibly cost-effective? I understand that it costs about £6 million a year for all 11 regions that it covers, which, to me, indicates great value for money. The BBC's charter says that the BBC should reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all the United Kingdom's nations and regions, and that it should offer a range and depth of analysis and content that is not widely available from other UK news providers. This is a point that so many hon. Members have made here tonight. If regional news and current affairs are not an essential part of any offering from a public service broadcaster, then what is? Surely, when looking at making savings, cutting investment in these programmes should be the last thing on the list rather than the first.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Just before the hon. Gentleman answers, may I say that the interventions are getting very long? They are almost mini speeches, dare I say it? Hon. Members may be wishing to catch my eye later, and they can indicate to me if so, but I would just point Members to the fact that interventions should be fairly short.

Neil Parish: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think that most Members are probably making interventions rather than speeches. I promise you that I do not intend to speak for four hours, despite what I said at the start of my speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Ruth Edwards) makes a very good point about “Inside Out” and the value that it offers for £6 million. She also emphasises the fact that we are, all the time, looking for a much more local basis for our politics today, which means that this would be going in completely the wrong direction. Whatever the party politics of this country at the moment, we have shown over the past few years that politics is not all about London, but about the whole of the country. People’s views are significantly different across the country and that is what we do not always see.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): As somebody who launched and ran the first local television station—run from Grimsby—I know that a very high-quality local television station can be run, producing news and political programming, for around half a million pounds a year. That is a challenge that I would give to the BBC. What is vitally important is that our local radio and television is impartial, which is not something that our online services and papers have to do. It is very important to get good quality impartial news to our constituents.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend makes a really good point about impartiality. Of course, that is very much what the BBC is set up to do—to be impartial. Sometimes some of us, from all parts of the House, wonder about that impartiality, but it is quite clearly there, and it is what the BBC represents. We therefore want that impartiality in both the regional and the local BBC. I have to say that, in our own BBC in the south-west, the people I deal with are pretty good and I must pay tribute to them. I will not name them here tonight, because that would be embarrassing to them. None the less, we are well represented and we have good people across the regions. It would be such a shame to lose them, it really would.

Jonathan Gullis: It is amazing to see the cross-party support and work on this subject, which is sadly not something that is often shown on our national television. I note that, in the west midlands, we have had more than 100 Labour Members of Parliament and councillors sign a letter, with Conservative backing, to the BBC’s “The Politics Show”. Will my hon. Friend be willing to lead the charge by going on “the Zoom”, as he says, and setting up a call with the director-general, so that we can all have our say?

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. I will make that offer to the director-general of the BBC; it will be interesting to see whether it happens. I agree with the Secretary of State’s position, and I have confidence in him being able to put our case very firmly

to the BBC. As my hon. Friend says, this is a cross-party matter, because we are all politicians; we are all in politics and we believe in representing our constituencies and getting our message across. We need the BBC and the media to deliver our message, irrespective of what party we belong to. It is at these moments that we can come together. Perhaps the public ought to see us on occasions such as this, when we are agreeing with each other. They watch Prime Minister’s questions and ask, “Why are you always shouting at each other?” but in fact we do not; sometimes—occasionally—we agree.

Bob Stewart: One of the reasons why we—colleagues—like local radio and television is that it tends to give us a better crack of the whip than going national does, and we are allowed to express ourselves a bit better. We like it, and that is why we support it.

Neil Parish: I think what my hon. Friend means is that on BBC national news, the moment you open your mouth you are interrupted, whereas on our regional programmes we often have a chance to make a point before we are stopped. I have probably put a few words into my hon. Friend’s mouth, but I think he is absolutely right. I should probably make a little progress now, or I will be on my feet for four hours.

This weekend, “Politics England” has the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) on the show to discuss freight travel and Brexit. Leeds and Essex are a long way apart. England is clearly too large to be a region that can be covered in one show. There are 533 English MPs in the House of Commons, and political issues differ from Yorkshire to Cornwall, from Essex to the west midlands. Brexit, as many interpreted it, was a statement against over-centralisation and a demand for more control over decision making. As more power is devolved away from Whitehall through greater local authority powers and new regional Mayors, the BBC should prioritise more investment in regional programmes, not less. It is vital that local politicians are scrutinised fairly, impartially and specifically on the matters that affect those regions.

Like the “Sunday Politics” show, “Inside Out” broadcasts across 11 English regions; it was due to return in September, but the autumn series has now been cancelled. As I said earlier, ITV is bringing its programmes back in September, and I think the BBC should do the same. Shall we send the message loud and clear from this House tonight that that is what we want the BBC to do? “Inside Out” has consistently won awards for its investigations and in-depth coverage, despite being made on a relatively small budget. It is the BBC’s most popular current affairs programme, outperforming “Panorama” and “Newsnight”, as hon. Members have said.

On 26 March, before “Inside Out” was taken off air, it had 3.29 million viewers across England. Premier League football, which was broadcast live for the first time on the BBC this weekend, had 3.9 million viewers. Surely the Government and the BBC should be funding local journalism, rather than intervening in the already lucrative market for live sport? The regional “Sunday Politics” shows and “Inside Out” are examples of the best of British broadcasting, and to lose or reduce them is to undermine the values on which the BBC is built.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman is making a really powerful case on behalf of “Inside Out”. Does he agree that it is one of the programmes that have made a real difference? Iain Wright, the former Member for Hartlepool and a former Chair of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, said that “Inside Out” was the key first step in exposing the exploitation at the Sports Direct factory in Shirebrook. It had a direct impact, not just on the people there, but on our work here. That would not have happened if local journalists had not been listening to local people and taken up that story.

Neil Parish: I think it brought the situation of workers at Sports Direct to the forefront, and hopefully much has been done to improve the situation since that was revealed. She is right to put that on the record.

The regional “Sunday Politics” shows and “Inside Out” are examples of the best of British broadcasting, and to lose or reduce them would undermine the values on which the BBC is built. At its best, properly funded local journalism engages the public, shines a spotlight on local issues and can change the country for the better. Recently, “Inside Out South West” broadcast a piece about the fate of amputees following surgery. A Mr Hopper, a vascular surgeon at the Royal Cornwall Hospital in Truro, developed sepsis and unfortunately had to have both legs amputated. Having performed thousands of amputations himself as a surgeon, he found as a patient that there was a gap in the rehabilitation care for amputees in the NHS. His story was broadcast in depth by “Inside Out” and it helped to spark a debate that led to changes in the allocation of resources by Public Health England. So again, real change can come from the programme. “Inside Out” was able to do the story justice and effect real change: it just shows how valuable properly funded local journalism can be.

Local news delivers local stories, a training ground for journalists and, importantly, a way for the BBC to demonstrate its commitment to and knowledge of the local area. A decade ago, ITV slashed its regional coverage, and MPs received assurances at the time that the BBC would not do likewise, and we want that honoured. With local newspapers struggling, the market cannot provide the depth of regional coverage the BBC is currently providing to our constituents.

As the BBC reviews its regional programmes in England, I sincerely hope that the views of MPs in this debate—we have had many great contributions tonight and I thank all Members for them, because it sends a really loud and clear message to the BBC—will be taken into account. The debate has shown how passionately we care about our communities, local journalism and local democracy. I hope that the Minister will join us today in asking the BBC to continue providing high-quality regional programmes. They are vital, valued and cherished in the south-west, as they are across all our English regions.

6.12 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) for securing this debate. The level of interest that there has been shows the desire across the country to protect this incredibly important institution. He was encouraged by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) to lead the campaign by setting up a Zoom call for us all to contribute to, but it seems to

me that he has created a sort of face-to-face Zoom call that might be familiar to some of us who were here before the coronavirus era. It is a way for us all to get into the same room and discuss this, and that is great.

Taking up the challenge set by the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), I think it is incredibly important to recognise the contribution that the BBC makes in my area, not just with “Sunday Politics”, but also with radio stations such as Radio Sheffield and Radio Derby and, of course, to recognise the broader role of local media such as the *Derbyshire Times* and Peak FM, which ensure that, as local Members of Parliament, we are held to account and that we can communicate with our local communities and be on the receiving end of some wise and frank advice from our local constituents about the issues.

It is incredibly important for our democracy that we are not just 650 people here to serve our parties, but we are people here to serve our local communities, to hear about local issues, to be asked about those local issues and to respond to those local points. That is the role that “Sunday Politics” plays, and there is no way that a politics programme for England would be able to do that. The idea that the issues that my constituents care about in Chesterfield and the local issues in the north-east or in Cornwall are all the same is just nonsense. The local holding to account that “Sunday Politics” does is incredibly important.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that now is a particularly bad time for the BBC to be considering this move? We heard in the previous contribution about devolution to metropolitan mayors, and the like, which needs extra examination. Our response to covid has, in large part, been led by our county councils and second-tier councils, as well as by local resilience forums. Those bodies are increasingly powerful, and increasingly relevant to our constituents and the population of the regions. Now, more than ever, the BBC should be focusing on that issue, and not withdrawing from it.

Mr Perkins: I could not agree more. Coronavirus has brought into sharp focus the need for a local response, given the extent to which local areas are experiencing a global pandemic in different ways. In London, coronavirus hit hard up front, and there were then regional variations as it went on, and differences in local responses. Local clinical commissioning groups responded differently regarding testing and the availability of personal protective equipment, and the public must be able to learn about such issues locally, and to scrutinise and question their politicians about that response. Ministers have stood at the Dispatch Box and been asked to respond on a national basis, but politicians must also be held to account for what is happening in our local areas with testing, PPE, care homes, and all those sorts of things.

Graham Stringer: I do not know whether my hon. Friend is as sad as I am, but over recent weekends, I have switched on the Parliament channel, and people can see coverage of virtually all the general elections there have been since television started covering them. One really interesting factor from those BBC archives is that the swing across the country in 1955 was almost uniform. In 1959, commentators were shocked when there was a slightly smaller swing to the Conservatives in the north-west—it was a big change. The four countries

of the United Kingdom are increasingly diverse. Does my hon. Friend agree that that means there should be more regional coverage, not less?

Mr Perkins: Once again, I absolutely agree. I think it was Tip O'Neill who was credited with the phrase, "all politics is local", and in the last general election we saw that more strongly than ever before. I represent Chesterfield, an area that, as long ago as 2010 when I came to Parliament, was surrounded by Labour seats, but there has been a big change in our area. Similarly, in the cities there has been a change in the opposite direction. I am very conscious of that point, and as colleagues such as my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) know, in areas where there is perhaps less representation from one party, it is particularly important that people still get to hear a voice from the Labour party, or, in areas where Labour is strong, a voice from the Conservative party. I think that "Sunday Politics" does that, and it is important to ensure that in areas where one party is in the minority, that voice is still heard in a local dimension.

As Member of Parliament for Chesterfield I have both the privilege and the slight irritation of being straddled between two areas. The majority of my constituents watch the Yorkshire version of "Sunday Politics" and regional news, but we are also covered by the east midlands region, and different people in my constituency watch different programmes. Because of that, when I have been on the two separate programmes, I have been minded of how different they are, and how they reflect the different issues that exist in West Yorkshire at one end, and Northamptonshire at the other end of the east midlands coverage. That gives me a strong sense of how different those areas are.

I would not say that my constituents appreciate my appearances, but they certainly respond to the appearances I make and appreciate that local coverage.

I noticed that the "Sunday Politics East Midlands" Twitter account has now been taken down. Someone at the BBC has made the decision, while the review is apparently still ongoing, to take down that account, to which people could go and see the coverage produced by the "Sunday Politics East Midlands" team. Recent such programmes have brought a local dimension to national stories: we hear a lot about HS2 on a national basis, but we have been able to debate what it means locally in the east midlands. Areas of the east midlands such as Chesterfield, Derby and Nottingham will be served by HS2, whereas in other areas HS2 provides a blight but will not provide a service. There is a perspective that is different from the national debate about HS2.

If "Sunday Politics East Midlands" disappears, I worry about how the people of the east midlands will learn about the latest prediction from the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) as to when the scrapping of HS2 is going to be announced. I do not know how they would ever find that out. Every six weeks or so, the hon. Gentleman comes on to tell us that it is about to be cancelled. I worry how people would find that out without the "Sunday Politics East Midlands" programme.

Steve Brine: I enjoy the hon. Gentlemen's contributions; he is a big thinker on these matters. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, of which I am fortunate to be a member, is currently holding a big inquiry on

public sector broadcasting. What the hon. Gentleman and everybody else is saying goes to the heart of the question of what we want a public sector broadcaster to be. Do we want hundreds of thousands of pounds to be spent on salaries for small, niche programmes on national network television? Do we want a commercial entity such as Radio 2 to be financed by the taxpayer—by our constituents—on penalty of going to prison if they do not pay? Or do we want the sort of coverage that the hon. Gentleman is talking about? Ultimately, as we lead up to the charter review—I am sure that the Select Committee's report will feed into that and into Ministers' thinking—the debate is really about what sort of public sector broadcaster we want to have, is it not?

Mr Perkins: It absolutely is. I am conscious that local media—particularly radio—are very much under threat. I have previously mentioned Peak FM, which has been a great, small local radio station in my area. It has recently been taken over by Bauer and its programming is going to go to the east midlands. We are now told that a traffic jam just outside Corby is local news; that makes no difference to people in Chesterfield. As the local dimension of the private sector media increasingly diminishes, there is an opportunity for the BBC to say, "Look, this is what we are great at. Of course we are going to compete on a national basis with national programmes on a Saturday evening, but this is what is special about the BBC." It will lose that at its peril: if the BBC loses programmes such as "Inside Out" and "Sunday Politics"—if it loses that sense of its ability to influence things locally—it will rue the day and we will all be the poorer for it.

Other Members, particularly the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, have mentioned the extent to which there is a sense that if something happens in London, it is national news—that if there is flooding in London or riots in London, we should all care about that. We all know that when we have flooding in different areas, it gets much more difficult to get local coverage. I entirely accept the point made by the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) about London having local news too, but for many of us who are more distant from London, there is a strong sense that what happens in London is given greater import than what happens in our areas. We are going to have the local elections in 2021, and we all know that what happens in London will be seen as national news. The London mayoralty is of course an important national post, but there are elections everywhere, and it is important that those elections are covered too. I do not think that will happen if these programmes disappear.

I could say other things, but I shall end my speech there because many other Members wish to speak. I thank the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton for securing this debate. I hope that when the Minister responds, he will give a really strong assurance that the strength of feeling in this debate will be conveyed to the BBC, and that it will be conveyed in the strongest possible terms just how crucial these programmes are to our constituents.

6.24 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): A few thoughts occurred to me when I was listening to my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) and some of the interventions that I think the BBC board would do well to reflect on.

[Mr Mark Harper]

The first is the question of the licence fee. I have my thoughts, and although I have not reached a conclusion about the licence fee, I can see both sides of the argument. One of the important things for the BBC to reflect on is that if it wants to retain the support of people across the country—although the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) is no longer in his place, this is a debate that happens in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as in England—it needs to retain the support of people from across the country for a compulsory fee. My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) said that if people do not pay that fee, they will go to prison. The BBC does need to think about what it is delivering. If it is not going to deliver anything different from what is available on a purely commercial basis, actually the licence fee is difficult to justify, so that is worth its reflecting on.

I talked about cost in my intervention earlier; that is actually very interesting, and again the BBC should reflect on it. I was looking at an interesting tweet from Chris Mason yesterday about technology. He had the example of a piece to camera that he did for the “Six O’Clock News” yesterday. The camera in question was the size of a highlighter pen, and the monitor used to film it was on his mobile phone. It seems to me that the developments in technology—I know this from interactions I have had with our own journalists from BBC Radio Gloucestershire about some of the technology now—mean that people can do things remotely. We do not have a whole swathe of people turning up; it is an individual, and those individuals do the recording, clip up the programmes and transmit them electronically straight into the studio. Technology should enable the BBC to deliver more local coverage more cost-effectively than ever before.

Of course, the BBC also has more platforms. My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton talked about some well-watched television programmes in our region including “Sunday Politics West” and “Inside Out”. However, it is worth reflecting on the fact that these BBC local journalists not only produce content for BBC local radio, such as the fantastic BBC Radio Gloucestershire, and for television—for example, “Points West”, the evening news in our region, and “Sunday Politics West”—but also generate content for the BBC’s own website. I know that that can be controversial, because many local journalists and local newspapers think that that local content unfairly competes with them, and indeed it does compete, but we should just think about the fact that if the BBC is producing local content, it is a bit silly if we cannot access it on all the different platforms. The cost of producing regional and very local content is coming down and the number of platforms available for people on which to view that content is going up so people can see that content more effectively. Those are both questions for the BBC to focus on.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) also focused on accountability. This is not just about holding us here in Parliament to account on how we conduct ourselves locally and on our records as parliamentarians; it is also about local government, which he mentioned. It is important to have important local outlets—both newspapers and the BBC—because otherwise our local councils will not be held to account by anyone. Even in

the time I have been involved in politics in my constituency, the level of coverage of what goes on in local council chambers has plummeted. We do not get the dedicated local government reporters that we used to get. There may be a big story going on in a local council—for example, stories about social care or how we look after people with learning disabilities and how effectively we get them into work—but such local issues are never going to be covered properly by national broadcasters unless we have a truly national scandal. Instead, we have to depend on effective local coverage, which in terms of reach means the BBC.

It is also worth focusing on how many people actually see this content. I may not be completely up to date with the figures, but I remember, on my most recent visit to BBC Radio Gloucestershire, asking about the number of people who listen to its programmes. Its morning breakfast programme, the drive time programme, is listened to by many people in my own constituency as they commute—or at least as they used to commute by car, in the days pre-coronavirus—and in Gloucestershire more people listen to that programme than listen to Radio 4’s “Today” programme. So more people in Gloucestershire listen to that local radio station for their news and current affairs and to hold their democratically elected politicians to account than listen to a national leading broadcast programme.

That is really important, and it says two things to me. First, it says that if we did not have that local programme, we would not be holding local politicians, local business leaders and local decision makers to account. Secondly, the fact that the listening figures are so high suggests that my constituents and other Gloucestershire residents find that content more relevant and more interesting to them than that of the national broadcasting programmes that are available at the same time. If the BBC is thinking about its attractiveness to the public—this comes back to my point about the licence fee—it would do well to reflect on that before it wantonly casts these services aside.

My final point, on the cost-effectiveness of the regional services, is the point I made in my intervention. When I visit Radio Gloucestershire—and also when I visit BBC Bristol when I am there for “Sunday Politics”—I look around the studio and see how the staff have to multi-task to put programmes together. I do not see a lot of fat, a lot of waste or a lot of unnecessary fripperies. I see a very cost-effective operation covering what my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton has described as a big region in the south-west. It is a shame that our colleague from Scotland, the hon. Member for Glasgow East, has gone, because my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), is fond of saying—I checked this once, to ensure that it was accurate—that his constituency in Tewkesbury is closer to the England-Scotland border than it is to Land’s End. That just demonstrates the size of one region in England, and it shows the nonsense of suggesting that even that one region can be adequately covered from London, let alone all the regions in England. That is a really important point for the BBC to bear in mind.

Those of us who have had the opportunity to go to BBC HQ at Broadcasting House will have noted the disparity in the resources put into the BBC centrally. I remember having a conversation with the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, who told me that, when he

did a press conference, he used to marvel—that is perhaps not the right word—at the number of questions he used to get from different bits of the BBC. Every single BBC programme insisted on sending its own person, rather than there being a single person to ask a question. There would be a question from the “Today” person, a question from the “Newsnight” person and a question from the BBC’s political editor. That did not suggest an organisation that was focused on delivering value for money. The BBC should bear that in mind.

Steve Brine: On that point, sort of, has it not been fascinating during the Downing Street press conferences to see the regional reporters ask their questions? They do it with a straight bat, without an agenda and without a tone. They just get to the nub of the question that matters to the people in their area. Has not that just been so refreshing?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes a good point. That is absolutely accurate, and the questions from the local journalists are often far more difficult for the Minister to answer because they are focused on the issue at hand. They do not have any of the Westminster aspect to them; they are straightforward questions. Those journalists are doing what journalists should always do, which is to ask us the questions that the listener or viewer at home wants them to ask. The journalist should be putting the question that the person at home, looking at the screen or listening to the radio, has in their head to the people making the decisions. If they are doing that, they are absolutely doing their job properly.

My final point is about some of the subjects covered, which I think the hon. Member for Chesterfield also touched on, as did my hon. Friend for Tiverton and Honiton. I will pick two examples. The first, which was a little while ago—well, it seems like a long time ago, but it wasn’t really—is flooding, which impacted different parts of the country in different ways and was something that sadly we experienced ourselves in my county of Gloucestershire. That is one set of circumstances when local reporting is at its best—when journalists get out into communities and report on the aspects of the issue that really matter to individuals.

I also agree with what the hon. Gentleman said about the coronavirus outbreak, two aspects of which are worth noting. The first is that the huge amount of very locally focused responses in our communities—through local resilience forums, county councils, district councils, volunteers, and town and parish councils—has been covered in local media outlets, including the BBC, in a way that it simply would not have been, and has not been, in national broadcasting.

Mr Perkins: The right hon. Gentleman is right that the local context has been different. What is also different is local accountability, because councils have decisions to make about the local response to coronavirus, and politicians have to answer for those decisions, whether they be council leaders or Members of Parliament. That is the other dimension to the point he is making.

Mr Harper: I am grateful for that spot-on intervention, which leads to my final point, about one of the things that we will now be focused on. The Prime Minister tomorrow will announce further moves, I hope, to enable us to get our economy back on track and functioning. One of the important ways to facilitate that is through the test and trace system, which is starting to be up and

running, and that is being dealt with not just by the NHS nationally. There is also an important local component, in that locally based, locally employed and locally accountable directors of public health will be responsible by the end of this month for putting together a local outbreak plan to deal with the inevitable local outbreaks—I say inevitable because we have already seen outbreaks in our country and others, whether in specific localities or specific businesses. That will be absolutely critical in getting the country functioning again while keeping people safe, and those outbreak plans will be locally developed, by locally accountable officials and councils.

That aspect is important, but when the inevitable outbreaks of coronavirus happen, it will also be really important to have quality journalism to report on what has happened in a non-sensationalist, factual way, so that local people know what is going on, what the facts are, what is being done to keep them safe and what they need to do to keep themselves and their communities safe. If we were to get rid of that local reporting and accountability, the country and our communities would be the poorer for it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton should be thanked for his wisdom in securing this debate, but also for brilliantly planning it to occur on a day when he would have a little more time than is often available in an Adjournment debate, thereby ensuring what I think will be quite a full debate. I hope the powers that be in the BBC watch BBC Parliament, which is another very valuable service delivered by the BBC, listen to the clear cross-party message—that should sound an alarm with them—from both main political parties and some of the smaller parties, and think very carefully about whether, come September, they should bring back BBC regional coverage and protect it in the months and years to come.

6.39 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing this debate. As he knows, I had hoped to intervene during the debate, but I have waited so that I can give my contribution with the full force of a speech.

I am keen to ensure that this issue is fully considered. I raised it in the House at business questions a couple of weeks ago, and had a tremendous response from people in the region and from other colleagues. It seems that we are practically all in agreement on this issue. Whatever party we are from, we are all convinced of the need for regional coverage.

In my case, that coverage is “Inside Out North East and Cumbria” and “Sunday Politics North East and Cumbria”. And therein lies an interesting point; we have talked about having localised coverage, and to those of us in the north-east and Cumbria, we divide into distinct areas. For us, that region in itself is a large area to cover all the local topics. I am sure that other hon. Members will have had the same experience—dividing the issues and dividing the coverage. But regional coverage is a hugely important part of ensuring that local issues—things that are of importance in the region or in part of the region—are considered. In the case of “Inside Out”, it is important to ensure that things that are important locally, and local aspects of national situations, are covered. I am therefore keen that we retain our regional coverage in “Sunday Politics” and “Inside Out”; it is hugely important.

[Liz Twist]

Some of the issues covered by our local “Inside Out” team over the past couple of years include the future of local newspapers, which, as others have said, are going through their own difficulties; railway services in the north-east, which we have had difficulties with in the past; the introduction of universal credit across the region and what that has meant for families; the Medomsley Detention Centre in my neighbouring constituency; and how frontline care workers are affected by the current coronavirus pandemic and what it means for them.

I was particularly pleased that “Inside Out” two years ago covered the situation at the Blaydon Quarry landfill site in my constituency, where we have had enormous problems over the years. At last someone was able to give proper time to understand what was going on, and to communicate that to the wider community. I thank the team for highlighting that issue. It is really important to my constituents—and to other hon. Members’ constituents, no doubt—that we have the space to discuss issues that matter to us on the ground and that make a difference to the lives in our communities.

Last week, over 100 stars and celebrities joined the call to retain regional programming, and to save regional current affairs and regional political coverage. They have written a letter to Lord Tony Hall, the outgoing chair of the BBC—I think he has actually gone now—and to Tim Davie, the new chair of the BBC, calling on them to reconsider the issue and stressing the importance of regional coverage, as we have done. I, too, wrote to Lord Tony Hall, or copied him into a letter to Helen Thomas, the director of regional programming for England, in which I raised the issue with her. I had quite a brief reply from Helen Thomas. I have not had one from Lord Tony Hall or from Tim Davie, so I hope that the stars do better than I do in getting a full response in response to their concerns.

Like many hon. Members, I suspect, I received a response from Caroline Cummins at the BBC yesterday evening, ahead of this debate. She talked about the issue of regional broadcasting. One of the things she pointed to was the ambition to have two thirds of BBC staff in the regions by 2027. None of us would disagree with that ambition, but we do not just need staff in the regions covering national issues; we need regional staff covering regional issues, ensuring that they get the coverage they deserve. So that answer simply does not wash.

Caroline also said that it was good that some of the crews had been doing pieces for “Look North” and other regional programmes over the period that we have not had the “Sunday Politics” or “Inside Out” regionally. It is good to see those issues being raised, but it does not give us the depth of coverage that we get on the “Inside Out” and “Sunday Politics” regional shows. It is good to carry that on, but it is not good enough for what we need in the future.

The one thing that Caroline does not mention is the future of the regional “Inside Out” and “Sunday Politics” shows. She needs to hear loud and clear—and I am sure she will from all of us—that we need to see those regional programmes continue. We have excellent regional reporters, producers and teams putting together those vital local programmes, and we need that to continue. Before I finish, I want to refer to some of the comments made on Twitter about “Inside Out” locally, but having held my iPhone, I cannot find them, so I will ad lib.

Lilian Greenwood: Perhaps this will give my hon. Friend an opportunity to find the relevant page. She was talking about the wonderful staff who produce these regional programmes. Does she share my concern that the National Union of Journalists and the other trade unions that represent those staff have so far been excluded from the review, and therefore their valuable insight and voice has not been heard by the BBC?

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend very much for that intervention, and I most certainly agree; there needs to be a great deal of consultation with the public and the regional staff about the future of their programmes. They deserve that consultation, and they deserve to know what is happening and have a say.

Thankfully, I have managed to find what I was looking for. These were some of the comments on the Twitter feed about “Inside Out”:

“Local and regional BBC news and programming like Inside Out and Politics is where the rubber hits the road between BBC and local/national communities. Consistently watched with quality ratings. What a loss it would all be.”

“Inside Out has been a beacon of investigative journalism in the region, your report on the Medomsley scandal was an outstanding example.”

“Inside Out from the BBC is set to be axed. It’s the last bastion of local North East news. Not everything should be about London”.

“Inside Out has been at the cutting edge of investigative journalism for years, we need MORE programming of this calibre not less.”

“So many important stories will fall through the cracks without @InsideOutCJ & his team & @BBCRichardMoss & his team are key to ensuring regional political scrutiny & issues like the #levellingup agenda are monitored.”

I agree with every word. I could probably fill the rest of the debate with the comments, but I will not, because I know that other Members want to contribute.

The BBC needs to understand and recognise how important these programmes are to our regions and to think again. All of us will know that being on “Sunday Politics” is not always easy or pleasant, but it is necessary. We need to be able to give an account for ourselves and discuss what is happening locally, and I certainly hope that the BBC will think again about this proposal and reinstate the “Inside Out” and “Sunday Politics” regional programmes.

6.49 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) for securing this very important debate. I speak as the chair of the all-party parliamentary media group and as somebody who has spent most of my working life working in regional media, having ran small local radio stations and big regional radio stations. I have never worked for the BBC, but I have always seen the BBC as an incredibly important part of our media landscape. The BBC helps commercial broadcasters to be as good as it is, because the BBC, when it is good, is the best in the world.

I want to place on record how supportive I am of the appointment of the new director-general of the BBC, Tim Davie. He has run one the most important divisions of the BBC: he ran BBC radio, so he understands the value and the intrinsic inputs and outputs of a broadcasting division such as radio. I wish him well and I know he will not shy away from the challenges that the industry

and his organisation faces. Most important is the challenge of helping to switch the BBC off its metropolitan bias, which, by its own admission, it accepts.

The director-general's job, of course, is to ensure that it delivers the BBC's public purposes. What are those public purposes? They include providing impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them—that sits at the cornerstone of what the BBC is about; showing the most creative, highest quality and distinctive broadcast output in the world; and being a beacon to support learning for all people of all ages. I want to put on record my thanks to the BBC for its work on BBC Bitesize during the recent lockdown. More children than ever have gone back to schools programmes. Many of us will remember growing up watching those programmes on a TV that was wheeled into the classroom. Nowadays, the TV sits in the corner and it is the iPad on which most BBC programmes are consumed. I am really pleased that the BBC has taken it upon itself to re-engage with schools programmes. The most important purpose for this debate is the requirement to reflect, represent and serve all the diverse communities in the United Kingdom, its nations and regions, and in doing so support the creative economy across the United Kingdom.

Those are not just broad words. The media regulator Ofcom reiterates those public purposes in the BBC's operating licence. It is a requirement for the BBC to do those things. Specifically, when we look at the importance of the BBC's public service role for our regions, the BBC "should ensure that it provides output and services that meet the needs of the United Kingdom's nations, regions and communities." That is absolutely at the cornerstone of what the BBC is about.

Let us be clear: the BBC must comply with those regulatory conditions. If it does not, it can have its licence revoked. Now is the time for our regulator, Ofcom, to look very closely at what the BBC is offering. Having worked in the commercial sector, I know that the role of Ofcom—as my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici) will no doubt recall—in ensuring that media providers deliver against their licence requirements, is forceful. It can close you down. It is time that the BBC understood that Ofcom has a role to play and that, as the regulator, it should intervene if the BBC decides that it is not going to deliver its licence requirements.

At a time when the BBC's regional news service at 6.30 pm is delivering the highest level of audience in the history of regional television—it is the most watched news programme on TV at that time in the evening—and we can see the evidence of demand for regional content, I really struggle with why the BBC should be thinking about taking that content out of the schedules. I know that people in Warrington value services such as "North West Tonight". I know that, because when I appear on them, I get calls from people to tell me they have just watched me. They are not sure what I have actually said, but they tell me that they have seen me on the programme. People watch these services and they really value their content.

Beyond news, Ofcom specifically says that at least 700 hours of regionally made programmes should consist of non-news content. That is where I again question the decisions being taken by BBC management. "Inside Out" has had its forthcoming series cancelled and the future of 11 regional departments in England are under review.

That really needs to be examined very closely. From the BARB—Broadcasters Audience Research Board—reports we see that regional output is attracting record audiences, so why is the BBC making those decisions when there is no other broadcaster serving those areas and those audiences?

Simon Jupp: This issue is even more important because vast swathes of local radio stations are about to lose their local programming in the coming months. Regional, local broadcasting from the BBC will be even more crucial at this time, as local services, hard fought for by communities, are lost in the coming months.

Andy Carter: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I know only too well the challenges that local media, and local radio in particular, are facing. As chair of the all-party group that deals with commercial radio, I have seen some of the figures from local radio stations around the country, whose revenue has been hit by more than 90% in the past three months. Their ability to deliver those programmes is incredibly challenged. The BBC's delivery of local services provides for demographics of audiences that no other commercial operators will be able to service; I am thinking, in particular, of older members of the community who are not served well by other commercial operators. That is where the BBC plays an incredibly important role.

I congratulate BBC local radio on the vital role it has played in explaining what is happening locally on an hourly basis to audiences around the country. With BBC local radio it is not about high-falutin presenters being brought in; it is about local personalities. It is about people such as Mike Sweeney in Manchester, who has been on the radio for 40 years and is now in his 70s, delivering fantastic local content in the middle of the morning. He is able to interview with real precision because he knows his local area. It is about people such as Roger Phillips in Merseyside. The hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) will have doubtless have been interviewed by Roger, as I have. He is a fearsome interviewer, but he will say that he is not a political reporter; he is a great local broadcaster who understands the area and recognises the value of delivering great local content to that area.

What covid-19 has shown us is just how interconnected every part of our society is and how important local media is for delivering messages to people living in local areas. It is crucial that we decentralise media and ensure that local broadcasting is allowed to be at the forefront of what the BBC does. As a proud northern MP representing Warrington, I know that the issues we face in Warrington are split three ways. Part of the constituency looks south to BBC Stoke, part looks east to BBC Merseyside and part looks to Manchester. One thing I would really like to see the BBC do is invest in areas such as that and put more content into them. It is time that the BBC recognised that local content is crucial to the lives we live today. I urge the BBC to think again, as it sends completely the wrong message to communities in the regions and about the stories that need to be heard if it is cutting regional content.

6.58 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), and I congratulate the hon. Member for

[*Wes Streeting*]

Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing this important Adjournment debate. I hope that the level of interest will not be lost on the Leader of the House and that he might consider trying to restore Westminster Hall debates as soon as possible, so that we can have more of these sorts of debates, on a range of issues, including and beyond covid-19, that our constituents care deeply about.

It is also a welcome novelty to be here in a debate where people are celebrating the contribution that the BBC makes to our national life. Every great nation is built on a set of shared values and shared institutions, and the BBC is one of our great institutions. We deride it and lose it at our peril. I have always thought it impossible to demand outstanding BBC services while also demanding the end of the licence fee, and although the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) gave it a go, I still think it is impossible.

The BBC should pay close attention to the speech made by the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), because although I do not think it would become impossible to defend the licence fee, it would certainly become a great deal harder if we lost the kind of unique content that includes BBC regional political coverage. There is nothing like it. It is an important part of the BBC's public service remit. As someone who strongly supports the BBC and the licence fee, I hope that message is well understood, and I hope that the fact that it is coming from both sides of the House will serve to reinforce the point.

I come to this debate with the perspective of one who represents a constituency that, as you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, looks out towards Essex and in towards London. Depending on who I am speaking to and in which part of the constituency I happen to be, I am either the MP for Ilford North in Essex, or the MP for Ilford North in London. To try to bring some consensus, I think it is really those dreadful people in inner London who we ought to be railing against, not London as a whole. Let us have less anti-London sentiment in this House, and instead unite against zones 1 and 2.

BBC Essex provides a really great service not only to my constituents, but to those right across the modern county of Essex. There are journalists at BBC Essex who really know the patch, such as Simon Dedman, a political correspondent who came to the station from "Look East". Having that ecosystem, where we recruit, train and retain experienced political reporters and broadcasters who focus on regional content, provides an enormous public service.

I also want to commend the BBC for the role that it has played through the local democracy reporters. This addresses the point, which we have heard expressed this evening, that the BBC competes with local newspapers that are already under considerable strain and financial pressure. The support for those reporters has been a really welcome innovation, fulfilling the BBC's public service remit while also providing practical support for local newspapers, so the sense that the BBC competes with local newspapers can be remedied.

I joked earlier about the perils of being a London MP, and the extent to which we are reviled outside our great city, but there are some serious points to be made about that. London-based media is not the same as London

journalism. I find it frustrating that in this place London is often presented as a city whose streets are paved with gold, where everything is wonderful, bright and rosy, and where every part is filled with prosperity. This city does have some of the greatest concentrations of wealth and success in the world, but it also has some serious issues with poverty and wider disadvantage.

Having London journalists reporting on London does a really great service to our diverse city, because London is about much more than the two cities of London and Westminster; boroughs such as mine, the London borough of Redbridge, and outer-London boroughs such as Havering, Bromley and Hounslow, are also part of this great and diverse city. Without the London regional political coverage, so many of the issues facing outer-London boroughs as well as the heart of London would be missed.

It is important also to recognise the powerful role of investigative journalism. I am thinking in particular of some of the reports that have stayed with me from the BBC's "Sunday Politics London", such as its groundbreaking reporting on female genital mutilation in our city. It reports not just on the problems we face, but on the great successes we have seen. There was a really great report and discussion one Sunday in which I took part with panellists from the London borough of Waltham Forest. As my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) knows, I hate paying tribute to the London borough of Waltham Forest, but on that occasion it really did deserve it.

There has been great reporting on the challenges in the provision of sexual health services in the city, and on the unique pressures faced in London. Crime is a concern in every part of the country, and to all our constituents, but we know that in London crime manifests itself in a variety of ways, particularly serious organised crime, violent crime and the crime associated with county lines, which starts in London but travels across the country. We have seen some great reporting on that too.

I have alluded to the awful and completely unjustifiable levels of poverty that still exist in this city—the children who are moved from pillar to post in temporary bed-and-breakfast accommodation because they do not have a decent home to call their own, the levels of hunger and the levels of homelessness. All of that is given an airing and greater salience across the city, particularly among Londoners who may not know what it is like to live in poverty. That is an enormous public service.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) said, we have to bear in mind the trend towards the devolution of power in our country—long may it continue. I do not think it is a coincidence that as well as having striking levels of poverty and inequality in our country, we have enormous regional economic imbalances. It is no coincidence that there is so much wealth, prosperity and opportunity concentrated in London and the south-east, and that we have one of the most concentrated systems of political governance in the western world.

I hope the trend of the devolution of power will continue, but with it has to come the scrutiny that local and regional journalism brings. I know that even the Mayor of London can sometimes find himself at fault—even he is not perfect—and it is important that, whether it is the Mayor of London or other great local leaders

across the country, they are held to account by strong regional political journalism. In London, we have that in abundance.

To conclude, it seems to me that with its review, the BBC is conducting one of those exercises that we in politics will find very familiar: we are told that there is a consultation and that there are open minds, but in fact the result is predetermined. I deeply hope that my cynicism is unjustified in this case. If not, I hope that the strength of feeling in the Chamber this evening, with an unusual turn-out for an Adjournment debate, helps to change minds at the heart of the BBC.

7.7 pm

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing this very important debate. There has been a fair bit of consensus in the Chamber today; I fear that I may make a few comments that do not secure consensus across the House, but I will speak freely.

This is an important debate because, unfortunately, the BBC's plan to cut local news coverage is, in my view, another sign of the BBC badly missing the mark and demonstrating how out of touch its national leadership has become from the majority of its audience. Public confidence in the BBC is, I would argue, hanging by a thread, not least after increasing instances of political bias in its national news coverage. At the height of the covid-19 outbreak, for example, five doctors and nurses were interviewed as part of a "Panorama" programme on the supply of personal protective equipment, and were critical of the Government's response. It emerged later that all of them were long-standing Labour party activists or supporters. The BBC either failed to realise that or, worse, went ahead with such a one-sided piece anyway.

Public confidence in the BBC has also been knocked recently—I am not saying this just because it is my favourite comedy—by high-minded executives removing programmes such as "Little Britain" from its iPlayer platform, over theories that some of the characters could be construed as offensive. This senseless decision, taken on viewers' behalf, implies that those of us who continue to enjoy comedies such as "Little Britain" have something fundamentally wrong with us and that we cannot be trusted to watch a comedy programme from just over a decade ago without taking away the wrong messages that fall below today's standards of political correctness.

It is actually quite chilling that a state broadcaster, funded by taxpayers and licence fee payers, is taking decisions to erase parts of our past, with no consultation or democratic process. The national leadership of the BBC therefore needs to be careful what it wishes for when it looks at cutting local news coverage to make just £125 million of savings.

I turn to some things that other Members on the Government Benches might agree with—I have some slightly fluffy, positive things to say. Unlike the BBC's often contentious national coverage, which is out of touch on many decisions, the BBC's local news and politics coverage is one of the few BBC outputs that still unites many of us in support of the corporation. In the BBC's local news coverage, including the excellent BBC Radio Suffolk and BBC Look East, we have household

names such as Andrew Sinclair and Mark Murphy, who has the morning show on BBC Radio Suffolk. I mention BBC Radio Suffolk because I fear that the decision on regional politics TV coverage will have implications for our brilliant local BBC stations.

The message that must be sent to the BBC is that many Members of this House are very much undecided when it comes to the future of the BBC and whether the licence fee should be looked at. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) is slightly more robust in his view and has obviously come to his decision, but those such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) and I are undecided. I remember sitting down with the head of radio content for Norfolk and Suffolk, who asked me for my position on the matter. At the time, I thought the BBC nationally could be treated separately from the BBC locally, but, of course, he explained that we could not. I had all sorts of issues with national BBC coverage—I have just outlined some of them—but, for me, BBC Radio Suffolk and BBC Look East are incredibly important to our local democracy in holding politicians to account.

That the BBC could not be separated out was the reason why I said, on balance, that I just about supported the licence fee. Of course, in the last few months more concerns have been raised about BBC impartiality in some coverage, and now we have this debate about the future of BBC regional political shows, which could easily morph into the future of local radio stations. My message to the BBC is to think carefully about the decisions it makes in the coming months, because they could just have an implication for the corporation's future.

7.12 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt). May I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) for bringing about the debate? I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on raising this matter last week in the Chamber and really pushing the debate along.

I am not going to bash the BBC. I am very proud of the BBC. It has been one of our most fabulous exports and one of the great institutions of this nation. Just witness the exports it has driven for us and some of the original programming it has created. In the agenda it has driven, whether it be political, environmental, social or whatever, it has made a huge contribution, and the cost that comes at to a household is presently 43p a day. I remember it running an advert when it was 20p a day—it does not seem that long ago; it was probably 15 or 20 years ago—but when we take into account cost-of-living rises and inflation, we see the value we derive from it is huge, given its cost per day to the average person.

The great thing about the BBC has been its regionality. I have lived in different regions of England and spent several years in more or less every place, and what is interesting is feeling part of that region and its identity. One of the greatest achievements of the BBC, with the demise of the regional ITV network, has been the strength and sense of cohesion within regions that it has helped foster. Latterly, I have established myself in the midlands

[*Matt Western*]

again, where I find myself with Nick Owen. Some hon. Members may remember Nick Owen—a great TV professional, who was on national TV for many years and now fronts “Midlands Today”, and so on. I think about credibility and trust, which many hon. Members have raised, and these individuals have earned, over many years, the confidence and credibility to present programming and give a sense of cohesion and regional identity. That also translates into the political programming that they deliver.

Shortly after getting elected in 2017, I found myself on the “Sunday Politics” programme and it was great. I cannot remember quite what the issues were, but there I was with Margot James—until recently, the Member of Parliament for Stourbridge—and we had a good discussion about all sorts of things. We were in front of the cameras presenting our case on those particular topics. I think that that has been really important and is worth fighting for.

It seems counterintuitive to be here discussing this when we are pushing for, and the public want, greater devolution, with more mayors, more combined authorities and perhaps more police and crime commissioners—although the jury is out on that one. They should be held to account. They should be on these programmes explaining to the public how they arrive at their priorities, how they are spending the money and what they see as important, and without this sort of programming, those people will not be visible. They will not be seen and heard. They may have a very good case to make, but they will not be heard. It is really important for our democracy that these platforms are available to them. Of course, it is important that we as MPs have that visibility, scrutiny and accountability as well.

After that first appearance, I was amazed at the number of people who texted me to say, “I saw you on ‘Sunday Politics.’” I did not realise that so many people had watched it, but it just goes to show that it did have an audience. One of the realisations of the last few years—with the trauma and seismic upheaval of Brexit, and now with the crisis of covid-19—is just how many people are tuned into political programming, because they want to understand what is going on. This is where the platforms are so important. It is about having the chance to explain why, with covid-19, there may be a regional disparity and why there might be different reactions from local authorities on how they are going about their programmes for recovery.

I can think back to times over the last few years when there has been programming challenging some of the issues in our region—for example, on Northamptonshire County Council and how it spent all that money building itself a new council office. Regional programming was needed to bring that out and expose it to the public. More locally, I have been campaigning against Warwick District Council, which is trying to do a similar thing. We have managed to stop it, but that was put out in the public sphere and we had that debate. That is why regional programming is important.

We have heard a lot in this debate about the value of “Inside Out” as a programme and how cost-effective it is. We think of its annual budget of £6 million for

60 people, with 11 regions serviced, and of how much it has fed into the different platforms in national news, online and so on.

Lia Nici: Given our levelling-up agenda and all our creative jobs around the country and in the different nations, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the proposed cuts to programmes such as “Sunday Politics” and “Inside Out” will have a huge impact on freelancers who are already struggling to keep their earnings going as productions are reduced throughout the covid period? This news will be absolutely devastating for them, but it also means that our creative industries will only be able to be run from the big metropolitan areas. What we want is good creative people across all our nations.

Matt Western: I agree entirely with the hon. Member. One of the great strengths of this country is its creativity and its media output. We are a huge exporter, as she will know very well from her own background, which she was describing earlier. She will know not only how valuable that export is, but how influential and how powerful it is in terms of the soft power that we project, or have projected perhaps until recently. It is something that we need to hold on to.

Just to go a little bit further into “Inside Out”, it is an extremely valuable strand because of how much it feeds into other programming. The story about Sports Direct and the investigation that was undertaken were mentioned earlier. That programme investigated that issue in the old-fashioned way. Its team realised that there had been 50 or 60 emergencies where ambulances had been called to a warehouse. They undertook that investigation to understand what had been going on, because so many workers were working in such shocking conditions in terms of the hours they were working, having too few breaks and so on. That is why these sorts of programmes are so important.

I understand that there is huge financial pressure on the BBC. The fact that households are paying 43p a day, I think, is quite ridiculous for such a fantastic service. One cannot even get half a chocolate bar for that kind of money. If we compare that with the cost of a pint or a coffee, I think that 43p is a very low cost for impartial, quality news programming and proper investigative journalism to ensure that politicians are held to account. That is why this issue is so important.

The future will be challenging for all sectors, including for the BBC. I understand the challenge with this particular programming—with the “Sunday Politics”, for example—because live programming is expensive. On the one hand, it is unaffordable, but then the recorded programming is unacceptable when we are so used to having immediate live content. With the changes in technology and how we have managed to adapt in recent months, I urge the BBC to think about finding ways to ensure that those in power are still held to account and are able to try to make their case for whatever is being debated that day.

With charter renewal coming up and future funding debates looming, the BBC must be careful that the issue does not play into the hands of its detractors, because it is vital that the case is made on the BBC’s behalf. The BBC provides an incredibly valuable service. The public want political news, whether that is Brexit, covid-19 or other things, and they want visibility and accountability.

To conclude, the BBC is a great asset and the regionality it provides has been so important for many decades. It is an incredibly valuable thing that we have in this country. We are one of the most centralised nations in the world—certainly in Europe—and the devolution of power that I think many of us are seeking needs to be held to account, and that is why the programming of “Sunday Politics” and of “Inside Out” should be retained and is so important to us all.

7.24 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): There have been many good contributions this evening in which hon. Members have raised all the broad issues relating to the decision the BBC has to make. I will not follow those; instead, I will focus on a single specific issue, which is the nature of political discourse and the contribution that local and regional BBC coverage makes to supporting good-quality political discourse. That is a very important issue for our time.

Perhaps it is because of the rise of social media, but there is an amplification of anger, which we all experience in our political lives and in the political life of the nation. Anger and confrontation, the virtue-signalling “gotcha” moment, the classification of the opponent as the “other”, the near-dehumanisation of political opponents—all these things are corrosive of our national political life. In my view, the BBC’s national political output is running very close to following that negative development.

One has only to look at “Newsnight” to start thinking of it as the telecast equivalent of the “gotcha” tweet, with constant interruptions and the imposition of the journalist’s viewpoint over that of the politician, regardless of their party or political viewpoint, who is being asked to express their view and is then prevented physically from doing so. Compare that with “Sunday Politics” and the regional coverage of the BBC, where we see time being given to politicians to make their political point and then to be challenged on it—not shouted at or interrupted, but respectfully challenged in a hard-hitting manner in a discourse that is polite, where the nuances can be seen, rather than the black versus white that the “Newsnight” type of environment encourages. It is discursive, not abusive, and it can focus on local issues which, as I mentioned in an intervention, are becoming more, not less, important as time goes on. As we devolve power to the regions, as we get more elected metropolitan mayors, as the impact of the actions of our county and second-tier councils is more apparent in the lives and the quality of life of our constituents, so we should focus more, not less, on local issues.

I regard the national political focus of the BBC as being more equivalent to PMQs, and “The Politics Show” and the time that is given to it as being more equivalent to the quality of this debate. I leave it to the House to decide which is the most edifying.

7.28 pm

The Minister for Media and Data (Mr John Whittingdale): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on holding this important debate. It is certainly one of the best attended Adjournment debates that I have been present at, as well as one of the longest, but perhaps more important is the fact that there have been a large number of excellent contributions and a large degree of agreement across the House on the importance of the BBC’s regional politics and current

affairs coverage. I welcome the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), who has been in his place throughout the entire debate. I am delighted to see him in his new role as Opposition spokesman.

I will also take this opportunity to congratulate Tim Davie on his appointment as director-general, and to pay tribute to Lord Hall, who has served as director-general for seven years. He took over the position in challenging times, and I think it fair to say that they have remained fairly challenging throughout his time, but he has done an excellent job in bringing leadership to the BBC. I certainly enjoyed working with him during our debates on the renewal of the BBC’s charter.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) said, the BBC has also played an extremely important role in the course of the past few months during this crisis. It has provided important factual information and reinforced the Government’s messaging. It has also provided great entertainment, and it has done a great job in providing programming for children unable to attend classes in schools through BBC Bitesize.

I want to start by saying that I am a strong supporter of the BBC and I also believe very strongly in the independence of the BBC. It is not for the Government to instruct the BBC how to fulfil the objectives that it is set in the charter. The Government have three roles when it comes to the BBC. It is to draw up the charter, which sets out the purposes of the BBC. However, the way in which the BBC meets those is a matter for the BBC under the scrutiny of Ofcom. The Government also have a role in the appointment of the chair of the BBC and some Members of the board and, thirdly, in the setting of the licence fee.

Andy Carter: Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is a test for Ofcom? This is the first time that Ofcom, in its role as a regulator of the BBC, will be able to look at what the BBC is doing in terms of its regional content. It will allow the Ofcom members to take a decision and a view on how the BBC will set those out going forward. This is quite an important time for the regulator to step forward and look at what the BBC is doing.

Mr Whittingdale: My hon. Friend is right in that it has only been since the new charter was put in place that Ofcom has had the role as an external scrutineer of the BBC, and it is the role of Ofcom to ensure that the BBC is meeting its purposes. He quoted in his own remarks one of those purposes from the charter and I want to come back to that, because he is absolutely right that providing regional coverage is one of the purposes that the BBC is required to fulfil. Having made it clear in my remarks that I do not intend to instruct the BBC, because I think it is completely wrong for the Government to attempt to do so, nevertheless, I entirely understand the concern that has been expressed by hon. Gentlemen from across the House about the BBC’s decision to cancel the autumn series of “Inside Out”.

Neil Parish: What tonight’s debate has shown is that, across the House, there is united support for keeping regional programmes and for making them even more local than they are now. We need to get that message across loud and clear. I understand that it not the Government’s perspective to dictate to the BBC, but it is also right that we send from this House a clear message that the BBC should maintain regional programmes and enhance them.

Mr Whittingdale: I agree with my hon. Friend, which is why I am grateful to him for having applied for and obtained this debate, because I have absolutely no doubt that the BBC will be watching it and that it will take account of the strength of feeling that has been expressed from all parts of this House. I am talking not just about the current affairs programmes, but also about the “Sunday Politics” show. As the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) pointed out, it was only last week that more than 100 of the industry’s most well-known figures, including Sir Lenny Henry, Stephen Fry, Fern Britton and Ken Loach, signed a public letter to the BBC to express their concerns over the future of these programmes and the impact that their withdrawal would have on the communities that they serve. These are programmes that have brought us first-class investigative journalism, and they are at the very core of public service broadcasting. One of the signatories of the letter was Samira Ahmed, who many of us will know having been subjected to questioning by her on the “Today” programme. She wrote:

“I was proud to be part of an Inside Out investigation for BBC Leeds that dared to tackle difficult issues around race and exploitation in the Rotherham Grooming Scandal. Now more than ever we need honest, fearless journalism that is rooted in the long-term expertise and professionalism of BBC journalists who know their local communities.”

I agree with the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) that the BBC is one of the most recognised and trusted brands across the world and that it produces some of the best TV and radio across the globe. As the Prime Minister put it, it is an institution to be cherished. Whether it is the recent drama on the Salisbury poisonings or the documentary following the work of the north-east ambulance service, the BBC lies at the heart of our public service broadcasting system, producing world-class content that serves to stimulate our interest, broaden our understanding, and help us to engage with the world around us.

That understanding of the world, and the BBC’s role as our national broadcaster, has never been more important. As we emerge from the crisis caused by coronavirus, we find ourselves at a time of increasing mistrust and facing an almost daily battle against misinformation. In that world, where “fake news” has had to be added to the dictionary, it is vital that the BBC upholds the values and standards we have all come to expect. The public should be able to turn to the BBC for transparent, impartial, reliable news and current affairs.

That applies just as much, if not perhaps even more strongly, in regional and local coverage, which is the focus of this debate. In the past few months, UK audiences have been turning back to television news. In the last week of March, 79% of UK adults watched the BBC network and regional news on television—up 20% on the previous month. Since the outbreak of coronavirus, the 6.30 pm regional news programme on the BBC has often been the most watched programme on television on any given day.

BBC local radio has also played a very important role. For instance, the BBC local radio “Make a Difference” campaign, which allowed a number of people to call to ask for help, support or advice and reassurance, received over 1 million calls.

Mr Perkins: Given the statistics that the right hon. Gentleman has outlined about the success of this output, what does it say about the BBC’s priorities that it would

even consider getting rid of these incredibly popular local programmes that are of such importance to people, at a time when it continues to make the other decisions that it does about the kind of output it has?

Mr Whittingdale: I fully understand why the hon. Gentleman regards that as a mistake by the BBC, and it is one that I personally would agree with him about. I will go on to set out why I think it is right that we ask the BBC to think again.

As my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Warrington South said, the royal charter sets out the public purposes of the BBC. One of these is:

“To reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom’s nations and regions”.

It goes on to say that the BBC

“should offer a range and depth of analysis...so that all audiences can engage fully with major local, regional, national, United Kingdom and global issues”.

Regional news and current affairs programmes are at the very heart of this particular public purpose. First, they fulfil a vital role in providing local content, which helps to sustain local democracy. A number of Members have made the point that that is becoming particularly important as we look at devolving more power to regions and local communities. It is essential that that takes place and that, at the same time, people who are holding that power are held properly to account. We all know that many of the issues affecting Plymouth will be completely different from those that impact on Hull, Devon or Coventry. It is important that all those different issues are aired properly and that politics does not seem to be only about Westminster—or, even, the London bubble.

People also want to know that they are heard, especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds and in diverse communities across the UK. They need to know that the issues that matter to them matter to us all, and they need the opportunity to engage in balanced debates and participate in the conversations that shape their daily lives. It is only through broadcasting those kinds of stories and conversations through regional TV or local radio that we can build the true picture of British life.

The second area of vital importance for local news and current affairs programmes, which has been referred to by several hon. Members, is the extremely important role they play in forming the next generation of skilled journalists. Without that training ground, some of the best known names in broadcasting today would not have had a start.

I will say a few words about each of the different areas of regional programming that the debate has covered. First, on the regional political coverage, the weekly regional political show plays a vital role in highlighting issues that may be of huge local importance but will probably never make it on to the national news. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who is no longer in his place, pointed out, those shows are often the only opportunity that Members of Parliament have to go on television to talk about the issues that affect them and their constituents. In my region, the “Politics East” programme, with which my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) and the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) will be familiar—as, of course, will you, Madam Deputy Speaker—does an extremely good job in covering political developments

in the region, as well as the debates that we have here on issues that are relevant to the region. If a Member from a particular region obtains an Adjournment debate on an issue that is of extreme importance to his or her constituents, we can look to the BBC's regional political show to at least give it some coverage.

The idea that a single politics England show could somehow substitute is wholly unrealistic, as the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) pointed out. The population of the east of England—from which you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I come—is over 6 million. That is more than the population of Scotland, yet Scotland is served by its own channel, BBC Scotland, which was launched in February 2019, and includes a huge amount of coverage of Scottish issues. That is not in any way wrong—it is as much a part of the BBC's public purpose to provide that programming as it is for any other part—but it does seem to illustrate why it is mistaken for the BBC to provide that amount of coverage of the Scottish nation while diminishing, and almost removing, the equivalent coverage that takes place of the 11 regions of England.

I turn to the current affairs programme that the BBC provides, "Inside Out". As has been pointed out by a several hon. Members, "Inside Out" has carried out a number of in-depth investigations of huge importance, many of which went on to become national stories, but probably would not have done so had it not been for the initial investigative journalism done by "Inside Out". The example of the working practices of Sports Direct has already been mentioned; Samira Ahmed drew attention to the Rotherham child grooming case; and there was a recent programme about the impact of smart motorways. All are hugely important stories that, one has to suspect, would not have ever been revealed had it not been for the work of the journalists on "Inside Out".

At a time when powers are being devolved to a more local level, it is all the more important that the scrutiny that a programme such as "Inside Out" provides is carried out. That is particularly reinforced given what is happening to other local media, as several hon. Members have mentioned. It is the case that both local newspapers and local radio are under tremendous threat. Sadly, we have seen a number of local newspapers shedding journalists

or, in some cases, even going out of business, and that has made the BBC's task of scrutinising and holding local institutions to account all the more important.

Local news production shows the BBC's unique value compared with strong national and international competitors. The choice available to viewers is growing, with new entrants such as Netflix, Amazon, Apple and Disney. That makes it all the more important that the BBC focuses on the role of providing public service broadcasting, which will not be provided by those commercially oriented, market-driven companies. My right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) questioned the future of the licence fee and rightly said that one of the principal justifications for the licence fee is that it funds a broadcaster which provides programming that otherwise would not exist. That has always been at the heart of the purpose of the public service broadcasting landscape, and particularly the BBC.

The BBC is uniquely privileged in that it receives public funding. It has been protected against the hurricane that has hit the rest of commercial media as a result of the loss of advertising during the covid crisis. The BBC has a protected income, and in that climate, it is all the more important that it continues to provide public service broadcasting. My view, and the general tone of this whole debate, is that regional political and current affairs coverage is at the heart of public service broadcasting.

As I say, it is not for me to tell the BBC how it should deliver the public purposes or use the money given to it through the licence fee, but I believe that regional news and current affairs are of great importance, because they are vital for our democracy, they help to train future journalists and they help the BBC and other public service broadcasters to remain relevant in this changing media landscape. I am confident that the BBC will have been watching this debate, and I hope that it will take account of the feelings and views expressed by all Members and decide to continue—indeed, strengthen—its regional political and current affairs coverage.

Question put and agreed to.

7.47 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 22 June 2020

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Business Update

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): Today, the Government will lay two separate pieces of secondary legislation to amend the Enterprise Act 2002. The first will allow the Government to intervene in qualifying mergers, including acquisitions, to maintain UK capability to combat and mitigate the impact of public health emergencies.

The second will lower the thresholds for intervention in mergers on public interest grounds for three sensitive sectors of the economy, intended to address any national security risks that may arise related to these sectors.

The Enterprise Act 2002 (Specification of Additional Section 58 Consideration) Order 2020

The Enterprise Act 2002 (Specification of Additional Section 58 Consideration) Order 2020 introduces a new public interest consideration for Government intervention in mergers and acquisitions. This new public interest consideration allows the Government to intervene in mergers involving businesses with a role in combating or mitigating the impacts of public health emergencies, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic.

The economic disruption caused by the pandemic may mean that some businesses with critical capabilities are more susceptible to takeovers—either from outwardly hostile approaches, or financially distressed companies being sold to malicious parties.

These new powers will enable the Government to intervene if a business that is directly involved in a pandemic response, for example, a vaccine research company or personal protective equipment manufacturer, finds itself the target of a takeover.

As this instrument is subject to the made affirmative procedure it has been made today and will come into effect tomorrow.

The draft Enterprise Act 2002 (Share of Supply Test) (Amendment) Order 2020

The draft Enterprise Act 2002 (Share of Supply Test) (Amendment) Order 2020 will amend the Secretary of State's powers to scrutinise mergers in three sensitive sectors of the economy on public interest grounds: artificial intelligence, cryptographic authentication technology and advanced materials. These changes are intended to address any national security risks that may arise relating to these sectors. The Government made similar changes in 2018 for three other critical sectors: military/dual-use technologies, computing hardware and quantum technology.

Separately, the Government will lay an accompanying instrument, the Enterprise Act 2002 (Turnover Test) (Amendment) Order 2020, which will be subject to the negative resolution procedure. Together, these two instruments will add the enterprise categories to a list of 'relevant enterprises' which are subject to lower intervention thresholds. The turnover test for intervention in these sectors will be lowered to £1 million; and the 'share of

supply' will be met where an enterprise supplies at least one quarter of all goods of a particular description and there is no longer a requirement for a merger to increase the share of supply.

These orders will therefore allow the Government to intervene on public interest grounds when smaller companies in these critical sectors might be vulnerable as a consequence of a merger or takeover. They will send an important signal to those seeking to take advantage of those struggling as a result of the pandemic that the UK Government are prepared to act where necessary to protect our national security.

I will also be placing copies of the non-statutory guidance relating to these amendments in the House Libraries.

[HCWS305]

CABINET OFFICE

Procurement Update

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): I previously provided a written statement on 29 April 2020 in relation to indemnities granted for IP infringement, in respect of the designs, and against product liability claims against the manufacturers of Rapidly Manufactured Ventilator System (RMVS) products through the Ventilator Challenge. I also laid a departmental minute before Parliament setting out the detail of these indemnities.

The Ventilator Challenge has been a resounding success, with four designs in production and over 7,500 devices delivered to the NHS. The Cabinet Office intends to grant similar indemnities in letters with other parties involved in the BlueSky Ventilators consortium. The contents of these letters are still under negotiation in the majority of cases.

It is normal practice, when a Government Department propose to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Department concerned to present to Parliament minute giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the minute, except in cases of special urgency.

Due to the urgent need to finalise the letters and release payments due to designers and manufacturers, it is not possible to allow the required 14 days' notice prior to the liabilities going live. Any delay would result in an unacceptable delay in payments due to designers and manufacturers who are supported by a largely SME supply chain.

The precise commercial terms that have been negotiated for each supplier are, and will remain, commercially confidential. While it is difficult to estimate the potential liability exposure, it could exceed £300,000. For this reason, I am informing Parliament of these arrangements.

On this basis, I have today laid before Parliament a departmental minute setting out what these indemnities are.

The Treasury has approved these liabilities. However, if any Member of Parliament has concerns they can contact the Cabinet Office who will be happy to provide a response.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2020-06-22/HCWS306/>.

[HCWS306]

TREASURY

Contingent Liability

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Bank of England decided at its meeting ending on 17 June to ask for an expansion in the maximum limit of purchases that may be undertaken by the Asset Purchase Facility (APF). This will encompass up to £100 billion of further purchases of gilts to support the economy.

In light of the latest economic conditions, the MPC judged further asset purchases financed by the issuance of central bank reserves should be undertaken to enable the MPC to meet its statutory objectives, and thereby support the economy. I have therefore authorised an increase in the total size of the APF of £100 billion. This will bring the maximum total size of the APF from £645 to £745 billion.

In line with the requirements in the MPC remit, the amendments to the APF that could affect the allocation of credit and pose risks to the Exchequer have been discussed with Treasury officials. The risk control framework previously agreed with the Treasury will remain in place, and HM Treasury will keep monitoring risks to public funds from the Facility through regular risk oversight meetings and enhanced information sharing with the Bank.

There will continue to be an opportunity for the Treasury to provide views to the MPC on the design of the schemes within the APF, as they affect the Government's broader economic objectives and may pose risks to the Exchequer.

The Government will continue to indemnify the Bank and the APF from any losses arising out of, or in connection with, the Facility. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

A full departmental Minute has been laid in the House of Commons providing more detail on this contingent liability.

[HCWS303]

EDUCATION

Educational Disadvantage: Covid-19

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson):

Every pupil in the country has experienced unprecedented disruption to their education as a result of coronavirus (covid-19). Those from the most vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds will be among those hardest hit. The aggregate impact of lost time in education will be substantial: the scale of our response must match the scale of the challenge. Returning to normal educational routines as quickly as possible will be critical to our national recovery, which is why the Government are working towards all pupils returning to school in September.

To further support pupils to catch up, the Government have announced a package worth £1 billion to ensure that schools have the resources they need to help all pupils make up for lost teaching time, with extra support for those who need it most.

Six-hundred-and-fifty million pounds will be spent on ensuring all pupils have the chance to catch up and supporting schools to rise to the challenge. While headteachers will decide how the money is spent, the Education Endowment Foundation has published guidance on effective interventions to support schools to make the best use of resources.

Alongside this universal offer, we will roll out a national tutoring programme, worth £350 million, which will deliver proven and successful interventions to the most disadvantaged young people, accelerating their academic progress and preventing the gap between them and their more affluent peers widening. The evidence shows that tutoring is an effective way to accelerate learning, and we therefore believe a targeted tutoring offer is the best way to narrow the gaps that risk opening up due to school closures.

[HCWS304]

Petitions

Monday 22 June 2020

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Animal shelter in Wood Green

The petition of residents of Hornsey and Wood Green,

Declares that the future of the wood green Animals Shelter should be safeguarded; notes the significant and long lasting history of the shelter and the charity in the community; further notes the current Charity are seeking to close the shelter in the near future; further notes that a public petition by residents across the UK, organised by Catherine West MP and local residents, has attracted over 2000 signatures in support of safeguarding the future of the shelter.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to press upon Wood Green, the Animals Charity, to stay in the Wood Green Area and maintain the operation of the shelter, and to safeguard its long-term position.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Catherine West, *Official Report*, 3 March 2020; Vol. 672, c. 806.]

[P002563]

Observations from The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice):

Thank you for presenting a petition in Parliament on 3 March about the closure of Wood Green Animal Shelter

The Government recognise the good work animal rescue charities do in rehoming animals. We are committed to improving animal welfare, and we have made good progress. We have introduced a ban on wild animals in travelling circuses, and created one of the world's toughest ivory bans. We have banned the commercial third party sale of puppies and kittens and introduced mandatory CCTV in slaughterhouses. Additionally, we will consult on banning keeping primates as pets, banning hunting trophies and banning the live export of animals for slaughter and fattening. We have also updated the licensing schemes for dog breeding, pet selling, animal boarding, riding schools and exhibiting animals. The Government is supporting the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill, currently before Parliament, which will increase the maximum custodial penalty for animal cruelty from six months' imprisonment to five years' imprisonment.

The Government maintain a good working relationship with animal welfare stakeholders, both directly and through the canine and feline sector group (CFSG), an umbrella organisation which represents a number of key stakeholders including animal welfare, industry and veterinary organisations, including Wood Green animal shelter, and which acts as a conduit of information from the cat and dog welfare field directly to the Animal Health and Welfare Board for England. This keeps us informed about issues as they arise.

We have been in contact with Wood Green Animal Shelter who have explained the reasons for closing the Hornsey branch. Wood Green aim to focus their resources

on one site in Godmanchester in Hertfordshire, which is able to provide better facilities in a more cost effective way. Although Wood Green will cease to have a base in the Hornsey area they have assured me that they will continue to provide the area with an animal collection service from their base in Godmanchester. This decision was taken prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus and the associated restrictions.

Many animal rescue charities are having to take decisions that will ensure that they are able to continue caring for and rehoming animals. Wood Green are a responsible animal shelter and would not be taking decisions that would compromise the welfare of their animals. I therefore consider that Wood Green's decision to concentrate on one location is in the best interests of the animals in their care. By continuing a collection service in the Hornsey area, there will continue to be a service for animals in need.

I am sure anyone interested in volunteering to help animals, and unable to be accommodated by Wood Green, would be welcome at any number of other animal welfare rescue and rehoming charities in the north London area.

Thank you once again for taking the time to contact the Secretary of State about this issue.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Sale of riot equipment to the United States of America

The Petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the current volatile situation in the United States of America following the death of George Floyd is of great concern to many people in Scotland; considers that Black Lives Matter protests have been largely peaceful but that a disproportionate and heavy-handed police response has further stoked tensions, resulting in many injured protestors; and further that President Donald Trump's actions have not helped to de-escalate tensions.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to immediately suspend the sale of riot equipment to the United States of America and make representations to seek a de-escalation of tensions.

And the petitioners remain etc.—[Presented by Patricia Gibson, *Official Report*, 9 June 2020; Vol. 677, c. 261.]

[P002569]

Petitions in the same terms were presented by the hon. Members for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) [P002570]; and for Glasgow East (David Linden) [P002571].

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mr Ranil Jayawardena):

HM Government have been sorry to see the violence that has taken place in the United States of America.

We take our export control responsibilities very seriously and operate one of the most robust and transparent export control regimes in the world. We rigorously examine each export licence application on a case-by-case basis against the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria.

HM Government continue to monitor developments in the United States of America closely. We are able to review licences and suspend or revoke as necessary when circumstances require, and this is done in line with the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria.

We publish information on all export licences issued, refused and revoked on a quarterly and annual basis as official statistics on gov.uk. The most recent publication was in April, covering export licensing decisions taken up to the end of December 2019.

ORAL ANSWERS

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