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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 9 July 2020

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Tourism Sector: Reopening

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help the tourism sector reopen safely as covid-19 lockdown restrictions are eased. [904439]

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help the tourism sector reopen safely as covid-19 lockdown restrictions are eased. [904456]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): The tourism sector has been severely impacted by this crisis, and we are working closely with the sector to get it back on its feet, including developing covid-secure reopening guidance for tourism businesses. VisitBritain has introduced an industry-standard quality mark called “We’re Good to Go”, which businesses can use if they meet covid-secure guidelines, and it has had over 20,000 applications already. The new £10 million kick-start tourism package gives small businesses in tourist destinations grants of up to £5,000 to help them adapt their businesses.

Dr Hudson [V]: Last weekend I joined several businesses in my constituency as they reopened and saw the great work they had done to reopen safely. Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking the tourism and hospitality businesses in Penrith and The Border and across the country for their efforts in preparing to reopen safely? Further to the welcome announcements from the Chancellor yesterday, does he agree that these sectors, which may be slower to recover, should be kept under review, with additional Government support provided if necessary to help them through to the next full season?

Nigel Huddleston: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. Tourism and hospitality businesses right across the country have invested an incredible amount of time and

energy in getting ready to reopen. Tourism is vital to our economy. I, too, was delighted to see the sector take its first steps towards reopening last weekend and to hear the announcement yesterday of a cut in VAT. Earlier this week I participated in a roundtable organised by Cumbria Tourism, with which I know my hon. Friend has been working closely. I will continue to monitor the situation and engage closely with business.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend will know from his visit to the Cotswolds last Saturday how important tourism is. In particular, the arts are very important. The Barn theatre in Cirencester is a relatively new and highly innovative theatre that has done an awful lot during the covid period to keep people informed through social media about the Government guidelines. Will he ensure that that theatre and other small theatres like it get their fair share of the £1.5 billion for theatres and the arts?

Nigel Huddleston: I would like to thank the Barn theatre for all that it has done to help the local community during the coronavirus crisis. Indeed, I thank tourism, leisure and arts businesses across the country, and it was a pleasure to visit some of them in my hon. Friend’s constituency last weekend. I can confirm that the purpose of the £1.57 billion cultural support fund is to support organisations across the cultural sector right across the country, including those that do not have a history of receiving public funding. More information on the eligibility criteria and application process will come by the end of this month, and I encourage the Barn theatre to apply.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op) After staffing, the largest cost that many tourism and hospitality businesses face is their rent. One of the sector’s main asks for yesterday’s statement was help with rent. There is a moratorium on evictions until September. However, many pubs, restaurants, amusement arcades, small museums and other tourist destinations face their quarterly rent bills when they have had no income. What additional steps are the Government taking to help them and ensure that we do not see mass closures?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those comments and I know he shares my concerns about the sector, which is why we have taken so many measures. The issue with rent has been raised in the working group. He is right that there has been a moratorium. We continue to look at further measures. The range of measures already announced are being taken advantage of by the sector, whether it is loans, grants, business rates relief or furlough. The VAT reduction yesterday was welcomed across the sector, but we will continue to engage with it and see what further assistance may be required.

Voluntary and Community Sector: Covid-19

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): What steps he has taken to support the voluntary and community sector through the covid-19 outbreak. [904440]

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure the sustainability of civil society organisations and charities affected by the covid-19 outbreak. [904453]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): The Government announced an unprecedented £750 million funding package supporting frontline charities to continue their vital work during the covid-19 outbreak, and we have unlocked a further £150 million from dormant bank accounts and building society accounts. In addition, there is the coronavirus job retention scheme and a host of other measures announced by the Chancellor yesterday.

Ian Lavery [V]: The work of the voluntary sector in Northumberland and across the country has been absolutely priceless during the covid-19 pandemic. The work has been literally life-saving for many of the most vulnerable people in our communities. However, Northumberland Community Voluntary Action reports that half the organisations that it represents have less than six months' reserves and a third expect to lose 50% of that income because of fundraising restrictions. Will the Minister give his cast-iron assurance, first, that for these essential organisations, Government funding will be targeted at local areas rather than being funnelled into the larger national organisations and, secondly, that Government assistance and support in the post-pandemic era will focus heavily on the operational challenges that will be required to function in the nation's new norm?

Matt Warman: I, too, pay tribute to the extraordinary work of charities in Wansbeck and beyond. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we need to focus on the vital work done by so many small charities. That is precisely why the £750 million of funding is being administered in the way that it is, and we are working as hard as we possibly can to get it to those charities as quickly as possible.

Dean Russell: Does my hon. Friend agree that, when the Secretary of State kindly spoke to Tom Cruise and the producers of "Mission: Impossible" on my behalf recently, he showed a real need for speed in putting together a cocktail of measures for the entertainment industry? It is our critics who cannot handle the truth that his actions were helping more than a few good men and women return to work across civil society and the entertainment industry in Leavesden in Watford. May I assure you, Mr Speaker, that this message will not self-destruct?

Matt Warman: My hon. Friend rightly pays tribute to an extraordinary industry. The only thing that I would say in addition is that he clearly deserves a cameo role in that next "Mission: Impossible" film.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Follow that!

One of the best ways to support the voluntary sector is to listen to it when it calls for a policy change. For example, the petition of Age UK to keep over-75s' TV licences free has now attracted more than 634,000 signatures, while 93% of the nearly 90,000 pensioners who responded to a survey by the charity said that television had become more important since the pandemic erupted. The BBC is cutting jobs and content to pay for the cost of the licence, which was dumped on it by the Government, and pensioners are forced to choose between eating and watching TV. Will the Government now listen to Age UK and reverse this unfair policy?

Matt Warman: The fact is that the BBC has had a generous licence fee settlement, and it is deeply disappointing that it has chosen to go down the path that it is apparently going down. I hope, of course, that there is yet time to reconsider that, because the hon. Gentleman is right to say that television has been a vital comfort for many people in the past few months, and it is a vital part of our national economy as well.

Broadband Delivery

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (SNP): What steps he is taking to ensure the effective delivery of broadband services. [904442]

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What steps he is taking to ensure the effective delivery of broadband services. [904454]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): The Government are investing £5 billion to deliver nationwide gigabit-capable broadband as soon as possible to ensure that the hardest parts of the country to reach are not left behind. We are also removing barriers to roll-out, for example by introducing legislation to make it easier for operators to connect to blocks of flats, and £1.8 billion has already been spent in making sure that 96% of the country can now access superfast broadband.

Kenny MacAskill [V]: Those words from the Minister are all very well, but the A1 and the east coast main line run through my constituency, as does the National Grid with Torness and Cockenzie, yet the essential medium, as shown during this coronavirus crisis, is connectivity and broadband. Much of that remains poor and entirely inadequate. Given that the Government's target is only 91% for geographic mobile coverage in Scotland, yet it is 98% in England, when can my constituents expect the broadband and mobile coverage that is required for this coronavirus crisis, let alone for the 21st century?

Matt Warman: As I have said, we have an ambition to deliver gigabit-capable broadband as fast as possible, and we are working with the Scottish Government to deliver that. I look forward to another meeting with my Scottish counterpart, Paul Wheelhouse, next week, because it is vital that we work together on this. The geography of Scotland is, of course, uniquely challenging, but we should not let that serve as a barrier to our ambitions.

Marion Fellows [V]: It is clear that post-covid society will rely even more on reliable broadband internet than it has until now. The Secretary of State's predecessor struggled with the reserved nature of broadband and telecommunications, so will the Minister and the Secretary of State now accept that this is an area reserved to Westminster, and will the Minister commit now to matching the level of funding for Scotland that Northern Ireland has enjoyed recently?

Matt Warman: We have put an additional £21 million into Scottish broadband, on top of the £101 million already invested in Scotland by the UK Government. The hon. Lady is right that we need to go as far and as fast as we possibly can, which is why we are working with the Scottish Government to make sure that it is

possible to increase coverage and that Scotland does not miss out on anything that it needs in this 21st-century connected environment. It is vital that we do that, and the challenging geography will not be a barrier to our ambitions.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) [V]: I am concerned that the Government have gone completely silent on their 2025 roll-out target for gigabit-capable broadband; instead, we are told that it will be delivered as soon as possible. It has been five months since the Secretary of State last pledged in the House the Government's commitment to the Conservative manifesto promise. No statement has been made, and industry voices are growing anxious that without immediate action to address the policy barriers, there is simply no chance whatsoever of achieving the target. Meanwhile, thousands of businesses across rural Scotland continue to struggle with archaic internet speeds. For the avoidance of doubt and for the record: 2025—yes or no?

Matt Warman: The Government have been clear that we will go as fast as we possibly can. We are removing the barriers that the hon. Gentleman discussed, but it is also right to say that it is an immensely challenging target. Going as fast as possible is the right thing to do, and we will work as hard as we possibly can to go as far as we possibly can by 2025. My ambition is absolutely to reach the number in our manifesto that the hon. Gentleman describes.

Rural Gigabit Connectivity Programme

Kate Griffiths (Burton) (Con): What progress his Department has made on the roll-out of the rural gigabit connectivity programme. [904443]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): The programme to deliver rural gigabit connectivity is making excellent progress, with nearly 500 rural primary schools—200 more than planned—having an arrangement to fund a gigabit-broadband upgrade. We continue to connect other rural hub sites, including health sites, and issue vouchers to rural residents and small and medium-sized enterprises. We will work with devolved Administrations, local authorities and other Government Departments to ensure that as many public sector sites as possible can be included in the programme.

Kate Griffiths [V]: The Staffordshire superfast programme team has done a considerable amount of work to bring superfast broadband services to my constituents in Burton and Uttoxeter, having reached more than 96% of east Staffordshire this year. However, I am concerned for those who live rurally, who are struggling to access connections of even 1 megabit per second. The community of Leigh, for example, has been quoted around £50,000 per household for a connection. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we might get affordable connections to our rural communities?

Matt Warman: I would of course be delighted to meet my hon. Friend. I pay tribute to the work that she is doing to champion this vital utility in the 21st century. Some of the geography of Leigh is challenging—a number of properties are a long way from exchanges—but

that is no excuse, which is why we are exploring all avenues. I look forward to discussing them with my hon. Friend.

Cultural Sector: Reopening

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help the cultural sector reopen as covid-19 lockdown restrictions are eased. [904444]

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help the cultural sector reopen as covid-19 lockdown restrictions are eased. [904448]

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help the cultural sector reopen as covid-19 lockdown restrictions are eased. [904452]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden): Arts and culture define our nation and form a vital part of the ecosystem that makes us a creative-industry superpower. At a time when the nation is crying out for comfort, they enrich our soul, which is why I was delighted this week to announce an unprecedented £1.57 billion package to help theatres, museums, live music venues and galleries to weather the ongoing storm. I want to see these institutions open their doors as soon as it is safe for them to do so. I am working extensively with the sector on how to achieve this and will be publishing further road map timings for further steps imminently.

Stephen Crabb: When it comes to live music and festivals, Britain probably leads the way. As the Secretary of State says, that success is built on an incredible ecosystem of British performers, technicians, sound engineers and many other freelancers. Will she say a bit more about how he intends the major package of funding that he announced on Monday to be used to support this important sector, which has taken a real battering over the past three months?

Oliver Dowden: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct to highlight the value of live music venues. I have engaged extensively with those in the sector, including hosting roundtables with them. I was determined that the package should include support for them, so it will cover areas such as grassroots music venues, concert halls and indoor arenas. We are defining live music venues, basically, as those wholly or mainly used for the performance of live music for the purposes of entertaining an audience.

Cherilyn Mackrory: In Cornwall, we have warmly welcomed the recent announcements from the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State, particularly in support of the arts, culture and heritage. In Truro and Falmouth, we are blessed to have a fantastic theatre on the brink of completion—namely, the Hall for Cornwall—which will serve the whole of Cornwall and act as a beacon for the arts in a whole county. What support can my right hon. Friend provide for organisations such as these, which are an integral part of our community?

Oliver Dowden: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I have been very clear right from the start in designing this package that it is intended to achieve two principal outcomes: first, to protect the crown jewels, our nationally and internationally significant institutions; and secondly, equally vitally, to help cultural institutions up and down the country where their loss would deprive communities of essential cultural experiences. We will be publishing the full criteria and processes shortly, and of course that will include, for example, demonstrating that they have exhausted all available funds. I know that my hon. Friend will be tirelessly making the case for Cornwall and, indeed, I hope the Minack theatre will soon be able to open as well.

Giles Watling: First, I thank my right hon. Friend for all the hard work, including putting up with me bothering him relentlessly, to achieve the remarkable result of the £1.57 billion for the arts and culture sector. Will he now agree to meet me and the all-party parliamentary group for theatre to discuss some policy changes, including the possible reduction in business rates, to help the theatre sector truly flourish as it begins to reopen?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is too modest to admit it on the Floor of the House, but I thank him too for his vital work in helping to shape this important package and to support this vital sector. I would of course be delighted to meet the APPG. In fact, the only thing that would give me more pleasure would be to go on a visit with the APPG to a theatre that was performing, which I hope will happen soon.

Covid-19: Creative Industries and Freelancers

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): What steps he has taken to support the creative industries during the covid-19 outbreak. [904445]

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he has taken to support the creative industries during the covid-19 outbreak. [904449]

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to support freelancers in the creative industries. [904455]

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): What steps he has taken to support the creative industries through the covid-19 outbreak. [904461]

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Caroline Dinenage): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to start by sending the very best wishes of the House to the former DCMS Minister, our hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who starts her treatment for breast cancer today. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Some of those in our creative sector, such as the film, TV and music industries, are already back up and running. We recognise the challenges the creative industries face because of covid-19. That is why, in addition to the unprecedented package of support for businesses, jobs and the workforce, the Government have announced an extra £1.57 billion cultural rescue package.

Zarah Sultana: My constituency is home to excellent theatres, live music venues, and museums and galleries. I would like to put on record that I was pleased to join the trustee board of the Albany theatre earlier this week. It is in part thanks to this vibrant cultural sector that Coventry was awarded city of culture 2021. The measures announced earlier this week are vital to ensuring that these organisations survive through the crisis, so will the Minister meet me to ensure that the support package finds its way to Coventry and keeps those organisations afloat?

Caroline Dinenage: Yes. The hon. Lady makes an excellent point, and I am very excited about spending more time in Coventry when it celebrates being the city of culture in 2021. She is right to draw attention to some of the incredible theatres and other cultural assets that her city has, and I would be very keen to meet her to discuss that further.

Lucy Powell [V]: As you know, Mr Speaker, Manchester really is one of the creative industry hubs of the UK. It is made up of not just its institutions, but a wealth of talented, highly skilled individuals and small and micro-organisations. Can the Minister tell them and me how the self-employed and those who are directors of limited companies will support themselves to stay in this industry in the coming months, when all their work has dried up and they have no extra support?

Caroline Dinenage: We know that the creative industries are not the venues, the organisations or the studios, but the people—the skilled artists, the craftsmen, the designers, the performers, the technicians. They are the ones who make us world-class in the sector, and we know that they include many freelancers and self-employed people. Some 2.7 million people have benefited from the self-employed income support scheme, and 95% of people who receive the majority of their income from self-employment have been eligible. The next round of that scheme will open in August.

Wendy Chamberlain: One of my constituents, Jim Sutherland, is a composer and music producer who has worked on the music of films such as "Brave" and "Outlaw King". A freelancer under PAYE, he and many like him are the backbone of our creative industries, demonstrating exactly the type of entrepreneurial spirit that this Government say they want to encourage as we recover. But yet again, in a week in which 200 MPs joined the ExcludedUK all-party parliamentary group, the Government have failed to support our self-employed people. What reassurance can the Minister give Jim and other freelancers in the industry that there will be support for them?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is rightly proud of her constituent and all the creative people in her area. We recognise the crucial role that individuals play in making our creative industries world leading. The £1.57 billion cultural package, announced this week which includes £97 million for Scotland, will allow more businesses to survive and more creative activity to restart, ensuring employment opportunities for freelancers. At the end of the day, that is what our freelancers want to do—they want to get back to work.

Mr Dhesi: With Pinewood Studios on our doorstep, Slough is a major cultural hub, but many of my constituents who work in the creative industries have contacted me to express grave concerns. I am sure the Minister agrees that the work they do is invaluable to our culture and economy, but owing to the limits of social distancing, many planned film and television shoots have not taken place, and local theatres are in a serious predicament. What measures will the Government put in place to ensure that in the coming months those industries will not suffer further as a result of covid-19 and will continue to be supported?

Caroline Dinenge: The hon. Gentleman speaks with great passion and I know he is a great supporter of the cultural industries and arts in his area. We have already made available £160 million through Arts Council England to support individuals and organisations—£20 million of that has gone to individuals and £50 million to the non-portfolio organisations the council would normally support—but the package announced this week is unprecedented. The £1.57 billion package is world-leading and will make a huge difference to struggling cultural industries up and down the country.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): The BBC calls them old classics; the rest of us call them repeats, and we are going to see a lot more of them due to our world-leading television and film production companies being shut down. What are the Government doing to ensure that this highly profitable, high-growth creative sector is brought back fully? How are they tackling the issue of reinsurance? After all, one can only watch so many episodes of “Dad’s Army” and “Bread”.

Caroline Dinenge: The same can be said about my hon. Friend’s jokes, but he is absolutely right to champion the sector. Our television and film production companies lead the world. That is why I have been meeting weekly with the sector to set up the guidance needed to get them back up and running, and I am pleased that so many are now able to start work. We are concerned about the insurance issue, and talks are ongoing to see whether we can help to resolve it.

Youth Projects

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): What steps he is taking to support youth projects. [904446]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Matt Warman): This Government are committed to investing in young people’s futures and ensuring that their voices are heard. The £500 million youth investment fund launching this year will fund new, refurbished and mobile youth centres, alongside investment in positive activities and youth workers across the country. DCMS launched a new online tool earlier this month to involve young people in policy making, and has supported the National Youth Agency to produce guidance for youth organisations on operating safely during covid-19.

Nick Fletcher: Does my right hon. Friend agree that to succeed in life young people need good role models? Will he therefore offer his support to my role models project?

Matt Warman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that good role models are crucial, now perhaps more than ever. I am delighted to offer my support and that of the Department to his new project, and I look forward to discussing it more with him.

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, but we now have to go to topicals.

Topical Questions

[904489] **Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oliver Dowden): This week, we announced the £1.57 billion package to help arts, heritage and cultural institutions weather the storm of covid. As I said, this is the largest ever one-off investment in UK culture and a testament to the Government’s commitment to the arts.

Alongside that, we have been working flat out to get our sectors back up and running. Elite sports events are back on, with a third of premier league games free to air. Recreational cricket is back this weekend. Cameras are rolling on British-made blockbusters. Hotels, bed and breakfasts and campsites are back welcoming guests.

We have more to do, and there will be further announcements on restarts imminently, but the best way to secure jobs and revive our sectors is to reopen them safely, and I will not stop until we have achieved that for all DCMS sectors.

Jason McCartney: Physical exercise is important for not just physical wellbeing but mental health. With that in mind, when will the Secretary of State update the guidance so that we can soon see the safe reopening of gyms and fitness centres?

Oliver Dowden: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has campaigned tirelessly on this point and raised it frequently with me. I also pay tribute to the gyms themselves, which have engaged very constructively with us to overcome some of the hurdles, and I hope to be able to make an announcement imminently on this issue. As I have said previously, the aim has always been to get gyms back by mid-July.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Chancellor rightly focused on jobs in his statement yesterday, but according to the Creative Industries Federation, freelancers make up 47% of the workforce. As the House has heard this morning from a number of hon. Members, millions of freelancers have been excluded from Government schemes and left without support for four long months, and they face the prospect of many more months without income. Will any of the money that the Secretary of State announced on Monday go to freelancers? If so, exactly when will they receive it?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the importance of freelancers. That is why, alongside the job retention scheme—the furlough scheme—there were also announcements for the self-employed, and tens of thousands of the self-employed have been able to access it.

In respect of the scheme I announced earlier this week, I would have hoped that the hon. Lady, having campaigned on this issue so tirelessly, would have started by welcoming this package and, indeed, joined the dozens of organisations that have welcomed it, and I am happy to share a dossier on that. The key thing for freelancers is to protect those institutions so that they can return as those reopen in the future. That is what this package achieves.

Jo Stevens: I will take that as a no, then.

The Government's failure to create a fully functioning test, track and isolate system has damaged public confidence, and the last thing the country needs now is another public health crisis. Earlier this week, the Centre for Countering Digital Hate published a report exposing how big tech companies such as Facebook and Google have profited from an anti-vaccination industry that has grown to 58 million followers during the covid crisis. Polling by YouGov showed that 31% of Britons polled do not plan to have a covid vaccination when one becomes available and that social media use and vaccine refusal are linked. When is the Secretary of State going to put public health and safety before the interests of the big tech companies profiting on the back of a global pandemic and publish the online harms Bill?

Oliver Dowden: I have great respect for the hon. Lady, but that is a gross mischaracterisation of the Government's priorities, given that we were the first Government to commit to bringing forward online harms legislation, and I have set out the timetable for doing that. However, she is absolutely right to highlight the concerns around anti-vax. Not only have we set up the counter-disinformation unit, but I am working with ministerial colleagues in the Department and across Government to co-ordinate our work on anti-vax, in preparation for the time when, I hope, we will have a vaccine available.

[904490] **Anthony Browne** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): South Cambridgeshire is the biomedical capital of Europe, with dozens of organisations working to develop treatments, cures and vaccines for the coronavirus. It is one of the most economically productive areas of Britain, but it is very rural, and many people working from home are frustrated by poor mobile phone coverage. I recently met my hon. Friend the Minister for Digital Infrastructure to discuss the matter, but will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State commit to working with me and the mobile phone industry to improve coverage in South Cambridgeshire, so that we can help to develop those cures and vaccines?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the issue, and I am determined to ensure that no part of this country is left behind when it comes to mobile connectivity. As he may know, we have already struck a deal with mobile operators to create a shared rural network that will make patchy coverage a thing of the past. Operators are developing roll-out plans, and I encourage my hon. Friend's constituents to engage with that process to ensure that they get the digital connectivity they deserve.

[904495] **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab) [V]: Now that Northumberland is to benefit from Government funding to boost the county's digital connectivity, does the Minister have a plan or timescale for the roll-out of fibre to the premises to facilitate job creation in North Tyneside and across the rest of the northern powerhouse?

Oliver Dowden: That is exactly why our manifesto contained the ambitious target of rolling out full fibre to the premises by 2025. We are making rapid progress, with numbers roughly doubling in the past year, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Digital Infrastructure and I are working tirelessly to drive us towards that target.

[904491] **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): Beautiful Hastings and Rye has an amazing cultural and arts sector that has unfortunately largely missed out on the remarkable economic packages provided by this Government. Bearing in mind the success of F. D. Roosevelt's public works of art project, what measures is my right hon. Friend considering to put rocket boosters under our performing arts sector and live music venues to enhance their contribution towards turbocharging our economy?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the central role of the arts in our creative industries, which help to make us a powerhouse. That is why we are working to ensure their reopening as rapidly as possible, and announcements on that will come shortly. It is also why I welcomed the Chancellor's tremendous announcement yesterday; those VAT cuts will apply to almost all the sectors that my hon. Friend highlights.

[904492] **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): Throughout the current coronavirus crisis, communities around the country have relied on their local radio stations, both BBC and commercial. In Aylesbury, Mix 96 has been a vital and valuable source of information, building on its 40-year commitment to the town. Does my right hon. Friend agree that when big media groups such as Bauer buy up small stations like Mix, it is important to balance commercial imperatives alongside a genuine commitment to serve communities with locally produced content, local news and jobs for local people?

Oliver Dowden: I wholly agree with my hon. Friend. Reliable local news is an important way of tackling the rise of misinformation and disinformation.

[904508] **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): The support packages are welcome and better late than never, but the Secretary of State is still not answering questions about how self-employed creators will be supported through this crisis in the long term. The creative sector is literally the life and soul of my constituency, so if this Government cannot guarantee the support that creators need, will he devolve the powers to the Scottish Parliament, so that Scotland can support its artists in all their different shapes and forms?

Oliver Dowden: I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that this package gives £96 million to Scotland under the Barnett consequential, so I trust he will ensure that that goes to those industries, rather than to the other priorities of the Scottish Government.

[904493] **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con) [V]: With the domestic hospitality and tourism sectors raring to rebound following the recent disruption, what is the Department doing to encourage the British public to support these efforts and visit our coastal tourist attractions and resorts, in particular the gem that is the Fylde coast?

Oliver Dowden: I share my hon. Friend's love of the Fylde coast, and I used to enjoy taking a dip in the sea in October when we had party conferences in Blackpool. It is precisely for such reasons that we have announced a massive VAT cut to help restart the tourism sector.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Secretary of State. We will now move on to questions to the Attorney General.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Crown Prosecution Service: Case Backlog

1. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the CPS on its role in reducing the backlog of cases waiting to come before the courts. [904519]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): I share the concern about the growing backlog in the courts. Covid has presented an unprecedented challenge for our justice system, and the UK is a global leader when it comes to the Crown courts. Jury trials restarted in May. Digital tools have been harnessed in more than 10,000 cases, and all courts will reopen by mid-July. I am proud that prosecutors have continued to fulfil their responsibilities despite the pandemic, both remotely and physically, and the CPS has been actively involved in cross-Government discussions to continue progressing work through the courts.

Jeff Smith: I join the Attorney General in commending the work of CPS staff and many others, including jurors, to keep our justice system running during the pandemic. Will she assure the House that measures taken to help reduce the backlog will not include judge-only-led trials?

The Attorney General: The Lord Chancellor and I discuss a range of criminal justice issues on a regular basis. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Ministry of Justice is leading the court recovery plan, which it published last week. That plan includes a suite of measures, both legislative and non-legislative. The point is that nothing is decided, but I can reassure him that I am deeply committed to the right to jury trial.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I think that all members of the Select Committee on Justice would welcome that last comment about the importance of jury trials, as I do. On the court recovery plan, the Lord Chancellor told the Justice Committee that he would make all resource that was necessary available to seek to clear the backlog, including the Nightingale courts, which we have heard about, and

sitting courts to maximum capacity. Will the Attorney General ensure that the CPS has the resources, in terms of not only money, but personnel—in-house lawyers, solicitor advocates and instructing independent members of the Bar, when necessary—to make sure that a competent qualified prosecutor is always available to prosecute cases wherever needed, to make sure that this backlog is dealt with?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The CPS is not immune to the impact of the backlog. I am pleased that throughout this pandemic it has coped remarkably well, despite the challenges. The recent inspectorate report published at the end of last month sets out in a lot of detail how well the CPS has responded to the difficulties. It is currently receiving 1.8 cases for every one that can be completed in the court. I should note that it has also successfully maintained its recruitment plans despite the pandemic, and we now have more than 300 new prosecutors within the CPS.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab) [V]: The recent HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate report found that it could take 10 years to clear the criminal case backlog, with 41,000 outstanding cases, in a criminal justice system on its knees. While Labour has been calling for Nightingale and covid-safe courts for the past four months, the Government have been discussing scrapping jury trials. So can the Attorney General confirm today when the Nightingale courts will be up and running, and how many victims of sexual violence are still waiting for their cases to get to court?

The Attorney General: I am glad that the hon. Lady has mentioned the recent inspectorate report, which I think gives a strong commendation to the CPS for its response to this pandemic. In comparative terms, there is a strong vote of confidence in the CPS's resilience, digital capability and planning for difficulties such as these. She is right to refer to the court recovery plan. As I have mentioned, the Lord Chancellor has published a detailed plan. Many measures are under consideration. There is a strong commitment to the right to jury trial, but no decisions have been made yet.

Contempt of Court: Media Reporting

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps she is taking to prevent media reporting which may lead to contempt of court. [904520]

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What steps she is taking to prevent conventional and social media reporting which may lead to contempt of court; and if she will make a statement. [904525]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): Reporting by the press or on social media may sometimes present a risk of prejudice to criminal proceedings. It is important to protect due process and the right to a fair trial. In my role as guardian of the public interest, I can issue and have issued media advisory notices. This is important in order to inform responsible reporting to avoid prejudice to ongoing criminal proceedings.

John Lamont: Does the Solicitor General agree that on the whole the press does act responsibly and is swift to act in relation to material that may be prejudicial to court proceedings?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right, and it is right to acknowledge that the press is on the whole very responsible in its reporting of court proceedings, which is why issuing a media advisory notice is an exceptional course of action. In the past 12 months, I have only done that twice. However, it remains an important power, which will be used if necessary.

Michael Fabricant [V]: Journalists get training, but the average person does not know about contempt of court and we get contempt of court through social media, so what can the Solicitor General's Department do to try to educate people when they might be doing just that inadvertently?

The Solicitor General: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. That is quite right, and he makes an important point about social media and the risk of contempt of court. My office has prepared and promoted materials available online to inform the general public, including slides and web pages, and I entirely agree that an emphasis on education is important to ensure that members of the public do not inadvertently publish prejudicial material online, because doing so can have serious consequences.

Crown Prosecution Service: Covid-19

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the CPS during the covid-19 outbreak. [904521]

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the CPS during the covid-19 outbreak. [904526]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): First, I thank the CPS for its hard work during this difficult time. It has had to adapt to significant changes to its normal working practices, and despite the challenges has maintained a high quality of service within our criminal justice system and for victims. The inspectorate report published on 30 June sets out an analysis of its response to the pandemic. It commends the organisation's digital capability, strategic planning and foresight in upgrading its capabilities, which meant that prosecutors were able to continue their vital work with minimum disruption. I was very pleased to visit virtually the CPS in the south-west, where I was able to see at first hand the impressive way in which it has transitioned to this new way of working.

Henry Smith [V]: What progress has the Crown Prosecution Service made in its recruitment campaigns during the covid-19 pandemic?

The Attorney General: Last week, I chaired the CPS ministerial board, at which I was pleased to hear that the CPS's recruitment programme has continued at pace throughout the pandemic, utilising digital tools, including video interviews. The CPS is recruiting 390 new staff as a result of the Government's £85 million investment in it. Two hundred and twenty-five lawyers have started and a further 76 have been offered roles and will be

starting in the near future. The most recent campaign closed on 17 June and resulted in a record number of applications—901.

Sara Britcliffe: Can the Attorney General tell the House how many members of the CPS were off sick due to covid-19?

The Attorney General: The CPS has been monitoring the absence level of both lawyers and support staff throughout the pandemic. Where necessary, the CPS has virtually redeployed staff between different CPS areas to ensure that workloads were effectively managed. Court closures and the significant reduction in court sittings resulted in the release of some staff to undertake different tasks and work. This increased the amount of legal and administrative resources available for casework.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab) [V]: West Midlands police recorded over 4,000 cases of domestic violence in the first month of lockdown, yet only 3% of those cases have resulted in criminal charges. Between 2015 and 2019, despite domestic violence cases rising by 77%, charging fell by 18% and convictions by 20%. I ask the Attorney General again: how many victims of sexual violence are still waiting for their cases to get to court, and what is she doing to ensure that domestic abuse does not go unpunished?

The Attorney General: It is essential that perpetrators, victims and their families know and understand that the criminal justice system remains open and operational during the covid outbreak, and the CPS and I are working closely with colleagues across Government and the criminal justice system to ensure that those horrendous offences continue to be brought to justice. Priority must be given to the most serious cases to make sure that dangerous offenders are dealt with quickly. That is why the CPS has worked with police colleagues to introduce an interim charging protocol with clear guidance on its use. All non-custody domestic abuse cases were categorised as high priority and will be dealt with accordingly.

Belly Mujinga

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): When he expects the Crown Prosecution Service to complete its review of the British Transport police's investigation of the alleged assault on Belly Mujinga at Victoria Station on 21 March 2020. [904522]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): First, I want to say to the hon. Gentleman that this is a tragic case, and my thoughts remain with Belly Mujinga's family and friends. On 5 June, British Transport police asked the Crown Prosecution Service to give its independent opinion on the available evidence and the prospect of its meeting the general principles of prosecution outlined in the code for Crown prosecutors. The Crown Prosecution Service has requested that the British Transport police pursue further lines of inquiry, and once that has been completed the CPS will be able to finalise the review.

Clive Efford: I am grateful for that response, which is very helpful. I am sure the whole House agrees with the comments made by the Attorney General. This was a very high-profile case and everyone was rightly shocked

when they heard the description of the alleged assault on Belly Mujinga. There was evidence from a colleague who was there at the time, so I was surprised that there was not sufficient evidence for a charge of assault, even if it was not possible to prove that it was the source of the covid-19 that eventually took her life.

I am grateful to the Attorney General for that answer, but can she give an assurance that she will continue to pursue the CPS and the British Transport police to bring this very important issue to a conclusion? Whether it is charges or insufficient evidence, the people who are concerned about this really need to know the outcome.

The Attorney General: I share the hon. Gentleman's commitment to justice for Belly Mujinga and her family here. The matter is still being considered, and the Crown Prosecution Service has requested that the British Transport police obtain further information on further lines of inquiry. As the review is still ongoing, I am unable to provide further information at this stage, but I am sure there will be an announcement in due course.

Domestic Abuse Prosecutions

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What estimate she has made of the additional resources required by the CPS to tackle the potential increase in domestic abuse prosecutions as a result of the covid-19 lockdown. [904523]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): The Government take cases of domestic abuse extremely seriously. Despite the challenges generated by the covid-19 pandemic, the CPS has shown its determination to bring perpetrators to justice and provide victims with the greatest possible protection from repeat offending. I have to say those cases are among the highest priority for the Crown Prosecution Service and the highest priority being dealt with by the criminal justice system.

May I take this opportunity to commend the superb work of the Duchess of Cornwall on the issue of domestic abuse and her leadership in this area?

Jessica Morden [V]: There has been an 83% increase in domestic abuse related crimes in Wales since 2015. The £85 million promised by the Government to the CPS will go nowhere near meeting the £225 million cuts made by the Government. What assurances can the Attorney General and Ministers give victims that the resourcing is sufficient for their cases to be dealt with effectively?

The Solicitor General: I thank the hon. Lady for that important question. The Government have recently announced a number of funding packages that are linked to domestic abuse post covid, including £16.6 million announced by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to go to 75 local authority projects for delivery of support to victims of domestic abuse and their children; £3.1 million from the Home Office for specialist services for children who have been directly and indirectly affected; and £28 million for a package of support for survivors of domestic abuse and their children from a fund from the Chancellor of the Exchequer. A lot of money is, rightly, being directed to that area.

Burglary: Prosecution Rates

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase prosecution rates for burglary offences. [904527]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): Burglary is a terrible crime that can have a long-lasting impact on victims. The CPS is committed to bringing robust prosecutions against offenders who commit burglary and ruin lives by doing so. The CPS will work with the police to ensure that the strongest possible evidence is put before the court. My right hon. Friend will be interested to know that the latest CPS data shows that of those prosecuted for burglary, 87.9% are convicted.

Theresa Villiers: I thank the Solicitor General for his answer. Many of my constituents in Chipping Barnet are really worried about burglary. May I urge him to urge the police and the CPS to take this very seriously? Too often, they seem to know who the burglars are, but charges, arrests and prosecutions just do not seem to follow.

The Solicitor General: My right hon. Friend is quite right to focus on this point, and I know that she has a track record of supporting her constituents in this area. The CPS is committed to bringing charges in all cases where the code test is met. If there is the evidence, if it meets the requisite standards, people will be prosecuted for burglary.

Human Rights Act 1998

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Justice on the effect on Scotland of the Government's plans to update the Human Rights Act 1998. [904529]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): I speak regularly with my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor on many matters, including manifesto commitments. The Government are committed to looking at the broader aspects of our constitution, including the balance between rights of individuals and effective government, and to updating the Human Rights Act. I can assure the hon. Member that any implications for the devolved Administrations will be closely monitored.

David Linden: I am grateful to the Attorney General. Last month, the Lord Chancellor referred to an independent review of the Human Rights Act 1998. Can the Attorney General clarify whether that is different from the constitution, democracy and rights commission? What role will devolved institutions have in any such review, given how important the HRA is to the devolved settlements?

The Attorney General: The Government are ensuring that the impact of any reforms on devolved jurisdictions is well considered. Any consideration by the panel of UK-wide judicial review issues will take into account the distinctive nature and context of each of the UK's jurisdictions. Where appropriate, the panel will put forward bespoke options to take into account those differences, rather than proposing a one-size-fits-all approach.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I very much regret that the Attorney General does not seem to share my enthusiasm for the Human Rights Act. She knows as well as anyone that messing about with it endangers future justice and security co-operation, as well as trade, with the EU, so why do the Government not put our safety, security and prosperity first and ditch the Tory party's Human Rights Act obsession?

The Attorney General: I share, I hope, the hon. Gentleman's commitment to law enforcement and criminal justice work throughout our nations, and I believe deeply in our co-operation on criminal justice matters with our neighbours. What I object to, however, is any submission to the European Court of Justice, and I am committed to our manifesto commitment to looking at the Human Rights Act and updating it.

Unduly Lenient Sentence Scheme

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): What recent sentences she has extended through the unduly lenient sentence scheme. [904531]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): The scheme has had a number of recent successes. I am pleased to inform the House of two in particular. A recent case dealt with horrific offending concerning streaming child sexual abuse images online. The offender's sentence was increased from one year and eight months' imprisonment to four years' imprisonment after I referred it. That was the first increase since that particular offence was brought within the scheme. In addition, I personally went to court to present the first controlling and coercive unduly lenient sentence. The sentence was increased from a two-year community order to three years' immediate imprisonment.

Marco Longhi: Does the Solicitor General recognise the importance of the fact that the punishment must fit the crime, for public confidence and also for my Dudley constituents?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to speak up for his constituents in Dudley on this matter. Public confidence in sentencing is crucial, and I am delighted to say that the general public do have and should have confidence in sentencing. The reality is that a very tiny fraction—far less than 1%—has to be referred to the Court of Appeal for a review of sentence for undue leniency. In his area, he might be interested to

know of a case where a sentence of two and a half years for possession of a sawn-off shotgun and other material was increased to five years when it was referred by me for a review.

Support for Law Firms: Covid-19

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the effectiveness of Government support for law firms during the covid-19 outbreak. [904537]

The Solicitor General (Michael Ellis): The CPS has made changes to its system for paying fees to advocates to help support them during this difficult time, adjusted to ensure payment for work performed, even where a normal invoice trigger point has not been reached. The Ministry of Justice is also working closely with legal practitioners to understand the impact of covid-19 on them. The Legal Aid Agency has streamlined the process for interim payments and hardship payments, including lowering the threshold for when such claims can be made.

Feryal Clark: Before the pandemic, many law firms were already struggling because of a decade of cuts in legal aid. What is the Solicitor General doing to ensure we have a functioning and fair criminal justice system when the crisis is over?

The Solicitor General: Prosecuting advocates play an essential role in our criminal justice system, and the Government support them, as can be seen with the recent influx of money from the Treasury to the Crown Prosecution Service. On 30 March, the CPS announced measures enabling interim invoices to be raised. That is just one mechanism by which we are supporting criminal practitioners working on Crown Court cases. They are now able to claim hardship payments, for example, which have been expedited. Millions of pounds in extra funding is being provided for not-for-profit providers. We are supporting the legal community across the board in what I accept are very difficult times.

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

10.31 am

Sitting suspended.

Bahrain: Prisoners Under Sentence of Death

10.34 am

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Foreign Secretary if he will make a statement on whether he will use the UK's constructive dialogue with the Government of Bahrain publicly to raise the cases of two prisoners who have been sentenced to death following torture, and who face a hearing this Monday when their death sentences may be confirmed.

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): The UK and Bahrain continue to have a close and important relationship. We benefit from an ongoing, open and genuine dialogue in which we work together on mutually beneficial issues while also raising points of significant difference with one another.

It is because of this long-standing partnership that we are able to have candid conversations about matters of importance to the UK—in particular, our human rights concerns. Our relationship allows us to raise sensitive and difficult issues, both privately and publicly, in a constructive manner in order to uphold our moral responsibility on human rights issues. We have raised and will continue to raise the cases of both Mohammed Ramadhan and Hussain Moosa at senior levels with the Government of Bahrain.

On 8 January, British embassy Manama officials attended the final session of the Court of Appeal for the retrial of the two men mentioned. Both individuals were convicted of terrorist charges and given the death sentence again. On 8 January, the former Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), publicly stated our deep concern that death sentences were again handed out, and the UK's position has not changed on this matter. We continue to actively monitor these two cases as they are taken to the court of cassation for final review.

The UK's position on the use of the death penalty is long-standing and unequivocal: we oppose its use in all circumstances and in all countries as a matter of principle. The Government of Bahrain are fully aware of our view. This was made explicitly clear by the former Minister to a senior Bahraini counterpart last year. It was then reinforced by my noble friend Lord Ahmad in the other place, who issued a public statement expressing the UK's opposition to the use of the death penalty, in response to actions taken in Bahrain.

I can assure the House that our efforts to raise these cases, and also the broader issues of the use of capital punishment, with the Bahraini authorities will continue. Bahrain is a Foreign and Commonwealth Office human rights priority country, in part due to its policy surrounding the death penalty. We continue to monitor developments on all matters that relate to human rights within the country. We remain absolutely committed to the promotion of universal freedoms and upholding human rights globally. That has been made clear only this week with the introduction of the UK's first autonomous human rights sanctions regime.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The House will be grateful to the Minister.

I want to make it plain that the first constituency case I took was of someone who I thought had been wrongly convicted in this country, and it took five years to establish that. I am working on two long-term cases in the United States of America.

Bahrain is important to us politically, diplomatically and militarily, and we hope that it is a mutual relationship. We know that there are times when Bahrain, as a sovereign country, has paid attention to outside prompting, and we hope, with respect, that it will listen to what is said here, what was said in another place yesterday, and what was said in the three debates that have taken place in Parliament during the past year or so.

Can I ask that the views of Parliament are put to the Bahrain authorities, with our respectful greetings, and say that if either the Court of Cassation on Monday or a sovereign intervention would make a difference, that would be noticed and appreciated, and would affect the way Bahrain is seen? I do not need to say what would happen if that does not happen.

I wish these men well. I wish Bahrain well. I hope that the work done by this House, by Amnesty International, by Reprieve and by Human Rights Watch will get the proper attention it deserves.

James Cleverly: I know that the Bahrainis do take seriously the views of the United Kingdom and this House. As yet, we do not know what the outcome of the Court of Cassation will be. If the death penalty is handed down again, I can assure the House that our opposition to the death penalty will be restated, at both official and ministerial level, to the Government of Bahrain.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) for his question on this crucial matter.

The trial is based on evidence secured through torture, including allegations that interrogators threatened to rape the wife of Mohammed Ramadhan in front of him after a series of brutal beatings and hung Hussain Moosa from the ceiling for three days while beating his genitals with batons. Finally, they have been sentenced to death. Condemnation of the trials of these two men has been almost universal from many of the organisations to which the hon. Gentleman referred. All have condemned the use of torture and all have called for their death sentences to be quashed.

Unfortunately, we have yet to see a decisive statement on this matter from the Government. Worse still, the two Bahraini security bodies that enabled the torture—the Special Investigations Unit and the ombudsman for the Ministry of Interior—were funded by this Government. The Government say that they engage with the Bahraini Government on human rights, the use of torture and the death penalty, and I listened carefully to what the Minister said, but where are the results from that engagement, given this case and many others? Since 2012, the Government have provided over £5 million of technical assistance, yet the number of executions has increased and human rights abuses have increased.

[Stephen Doughty]

The Foreign Secretary spoke earlier this week about Magnitsky sanctions, absolutely rightly so, and the importance of human rights and opposing the death penalty and torture. In that light, will the Minister condemn the use of torture by the security forces in Bahrain in these two cases, rather than just monitoring them? Will the Prime Minister raise this matter with the King? Will the Minister raise it directly with his opposite number? Will he press the Government of Bahrain to establish an independent commission of inquiry to conduct an Istanbul protocol-compliant investigation into the torture allegations for these two men? Will he freeze assistance to the Bahraini security bodies that are potentially implicated in this case? Will he publish the human rights assessments and the assessments against the overseas security and justice assistance guidance, which the Foreign Office is supposed to use when funding such programmes to assess whether the programmes it supports are implicated in torture and the use of the death penalty?

It is one thing for the Foreign Secretary to speak of taking action against those complicit in torture and the death penalty, those who are blood-drenched, but it is another for the Government to walk the walk. Time is of the essence in this case. Will the Minister speak out? Will the Government speak out at the highest levels and do what they can to get the death sentences commuted?

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the points he raises. I can assure him that the United Kingdom Government, Her Majesty's Government, oppose torture as well as the death penalty, and that has been communicated widely and regularly. It is well known around the world. He makes reference to the OSJA process. I can assure him that it is a robust process which ensures that when the British Government train or support other Governments around the world, that training or support is not used to facilitate human rights abuses. The process constantly reviews our relationships and I am confident that it is robust.

With regard to the oversight bodies the hon. Gentleman mentions, it should be noted that they have brought about a change in the way that Bahrain works. Police officers and prison officers have been brought to justice because of the oversight bodies that we support. The Bahraini royal family have demonstrated a desire to improve their structures and transparency, and the resilience of their governmental structures. The oversight bodies we support are a part of that. While they continue to express the desire to improve their structures and head in a positive direction, we will maintain our support to enable them to do so. As I have said, Bahrain remains a human rights priority country. We wish to see improvement. Where the Bahrain Government express a desire to implement that improvement, we will continue to support them to do so.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I very much welcome the urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley). I draw my right hon. Friend the Minister's attention to the Foreign Affairs Committee report of 2018, in which we raised questions about this funding because of the torture of Mr Ramadhan and Mr Moosa. May I urge him to think very hard about the position of Her Majesty's Government on this? I also urge him to

write to His Majesty King Hamad and remind him that al-rahman al-rahim—the most compassionate, the most merciful—are the names that are given to God, by the Prophet, peace be upon him, and that perhaps this might be one of those moments when His Majesty could think hard about the decisions that are before him.

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend; his points are very well made. One of the advantages of having more than 200 years of relationship with the Bahrainis is that we can speak candidly, clearly and at the highest levels. We are more than comfortable with reiterating our opposition to the death penalty and torture, and we are happy to restate that at the highest levels within Bahraini society.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): [V] As the SNP spokesperson on international human rights and as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on democracy and human rights in the Gulf, I congratulate the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) on securing this urgent question. The Minister and his FCO colleagues have become serial correspondents on this issue recently, as recourse to the death penalty in Bahrain has become increasingly commonplace. Since 2012, the United Kingdom has been providing Bahrain with what it calls technical assistance. That technical assistance is designed to build effective and accountable institutions, strengthen the rule of law and assist with police and judicial reform. That is clearly not happening. Given that the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims has declared that the investigation of this case, carried out by the Bahrain special investigation unit, was seriously flawed, failed to meet even the minimum standards of international recognition and breached the Istanbul protocol, will the Minister now urgently review that technical assistance programme for Bahrain, and will he agree to suspend it immediately if these death sentences are carried out?

James Cleverly: The point I made in response to the shadow Minister is that the OSJA process is robust. The process is designed to ensure that when the United Kingdom Government provide assistance to a foreign Government, it does not in any way help to facilitate human rights abuses. It is held constantly in review and we review our relationships regularly, so obviously, by definition, our relationship with Bahrain and any future technical assistance will be assessed against the criteria that we have put out. I would say, however, that a number of the oversight bodies are only in existence because of the strength of the relationship between the United Kingdom and the Government of Bahrain. Where those bodies are seeking to improve and to become more transparent and robust, we will seek to help them to do so. If we were to disengage, I do not believe that that would be conducive to improving the human rights situation in Bahrain.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): [V] I thank the Minister for his comments on this case. Building on that engagement, what action are the Government taking to ensure that Bahrain is meeting its human rights obligations and, more widely still, what steps is my right hon. Friend taking to continue to position the UK at the forefront of promoting human rights, to ensure that rights really are respected in Bahrain and across the world?

James Cleverly: The UK Government remain committed to promoting universal freedoms and human rights around the world. That is and will remain at the heart of our foreign policy, to ensure that the UK remains a force for good. Being able to promote human rights cannot just be done in the abstract, although it is easy to do so from these green Benches. To be a real, meaningful champion of human rights, we have to have influence on Governments. Bahrain is a human rights priority country, and through our close relationship with Bahrain, we seek to persuade and support it on a journey to improve its human rights situation. That is how effective Governments operate.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): With only five days to save their lives, and in the light of the UK's assistance to the bodies that enabled their torture and death sentences, can the Minister confirm that the Government will make effective representations in the cases of Mohammed Ramadhan and Hussain Moosa before the Court of Cassation's final decision on Monday?

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Lady for the point that she has raised. As I have said, it is the strength of the relationship between the UK and Bahrain that allows us to have frank, candid and regular conversations at senior official, ministerial and Head of State level about a whole range of things. I assure her that if the death penalties are upheld through the Court of Cassation process, the UK will publicly and loudly remind Bahrain of our opposition to the death penalty, and we will continue to seek to have it set aside.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: Listening to the excellent Minister, I am wondering whether, to get the result that everyone wants, the comments should be made to Bahrain in private rather than necessarily in public. Can I ask him about freedom of the press in Bahrain? A free press helps to guarantee human rights. What efforts are being made to ensure that there is freedom of the press in Bahrain?

James Cleverly: One of the first events in which I took part on being appointed as Minister was when the Foreign and Commonwealth Office hosted journalists from north Africa and the middle east to support media freedom. Media freedom remains a priority for the UK Government. Legislation is planned in Bahrain to provide additional protection to journalists, but the timing and detail around that legislation remains vague. We continue to engage at senior level to push for that legislation to be brought forward, and for the enhancement of the protection of journalists in Bahrain.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP) [V]: As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary human rights group, I wrote to the FCO, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), on Monday to request an urgent meeting about the cases of Mohammed Ramadhan and Hussain Moosa. With less than one week to save their lives, and in the light of the UK's assistance to the special investigations unit that enabled their torture and imminent death sentences, will the Minister meet us to discuss those cases before the Court of Cassation's final decision on Monday?

James Cleverly: I am always happy to meet parliamentary colleagues about important issues such as this. The likely timing of the Court of Cassation judgment may make it difficult to do so before Monday, but I assure the hon. Lady that we will continue to make every effort to prevent the death penalty, whether it be in Bahrain or more widely. I assure her that even if the death penalty is upheld by the Court of Cassation, that will not be the end of our efforts to prevent the death penalty in Bahrain. As I say, I am more than happy to facilitate a meeting with her and with parliamentary colleagues.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend could tell the House what wider measures his Department is taking to ensure political reform and democratic accountability in Bahrain.

James Cleverly: Bahrain remains one of only two countries in the Gulf with an elected Parliament. UK support has strengthened the institutional capacity of the Bahraini Parliament's secretariat, and we have enhanced the skills of staff to support MPs in their oversight of the Government. In addition, we have helped local NGOs to raise Bahraini youth awareness of democracy and parliamentary work, and we will continue to pursue those things.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I chair the all-party parliamentary British-Qatar group, among others, and the Minister will know that when it comes to engaging with countries in the Gulf, I preach a sermon of pragmatism and humility. But surely we can only encourage progress if we see it actually happening—expressing desire for change is not good enough. The OSJA process on which the Minister relies has been criticised by the Home Affairs Committee as being not fit for purpose. If he is going to rely on that process, will he publish the assessment carried out under it in relation to this assistance, and will he promote within Government an overhaul of that whole process?

James Cleverly: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the points that he has made. It was a Conservative Foreign Secretary who brought in the OSJA process, and as I have said, it is, by definition, constantly under review, and we seek always to improve it. The oversight bodies that have been criticised in the Chamber today only recently came into existence, and their existence is, in significant part, because of the work that the UK Government have done with the Bahrainis. There is a desire to see these organisations and their processes improve, and our technical assistance is part of that improvement programme. It would be entirely counter-productive for these organisations to be dispensed with, because I cannot see how that would increase or improve the oversight of the human rights situation. The aim surely should be to improve them, and it is through our close working relationship that we seek to do so.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend outline what steps the Government have taken to ensure that Bahrain is clear about the UK's position on human rights?

James Cleverly: The best way of ensuring that Bahrain understands our position is to state it loudly, regularly and directly. As I say, we have had a relationship of over two centuries with the Bahrainis, which perhaps gives

[James Cleverly]

us a unique ability to speak candidly and frankly at the highest levels. I assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to do so.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP) [V]: When the Foreign Secretary announced earlier this week the imposition of Magnitsky-style powers to sanction those complicit in human rights violations and abuses, he said that this country makes it

“crystal clear to those who abuse their power to inflict unimaginable suffering that we will not look the other way.”—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2020; Vol. 678, c. 664.]

Will the Minister therefore confirm that the UK Government will impose a human rights sanction on both individuals and organisations in the Bahraini authorities who have been complicit in the torture of Mohammed Ramadhan and Hussain Moosa?

James Cleverly: I was incredibly proud when my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary announced the UK’s independent sanctions regime and demonstrated to both the House and the world that the United Kingdom takes human rights abuses seriously and will deal with them. While we were a member of the European Union’s human rights sanctions regime, we had a convention that we did not discuss potential future sanctions, and that remains the convention under our domestic sanctions regime.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Father of the House on bringing forward this urgent question in such a timely manner. Does the Minister agree that cutting our modest and highly monitored technical assistance to Bahrain, particularly the special investigations unit and the ombudsman, would likely make matters worse? Will he use the influence that he has with Bahrain and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to ensure that the judiciary is distanced from the Executive and that sentencing discretion is reduced in those two countries, since it too often produces perverse and unpredictable outcomes?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend and predecessor knows better than many the nature of our relationship. I commend him for his work on this issue directly with the Bahrainis. As I have found in many cases, both public and private, I can commend the work that he has done and agree wholeheartedly with it. It is the strength of our relationship—the long-standing, strong and powerful relationship between the Government of the UK and the Government of Bahrain—that allows us to support improvements when they are put in place and to ensure that oversight bodies improve their independence and effectiveness. We will continue to push for that improvement.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Minister for his statement arising from this urgent question. The situation is now very serious, given that both Mohammed Ramadhan and Hussain Moosa are at risk of imminent execution should their sentence, which is based on a torture-obtained confession, be upheld in five days’ time, so will the Minister ask our ambassador to Bahrain urgently to attend their trial in Bahrain as an international observer?

James Cleverly: One by-product of the strength of our relationship is the ability of Her Majesty’s ambassador to attend trials of this nature in Bahrain. I have spoken to Her Majesty’s ambassador to Bahrain on a number of occasions about this very issue, most recently this morning. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we remain fully engaged and that the ambassador and his team are fully engaged in the country. If the Court of Cassation hands down a death sentence again, we will not stop at that point but will continue to dissuade the Bahrainis from utilising the death penalty.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments so far. It is clear that our relationship with Bahrain is not just strong and deep diplomatically, but exists across a range of areas, from business to the armed forces. Will he reassure the House that we will use that range of channels to encourage diplomatic, human rights and political reform in Bahrain?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the strength of our relationship with Bahrain stretches across a number of areas, including commercial, military, security and social. I have said it a number of times, but it is worth repeating that it is because of the strength of our long-standing relationship that we are able to have difficult conversations with the Bahrainis on issues such as press freedom and human rights.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): There are 24 prisoners on death row in Bahrain, of whom 10 are in imminent danger of execution. Those 10 include Zuhair Abdullah and Husain Rashid, whose cases I raised with the Foreign Secretary when he gave his statement on human rights abusers on Monday. His reply that the designation of abusers will be blind to ulterior considerations was somewhat undermined by the decision the next day by the Secretary of State for International Trade to resume the arms trade with Saudi Arabia. Will the Minister look again at the responsibility of individuals in the Bahraini regime, and in particular Prince Nasser bin Hamad, the son of the King, who is alleged to have an involvement in torture going back to the Arab spring and whose diplomatic immunity was removed by the High Court here?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman conflates two fundamentally different issues when he talks about the export licences and our sanctions regime. The sanctions regime that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary put forward this week highlights the huge importance that Her Majesty’s Government ascribe to enhancing and protecting human rights. Individuals were sanctioned, and I am proud of the fact that we were able to put those sanctions into force. We will continue to protect human rights and we will continue to encourage Governments around the world, including in the Gulf, to improve their record on human rights. We will do so both publicly and privately and in the most effective way, whatever that is.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the right to a fair trial is enshrined in the constitution of Bahrain, so we must encourage the Government of Bahrain to follow due process in all cases?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Bahraini Government have demonstrated a desire to improve. They want to have a free and robust judicial system, and we want to help them to do that. Through technical assistance, we will help to encourage improvements in the core institutions of Bahraini society.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Under Bahrain and Britain's integrated activity fund, the special investigation unit in Bahrain has received UK taxpayer-funded training through the College of Policing, but that institution has now been shown to be complicit in the whitewashed investigation that led to these men's death sentences being reimposed. Will the right hon. Gentleman now halt any support for the Bahraini oversight institutions, which have demonstrated that they do no more than facilitate the whitewashing of human rights abuses and allow an escalation in the usage of the death penalty?

James Cleverly: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office does not currently provide funding or training to the Bahraini Royal Academy of Policing. The UK has been providing a range of technical and practical assistance to the Government of Bahrain since 2013 to bring about improvements in the robustness of their oversight bodies. Where abuses have taken place, public servants have been brought to justice, and my understanding is that 97 police officers or prison officers have been brought to justice due in significant part to the oversight bodies that the UK Government have helped to strengthen and improve.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I understand—nobody has mentioned this so far—that both men were convicted on one confession and on forensic evidence and victim and witness testimony, including mobile phone records and text messages that co-ordinated the attack that lured police officers into a deadly trap. One policeman was killed and others, including civilians, were badly hurt. I visited Bahrain's independent human rights oversight body, and I was impressed by its independence and its reports—it can go anywhere. I do not support the death penalty, and I hope that if the sentences are upheld on Monday, His Majesty the King of Bahrain will commute them. However, does the Minister agree that Bahrain's judicial system is pretty fair and very open to scrutiny, especially when looking around the rest of the middle east?

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend. I am not in a position to go into the details of all the evidence that was put forward in the trial of the two men, but the oversight bodies that the UK Government support, including the Court of Cassation, have been able to conduct oversight of the process. We want to support the judiciary in Bahrain to continue to improve. Indeed, we are pleased, following work with the Bahrainis, that they are now moving to alternative sentencing to reduce the number of people in incarceration and are learning from the UK about reducing the prison population and overcrowding in prisons. We want to continue to support the Bahrainis as they move in the right direction when it comes to their criminal justice system.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): The vast majority of residents in Kensington want to see the end of the death penalty across the world. What steps are Her Majesty's Government taking to achieve that end?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is right; the UK, both in society and in government, is opposed to the death penalty across the world. We make that point clearly and regularly to our friends around the world, and we will continue to push for that in general. Indeed, in the instance of these two individuals, if the Court of Cassation upholds the death sentence—the decision has not yet been made—we will continue to lobby the Bahrainis for it not to be imposed in this case.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con) [V]: The United Kingdom and the kingdom of Bahrain enjoy a close and enduring relationship born out of friendship and marked by genuine affection and mutual respect. British values, not race or religion, characterise our people and we place the sanctity of human rights above all considerations. That being indisputable, will my right hon. Friend confirm to the House that human rights remain at the heart of every policy of Her Majesty's Government, including foreign policy, and that that is exemplified by their designation of Bahrain as a human rights priority country?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is right; human rights are absolutely at the heart of this Government's foreign policy. They are a topic that I discuss regularly with my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and my noble friend Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, who leads for Her Majesty's Government on human rights. We will continue to push for improvements on human rights around the world with all our friends and partners internationally. I assure him and the House that that will remain absolutely at the heart of foreign policy. It is a point on which the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary are rightly proud.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): May I pursue the question from the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden)? The UK's College of Policing continued to provide training to the ombudsman of the Ministry of Interior and the Bahraini special investigation unit in 2019. Will the Minister inform the House what the College of Policing's training covers on the treatment of prisoners, the use of torture and the threat of the death penalty against prisoners?

James Cleverly: As I have said on a number of occasions, the United Kingdom strongly opposes the use of the death penalty and the use of torture. Our technical assistance to those oversight bodies is to ensure that they improve their effectiveness and transparency. That is what the work of the UK Government, in conjunction with the Bahraini Government, is seeking to achieve, and we will continue to push for the improved accountability, transparency and effectiveness of such oversight bodies.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I begin by thanking the constituents of mine who raised this issue with me. It serves as a reminder to the Bahraini Government of how badly these cases affect their reputation among residents of the world, including in Crewe and Nantwich. We have covered the importance of judicial reform and political reform. Will my right hon. Friend update us on what progress we have made in discussing freedom of religion with the Bahraini royal family?

James Cleverly: Freedom of religion is also a cornerstone of our force for good in UK foreign policy. My hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) works with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on protection for religious freedom; he will take an interest in my hon. Friend's point. We very much impress upon our friends around the world the importance of religious freedom, and we will do so with regard to Bahrain as well.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): If their death sentences are confirmed, Mohammed Ramadhan and Hussain Moosa will have exhausted all their legal remedies and will face imminent execution. What is the Minister's assessment of the efficacy of the Government's encouragement of Bahrain to follow due process and meet its international human rights obligations?

James Cleverly: As I have said, the existence of the oversight bodies is in part because of the work that the UK has done with Bahrain. We will seek to continue to improve the effectiveness and transparency of those oversight bodies. That will be an enduring function of our relationship with the Bahrainis.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): My right hon. Friend has already referred to this in answer to a previous question, but given the key importance that a truly free press has in ensuring human rights, will he provide further assurances to the House that the Government will take every possible step to safeguard press freedoms in Bahrain?

James Cleverly: As I have said, we do have concerns about the diversity of the press in Bahrain. It is part of the reason why Bahrain remains a human rights priority

country for the UK. We know that there is proposed legislation, and we will encourage the Bahrainis to bring this forward swiftly.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: It seems to be the case—I want to understand why—that the FCO has defended the Bahraini ombudsman and the Special Investigations Unit, which it seems to want to improve, in its clearly flawed and heavily influenced investigations into the extraction of so-called confessions by torture from Mohammed and Hussain. If we are to have any continuing measure of international legitimacy, we must not be seen to be supporting regimes, and agencies within regimes, that whitewash allegations of torture, resulting in totally disgraceful death sentences on bogus charges simply for voicing dissent. There is no time to monitor a journey by Bahrain on human rights. I appeal to the Minister not to rest for a second on this issue as it is a matter of justice and of life and death.

James Cleverly: A number of right hon. and hon. Members have raised these oversight bodies. It is important that there is oversight of the process, so oversight bodies need to exist. It is important that those oversight bodies improve, and we are seeking to improve them. The Government of Bahrain desire to improve those oversight bodies and we are helping them to do so. Where a country with which we have had relations for more than two centuries explicitly seeks to improve the transparency, effectiveness and resilience of its institutions, we will seek to help it provide that improvement.

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

11.16 am

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

11.20 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing Monday 13 July will include:

MONDAY 13 JULY—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Bill, followed by consideration of a procedural motion, followed by all stages of the Stamp Duty Land Tax (Temporary Relief) Bill, followed by motion relating to the membership of the Intelligence and Security Committee.

TUESDAY 14 JULY—Remaining stages of the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill.

WEDNESDAY 15 JULY—Opposition day (10th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party, subject to be announced, followed by motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to terrorism.

THURSDAY 16 JULY—Second Reading of the Non-Domestic Rating (Public Lavatories) Bill, followed by general debate on restoration and renewal.

FRIDAY 17 JULY—The House will not be sitting.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the business next week and for arranging the statement later today on Baroness Cumberlege's report, "First Do No Harm". I acknowledge the persistence of my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who started asking questions in 2011 and has managed to lobby three Prime Ministers, as a result of which we have an excellent report and the survivors will finally get justice.

The shadow Chancellor said, "Thanks for the meal deal, but we were promised a new deal." We do not appear to have had that new deal. We are encouraged to eat out, and I wonder whether, in the autumn statement, there will be vouchers for the gym.

The Chancellor was right that there is a nobility of work. Where is the nobility of work for the 12,000 staff at British Airways? Where is the nobility of work for the 3,000 Rolls-Royce staff, or the nobility of work for our manufacturing sector, with over 1,000 jobs being lost at JLR in the west midland? Our hard-pressed health workers have no pay rise, and the retail sector was again left out. There was nothing for local newspapers, which have said they would like a further business rate holiday. The News Media Association says that since the start of the pandemic, advertising revenue has declined by 80%. Could that be inserted in next week's debate?

The Prime Minister will not apologise. Will the Leader of the House give us a mea culpa? On 30 April, I received this from the manager of a residential care home in my constituency:

"We have only just had our number of deaths declared which is appalling. We alone lost eight residents...(our little family). We have let families see them when they are near to the end of their lives. We have had lots of sad moments and has a thought had been given to us? NO. We are the forgotten ones. Many sleepless nights have been done thinking of our beloved residents (family). WE WOULD JUST LIKE SOME EQUALITY TO THE NHS. We deserve a national badge like the NHS."

Carers have left their homes to stay in residential homes to look after the residents there. The Prime Minister has said that too many care homes do not follow procedures, but does he really know about procedures? Is it following procedures to go to Durham for an eye test, or to a holiday home in Greece? If he will not apologise, perhaps he could cover the cost of TV licences for the over-70s. Age UK says that nine in 10 respondents said that TV was more important to them since the pandemic. Could coverage of that social policy be inserted into the package next week?

There is no business for the third week after this. Could the Leader of the House schedule time for a debate on early-day motion 593?

[That this House recognises the life-changing injustices experienced by subpostmasters throughout the Horizon scandal; notes with the deepest sadness that subpostmasters have served custodial sentences and suffered bankruptcy for offences they did not commit; recognises the role of the Government in prolonging this crisis through not fulfilling their role of shareholder representation on the board of Post Office Limited; expresses concern at the scope and formation of the inquiry currently outlined by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; and strongly urges the Government to institute a judge-led public inquiry into this matter at the earliest opportunity.]

The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), said in the House that there would be an independent review on the Horizon IT scandal. It is now a month since he made that statement. The Government website said that the review would come "shortly". The EDM is calling for a judge-led independent inquiry. People have served custodial sentences and gone bankrupt, and they were totally innocent. This is what the judge said when he gave judgment:

"the Post Office...has resisted timely resolution of this Group Litigation".

That means that the Post Office was dragging it out so that the victims did not get any recompense or as much as they should have done—it was all tied up in legal fees. This was a terrible injustice and we need to learn the lessons.

May we have clarification on the statement on the £1.57 billion for the arts, because it does not contain clear guidelines on funding scope, timing or eligibility? The statement says that the guidelines will be made "shortly". May we have a statement on exactly what the guidelines are and when "shortly" is?

I am a bit upset because the Leader of the House does not appear to be answering my questions on Nazanin, Anousheh, Kylie and, of course, Luke Symons. May we have an update, as we have had Foreign Office questions and even a statement by the Foreign Secretary on global human rights? Finally, may we have an urgent debate on our borders and smuggling, as it seems there might be some dispute within Cabinet?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Let me answer straightaway the right hon. Lady's question on Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, because, as I promised last week, I have taken this up with the Foreign Office. I have spoken to a Minister at the Foreign Office and I can give her the reassurance, which I hope will provide some comfort, that this is absolutely top of their list of priorities and they are

[*Mr Rees-Mogg*]

continuing to work to secure Nazanin's release. The matter is taken seriously by the Foreign Office, as it should be.

I share the right hon. Lady's wish to congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on the terrific work she did, which led ultimately to the Cumberlege report. I was a member of her all-party group on Primodos, and I think the work done there is of fundamental importance. I am pleased with and welcome the Cumberlege report, which the Government are of course looking into before responding to fully. This is an example of how this place can be used to make things happen and to make things change using procedures within Parliament. That is always welcome.

I am not sure whether the right hon. Lady welcomed the new deal or not. She was just a little grudging about this incredible support being provided to businesses up and down the country. The record is remarkable: 9.3 million jobs on the furlough scheme, costing the taxpayer £25.5 billion; and 2.6 million self-employed people being supported, at a cost of £7.7 billion. If that does not show that the Government understand the nobility of work, I do not know what does. The Government have put taxpayers' money where their mouth is to ensure that jobs are protected and kept, and that the structure of the economy is maintained. The next package is a £30 billion one. It is really important to understand the fundamentally different nature of this crisis from the one that hit in 2008. Then, we were facing a crisis of over-expenditure, bad management of the economy and fundamental failings, whereas now we face a collapse in demand created by a pandemic and the right response is fundamentally different from the one we had in 2010, which has very successfully left us in a position where we can afford these extraordinary but necessary measures.

The right hon. Lady mentioned the concerns about care homes. The work done by people in care homes has been remarkable, in the most difficult circumstances, and the Government have done everything they can to support them. That has partly been through the funds sent to local authorities, with the £600 million infection control fund to ensure that the money is there to help care homes; through the overhaul of the way personal protective equipment is delivered, to ensure that that is available to people in care homes; and through ensuring that the workforce is expanded through a new recruitment campaign, so that people are there to help where they are needed. But I share her view that the work done in care homes is of fundamental importance, and I would dispute her conclusion that they have been forgotten—they have not been forgotten, and they are very much valued.

On TV licences, I think the right hon. Lady's message will be heard by the BBC, and let us say to Auntie, "Come on, let's be nice to the over-75s as they are some of your most loyal viewers and listeners, and it would be right to allow them to continue to watch television for free."

On EDM 593 and the Horizon scandal, there is no worse scandal than imprisoning people or unjustly taking away their livelihoods when they are accused of crimes that they did not commit. The seriousness of what the right hon. Lady has raised is well known, and again it shows how the procedures of this House may be used to right wrongs—our historical role of redress of grievance.

We had an urgent question on the money going to the arts, and amazingly, for once, a Government package was actually welcomed by everybody. I think it was a great triumph generally for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, who managed to put together an amazing package supporting some of our most valued institutions, and that is extraordinarily welcome.

Finally, the borders issues will be sorted out—things are working, and there is a deadline set for July of next year—and we will always emphasise the unity of the United Kingdom.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): The Chancellor's "eat out to help out" voucher scheme for August is an absolute lifeline for the local economy in Eastbourne, and it will—I hope—promote wellbeing in bringing people together. With the ministerial team working so hard at present to bring back gyms, leisure centres and pools, might we consider, as complementary to that scheme, access to those places so that we can equally promote the physical wellbeing and get the nation up and running?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. I cannot claim to be a native gym-goer personally. I did have to go occasionally in my childhood, and I have never quite recovered from the experience. However, many people up and down the country will be very keen to get back to sports centres, gymnasiums and swimming pools to get themselves into peak physical performance—and they can then compensate by eating out to get back the calories that they have just burned off in the gymnasium. The voucher scheme is time-limited to boost hospitality businesses and encourage people to unleash the latent demand that has been pent up over the past few months in a particularly vulnerable sector employing millions of people. I hope she understands that we are not able to offer such support to all sectors of the economy, but I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will look to support some industries that come under acute pressures in the coming months.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP) [V]: The Chancellor must be peeved that his grand announcement yesterday received such a mixed response, with many industry bodies saying it is insufficient. When we debate these plans on Monday, will the Leader of the House try to persuade his right hon. Friend to listen to others and seek consensus? It is increasingly bizarre that the Chancellor insists on a one-size-fits-all approach to business support, when everyone else knows that different sectors are affected differently. The fact is that, come the autumn, there will be many businesses which would in normal circumstances be perfectly viable that cannot trade because of public health restrictions. As the chief strategist of J. P. Morgan said yesterday:

"Removing the furlough scheme before activity has recovered is like building three quarters of a bridge and not finishing it because it is becoming expensive".

Secondly, I want to ask again for a debate on the financial straitjacket in which the devolved Administrations are forced to operate. Every time I ask about devolution powers, the Leader of the House gives me an answer about money. I am not sure if he is evading the question or he does not understand it. The fiscal framework of devolution was not designed to respond to a global

pandemic, and it needs to be changed. To give this week's example, the arts rescue package announced on Monday includes repurposing capital spending in England, so why will the Government not allow the Scottish Government to do the same? We hear from many Cabinet members that Scotland's salvation is due to the strong arms of the Union, implying that only big countries can deal with the pandemic, but that is not true. In fact, many small countries have proven more agile and effective, but if the Leader of the House does believe this, can he explain why support for Scotland becoming an independent country is now running at 54%, an all-time historical high?

Finally, can the Leader of the House confirm whether, in next week's debate about restoration and renewal, the Government will bring forward their own, revised plans? In particular, does he believe that the decision to build a complete replica of the House of Commons Chamber for a temporary decant is profligate and ought to be reviewed?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is concerned that the Chancellor is peeved, but as his own happy countenance looks down upon us, we know that he himself, in his cheerful, jolly and bonhomous way, would never be peeved—it is hard to think of a less peevish person.

The hon. Gentleman talks about the furlough scheme, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is absolutely right: the furlough scheme cannot go on forever. It has been an amazing effort by the taxpayer to ensure that the structure of the economy is maintained and, therefore, that we can have a V-shaped recovery. However, the Government—the taxpayer—cannot afford indefinitely to provide this level of support. Therefore, October seems to me to be about the right date.

The hon. Gentleman complains that he does not like the answer I gave him on the fiscal settlement for Scotland, but I have good news for him: the figure I gave him last week is lower than the figure I shall give him this week. Owing to the strength of the United Kingdom, the Barnett consequentials have led to £4.6 billion being available to be spent in Scotland. That shows the success of the economic management of the United Kingdom over 10 years of coalition and Conservative Government. The ability to answer the challenges of 2008 and to ensure that the public sector finances got back into proper shape so that we could afford to deal with a fundamentally different crisis, which required a different response and the expenditure of taxpayers' money, is a tribute to the strength of the United Kingdom. Where would Scotland be had it gone for independence in 2014, with its revenue dependent on the oil price, which has subsequently collapsed? It would be bankrupt. The hon. Gentleman calls for bankruptcy; Her Majesty's Government have provided solvency and support for the people of the whole United Kingdom.

As for restoration and renewal, we will debate that next week.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Buckinghamshire has more microbusinesses than any other county in the country and, consequently, a large number of directors of very small companies. Many of those directors pay themselves primarily through dividends, to reflect the variations in their cash flow. Sadly, they have not been

able to benefit directly from the Government's extremely generous support schemes for salaried workers and the self-employed. Will my right hon. Friend consider a debate on the value that small company directors bring to our economy, with their spirit of entrepreneurship, their willingness to take risks and the employment opportunities that they bring to others?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the crucial matter of the value that small company directors bring to our economy—or rather the directors of small companies; they themselves are not necessarily small. Many excellent small businesses exist in his constituency, and I am sure they will be grateful to him for bringing our attention to them today and, indeed, in yesterday's general debate on the economy following the Chancellor's announcement. It is absolutely fundamental that small businesses are supported, which is why so much has been done. The lifeblood of the economy flows from small businesses; they are the ones who generate our wealth and who allow us to pay for the public services that we need, so it is crucial that the self-employed are helped, as they are being by the Chancellor's comprehensive plans.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: Given that we have another scheduled general debate in Government time next Thursday, can I again appeal to the Leader of the House for time for Backbench Business Committee debates? I know that these are exceptional circumstances, but we have had only one day and 90 minutes' worth of debate since the general election. This week, there are two days of estimates debates, and although the subjects were determined by the Committee, we do that work on behalf of the Liaison Committee, whose time it really is. The first estimates day, on Tuesday, was not afforded any measure of protected time, resulting in three 80-minute debates, severely restricted speaking time and some Members missing out.

We are also getting requests for time from Select Committee Chairs who want to make report launch statements, but we cannot facilitate them. We know we do not have time next week, so if the Leader of the House, in the course of today's exchanges, refers Members to the Backbench Business Committee, given that more than 20 debates are waiting to be held, that suggestion will lack a measure of legitimacy. I suggest to Members that, if the Leader of the House does refer them to the Backbench Business Committee, they look at him wistfully—and possibly disapprovingly—while shaking their finger, because it will be a response, given the record, that currently lacks validity.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Backbench Business Committee does very important work in ensuring that issues that Back Benchers are concerned about are brought to the wider attention of the British people. There were a number of Backbench Business debates facilitated by the Government, as general debates, before the Backbench Business Committee was established, and we did our best to ensure that the general debates early in this Session were of interest to the Backbench Business Committee, but the hon. Gentleman rightly points out the pressures on parliamentary time. Members want urgent questions answered and statements delivered, and that inevitably pressurises the timetable. We have also given time to the Petitions Committee, because

[*Mr Rees-Mogg*]

without Westminster Hall, it does not have its general slot, so I think the overall record of delivering time for Back-Bench debates has been generous, even if it has not specifically benefited the hon. Gentleman's Committee.

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con): In the light of the 1,400 redundancies announced at Airbus in Broughton this week, which will seriously impact on my constituency, will my right hon. Friend find time for my fellow north Wales blue wall MPs and me to have a debate on Government support for the aviation and aerospace sector to see what more could be done over and above the £6 billion of sectoral support that has been provided to date?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Six billion pounds is an important amount of support, and my hon. Friend is right to highlight the work being done by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and HM Treasury over the past week to support local jobs in his constituency. Aviation and aerospace companies are vital to the economy, which is why the support has already been there, including time to pay, support for employees and loans. These are designed to ensure that companies of any size receive the help that they need to get through this difficult time—airports, airlines and the wider supply chain. We will continue to work closely with the companies affected and we are open to offering further support, so long as all other Government schemes and commercial options have been exhausted, including raising capital from existing investors. We will consult on what we can do on aviation taxes. The Chancellor will say more about that in due course.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the answer that the Leader of the House has just given, because aviation, aerospace and our local airports are all struggling and need help. I hope that there will be time for a full and proper debate, but was the Leader of the House as shocked as I was by the Northern Ireland Health Minister, who proposed to close air links between Great Britain and Northern Ireland as part of his public health strategy? Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that that is completely and totally unacceptable, and will he ensure and make a commitment from the Dispatch Box that links with Northern Ireland will remain open as a priority?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am as astonished as the hon. Gentleman, and I was even more astonished when I discovered that the comment was made by a Unionist. It sounded more like Nicola Sturgeon's famous wall that she metaphorically wishes to build, and I am sorry that a Unionist would ever take that view. We are one United Kingdom and we must maintain all our links.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): The business community in Padstow has highlighted an anomaly with me today around street trading. We currently have henna tattooists and braiders working from the quay while our beauty salons and tattoo parlours are closed. Will the Leader of the House bring forward some time to discuss this loophole, to see how we can help legitimate businesses in Padstow that are paying business rates, rather than those that pay no rates and are currently using the system?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We will inevitably discuss these issues. My hon. Friend is championing his constituency interest in the way he always does—in a noble way—for which he deserves great credit. Obviously, businesses are opening up at a different pace and it is a question of spreading the risk to ensure that more and more businesses can open safely, but Her Majesty's Government are keen that all businesses should be able to open safely.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Does the Leader of the House share my disappointment that, nearly 24 hours on from yesterday's summer economic update, the Scottish Government have yet to have the full extent of the Barnett consequential of that announcement confirmed? It is not an uncommon situation for the Scottish Government to have to wait several days for that detail to feed through, which makes the UK Government look rather incompetent and discourteous. As somebody who clearly takes great care to be neither of those things, will the Leader of the House be good enough to arrange for a relevant Minister to come to the House to make a statement on behalf of the Treasury to explain why these problems appear to be a built-in feature of the Treasury's approach to such matters, rather than just an occasional glitch in the system?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am glad to say that the Barnett consequential so far are £4.6 billion, so there is a substantial amount of money, thanks to the strength of the United Kingdom, going to the Scottish Government. The Barnett consequential relate to a well-established formula. The former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Joel Barnett, a very distinguished Labour figure, established the formula, I think in the prime ministership of Harold Wilson—it was either Harold Wilson or Jim Callaghan—and it has been the way in which money has been distributed ever since. That money flows, and that is the important thing.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): Last month at Great Western Park and in the Ladygrove area of my constituency, we had unauthorised Traveller encampments descend. Local residents were subjected to noise, mess, vandalism and other antisocial behaviour for close to a week. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government are developing proposals to actively tackle that, so that our constituents do not have to deal with it for so long, and that those proposals will be brought to this House as soon as possible?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and commend him for the work he is doing to champion the concerns of the people of Wantage, which is the birthplace, of course, of Alfred the Great. Although the majority of Travellers obey the law, we recognise that unauthorised encampments can cause significant distress to local residents with antisocial or criminal behaviour. The Government consulted on measures to enable the police to tackle unauthorised encampments more effectively and will publish a response to the consultation in due course. As the then Housing Minister, now the Foreign Secretary, said when launching the consultation:

“We must promote a tolerant society and make sure there are legal sites available for Travellers, but equally the rule of law must be applied to everyone.”

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab) [V]: Please may we have a debate on what the the Government can do to support our steel industry? Today, the Community union and others are launching a campaign to highlight how we need our steel. A debate would give hon. Members an opportunity to press Ministers to commit to using Britain's steel as we rebuild, and to getting all Departments signed up to the steel charter.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is a great champion of the steel industry and has been for a long time, and the Government are very keen to help all industry. That is why the plans that have been put in place are to help the whole of the British economy, and that seems to be working well. It seems to be helping to keep people in work, which is absolutely essential. As regards a specific debate, quite often before the start of a recess there is an Adjournment debate that allows a wide range of topics to be debated. I would not like to give away what I am going to say next week, but it may be possible that such a debate will be facilitated.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the live export of animals? I was horrified to learn that yet again we will have more consultation on the subject. All Members are being inundated with emails about the import and export of real fur. Exporting live animals is cruel and needs to stop. We do not need any more consultation.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend makes his case as always with passion and energy. One of the manifold advantages of leaving the European Union is that we will be able to make these types of laws for ourselves, and we will not have to give way to a higher power. His energetic championing of these issues in Parliament will have its consequences.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: On 12 May, I told the Chancellor about Ranjith Chandrapala, a bus driver from Hanwell in my constituency who died of covid-19. I asked the Chancellor to extend the Government's covid-19 life assurance scheme for health and care workers' families to others, including the families of bus drivers such as Ranjith. The Chancellor did not answer directly and his team said I should ask the Transport Secretary. I have now received a response from the Minister responsible for buses saying that support provided to key workers on the frontline will continue to be reviewed across Government. Will the Leader of the House invite the Transport Secretary to make a statement before the recess explaining once and for all whether and when the Government will do the right thing and extend the life assurance scheme to the families of transport workers like Ranjith who have died during the outbreak?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman raises a sad and important case and an issue that should concern us all. I will happily undertake what he has asked me to do and raise this issue with the Secretary of State for Transport to try to ensure that he gets a complete answer.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con) [V]: I am privileged to be the honorary president of the Buckinghamshire Campaign to Protect Rural England,

and its latest report, which is called "Greener, better, faster", makes great reading. It sets out how the countryside itself can provide many of the solutions to tackling climate breakdown. Can the Leader of the House encourage his colleagues to hold a debate on this report in Government time to give us the opportunity to highlight further the ways in which we can support the transformational change needed across society to reach net zero emissions while at the same time preserving our landscapes, habitats and the wildlife living in them? I understand that Ministers have responded positively to the recommendations, and such a debate would enable them to put on record their support for the CPRE's sterling work, which benefits us all.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her question. I have not yet read the report that she refers to, but I hope she will agree that the Government want to ensure that our economic recovery is sustainable and environmentally friendly. Many of the measures announced by the Chancellor yesterday will ensure that that is the case. We are already championing innovative and eco-friendly technologies, and our ambitious Environment, Fisheries and Agriculture Bills will enable us to protect our precious natural environment and diverse ecosystems for years to come, in line with the legal commitment to a net zero economy by 2050. Along with my right hon. Friend, I and many others representing rural constituencies want to see the country's rural economy coming firmly back to life in the next few months. Our countryside is far more than an attraction to preserve in aspic; it is made by the millions of people who live and work there, and I believe the Government must do all they can to support rural lives and livelihoods throughout this recovery.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): People living with phenylketonuria—PKU— which is a genetic condition that means they cannot process proteins well, have been waiting for a drug called Kuvan for many years. It has been available for 11 years, and it is long overdue for them to be able to access that therapy. Will the Leader of the House schedule a debate in Government time to look at how we can ensure that people are able to access Kuvan for the benefit of their health and their lives?

Mr Rees-Mogg: When each and every one of us as constituency MPs has a case where there is a drug available and there is a constituent who cannot get access to that drug, it is one of the issues we always pursue with the most single-minded vigour, and that is absolutely the right thing to do. I have had representations made to me by my constituents about PKU, and I therefore have great sympathy with what the hon. Lady says. I would encourage her to continue making that case, and the hint I gave about the Adjournment debate may also be useful to her.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con) [V]: Laughing gas or nitrous oxide, as it is also known, is becoming the cigarette butt of our time. I am sure Members across the House are seeing an increasing number of those toxic silver canisters piling up across their neighbourhoods, as they are in Bolton. This is a scourge on our society and no parent wants their child exposed to that sea of

[Mark Logan]

silver. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we are in need of a new debate on how to put an end to what is no laughing matter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is getting into the bad pun territory that I thought was the preserve of the Leader of the House.

I understand the seriousness of this issue, and I sympathise with the point that my hon. Friend is making. It is very unpleasant to see this type of litter and he is right to understand the concerns that parents have. It is an offence to supply nitrous oxide if the vendor knows or is insufficiently aware of the fact that it would be used for psychoactive effect. Concerns about the supply of nitrous oxide for its psychoactive effects can be reported to the police and problems caused by the consumption of intoxicating substances in public places can and should be reported to local authorities. I am pleased to say that my hon. Friend will have the opportunity to put his views directly to Ministers during the Adjournment debate on tackling the misuse of nitrous oxide on Tuesday 21 July.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Today the Leader of the House will receive a letter from me and other MPs setting out why it was illegal to pass a rule that said that 250 MPs should be excluded from parliamentary debate, and setting out that Parliament is in fact not empowered to remove the source of its own legitimacy, and that the vote itself was illegal because it excluded those 250 MPs. Will he undertake to ensure that he responds to this letter within seven days, with a view to resuming hybrid operations in this Parliament, or else at least sets out in full the counter-arguments to these arguments? Will he make arrangements for a full debate on this matter that includes all those people who have been excluded, without personal risk, in order that we can all get back to full operational work in this place, using the technology available, and do not have to resort to the courts?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have not yet received the hon. Gentleman's letter, although I look forward to doing so with bated breath—the excitement that awaits me at the end of this session is almost overwhelming. However, this House made its decision. It made its decision in a legitimate vote. We have exclusive cognisance of our affairs. We made the right decision. We are back to work. We are legislating effectively. The Government are being held to account. It was absolutely the right thing to do, and the hon. Gentleman, when he feels that he is well enough to come back, will be enormously welcome. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: I do not think that is quite acceptable from the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) and I hope he will be sending an apology to the Leader of the House.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Local bus services have been particularly hard hit by coronavirus, but this decline is nothing new: we are seeing a third fewer bus journeys in Stoke-on-Trent than a decade

ago. Will my right hon. Friend agree to a debate in Government time to consider how we might reverse this trend and aid our recovery?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank my hon. Friend for raising a matter that is of great importance to all our constituents, as I am sure that his constituents in Stoke-on-Trent would agree. Buses are a lifeline for people who need to travel for work or to buy food, and for all the other purposes for which public transport is needed. The Government have committed over £650 million to keep buses running and increase services for those who need them, while also allowing for social distancing while travelling. We have announced a £5 billion package to improve local bus services, as well as a new national bus strategy, which will include Britain's first ever all-electric bus town and new low-fare, high-frequency super-bus networks. Bus services received £2.1 billion last year, and since 2010 annual support from the public sector has been 16% higher in real terms than it was under the last Labour Government.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Again the Prime Minister's special adviser is in the news. As well as regularly sharing his many views on our nation's defence on his very public blog, he is now going to be visiting sensitive MOD sites in the middle of a defence review. Could the Leader of the House find some parliamentary time so that the Minister for the Cabinet Office can share with us what changes have been made to the code of conduct for special advisers?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is quite right that those who advise the Prime Minister are able to get access to information, acting on the Prime Minister's behalf. It is entirely proper and a normal thing to happen.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Tomorrow I shall be visiting a beauty salon in Cleethorpes. I hasten to add that this will not be for treatment, although I am sure that hon. Members would say I am probably in need of it. In answer to an earlier question, my right hon. Friend said that businesses must open safely. I think that beauty salons deserve an explanation as to what is needed in order for them to open safely. They are frustrated and angry. Could he arrange for a statement on Monday to explain the situation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I cannot understand why the Adonis of Cleethorpes could possibly need to visit a beauty salon. Indeed, the people of Cleethorpes are renowned for their beauty across the nation. [Interruption.] Of course, except Somerset.

The beauty sector is an important one, and it holds a key to our communities' economic recovery. I understand the anxiety of those who own or work in such establishments and commend their keenness to return to work. My hon. Friend will be aware that non-essential retail outlet can open, provided that they have been made covid-secure. Pubs, restaurants and hairdressers, as well as museums and places of worship, are now able to reopen, provided they are covid-secure. Our hope is to reopen gyms and leisure facilities in mid-July. Other close-contact services and tattoo and nail parlours will follow as soon as possible. The Government have been clear that they want to reopen the economy carefully

and gradually, which is why some businesses that involve less sustained contact between people have opened before others.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I shall be heading to the gym next week, by the sound of it, rather than the beauty salon.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: As of December, the amount of Child Maintenance Service arrears in my constituency was £599,000—a staggering amount being denied to hard-pressed families. That situation is now exacerbated by shortfalls in payments due to paying parents' loss of income during the covid-19 emergency. Can we have a debate in Government time on the operation of the Child Maintenance Service and how this vital family income can be protected?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is obviously important that child maintenance is paid and that families have access to the funds they need. Universal credit has been working extremely well in helping families. Increased advances of up to 100% of a monthly payment and cutting the taper rate so that people keep more of their money are helping families in need, but the hon. Gentleman makes an important point about maintenance payments.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Can we have a debate on building standards for homes? Across our country, many more homes are being built, but more could be done to improve the standards to which they are built, particularly on the environment and digital connectivity. There are examples of new homes being finished very poorly. Constituents have contacted me to highlight disturbing quality problems and poor levels of customer service from some house builders in putting things right. If we have a debate, we will be able to address both issues.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very sympathetic to what my hon. Friend says. I think all of us have had constituents come to us who have bought new homes that have not been up to standard. I have one constituent whose home was actually unsafe in the way that it was delivered to him. It is important that we build more homes, and we need to be Macmillanesque in our ambition, but they need to be good-quality homes. They need to be safe, comfortable and energy-efficient but also beautiful, in the hope that they will survive through the generations in the way that some of the houses we have in this country have survived. Those living in new build homes must feel confident that their property is safe and of high quality. We will ensure that a new homes ombudsman is established and legislate to require developers to belong to it. That will offer better protection for homebuyers, resolve disputes and improve quality. The Government have taken bold steps to reopen the housing market safely in recent weeks following the crisis, and we are taking a number of legislative measures to make construction easier and quicker and to bring forward transactions by suspending stamp duty for house sales under £500,000 until next March.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: I, too, welcome many of the measures announced yesterday, particularly the further support for the hospitality sector. The Leader of the House has just said that the

Government's intention is for gyms to reopen in mid-July if those leisure facilities are deemed to be covid-safe. The Prime Minister said last week that a statement on their future was imminent. Can we have an indication from the Leader of the House of when that statement will happen, so that our gyms, pools and leisure centres—and, for that matter, remaining retail businesses such as beauticians—can begin to plan for the new normal?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his warm welcome for what is being done for the hospitality sector; I am grateful for this level of cross-party support. Imminent is imminent. I cannot do more than reiterate the Prime Minister's words, although perhaps we should consult the great dictionary of Dr Johnson—not an ancestor, I believe—to see what “imminent” means.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Education is meant to be something where science, technology, history and philosophy come together and where diversity of thought is debated and explored—where children are taught how to think, not what to think. Sadly, that seems to be less often the case. Several students came to me yesterday and said, “We no longer feel that we are allowed to share our opinions if they are contrary to that of the pervasive world view within the school and integrated curriculum.” Can we have a debate in Government time on the importance of protecting free speech and diversity of opinion in education? As with the BBC's remit, why should schools not be required to present multiple sides of political, historical and philosophical debate?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Freedom of speech is fundamental to how our society operates. Democracy, the rule of law, freedom of speech and the rights of property are the four pillars on which our constitution is built—a constitution that has thrived through the centuries. If we take away freedom of speech, we undermine all the other pillars that have supported our constitution.

It is a requirement in state-funded schools to teach a broad and balanced curriculum that promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at schools, and that must be done in a way that encourages freedom of speech. The key to that is that we all have to accept the right of people to express views not only that we do not like but that, on occasion, we even find offensive. If we accept only views that we like and find unchallenging, there is no freedom of speech.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. There are 16 Members still trying to catch my eye. I would like to get you all in, but succinct questions and answers, please.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Earlier this week, I chaired a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on mental health. We heard about a worrying rise in urgent mental health referrals and a similarly worrying reduction in routine referrals, flagging up a probable pent-up demand on mental health services. May we have a debate on how the NHS can be helped to deal with the mental health consequences of the pandemic?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is a matter of concern to everybody across the House and has become a major priority.

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

Mental health funding increased to £12.5 billion in 2018-19, and that will go up by £2.3 billion a year by 2023-24 to support an extra 380,000 adults and 345,000 children. There has been £9.2 million of additional funding for mental health charities during this crisis. This is an issue that the Government take really seriously, as do Members across the House.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): May I say how delighted I am that the Second Reading of the Non-Domestic Rating (Public Lavatories) Bill is coming forward? As co-chair of the APPG on local democracy, I know that town and parish councils across the country have had to pay huge amounts over the last few years to try to keep public toilets open, and that many have faced huge financial pressures that have forced them to close toilets. The Bill will be a lifeline to many of them, especially with the extra covid costs they have faced. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, alongside the many other recent measures we have introduced to help local councils, this will be a major additional boost, ensuring that public toilets remain available and are not closed, and helping our high streets and those with hidden disabilities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The taxation of toilets has been an issue since the reign of the Emperor Vespasian, who famously said “pecunia non olet”—“money does not stink”. He thought it was quite reasonable to tax lavatorial facilities. Her Majesty’s Government take the opposite view and are keen to remove these taxes, and I hope it will be a relief to one and all.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) [V]: On 26 June, *The Telegraph’s* news site announced that half the UK’s imported covid-19 infections are from Pakistan. That had no basis in fact and no reference to expert evidence, but it was followed by *The Sun*, MailOnline and, soon afterwards, far-right groups stoking anti-Muslim propaganda. This was nothing short of hate speech, and I know that just by raising it I will be targeted by those on the right. Will the Leader of the House condemn *The Telegraph* and other media outlets for this irresponsible, offensive and racist reporting; will he report this incident to the Independent Press Standards Organisation, as I have done; and will he contact all media owners, including those in social media, to demand a stop to this hate propaganda?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is right to report things that she thinks are inaccurate to IPSO; that is the purpose of the body. The press is self-regulated, and that is quite right. The Government should not intervene in the regulation of the press—if they seek to do that, they risk undermining freedom of speech—but equally, those protections are there. IPSO is there, and the hon. Lady is right to use it.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con) [V]: In recent decades, unfortunately, the environmentally important Sussex coast kelp forest has been seriously degraded. May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for the Environment on the proposed signing of a byelaw to ensure that that kelp forest is protected for the future?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend always raises important points in this House. This, I understand, has been passed through the normal processes and a formal application is awaited by the relevant ministry. However, I will try to find more information for him on the details of the subject.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It was good to hear from the Leader of the House about the motion on terrorism on Wednesday. I hope that that is to ban one of the extreme right-wing organisations that a number of us have been campaigning on, such as the Order of Nine Angles, which should not be operating in this country. I have heard that there are significant delays proposed to the online harms Bill, which comes on the back of the Online Harms White Paper. Will he explain what the Government’s plans are to bring that forward? As we heard in a group meeting with the all-party group against antisemitism this week, many extreme right-wing organisations that have antisemitic, racist, Islamophobic and homophobic ideology are organising, recruiting and grooming new followers online.

Mr Rees-Mogg: There is a full legislative programme, as the hon. Gentleman knows, and Bills are being brought forward and processed rapidly by the House. We are doing well at achieving our constitutional obligations. In relation to the online harms Bill, the absence of the Bill does not remove the responsibility from the providers of these services to ensure that they are run and provided properly and that antisemitic material has no place on any properly run website.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con) [V]: Nail bars, beauty therapists, masseurs and tattoo artists, along with similar businesses, are an important part of our high streets, while dance studios, gyms, small outdoor festivals and swimming pools are an important part of our cultural life. All are very keen to get back to work and reopen. They have gone to extraordinary lengths to make themselves covid-safe, yet they have not yet opened. May I echo the call for an urgent statement on the specific reasons why certain sectors cannot open, what the barriers to opening are, and how those barriers could be addressed?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Indeed. What is being done is ensuring that things open up in a progressed way so that the lowest-risk activities open first and the higher-risk ones open later to ensure that it is safe to do so. The programme being followed is being followed very safely and seems to be working. I said earlier that some further openings will happen in mid-July and that is now not very far off, so there is good news coming. However, my hon. Friend is absolutely right to be championing those businesses. They want to get back to business. The Government want them to be able to get back to business, but it has to be safe.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) [V]: Feasgar math, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is good to see you.

UK productivity is at the best of times 15.1% lower than the G7 average. When methods of improving productivity are found, it is always foolish to go backwards. Parliament should surely set an example to businesses and workers, so instead of me taking two flights to London

to a Chamber which, as we can see behind the Leader of the House, has pandemic restrictions, we should continue with a safer, inclusive and more productive hybrid Parliament where votes can happen on an island Hebridean croft with exemplary efficiency compared with the overseas Westminster conga lines.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar makes his own argument for bringing Parliament back. May I say how much we miss him? Normally, we have some entertainment and forthright debate. We have the people of Na h-Eileanan an Iar beautifully and brilliantly represented. Whether the subject has anything to do with the hon. Gentleman or not, there is always a catcall or a few words of wisdom coming forth. Now, what do we have? We have some silent mutterings. He is on mute and we miss his dulcet tones. We want him back. He is the great argument for Parliament coming back physically.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Professional football clubs such as Blackpool FC are at the heart of their local communities, but many of them, especially those in leagues one and two, are suffering considerable financial difficulties because of the lack of match day revenue. With no imminent prospect of gates returning any time soon, the fear is that over the summer successive football league clubs will enter administration because of covid-19. Does my right hon. Friend think it would be in order to have a debate in this place about sustainable finances for football league clubs and the steps that the Government can take to support them?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises a very good point. Football clubs play a key role in the health and joy of communities throughout the country, especially in many of the northern towns and cities, like those in his constituency. Those clubs are not just sporting institutions, but vital for many local economies and livelihoods. I appreciate that the return of broadcast competitive sport behind closed doors does not really touch the joy and excitement of a full stadium of fans, whether we are talking about football, cricket or rugby—cricket is slightly more commonplace in my constituency. Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions took place only this morning, and I advise my hon. Friend to take the matter up further with that Department.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Further to the question from the hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts) about job losses at Airbus, I was pleased to hear the suggestion from the Leader of the House that help might now be available to prevent them. I am surprised, because when I asked the Chancellor about it yesterday, he was very clear that no more support was forthcoming. Although this U-turn is welcome, it is important that we get the Chancellor back to give another statement and confirm whether there will, in fact, be an aviation sector deal to prevent us from losing these highly skilled jobs, which we cannot afford to let go.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will reiterate what I have said, because this has been Government policy for some time. We will continue to work closely with the companies affected and we are open to offering further support, so long as all other Government schemes and commercial options have been exhausted, including raising capital

from existing investors. I think it was on the news this morning that a major company is at least keeping that option open. It is not all for the Government to do; existing investors have a responsibility as well. The position is that so long as all other Government schemes and commercial options have been exhausted, the Government are open to offering further support. That has been the position for some months.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): Crime and antisocial behaviour continue to blight my communities in Wednesbury, Oldbury and Tipton. I have been inundated by communications from residents of Tividale who have had to organise themselves into a street watch to combat crime and antisocial behaviour. Mr Speaker kindly granted me an Adjournment debate earlier this year, and I have raised this issue with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who came to my constituency and met my constituents. What advice would the Leader of the House give me and my constituents in Tividale about how to ensure that this issue is not brushed under the carpet and that they finally, after 20 years of broken promises, get their voices heard?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend does not need any advice from me. He clearly knows how to use parliamentary procedures to raise an important issue that affects his constituency. It is our duty as MPs to help to ensure that our communities are safe and secure, and that their law-abiding members feel confident as they go about their business. The Government are doing the right things. We have already taken on an extra 3,000 new police officers, which is part of the aim to employ another 20,000 in total. I commend my hon. Friend for what he has done so far, and encourage him to carry on badgering us all until he is satisfied.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab) [V]: The Ministry of Defence owes Iran more than £400 million and has said that it wants to pay that debt, but the Government have fought paying it for more than 20 years in the international courts. In 2017, the Iranian ambassador put on social media that the money was about to be sent. Can we please have a debate in Government time about the delay in settling our debt to Iran?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Iran is not necessarily the most friendly regime to the United Kingdom, and we have to look at our relationship with Iran in the round, but I will happily take up the hon. Lady's point with the Foreign Office.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: According to reports, an estimated 40 million people across the world are victims of modern slavery. In the UK we have first-rate legislation to combat modern slavery, but we have recently heard the stories of what has occurred in Leicester, where victims of modern slavery are also becoming victims of covid-19. Can we have a statement from the Home Secretary on the measures the Government are taking to combat modern slavery and bring to justice the evil perpetrators so that they suffer for the crime that they are committing against humanity?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is so right to raise this point. The evil of modern-day slavery should not be underestimated. We were the first country to publish a Government statement on modern slavery setting out the steps we have taken to identify and prevent modern slavery in supply chains, and that was one of the great achievements of the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). The Home Office has launched a new single competent authority to handle cases of modern slavery and a new digital system, making it easier for those on the frontline to refer victims for support, and that has allowed us to identify more victims than ever before.

Last year, over 10,000 potential victims were referred—52% more than in 2018—and it is worrying in itself that there should be such a high number. A high number is an indication that we are introducing policies that help, but it cannot be an indication of success, because if there is any modern-day slavery, that is in and of itself not a success. Some 1,600 police operations are ongoing, which is not far off tenfold the number only four years ago, but we have to go further. Modern-day slavery is an evil, and my hon. Friend is right to highlight it.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I realise that the Chancellor had a lot on his plate yesterday, but unfortunately there seemed to be no announcements regarding the green potential of hydrogen. The UK is well placed to leap forward both in hydrogen production, especially from wind farms, and in vehicle manufacture, notably buses from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Yorkshire, and construction vehicles and trucks. May we have an early debate to stimulate not just discussion, but some urgent decisions?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Thanks to the Chancellor's innovative scheme, we will all have a lot on our plate on some days in August—more on our plate than we might have been anticipating. As regards hydrogen, the right hon. Gentleman rightly raises an important point about an environmentally friendly source of energy. Yesterday's statement was 20 minutes long and inevitably could not cover everything. As I said, there may possibly be a debate on matters to be considered before the forthcoming Adjournment, which will be an opportunity to raise the subject, but the right hon. Gentleman is an experienced parliamentarian and knows better than I do how to get things raised in this House.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: The Committee on Standards in Public Life has just started a full investigation of the Electoral Commission to see whether it complies with the seven pillars of standards in public life: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. It is clear to me that the Electoral Commission complies with none of them, following its political pursuit of leave campaigners after the EU referendum. May we have a debate on the Electoral Commission? Such a request would normally be for Westminster Hall, so is there any chance that we can get back to Westminster Hall and have a debate on the Electoral Commission?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises some serious concerns. The Electoral Commission should clearly be like Caesar's wife: it should be above suspicion, and

there should be no stain on it or fear of partiality of any kind. If there is any question, it is right that it is raised in this House in the way that he has done. Time for a full-length Government debate will be difficult to provide. However, any appointments made to the Electoral Commission do come before this House, so there are occasions when we are able to consider matters relating to the commission.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): As the Leader of the House will know, Nottingham is home to two internationally renowned universities, and usually many thousands of students, but as the country went into lockdown, many students returned to their family homes. As university campuses reopen and students return to our city, local residents are understandably anxious about the impact on social distancing in local shops and on services, and the potential risk to public health. Students and their parents are also concerned about safety, and particularly about wellbeing and mental health, especially in halls of residence. May we have a statement from the Minister for Universities to set out what she is doing to help our institutions to address some of those issues?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As always, the hon. Lady raises an important and interesting point. Inevitably, before universities reopen, there will need to be reassurance, both to the communities in which they sit and to the people going back to university—the students themselves—that it is safe for them to do so. That will tie in with the return of schools at the beginning of September. Usually, universities go back a little bit later, so there is a little more time to allow for them to go back. The hon. Lady is also right to raise the issue of mental health; I mentioned earlier the figures relating to mental health, and it is an issue taken seriously throughout the House.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): The Department for Transport has been absolutely right to empower local councils such as Southampton City Council to introduce temporary cycle lanes and bus lanes during the pandemic, to see how they work, but does my right hon. Friend agree that before any such temporary measures become permanent, there should be a requirement for a full public consultation among residents? Will he ask the Department for Transport to make a statement?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely good and important point. As a motorist, I know that there is nothing more frustrating than when one sees a bus lane that is meant to be in operation and one has not seen a bus go down it for weeks, let alone that day. It is important that bus lanes are put in the right places and that the interests of motorists and communities are not overlooked.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Leader of the House for his statement. Before we move on, the House is suspended for three minutes.

12.26 pm

Sitting suspended.

Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review

12.29 pm

The Minister for Patient Safety, Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (Ms Nadine Dorries): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the independent medicines and medical devices review. This review was announced by my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) in February 2018, in response to public concern about the safety of medicines and medical devices used by the NHS. It focused on three areas. The first is Primodos, a hormone-based pregnancy test that is claimed to have led to miscarriages and birth defects during the 1960s and '70s. It was prescribed to more than 1.5 million women before it was withdrawn from use in 1978. The second is sodium valproate, an anti-epilepsy drug that has been definitively linked to autism and learning disabilities in children when taken during pregnancy. The third is the vaginal mesh implants used in the treatment of pelvic organ prolapse and stress urinary incontinence, which have been linked to crippling, life-changing side-effects.

Baroness Cumberlege was asked to conduct a review of what happened in each of those three cases, including whether the processes that were followed were sufficient when patients' concerns were raised. She was also asked to make some recommendations for the future, such as: how to consider the right balance between the criteria or threshold for a legitimate concern; how best to support patients where there might not be a scientific basis for their complaint, but where they have still suffered; how we can enhance the existing patient safety landscape; and how we can be more open to the insights that close attention to patient experience can bring.

The report has now been published, and a copy has been deposited in the Library of the House. It makes harrowing reading. Every page makes clear the pain and suffering that have been felt by so many patients and their families. As Baroness Cumberlege herself said, they suffered "avoidable harm". She said that she had listened to the heart-wrenching stories of acute suffering, of families fractured, of children harmed and so much more.

On behalf of the health and care sector, I would like to make an apology to those women, their children and their families for the time the system took to listen and respond. I would also like to thank every single person who has contributed to the review. I know that some of them wanted to be here in the House today. They felt as though their voices would never be heard, but now they have been, and their brave testimony will help patients in the future. I have watched and read some of their testimonies. They left me shocked, but also incredibly angry and most of all determined to make the changes that are needed to protect women in the future. It is right and proper that the victims were the first people to see this report. As a Government, we have now received its findings and, as hon. Members will understand, we are taking time to absorb them before we respond. That is the least that the report deserves. We will update the House at the very earliest opportunity.

I would like to thank Baroness Cumberlege, who has carried out her work with thoroughness and compassion. She has worked tirelessly to ensure that patients and

their families have been heard, and I would like to pay tribute to her and her team. I know that the patients' stories that they have heard have been harrowing and, at times, frankly beyond belief. She has done us all a great service by highlighting them, along with the suffering of so many women and their families. I know that there will be strong feelings across the House about the report, and that hon. Members will be eager to hear a fuller response. However, it is imperative for the sake of those who have suffered so greatly that we give the review the full consideration that it absolutely deserves.

It is clear, as I am sure the whole House will concur, that the response to these issues from those in positions of authority has not always been good enough. The task now is to establish a quicker and more compassionate way to address issues of patient harm when they arise. We must ensure that the system as a whole is vigilant in spotting safety concerns, and that we rapidly get to grips with the concerns identified by the report. We must make sure that different voices are invited to the table and that patients and their families have a clear pathway to get their answers and a resolution. The issues tackled in this report are, from one perspective, complex—matters of regulation, clinical decision making and scientific judgment—but there is one simple core theme that runs through all of this, and it goes to the heart of our work on patient safety. It comprises just two words: listening and humility. So much of the frustration and anger from patients and families stem from what they see as an unwillingness to listen—for us to listen and for them to be heard. We need to make listening a much stronger part of clinical practice and to make the relationship between patients and clinicians a true and equal partnership.

While the review has been progressing, the Government and the NHS have taken a number of steps relating to the concerns it has raised. However, there is always more that we can do, and it is clear that change is needed. We owe it to the victims and their families to get this right. I commend this statement to the House.

12.36 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Minister for coming to make this statement today and for providing advance sight of it.

"Ignored", "belittled", "derided", "gaslit"—those who have campaigned to highlight the harm caused by Primodos, sodium valproate and pelvic mesh have been called every name under the sun, but today they are one thing alone: proven right. I thank the noble Baroness Cumberlege for overseeing a piece of work that will make a huge difference to so many people, both today and in the future. It is hard to read, but it is vital that we do, and that we understand it and learn from it. It is really important to note that campaigners have universally said how well the review team treated them.

The review's report thoroughly investigates what happened in respect of each of the three areas that I mentioned. Although, on the surface, they are separate, they have an awful lot in common, not least that they were all taken and used by women, and in two cases, pregnant women. This is clearly no coincidence, and I was glad to hear the Minister say that the healthcare system must do better to protect women, because these cases reek of misogyny from top to bottom—

[Alex Norris]

and of ageism and ableism as well. They also share the reaction of the healthcare system, which, according to the report, failed to monitor the use of these medicines and medical devices, then failed to identify and acknowledge that things had gone wrong, and then failed to work in a joined-up fashion to improve. The healthcare system failed to protect these people. As the review says, it has taken the act of having a review to shine a light on these systemic failings. I share with everybody else the love affair that we, as a nation, have with our health system, but we cannot be blind to its faults, and it is time that we acted on them.

We would not be here without the campaigners. Without their tireless activism—for many decades in some cases—this would have been ignored. I want to take the opportunity to highlight a few of the groups that have done such tremendous work. That is a dangerous game, I know, and I can only apologise to those whom I do not have time to mention. Marie Lyon has led the way in bringing to attention the damage that hormone pregnancy tests, including Primodos tablets, can do. This report has finally proven her to have been right all along, stating that opportunities were missed to remove them from the market. She is right, too, that the Department for Work and Pensions has mugged campaigners over the condition insight report. I hope the Minister will commit to righting that wrong, too. Janet Williams and Emma Murphy, who founded the Independent Fetal Anti-Convulsant Trust—In-FACT—have fought so long to be believed and for action to be taken regarding sodium valproate, the risks associated with which far too many expectant mothers were unaware of. Kath Sansom, who founded Sling the Mesh, has provided so much support for so many people living in incredible pain because of pelvic mesh. This is a sombre day for those people, but I hope that they can take some satisfaction from the fact that their efforts have paid off in this way.

I would not often say this, but this is a day for parliamentarians, too. It was not clinicians or regulators who brought this to the surface. It was right hon. and hon. Members who listened to and believed campaigners and fought for them, too. Again, there are too many to name, but I will mention my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and my predecessor as shadow Public Health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson).

There is not time for me to cover all the report's recommendations, but I want to highlight a few. Recommendation 1 calls for a fulsome apology. It was right that the Minister did that, and it will be greatly appreciated. Recommendation 3 calls for a new independent redress agency for those harmed by medicines and medical devices, to create a new way of delivering redress in the future. It suggests that manufacturers and the state could share the costs. I would be interested in the Minister's reflections on that. When does she think that could be implemented by?

Recommendation 4 suggests separate schemes for each intervention—HPTs, valproate and pelvic mesh—to meet the cost of providing additional care and support

to all those who have experienced avoidable harm. That is the ethical responsibility of the state and manufacturers. Will the Minister today commit to that recommendation—to providing some redress for those who have suffered avoidable psychological, physical and neurodevelopmental harm? Will she commit, critically, to work on that with these people? For too long, they have had things done to them and they are owed the opportunity to shape their futures.

On recommendation 6, regarding the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, I said at every stage of the Medicines and Medical Devices Bill that the timing for that Bill was challenging, although that was inevitable as we had to get on with it, because the report would have profound implications for the MHRA—and, boy, does it. I would like the Minister to commit to amendments in the other place to make sure that the MHRA regulatory regime is as strong as possible.

Finally, and absolutely critically, recommendation 9 calls for the immediate creation of a taskforce to implement the recommendations. Will the Minister commit to that? It was right for her to say that she needed time for reflection, but I would be keen to have a definition of how long she feels the Government will need to reflect.

This is a sombre moment. It is incredibly hard to read the report, but it is vital that we do so. Campaigners and those affected have got justice today; now they need action. We will not let the report gather dust on a shelf. We will be fighting every day to get the recommendations implemented and to meet the needs and the expectations of those who have fought for so long.

Ms Dorries: That was a long list of asks. I am sure the hon. Gentleman appreciates that we received the report yesterday, and it is a detailed, in-depth and complex report. He is pushing an open door, with almost everything he asks—patients absolutely have to be at the heart of this. The report is entitled, “First Do No Harm”. Our response has to be to do good. We are listening; I am in listening mode. I have listened to what he has said. I will listen to what everybody here has to say today, and to what all the groups have to say, about the details of the report. We will take it away.

The hon. Gentleman asks how long; I am sure he appreciates that work needs to be done to formulate a response. The response will come as soon as possible, as soon as the work has been done. He is quite right about the role of women, which he referred to at the start of his comments. Whether it is Shipman or Paterson or maternity issues or the Cumberlege report, more often than not women are at the heart of these—for want of a better word—scandals. He is absolutely right, and I feel very passionately about making sure we come back with a really positive and robust response to this report as soon as possible.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I thank the Minister for the compassion and the anger in her response. She is a fantastic champion of patient safety. I also thank the many hon. Members, including my right hon. Friends the Members for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), who persuaded me to commission the report. I, too, would like to thank the brave campaigners who have not stopped until they got justice. I particularly thank

Baroness Cumberlege, Sir Cyril Chantler and their team, who did a painstaking amount of work to get to where we are today.

I commissioned this report because I knew that many lives had been ruined because we did not act quickly enough to deal with problems in these three areas, but the results are far more shocking and disturbing than I ever imagined at the time. Thousands of lives have been blighted by what went wrong in the most terrible way. Does the Minister agree that the central issue is not about the three areas alone, but about all medicines and devices where there is no one for patients and people who are suffering to go to with the confidence that they will be listened to? That is why the suggestion of a patient safety commissioner is so important. It is not a tsar or a quango; this would be a person who would listen to people whose voices were not heard. I hope the Government take that recommendation seriously.

Will my hon. Friend give a commitment that the Government will come back to this House before the end of September with their recommendations? We completely understand her tremendous commitment to patient safety, but does she agree that the gravity of this issue is such that it should be the Health Secretary, who made a very important apology yesterday, who comes back before the end of September and tells the House what the Government are going to do?

Ms Dorries: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend, who commissioned the review in 2018. Thank goodness he did, because without it, these voices would still be struggling to be heard.

On my right hon. Friend's question about the patient safety commissioner, as that is a recommendation, it will be considered, as will every other recommendation. It is important to mention that we have Aiden Fowler, whom my right hon. Friend appointed to NHS Improvement to take on the head of patient safety role on behalf of NHS England. That does not mean that we will not consider the recommendation thoroughly; we will do so.

Obviously, I cannot speak for the Secretary of State, but I am sure he is aware of my right hon. Friend's comments. I cannot commit to coming back by the end of September; what I can give the House is my absolute assurance that I will chase this daily. The work commenced when the report became available to us, and a huge amount of work has been done overnight on assessing the recommendations made in the report. I or the Secretary of State will be back here as soon as possible with our recommendations.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP) [V]: I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. Of course, her apology is very welcome.

"We have found that the healthcare system—in which I include the NHS, private providers, the regulators and professional bodies, pharmaceutical and device manufacturers, and policymakers—is disjointed, siloed, unresponsive and defensive."

Those words in "First Do No Harm", the report published yesterday on the Primodos, sodium valproate and pelvic mesh scandals, are a hugely powerful indication of the abject failings that must be addressed by the Government. Credit must go to Baroness Cumberlege and her team for all their work.

Yesterday was a landmark day for victims and survivors of those scandals, and we pay tribute to all the campaigners who fought so hard for so long, including Primodos campaigner Marie Lyon and my constituent Wilma Ord, whose daughter Kirsteen was affected by Primodos. Their fight must now be our fight.

Justice is not served until the recommendations are fully implemented. I understand the desire and the need to reflect on what is needed, but a full commitment to the implementation of all the recommendations is vital. In particular, will the Minister ensure that the taskforce to guide the recommendations is set up at speed and as soon as possible? Will she also commit to vigorous pressure being exerted on companies such as Bayer, which, to be frank, have got away with murder? They are responsible for Primodos and need to pay proper compensation to victims.

Will the Minister ensure that the recommendation of a patient safety commissioner is implemented and the post established as quickly as possible? In the words of Branwen Mann, a young person affected by sodium valproate,

"I know that the full harm done by sodium valproate is barely understood, or even recognised by anyone other than the family that live it."

That cannot continue.

Finally, will the Minister ensure that the central patient identifiable database is created by collecting details on the implantation of all devices at the time of operation? So many patients affected by surgical mesh and other devices have never had their devices tracked or registered, which in the age of advanced technology is, I am sure she agrees, frankly ridiculous.

Ms Dorries: Again, that is a list of asks, and as I said in my reply to the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris), we will take on board all the requests made and come back in time with a full report.

On the hon. Lady's last ask, about the database, we have begun working with NHSX on establishing a database of those women who have had the vaginal mesh. We are looking at how those meshes can be safely removed, with their consent and with all the details explained to them. Getting that database together, both historically and moving forward, is work in progress. On the rest of the hon. Lady's asks, we will be back with a full report, in which all of her points will have been considered.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: The three scandals we have heard about are terrible, but can I ask the excellent Minister about the future? I piloted through Parliament the Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Act 2020, which should allow us to get more data on problems that arise in the NHS. What further steps will the Minister take so that a future Minister does not have to come to the Dispatch Box to make a statement like the one she has just had to make?

Ms Dorries: In the Department of Health and Social Care, we work daily and continually on improving patient safety to make our NHS the safest healthcare system in the world. Procedures such as the national guardian scheme, which my hon. Friend mentioned, and others that have been put in place all work towards that goal. This report, tragic and harrowing as the

[*Ms Dorries*]

stories in it are, will go a long way towards enabling us to develop systems that enable the patient's voice to be heard earlier.

That is the core issue. The thread that runs through is how long it takes somebody who has a complaint to have their voice heard and their complaint acted on. That is something that we need to resolve. If we can do that—if patients' complaints can be heard and can be resolved as soon as they are raised—no Minister will, hopefully, ever have to come to the Dispatch Box in the future, because situations will have been dealt with effectively and promptly, and lessons will have been learned.

My hon. Friend will also be aware that we have introduced the Health Service Safety Investigations Body, and there are other measures that will help us to take the learning from incidents and move forward. Work therefore happens daily on improving patient safety and getting to the place he outlined, where a Minister will never have to come here and apologise again.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab) [V]: I thank the Minister for her statement today. First, may I express my sincere gratitude to Baroness Cumberlege and the review team, who have shown such empathy and understanding to patients, their families and campaigners who have campaigned tirelessly on these issues for years? My mam is one of the thousands of patients who had her life and her health ruined because of this quick fix with a bit of tape. She was never warned of the damage that this plastic mesh could cause her body.

The review recommends setting up a network of specialist centres to provide comprehensive treatment, care and advice for those affected by implanted mesh, and that is to be welcomed. Does the Minister agree, however, that it would be abhorrent for any of those centres to be led by any of the surgeons who promoted mesh or put it into women, knowing it damaged them? For some women, it has caused the most unimaginable pain and life-changing damage.

Ms Dorries: I thank my hon. Friend—I do regard her as a friend because she is such a principled campaigner on issues such as this. I hope she does not mind my saying that I know that her mother gave evidence to the review and went along to one of the hearings. I thank her for that, because it was a very brave step to take. This is not an easy thing to talk about, so that was incredibly brave of her. We owe her for her bravery in coming forward, and I thank the hon. Lady for mentioning that.

I completely agree with the hon. Lady. I cannot comment on the specific point about individual doctors with expertise because work has to go forward on removals of meshes and on where we go in the future. However, on specialist centres—I think she is aware of this—NHS England is assessing bids from NHS providers to become specialist centres and to provide treatment for women with complications from mesh inserted for urinary incontinence and vaginal prolapse. Following the covid-19 pandemic, during which some of this work has unfortunately been halted, every effort is now being

made to finalise the centres quickly. Stakeholders will be kept up to date with progress, but we do want to see more of that work.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): In October 2017, I stood in this very spot with the report in my hand, and it was a whitewash. It was disgusting to the victims—we have not heard that word yet today, but they are victims—of what has gone on in these three terrible cases. In particular, the Primodos victims were shown no compassion in the report and were in many ways blamed for what had happened to their children.

The new report is completely different. I apologise to my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), who was the Secretary of State, because I was critical of the three problems' being put to Baroness Cumberlege in one inquiry; I thought it would be much better if each was looked at individually. I apologise to Baroness Cumberlege, because I said that to her as well as to the then Secretary of State, and I was wrong. This report is probably the best report on what has gone wrong inside the NHS that I have ever seen.

The NHS does wonderful things, but it gets things wrong. We all praise the NHS. We stood outside last weekend—I hope people did—and praised the NHS on its 72nd anniversary. But when it gets it wrong, it gets it seriously wrong. In 1967, it knew that Primodos was a danger: the company knew and the NHS knew. Young women went to their GP, and said, "I think I might be pregnant". Very often, no prescription was issued. There were no warnings and no concept of what could happen to their foetus if they were pregnant. The drawer was opened and the tablets were given to them. Those tablets were given by the drug company to the GP, who in many cases did not even issue a prescription.

Today, we have the report, with nine recommendations, but how are we going to compensate those families? It is not just for the women, but for their families, including the men who have stood next to them, such as Marie Lyon's husband, who has been with her all the way through. How are we going to compensate those who lost their baby, who were told to abort their baby or who had a stillbirth? How are we going to compensate and help those families when the loved ones, the mums and dads of the survivors—they have terrible disfigurements, and they did brilliantly well to give evidence for the report—are no longer with us and the survivors need such support afterwards? While we must make sure this never happens again, we must also make sure that we look after those families and that the drug companies pay for what they did to those families.

Ms Dorries: My right hon. Friend makes an impassioned and compassionate contribution, and he should be recognised for his long-term campaigning and his advocacy of the people he mentions who have suffered as a result of what has happened. I cannot comment on the individual points he has raised, particularly on Primodos, because there is legal action pending, but I hear everything he said and others will hear his comments too.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank Baroness Cumberlege profusely for her review's welcome conclusions on Primodos, and I praise the Sky journalists who have worked on this, and Marie Lyon and all the other campaigners. However, can I tell the

Minister that I see this just as the beginning of the end, because we have not yet got justice for the women involved or their adult children? We want to see the conclusions implemented as soon as possible, and we want to see compensation for the women and their adult children. But I also want to see criminal charges brought against the real perpetrators of this scandal for the cover-up, the suppression of the evidence of harm, and the marketing and sale of a drug that Schering and Bayer knew was dangerous and would result in miscarriages and birth defects.

I am grateful for the way that the Minister has produced her statement today. Will she ensure that her Department, the Department for Work and Pensions and the rest of Government know that we will not stop campaigning until full justice is given to these women and their adult children?

Ms Dorries: I commend the right hon. Gentleman for his compassion and for his commitment to campaigning on this. I just have to repeat what I said in my previous answer. I have every—every—sympathy with every parent, mother and family who have been affected, but due to pending legal action I cannot make a statement.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Today is a day of strongly mixed emotions—one of joy that we have such a comprehensive and thorough report recognising what many women and others have been through, and of course one of absolute sadness and anger that it ever had to come to this. I first raised the issue of sodium valproate in 2013 or 2104, and vaginal mesh in October 2017. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) for putting the inquiry in place, and to my hon. Friend the Minister for the way that she has handled today's statement.

The Government, as my hon. Friend said, are now going to take note of what happened. I would like two particular areas to be looked at. First, we need to make sure that the complaints commissioner is thoroughly independent of the healthcare sector, because we cannot again ask people to mark their own homework. Secondly, there is the issue of powers of redress and *ex gratia* payments. One of my constituents has had to borrow tens of thousands of pounds to correct her mesh implant through private surgery. This operation was done and recommended by the NHS. If we could speedily get these recommendations in place and compensate women who have had to take on their own financial burden to correct this surgery caused by the NHS, that would be most welcome.

Ms Dorries: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and for his campaigning. It is the campaigning of Members of this House on behalf of their constituents that has got us to the position where we are today. It demonstrates how this place works at its best when MPs represent their constituents in campaigning on issues such as this. On his specific question, I would like him to write to me, because I am not quite sure why, if the operation was undertaken by the NHS, his constituent had to pay tens of thousands of pounds. If he would like to write to me and let me know the details, I will give him a more detailed response.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on valproate and other anti-epileptic drugs in pregnancy, I would like to

put on the record my and the group's thanks to Baroness Cumberlege for her work on this. We welcome the report. I believe that its recommendations should be implemented in full as quickly as possible, because it is 268 pages about four decades of women being let down and lied to. When those women have campaigned for justice, Members of this House have told them that they are bored housewives and they are being hysterical. We cannot allow these women to be denied justice any longer. I would like to invite the Minister to join a meeting of our all-party group so that we can talk about the recommendations in more detail in a way that we cannot do on the Floor of the House.

Ms Dorries: I could not agree with the hon. Lady more. As I said earlier, whether it is Shipman, Paterson, Cumberlege or a maternity incident, women so often struggle to get their voices heard when they are at the heart of issues like this. I would be happy to talk to the all-party group, particularly on sodium valproate, where a huge amount of work is being done. We are seeing the number of users of sodium valproate in pregnancy declining, but there is more work to be done. I would be particularly interested in talking to the hon. Lady about how we get the message out about the dangers of sodium valproate, because there are women who suffer from epilepsy for whom sodium valproate is the only treatment that works effectively. That is the heart of the problem that we need to keep discussing and work through further. I am happy to meet and talk to her.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): The NHS collects a wealth of data in different clinical settings, but often computers and systems do not talk to one another; they are silent. What is on a GP's computer may not be on a hospital computer or a health visitor's computer, and this report highlights the critical need for registries and data that are systematically collected. Can the Minister assure me that another registry or dataset will not end up isolated and silenced, as many of the victims were before this report?

Ms Dorries: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. I had a thought while I was listening to him, which is that I did not mention Sir Cyril Chantler in my statement, the doctor who contributed hugely to the report, along with Baroness Cumberlege. I thank both of them. They worked as a team—even though it is the Cumberlege report, they worked together, and Sir Cyril deserves recognition and thanks for his work.

I agree with my hon. Friend. Because of the many reports a number of regulatory bodies have been established, but it is in their talking to each other and the bridges between them that we have problems. We recognise that this is a complex area. However, we have already gone beyond the development of the database. The Medicines and Medical Devices Bill was amended in the House, with cross-party support, to create a power to establish a medical devices information system. That will respond to Baroness Cumberlege's recommendations in full, including ensuring that private providers that do not operate under the NHS contract can be required to provide data to that information system. NHS Digital is leading work with system partners and the devolved Administrations to ensure that this comprehensive database can be used to support clinicians and the MHRA. My

[*Ms Dorries*]

hon. Friend is right to say that in the development of the database, all the organisations and regulatory bodies need to work together and support one another.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) [V]: As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on hormone pregnancy tests, I am proud to have campaigned with Marie Lyon for the Primodos families for almost a decade. I welcome the recommendations in the Cumberlege review, and I pay tribute to Baroness Cumberlege and her colleagues for their integrity and unflinching courage, but campaigners like Marie should not have had to give up their entire lives to pursue truth and justice. This is a scandal that should never have happened, and it is one of the greatest medical frauds of the 20th century. When I raised this first with Ministers in 2012, and several times with Prime Ministers since then, I was dismissed. I was met with constant denial, and doors were slammed shut at every turn. Can the Minister assure the House that enough is enough and that the Cumberlege review is a turning point for the Primodos families?

Ms Dorries: I thank the hon. Lady for her ardent campaigning on this issue. I can only say again that I have absolute sympathy with the families on whose behalf she has been campaigning, but once again I refer to my earlier answer: owing to pending legal action I cannot comment on Primodos.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): This report was an incredibly difficult read, but what one of the things that stuck with me most is the guilt that so many mothers have felt for taking drugs that inadvertently harm their babies. I would like to echo what is said in the report: this was not your fault. Please can the Minister reassure all pregnant women across the country and the House that action has been taken to improve the monitoring of drugs used during pregnancy?

Ms Dorries: I thank my hon. Friend for her comment. She is absolutely right. The report is entitled “First Do No Harm”, and we here have to do some good in response to it. Work is being undertaken—the all-party Parliamentary group for valproate and other anti-epileptic drugs in pregnancy works incredibly hard. It is about getting information out there. For some women with epilepsy, sodium valproate is the only drug that works, and the pregnancy prevention programme works alongside this. As I have said, I cannot comment on Primodos, but work is ongoing. We have seen a decline in the number of pregnant epileptic women taking sodium valproate. That decline needs to be driven down even further, in tandem with the pregnancy prevention programme, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right. I hope that nobody ever has to come to the Dispatch Box again to discuss a report such as the Cumberlege report and have to apologise for what happened, with the glaring inconsistencies in treatment that has been provided to those women who have not received the information they should have received when taking those drugs.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: After decades of having their concerns dismissed and struggling to be heard, the victims of these scandals

deserve both the apologies we have heard and ex gratia payments for the avoidable damage they suffered. Will the Minister confirm that it will be a priority to establish the independent redress agency recommended to help those affected by these scandals and a priority that the agency will be able to move quickly to provide the redress that the victims deserve? They have waited long enough.

Ms Dorries: Every recommendation in the report is a priority and everything will be given equal consideration. I hope that either I or the Secretary of State will be able to come back to the House as soon as possible after the report has been evaluated in full and make our own recommendations at that time.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for her statement. Will she confirm that the Medicines and Medical Devices Bill incorporates steps to establish a database of medical devices, including information about device safety, which is a key part of the Cumberlege review? I wish to pay tribute to the many campaigners for their tireless work and, in particular, to my neighbour the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for her work on Primodos.

Ms Dorries: I thank my hon. Friend for that. The Bill makes it clear that patient safety is paramount in any regulatory change on medicines and medical devices in the future. The Bill will allow us to implement a framework to continue to update and amend the Medical Devices Regulations 2002 and the Human Medicines Regulations 2012 to respond to patient safety concerns. It already explicitly sets out provision of the medical device registers and information gateway, which will allow the Secretary of State or the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency to disclose information about medical devices to the NHS family.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): First, I wish to pay tribute to those amazing activists, including Members of this House, who have painstakingly and persistently fought for justice, struggling to get their voices heard. Although those campaigning for the truth about the side-effects of Primodos, sodium valproate and pelvic mesh repairs have been vindicated by the findings of the Cumberlege review, it is too often the case that women’s health issues appear to be repeatedly dismissed and de-prioritised, sometimes with devastating long-term effects. What will the Minister be doing to get rid of this shameful health injustice?

Ms Dorries: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I am here listening to everything that everybody has to say about this report. I am working with a team to evaluate every recommendation and every aspect of the report. I think I have answered twice, and I concur 100% with his opinion that so often we fail to listen to women’s voices and fail to take them seriously, and they live with the lifetime consequences of that.

We have a number of investigations taking place. When this Government, and in particular, the Department of Health and Social Care, hear that there has been what we consider to be an issue of concern anywhere affecting women we are not afraid to investigate thoroughly. The hon. Gentleman will know that we have mentioned a number of investigations recently. The NHS does

amazing work, and we go out and clap for our carers, as we have done particularly in recent months. We have an amazing NHS, but we cannot say that problems do not occur and things do not happen, because they do. There has to be a quest for constant improvement and learning.

In answer to the hon. Gentleman's question, let me say that the only way we can improve is by learning. We have to learn from the Cumberlege report. We will need to learn from the Health Service Safety Investigations Body—from the investigations and the learning. We have to learn from the Care Quality Commission. Learning now needs to be something where we do not apportion blame. If we continue to have a culture where we apportion blame to hospitals and to individuals, it will be difficult always—the barriers to learning will always be there. That is how I answer the hon. Gentleman's question and how I give my commitment—to ensure that we do not apportion blame, but we do learn and we take those learnings, that we apply them and move forward.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): It has been really reassuring hearing so many Members pay tribute to those who have campaigned so tirelessly for this report to be done and contributed to the report. I would like to add my own personal tribute to Joanne Bylett from Bishop Auckland, who is personally affected by Primodos. Joanne and her daughter Natalie have been amazing in their campaigning efforts, and I just wanted to put that on record.

Across my constituency, there have also been women affected by vaginal mesh implants. Will the Minister continue to work with the NHS and with women who have those implants to ensure that any removals are carried out with a full understanding of what that removal will entail?

Ms Dorries: My hon. Friend raises the important issue of informed consent, which has come very much to the fore recently, including how detailed consent needs to be and how much information people need to have. Of course we are working with those women and ensuring that they have every detail and every bit of information that they require before mesh is removed so that they know exactly what operation they are undergoing. That needs to be a template for moving forward. Informed consent needs to be what we move forward with in much more detail, so patients are fully aware of the risks and benefits of any surgical procedure they are undergoing.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): One of the most disturbing aspects of Baroness Cumberlege's report is the way that women have been dismissed when they report concerns and debilitating pain. That is a fundamental point in this entire scandal: as multiple studies have shown, there is an imbalance between the experiences of men and women in many areas of medicine, suggesting that a gender health gap does indeed exist, and often shows up in the misdiagnosis of women's symptoms, while at other times it appears that their health concerns are just not taken as seriously. I have heard what the Minister said in response to earlier questions on this issue, but undoubtedly this is a systemic problem. Does she have any plans to review male bias across the NHS involving devolved Governments?

Ms Dorries: The hon. Lady is absolutely right in everything she said, and I completely agree with her, 100%. My team of officials and I, from the very first

day that I arrived in the Department, have been looking at a women's agenda and at the way that in so many areas of healthcare there does appear to be an unintentional bias. I am not saying that it is intentional and I would not particularly use the word "misogyny", but there is an unintentional bias. It is proven by the amount of time it takes for women to have their voices heard and for their complaints to be taken seriously and yes, addressing that is absolutely a priority. The problems that women were subjected to and the prolonged pain they experienced simply because their voices were not being heard is something that we will have to address in our response. That bias against women must surely be obvious from the number of inquiries that we are having about women-only issues, and I hope that highlighting that, bringing it here and not being afraid to ask for inquiries where we see that bias taking place, is like shining sunlight on it—to quote someone long before my time. It is only by opening up these issues, allowing a spotlight to be shone on them and not being afraid of what we find that we can go anywhere towards addressing this. We do it by establishing a blame-free culture, a bit like the airlines industry has in the HSSIB, where we look at incidents that have happened, do not blame anyone, and make sure clinicians, nurses and healthcare workers can reveal what has happened in an incident. By doing so, we can put the learnings in place to make sure that it does not happen again.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con) [V]: The report from Baroness Cumberlege is more than welcome. It demonstrates to me, and to many of us, that the key to getting this right is having the knowledge, because with knowledge we have power—the power to prevent something like this from happening ever again. Only with that knowledge and that data can we ensure patient safety for the future, and safe innovation. In that regard, will the Minister consider going further than Cumberlege and the current medicine and medical devices legislation? We need a single database with all devices, not just those that are in vitro, and we do not need a web of connected databases; we need one. Also, we need this to be linked—we need information about devices and information about patient records connected, and those patient records must include primary and secondary care. I would like to see something that is truly integrated, internationally compatible and searchable, whether by universities, academics or the medical profession. I would like to see something that is state-of-the-art and internationally the best. To enable that, will the Minister create some form of protocol so that existing databases can in future be migrated into the master plan? At the moment, there is no plan for that. The concept is seen to be too difficult, but—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I appreciate the importance of this statement, but please could we have shorter questions? I want to get everybody in and I think it is important that we do so.

Ms Dorries: Yes, we will look at that.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Baroness Cumberlege's report is not just welcome, but blunt, both in the way it talks about the specific problems with women patients treated by Primodos, sodium valproate and mesh, and in the way it talks about the systemic and

[Christine Jardine]

cultural problems that we have, which mean that this is not the first time that we have dealt with these issues in this place. Hopefully, it will be the last, but the report does say that there is nothing that leads the panel to believe that this is not happening with other medications and devices. I was in exactly the position of those women who were prescribed sodium valproate, but I was lucky. I had a female GP who spotted the danger and advised me, and I was given alternative medication—taken off it completely in fact—before I became pregnant. Can the Minister assure me that from today, we will take a much more positive approach, so that as well as the recommendations, we will have some kind of strategy—a cultural approach—to getting across how important it is that these issues are dealt with when women go to their GPs?

Ms Dorries: I will try to keep my answers shorter. The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The sodium valproate pregnancy prevention programme is running hand in hand with an information awareness programme. Many GPs are aware, but of course there is still a problem and it is something that we are addressing.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): My constituent Diane Surman's daughter, Helen, was affected by the Primodos scandal, and I am delighted that their circumstances have finally been recognised for the injustice that they are. Will my hon. Friend assure me that the Government will do all they can to ensure that Bayer recognises its responsibilities, apologises and contributes towards the payments outlined in the report?

Ms Dorries: I cannot comment on Primodos owing to pending legal action.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): For too long, female patients have had crippling pain dismissed as “women's problems”. As the Minister said, women have been failed, so can I press her further on the recommendations of this report? Will the Government appoint a patient safety commissioner to ensure that women are taken seriously and that terrible mistakes like this do not happen again?

Ms Dorries: We will be considering all the recommendations and returning to the House with a full report as soon as possible.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): As vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for valproate and other anti-epileptic drugs in pregnancy, I thank the Minister for her tone today. Does she agree that it is shocking that the Committee on Safety of Medicines as long ago as 1973—this is the predecessor of the MHRA—was clearly aware of the risks in pregnancy of the use of anticonvulsants? It said that they are liable to produce abnormalities. Over that period, 20,000 children could have been affected. There are families, such as those of Janet Williams and Emma Murphy, who have campaigned tirelessly—I pay tribute to them too on this issue—who now have to care for those children, potentially for their entire lives. Much more support is needed for those children from local authorities and health authorities. It has not been given until now as a result of the lack of

recognition of the link between, and risks of, anticonvulsants in pregnancy and abnormalities. Will the Minister, when she meets us, focus on ensuring that that issue is taken forward so that more support can be provided?

Ms Dorries: I absolutely will. My hon. Friend highlights how long it takes for women's voices to be heard—since 1973—and I will do as she asks.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): May I add Owen Smith, my former constituency neighbour, to the list of those who campaigned vociferously, in particular on mesh? Medical innovation does save lives. I have sat next to a doctor who worked for many years on melanoma, and she said that, for nearly all of her career, when she met somebody with melanoma she basically had to manage their expectations of how long they were going to live. Now, because of medical innovation, she is able to save their lives, but she can do that only if the medication being provided is guaranteed safe.

As I understand it, nearly all the clinical trials that were started at the beginning of this year in relation to cancer have been stopped. We need to get them started again so that people can be certain that they are safe. Is it not time that doctors, instead of writing to other doctors and copying the patients in, wrote to the patients and copied the doctors in, so that the patient is put in control of their own treatment?

Ms Dorries: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point about cancer trials. He may have heard the recent announcement that one of the Nightingale hospitals is to be used for processing cancer diagnoses. I believe that cancer treatments have started again, but I will come back to him with further information because this is not really in the scope of the report.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): We have heard a great deal about my hon. Friend's agenda for women, and I hope that the Women and Equalities Committee will have a chance to scrutinise it at some point.

I remember first meeting Emma Murphy and Janet Williams to talk about sodium valproate back in 2014. The Minister is absolutely right to point out what a valuable treatment it is, but it has massive dangers for pregnant women. She spoke of the pregnancy prevention programme, but there are drugs out there, such as Roaccutane, for which people cannot get the next month's prescription unless they take a pregnancy test. Will she consider going further than the advice in the information that is given out to doctors and women and ensure that it cannot be given to pregnant women?

Ms Dorries: That is an interesting proposal. My right hon. Friend has spoken about Roaccutane several times in the House. She makes an interesting comparison, and we will go away and look at it.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): This report is vindication for the campaigners, but it will also provide relief for the McLellan family and the Pierce family, constituents of mine whose lives have been blighted for decades by the consequences of Primodos. I am particularly pleased that one of the recommendations is for an ex gratia scheme for discretionary payments to the families for their costs, but I remind the House that

many of the children are now in their late 40s or 50s and the mothers are generally in their 70s. They have suffered for too long already, so will the Minister commit to getting that redress for families as quickly as possible?

Ms Dorries: As the hon. Gentleman knows, that is not a commitment that I can make here at the Dispatch Box today, but we will return to this. All the report's recommendations are being studied. It is a deep, comprehensive, two-and-a-half-year report, and it deserves thorough analysis and a proper response. It is not for me to come here and make recommendations the next day on the back of a huge report. We only saw it yesterday, and we need to evaluate it before we can come back with recommendations.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): This morning, I had a moving conversation with Julie Satari, a well-loved schoolmistress in Wakefield who underwent the mesh removal procedure. In addition to the significant cost, the nature of such procedures is torturous, both physically and emotionally. Julie told me that she, along with many others she knows, cried yesterday as she read the Baroness's report approvingly. Julie asks, "Will Her Majesty's Government help wipe away their tears with immediate action, not promises for the future?"

Ms Dorries: As I have just said, this is a two-and-a-half-year report: it is complex. It is a deep dive into issues relating to Primodos, sodium valproate and vaginal mesh. There is absolutely no way that I could come to the Dispatch Box today and do what my hon. Friend asks. We need to evaluate the report properly to do it justice—to do those brave women who came forward justice. As I say, we will return to the House with our recommendations and an evaluation of the report in full.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: I welcome the Minister's statement and, indeed, the Cumberlege report itself. The concerns we hear throughout the Chamber are justified; we absolutely have to right the dreadful wrongs of these health scandals. I pay tribute to all those groups that have campaigned for justice for so long, because women's health issues have appeared to be repeatedly dismissed and deprioritised. The review found that research on patient safety was neither prioritised nor funded. Can the Minister explain why historically that has often been the case, and whether and how she intends that to change in future?

Ms Dorries: Apologies, but I am not sure what the hon. Member means in terms of patient safety in the past. All I can say is that patient safety is an absolute priority. My ministerial title changed recently to make patient safety the Suicide Prevention and the first consideration in my title. I am the Minister of State for Patient Safety. That is a demonstration of the Department's absolute commitment to patient safety going forward. It is a high priority in the Department of Health and Social Care. Everything we do in terms of health—from HSSIB and the CQC to NHS Improvement—and a number of measures that we have put in place in recent years demonstrates that commitment to patient safety. We want to make the NHS the safest healthcare system in the world. We continue to strive to achieve that.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I welcome the report and its wide-ranging recommendations, particularly those focused on a medical devices registry and the need to improve our post-market surveillance of drugs and treatments in this country. However, I urge caution in respect of the risk of creating new posts and bureaucracy when we already have an extensive number of organisations—including the CQC, the ombudsman and Healthwatch—and hospitals themselves have a responsibility to listen to complainants, whatever the cause of their complaint might be. In my time at the Patients Association, we ran a survey of complainants across a number of hospitals to compare and pick up those hospitals that were not as good at listening as others. Does the Minister agree that, if all healthcare providers had to survey their complainants and we could compare how well providers were listening to them, we might see improvement on the frontline for patients, in respect of all different causes of complaint?

Ms Dorries: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. It is a recurring theme—over and over again—that when patients complain, the first point of complaint is the trust where they were treated, but that is often where the logjam is. A patient-safety campaigner told me recently that it was seven years before the chief executive of a trust would even acknowledge his complaint or meet him. That is where we see the logjam happening. I will take away my hon. Friend's point and consider it, because it is a very important one.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Like the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), I wish to focus on the specific issue of sodium valproate. Given that this was a UK-wide review, what discussions is the Minister having with her counterparts in the Scottish Government to ensure that we find a systematic way to identify women who are at risk—say, by way of a patient register?

Ms Dorries: Health is devolved in Scotland, of course, but we constantly have conversations with our healthcare partners across all the devolved nations.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): I welcome the statement and the report. My thoughts are with those individuals and families whose lives have been turned upside down by these issues. Will my hon. Friend work with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency to ensure that patient safety is central to its work?

Ms Dorries: Absolutely. The MHRA itself is undergoing a culture change and an operational change and is itself looking into how it responds to patients and the way it considers patient safety as a priority. I am the Minister for Patient Safety. Making patient safety has to be one of our No. 1 criteria in the NHS. People who come into the NHS—who come into hospitals—have an absolute right to be confident and safe. All organisations in the healthcare structure need to do the same in that respect.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for her statement and for answering all the questions on the call list.

Point of Order

1.34 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. This has been a really important hour and a bit. In many ways, this could easily have been a three-hour debate in Westminster Hall, if that were in operation. Of course, many of these stories came to be part of a campaign in Parliament by way of Adjournment debates, Opposition day debates and debates in Westminster Hall. It is not in your power, Mr Deputy Speaker, to get Westminster Hall up and running on Monday, I am sure, but I wonder whether you could feed through into the system that many of us would love to have similar opportunities as soon as possible to raise all the campaigning issues coming out of our constituencies, some of them medical, some involving many other aspects. If we could get it back up and running, instead of just the four end-of-day Adjournment debates, it would make it much easier for us Back Benchers to do our job.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): This has been one of the most significant statements I have witnessed. When I first entered the House in 1992, we did not have Westminster Hall, and I know that since its introduction it has added to the democracy of Parliament. I will make certain that the hon. Member's words are passed on to the Leader of the House and the Speaker in order that we can get the House fully operational as soon as it is safe to do so. I thank him for his point of order.

1.35 pm

Sitting suspended.

Estimates Day

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

MAIN ESTIMATES 2020-21

DEPARTMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Official Development Assistance

[Relevant Documents: Second Report from the International Development Committee, 2019-21, Effectiveness of UK aid: interim findings, HC 215, published on 9 June and oral evidence taken before the Committee (impact of coronavirus) on 15 May, 4 and 16 June, and 6 July, HC 292 Oral evidence taken before the Foreign Affairs Committee (Coronavirus: FCO response) on 30 June, HC 239, and (FCO-DFID merger) on 7 July, HC 525.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That

(1) for the year ending with 31 March 2021, for expenditure by the Department for International Development:

- (a) further resources, not exceeding £3,706,011,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 293 of Session 2019-21,
- (b) further resources, not exceeding £2,258,300,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
- (c) a further sum, not exceeding £6,179,917,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament; and

(2) for the year ending with 31 March 2021, for expenditure by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office:

- (a) further resources, not exceeding £1,633,176,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 293 of Session 2019-21,
- (b) further resources, not exceeding £51,513,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
- (c) a further sum, not exceeding £1,699,106,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—
(Michael Tomlinson.)

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The debate will be opened by the Chair of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). I warn hon. Members that, because we have two debates, there will be a four-minute limit on all Back-Bench contributions.

1.39 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for scheduling this debate. We can see from the number of people who want to speak just how important a topic this is.

I am here as Chair of the International Development Committee. I was elected by the House to scrutinise development, and I hope that I will be able to continue in that role in some form. The merger came as a complete surprise, especially as the integrated review was formally paused in April and is not due to start until the autumn. I fully accept that it is in the Prime Minister's gift to change the machinery of government;

however, it is unfathomable that a merger is being carried out in the midst of a pandemic, with no consultation of the sector or staff and no evidence that the move will save money or, indeed, make us more efficient at delivering the global Britain the PM so dearly wants.

I would like to start by speaking the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), who is a member of the IDC. He said: “As a boy growing up in India, I saw the crushing weight that poverty exerts on people. I saw the lives blighted by ill health and by lack of education.” Fundamentally, that is what DFID does: it raises people up. Those same children, were they born today, wherever it may be—in Pakistan, Ethiopia or Nigeria—could expect a different course.

UK aid saves lives and changes lives—not the lives of those who promise to support a global Britain or buy whatever service our diplomats are hawking that week, but the lives of the most in need. That is why aid should never be linked to political pressure: the ones who lose out are never the ones in charge, but the weakest, the poorest and the sickest. Furthermore, there needs to be a system in place to scrutinise the aid that is given to eliminate poverty, to enable education and health provision for all and a better life for all, and to meet our commitments on the sustainable development goals.

I would also like to speak on behalf of another IDC member, the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham). She urges the Government to embed gender equality in the new Department. A commitment to girls’ education is meaningless unless child marriage, female genital mutilation, gender-based violence and cultural stereotypes are challenged, so we both also request that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office makes sure that the Department for International Development safeguarding unit is retained, as the UK needs to deal with sexual abuse by aid workers, not just the abuses that are carried out by people in their own country.

The recent IDC report on the effectiveness of UK aid examined the impact of UK aid spending. On humanitarian assistance, from 2015 to March 2019, UK aid reached 32.6 million people; from the start of 2015 until the end of 2017, UK support immunised an estimated 56.4 million children, saving almost 1 million lives; and between 2015 and 2019, UK aid supported 14.3 million children to gain a decent education and 51.8 million people to access clean water and better sanitation.

UK aid spending amplifies our voice on the world stage. It promotes our national interests by projecting our core values and transforming the lives of the very poorest in the world. A shift away from that is counterproductive. Global poverty drives conflict and instability. I agree with the Secretary of State that, unless we use our aid now to address covid-19 in the global south, 30 years of development investment could be wiped out. That position is evidenced by the World Bank’s estimate that 49 million people will be pushed into extreme poverty this year alone.

The IDC is finalising a report on the merger, to be published next Friday, which will examine the management of the transition to the new FCDO, the principles underpinning UK aid, and future scrutiny arrangements for official development assistance spending. I hope

that the Government will use the report to strengthen the new Department and avoid the pitfalls of other countries.

The UK voluntarily adheres to an internationally recognised definition of aid. That gives us great international standing, as we are seen to be doing the right thing. ODA is designated as assistance given

“with the promotion of the economic development and welfare of developing countries as the main objective”.

UK aid is also bound by four Acts of Parliament, notably the International Development Act 2002, which put poverty alleviation at the heart of the UK aid programme. I am therefore relieved that both the PM and the Foreign Secretary keep reiterating their commitment to spending 0.7% of gross national income on aid, keeping within the OECD Development Assistance Committee’s definition, and preserving the primary focus of UK aid on poverty reduction. However, we all know that the devil is in the detail.

Although DFID remains the largest distributor of UK aid, at 73%, its share of spend has been decreasing over recent years. Non-DFID aid has a very different geographical profile, with around three quarters of it going to middle-income countries, including China, India and South Africa. The shift to increasing amounts of ODA being administered outside DFID has created significant challenges for the management and oversight of spending. Not all ODA programmes administered outside DFID are adequately targeted towards poverty reduction. Seven of the 10 UK Government Departments assessed, including the Foreign Office, were failing to meet aid transparency targets. DFID, however, has been rated very good for seven consecutive years.

It is the Committee’s view that stronger accountability and oversight are needed to help to prevent future distortions in the uses of development assistance and an undermining of the case for aid. In the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015, it became a requirement for the Secretary of State to ensure that the value for money of UK ODA expenditure was subject to independent review. I commend the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for the creation of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, which carries out this task. In addition, parliamentary scrutiny is currently carried out via the International Development Committee. Because of the scale of the ODA budget and the fact that this is cross-departmental, I ask the House to look favourably on the Committee’s request that its remit be extended once the merger is completed so that it can continue to scrutinise ODA spend and continue to have responsibility for receiving and considering reports from ICAI. I quote the Centre for Global Development’s Ian Mitchell:

“The Government should create a cross-cutting committee like the Public Accounts Committee to focus on questions of aid value for money. This would provide visibility and reassurance to taxpayers and Parliament alike on aid spending and enable the Foreign Affairs and Development Committee to focus on policy.”

Merging Departments may seem attractive in the short term, with the possible administrative savings and improved policy coherence, but it can be extremely disruptive and costly and impair organisational effectiveness. In the long run, the creation of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office could reduce the UK’s clout on the international stage, rather than enhancing it.

[Sarah Champion]

Australia's merger led to the departure of significant numbers of skilled AusAID staff, taking their expertise with them. This had a clear impact on Australia's aid effectiveness, with AusAID's former deputy director general Richard Moore estimating that up to 2,000 years of expertise might have been lost. Canada merged its development department with foreign affairs to create Global Affairs Canada. Administration costs in the new department immediately increased and the merger was beset by poor transparency from which it is still recovering. Narrowly defined economic or foreign policy goals can create tension with UK aid's other objectives, such as poverty reduction, with the risk that neither is done well. There is also a risk that the pursuit of mutual benefit and national interests goals might lead to the tying of aid, so the Government need swiftly to put in measures to prevent that.

The Government also need to set out how they intend to ensure that ODA administered through the FCDO meets the necessary high standards of transparency and value for money in its programme and spend, regardless of which Department spends it. Parliamentary and independent scrutiny must continue through a dedicated ODA spend committee, as must the maintaining and resourcing of ICAI. We urge the Government to present a statement to Parliament setting out an evidence-led rationale for any change in development priorities, quantifying expected costs, setting out how the changes would be beneficial and, crucially, dealing with how ODA spend will be measured and controlled.

Finally, DFID is not perfect, but on every international rating it scores among the best in the world for transparency and value for taxpayers' money. I strongly recommend that, rather than fully blending both Departments, which could lose the sum of its parts, the Government instead transpose DFID wholesale, allowing its good work to continue for the benefit of global Britain.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. There is now a four-minute time limit.

1.49 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I must say that I agree with almost every word that my friend the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) has shared with the House. There are very few who could praise the Department for International Development as highly as I have, not just here but when I first came into contact with DFID in a meaningful sense when I was the adviser to the governor of Helmand. From 2006 to 2007, I had the great privilege of working alongside some of the UK's most effective foreign policy experts in DFID, delivering marketplaces, roads and opportunities for individuals to turn away from a drugs economy and towards a prosperity that would have, one hoped, led to a real change in that country. It was one of the great privileges of my life. Those experts, however, were not just working in the pursuit of the alleviation of poverty; they were working in Britain's national interest.

Here, I will pick up on some of the words used by the hon. Member for Rotherham. She specifically and rightly said that these actions are in Britain's national interest.

Defending the people of Sierra Leone—this is particularly close to the heart of the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, my right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), whose family hail from there—is absolutely in our national interest. Furthering the work that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) pursued when he was Secretary of State is directly in Britain's national interest. That is why, although I appreciate the concerns my right hon. Friend has, I think that merging British foreign policy and our national interest with our aid Department can be done to the promotion of both. As long as we maintain the culture, we will do better.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): I agree with my hon. Friend, but does he agree with me that it is vital that the UK aid budget, as it is funded by the British taxpayer, is properly scrutinised in Parliament?

Tom Tugendhat: I will answer that with just a few words. Tax is money taken by force. It must be scrutinised by this House to ensure it is being spent appropriately and correctly. That is why I am passionate in defending ICAI, and my hon. Friend chairs the International Development Committee's Sub-Committee on the Work of the ICAI so effectively.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I am very pleased to hear what my hon. Friend says about the absolute importance of ICAI. He talks about the spending being in the national interest. May I make it clear that many of us believe that every single penny of the international development budget is spent in Britain's national interest?

Tom Tugendhat: That is only true because of the assiduous nature with which my right hon. Friend and others have supervised the spending. There are other organisations that spend in other ways where I would argue that that is not the case. However, the way the DFID budget has been managed by my right hon. Friend—and, indeed, by Ministers such as the one sitting before us today—has absolutely prioritised British national interest through the alleviation of poverty and focusing on different areas, such as defensive and educational elements of our national interest, and has absolutely delivered. I think that is fundamentally in the British national interest, and that is why I am very keen to defend the 0.7% target and the amazing work of the people in East Kilbride, demonstrating that the UK working together abroad really does promote the interests of all of us.

It is essential for us to remember that, when we look around the world, we see countries and people with whom we have different relationships. From the Scottish National party Front Bench, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) will talk passionately about Malawi and the deep links between the people of Scotland and Malawi. He is absolutely right. I could talk passionately about Afghanistan or Iraq, two countries I have been involved in. The Minister could talk about Sierra Leone. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield could speak about that depth of relationship with any number of other countries. This is essential. What we are talking about is harnessing the combined interests of the peoples of these islands—our pasts, our histories, our interests and the living bridges

that tie us around the world—and making sure that we build on them. That is why this union, the link between Foreign Office and aid, is fundamentally one that can work.

But—there is always a but, isn't there?—it depends on culture. It depends on making sure that we do not make the mistake that Australia made in losing amazing people. It means we must remember that when we bring DFID and the Foreign Office together it is a merger of equals and not a takeover. It means we must remember that when Lord Hague, when he was Foreign Secretary, spoke about preventing sexual violence in conflict, that was about both aid and foreign policy. We can see that the Departments are already working together. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield will say there is no such thing as a merger of equals. In that case, perhaps this is a DFID takeover of King Charles Street.

There is a real opportunity here. So long as we get the right person as permanent under-secretary—somebody who can work in a multinational environment, who can run a budget that is about a dozen times that of the Foreign Office, and who can hold accountability for British taxpayers' money and ensure that it is spent in the national interest—I think we can get the effect that the Government seek. If we do, we will supercharge foreign policy from these islands, double down on our soft power and turn it to real strategic effect. I hope that we will do so not just for these islands; not just in defence of the international rules-based system that has allowed us all to prosper, broadly speaking, for about seven decades, mostly in peace and harmony; but for countries around the world, so that more and more can share the opportunities. That has never been more important, and it has never mattered more. The Minister's hands are heavy with the burden that he carries.

1.55 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this timely and important debate. I pay tribute to the thousands of DFID staff in my constituency of East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, those here in London and those who are based around the world in the various DFID country offices. We should never underestimate the work that they do, and we must ensure that they keep on doing that work to support people in poverty worldwide. We often hear, in the House and outside it, that DFID is a powerhouse in development and one of the premier aid agencies in the world. It is because of those people, with their passion, their dedication and their commitment to their work, that that reputation exists.

I cannot begin to imagine how those staff are feeling right now, during what must be a challenging time. I am aware that the Prime Minister has reassured them that there will be no compulsory redundancies. However, in answer to my recent written questions, I was informed that jobs will change at DFID in East Kilbride, and that voluntary redundancies have not been ruled out. I would welcome urgent reassurance from the Minister on this issue. In such an unsettling time for workers across the United Kingdom, the Government must do everything possible to support staff at DFID and secure all jobs.

I am perplexed by the timing of the Prime Minister's decision to merge DFID with the Foreign Office. In the midst of a global pandemic, it does not make any sense.

The integrated review was meant to ask the experts, "How do we get this right? How do we make this work?" But with the stroke of a pen, the Prime Minister has done away with the review—another example of a Government who have had enough of experts.

Speaking of experts, I would be extremely interested to hear just who the Government consulted before making the decision to merge the Departments. According to the Prime Minister, there were a whole host of consultations before the announcement, but that does not seem to have been the case. It seems that no civil society organisations—often the experts working on the ground, on the frontline, delivering aid programmes—were consulted. Even Bond, the umbrella network for NGOs and charities working in international development, was in the dark about the decision, just like the rest of us.

Who did the Government speak to, and who actually thinks that this merger is a good idea? What plans do the Government have to consult civil society organisations, such as SCIAF? That organisation—the Scottish Catholic International Aid Funding—has been doing excellent work on women's empowerment projects in 25 villages in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi and Rwanda; building the resilience of 23,143 agropastoralists in Ethiopia; and integrating community development in Cambodia, supporting 11,095 people to gain food security, water and sanitation facilities.

We have heard from the Government that development will be a core focus of the new Department, but they must understand that there are big concerns that the merger is nothing more than an opportunity to use the DFID aid budget to prop up FCO diplomatic activity. If we lose the International Development Committee—a robust and dynamic Committee on which I have had the pleasure of serving; I think it would be a dreadful idea to lose it—there must be a new cross-departmental ODA Committee in its place. It is for the birds to think that anyone in the Foreign Affairs Committee has time to focus on such a huge programme of aid and development on top of their already valuable work.

I am aware of the time, and I must conclude.

This ill-timed merger cannot happen at the expense of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people, particularly those with disabilities. We must ensure that we support them—anything less will be letting down the poorest and most vulnerable across the world.

1.59 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): May I start by very much welcoming this merger and the announcement of 16 June? I also welcome the Prime Minister's recommitment to 0.7%. We are the only G7 country so to commit, and that has been the case since 2013. We need to be very proud of that. It was in the manifesto on which I stood and it is contained within statute, and I am very pleased that it will continue, but it has to be said that aid is not necessarily the best sell on the doorstep, as we found in December last year. The merger will make sense to many of our constituents, who are generous people but who also want a sense that there is something in it for them—that aid will indeed be in pursuit of the national interest—and the merger surely makes sense in that context.

I am also impressed by the OECD's 2009 report "Managing Aid", which laid out the bare facts that Britain is unique in how we have approached international

[Dr Andrew Murrison]

development. Either we are right, or everybody else is right. We cannot all be right, and I have been impressed by the work of, for example, Norway, when I have been doing international development. Although it is a small country, it punches well above its weight in terms of the effect it manages to bring to bear, and that goes for other countries—often small countries—such as Ireland, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), the Chair of the Select Committee, made reference to Australia. Others have pointed out that there was something of an exodus when Australia merged its Foreign Office equivalent and international development. I am concerned about the difference in terms and conditions between the civil servants in both Departments, whom I know quite well and whom I respect and admire enormously. Will the Minister say whether there will be a levelling up or levelling down of those terms and conditions of service in the new Department?

DFID spends its money extremely well, and that is recognised. Other Government Departments, sadly, do not do that. It is true that the Foreign Office tends to spend at the riskier end of the spectrum. It is true that DFID tends to spend its money through large NGOs. That is therefore safer, but nevertheless we need to ensure that the merger inculcates DFID good practice into our aid spending across Government. The test of the success of this evolution will be whether we are able to spend our money better, particularly for Departments other than DFID whose records are not brilliant.

Finally, I make mention of the Gavi replenishment, which the Prime Minister hosted on 4 June. It was a great success. I slightly regret the fact that we did not manage to have in person the Liverpool iteration and the iteration in London that I was planning when I was at DFID. It is an irony, is it not, that it took an infectious disease to throw that off track, but it was a huge success, with \$8.8 billion committed for the world's most vulnerable, potentially vaccinating 300 million children. That is an extraordinary achievement in diplomatic terms—a triumph—and I am enormously proud of it.

Covid will hit the bottom billion hardest. We need to ensure we look again at our aid budget to ensure that we use a large part of it to strengthen healthcare systems across the world, so that when we have an effective treatment for this awful condition and its probable successors and a vaccine that works, we are able to roll that out for those people. As covid has shown, we are all in it together. We are in a global village, and the new Department will be well fitted to take up the challenges of the future.

2.3 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): When the Prime Minister announced his decision to scrap the Department for International Development, he explicitly told me from the Dispatch Box that

“there has been a massive consultation over a long period.”—[*Official Report*, 16 June 2020; Vol. 677, c. 678.]

Since then, more than 200 leading aid organisations have disputed that statement. That is summed up by the CEO of the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development stating clearly:

“This proposal did not come as a result of a consultation with those who want to focus on the poorest.”

That is a damning indictment of the decision.

I realise that this is embarrassing for the Prime Minister, but his own Secretary of State for International Development said that the announcement was first made to Parliament, making it clear that there was no consultation, despite what the Prime Minister said to this House. The only conclusion we can draw is that the Prime Minister has misled the House, and not for the first time. That is more than disappointing. It is shameful that we cannot trust what the Prime Minister says from the Dispatch Box.

At a time of global crisis, the public must be able to trust what is being said in this House, especially by senior Government Ministers. The Prime Minister's sloppy attention to detail and his disregard for accountability makes a bit of a mockery of Parliament. If the Prime Minister expects the public to trust what he says, as a minimum, he must come before this House at the earliest opportunity and clarify what he said. If there was no consultation, let him say so. The demise of the Department for International Development will have a massive impact, not just in Westminster but across the world. It cannot just be dismissed as if the Prime Minister's words were a slip of the tongue.

It is not just the way the decision was announced that is the problem. As an internationalist and a passionate campaigner for equality, I am appalled by the Government's decision to dissolve DFID, one of the most important Departments in the Government. It is accountable in its spending and uses its resources to help those most in need. Although Government Members might not like to admit it, I think every Member of the House can see that the decision to merge DFID with the Foreign Office was nakedly political. The Government have rejected the idea of foreign aid as a humanitarian endeavour and turned it into a branch of foreign policy.

To put it bluntly, at a time of global crisis, this Government have abandoned support for the world's most vulnerable communities. The Secretary of State for International Development has said that the coronavirus pandemic could undo decades of international development work, while the International Development Committee has been clear that stability in UK aid is needed now, at this time. This merger does exactly the opposite.

Under DFID, official development assistance goes to eradicating poverty and improving conditions for the most vulnerable people in our world. In 2018, the three aid sectors that DFID spent most of its budget on were humanitarian aid, health and economic infrastructure. For the Foreign Office, it was administrative costs. The Prime Minister says he wants to refocus the aid budget to “safeguard British interests.” For me, eradicating world poverty is a British interest.

International development was one of the few areas where the Government could claim that they were world-leading. Had the Prime Minister bothered to conduct the consultation he claims to have, he would have been informed of the damage that this decision would cause. In the aid and development sector, the decision has been greeted with dismay. Bond, a UK network for organisations working in international development, published a letter signed by almost 200 UK aid and development leaders, calling the decision an “unnecessary and expensive distraction”—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I call Sir Oliver Heald.

2.8 pm

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): The hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) made a strong point about the strength of the work of DFID. The rest of her speech would probably have gone down better with her local constituency Labour party.

My hope—as my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) said—is that the merger of DFID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will be an opportunity to reaffirm Britain’s role as a compassionate, ambitious and outward-looking leader on the global stage. Britain is known for its development help and does a distinctive form of development. I pay tribute to the current Secretary of State and recent incumbents of the post.

As UNICEF said recently, Britain can be proud of enabling every child to survive, thrive and unleash their full potential. From their championing of 12 years of quality education for every girl, to their commitment to ending preventable child deaths and remaining the largest donor to Gavi, the vaccine alliance, this Government have demonstrated their dedication and support to children around the world. We want to continue that work, and I believe that it will be possible to do it within the new Department.

I particularly want to pick up on a point that the Chair of the Select Committee made about the views of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) on safeguarding. One of the strengths of DFID has been not only that it has delivered this distinctive aid—of course, much of it helping and empowering women around the world, as well as helping children—but that it has led the way on the importance of safeguarding. It is important that we have the right measures in place to avoid the sort of scandals that we have had with sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment. Over the past 20 years, work has been done in this area, and it seemed to be improving, and then it has happened again. DFID did great work at its London safeguarding summit on 18 October 2018 in driving the collective effort to try to respond to this. The International Development Committee has produced important reports on this matter and it is currently looking at it again.

This history, which goes back 20 years, is something that I became involved in when Oxfam asked me to sit on its independent commission, looking into the events in Haiti. We were able to do a great deal of research, and we found, in our in-depth research in three countries on women and girls in refugee camps, that sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse were quite common and transactional sex was endemic in two of the three countries. There was even a lack of understanding both by aid workers and the recipients of where the line should be drawn in terms of sexual misconduct. For example, one older woman explained that she had to wait in line for food, because the younger women, who were prepared to be girlfriends of the people handing out food, took precedence. To be fair to those at Oxfam, they responded to the crisis with great energy, and they produced a 10-point plan and agreed to all the

recommendations in our report. That resulted in a major overhaul of their systems to ensure that standards were maintained.

Now I have a seven-minute speech and I see that I have 22 seconds left. I will just say that I am also on a DFID aid worker ID steering group and I am determined and very much hope that that can continue its work, because we do need to be able to identify aid workers and their history and then put the protections in place.

2.13 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. That is a very concise summary of what my constituents in Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East are saying to me about the proposed merger of the FCO and DFID. Indeed, far from its being broken, my constituents in Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East love the work of DFID and let us face it, there are not many Government Departments that we can say that about. Far from fixing anything, they see this merger as a cause for significant concern and a hugely retrograde step.

Nobody on the SNP Benches or any of my constituents are arguing that UK aid will shudder to a halt overnight as a result, but the worry is that the goal of reducing poverty and inequality in some of the world’s poorest countries will be diluted, with UK aid redirected to serve foreign policy and business interests. The rigorous monitoring and evaluation of aid will be lost in the Department, which is proving notoriously difficult to hold to account, and diplomats rather than aid experts will be making strategic decisions. My constituents are worried that it will be the world’s poorest communities that will pay the price.

As the Prime Minister himself said, DFID has been a more effective spender of aid than any other Government Department, so my constituents are simply asking, why does he want to meddle with that? Conservative Members seem to be arguing that everything will carry on just as before. That is a very strange argument for a fundamental change to departmental structures, and nothing that I have read in Government statements or letters assuages these concerns. On the contrary, they confirm our fears. When speaking to the House, the Prime Minister appeared to argue that we should move aid from Zambia to Ukraine and from Tanzania to the western Balkans, not because of any assessment of need, but because it was in what he thought was the UK’s interests. I have absolutely no objection to the Prime Minister talking about cross-Government strategies, cross-departmental working and so on, but he is absolutely wrong to describe a separate aid Department as a luxury. To me, it is essential precisely because it prevents the conflation of development need and diplomatic self-interest that my constituents fear.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I am listening very carefully to what the hon. Gentleman says, but he will recall that, in the White Paper that the Scottish Government produced ahead of the 2014 independence referendum, they recommended that if Scotland had its own arrangements the international development department would sit within its foreign affairs department.

Stuart C. McDonald: We have already heard about the good work that small independent countries can do, and how they make up their Government departments will vary from country to country. My whole point is not that this will bring aid to a shuddering halt but, as I have said, that it will undermine its effectiveness and the good work that the Department does.

The issue is not, as was said earlier, whether aid is in the UK's interests, but whether the merged Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will genuinely pursue a true aid agenda or will pursue a security, trade or defence agenda. Speaking specifically about UK Departments, we must remember that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office seems to think that it is in our interests to sell arms to Saudi Arabia. While the Prime Minister was in charge of that Department, there were real questions and concerns about the UK watering down EU proposals for an independent international inquiry into the war in Yemen, yet the same decision makers will now be responsible for the aid we send to Yemen.

How do we align those different goals? Am I being alarmist? Perhaps I am, and I hope that these concerns are entirely ill-founded, but we had an urgent question earlier today on Bahrain and its appalling human rights abuses. Our relationship with that country, and the FCO's investment there through our conflict, stability and security fund, hardly inspire confidence that the FCO really is able to differentiate aid from a strange Foreign Office agenda.

For all those reasons, we really should think again. However, if we are to press ahead with this ill-judged decision, we need more than easy assurances from the Dispatch Box that the focus on tackling poverty and gender inequality will remain. We need that spelled out in departmental plans and strategies, as well as in budgets, and we need strict rules that require a minimum spend in the world's least developed countries. We also need a more robust framework of scrutiny than ever from the Select Committee and the Independent Commission for Aid Impact. Otherwise, I fear that ever more spending motivated by trade or defence interests will be parcelled up and badged as aid. We may very well still meet the 0.7% goal, but we will do so in a more hollow and empty way. The fear we have is that that is precisely what the Prime Minister wanted to achieve.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am afraid that if I am to have any chance of getting people in, I will need to reduce the limit after the next speaker to three minutes. I call Laurence Robertson.

2.17 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing this debate and on her comprehensive speech. A year ago, I led the very same debate; we did not know about the merger then, but we did discuss whether DFID should continue as a separate Department at that point, and I think the view was pretty overwhelming in the House that it should continue.

I have to say that I have rather mixed feelings about the announcement. I understand where the Government are coming from, and they do indeed want to make sure that British interests are best served with the aid we

provide. However, as I said to the Prime Minister when he announced the merger, I would argue that poverty reduction programmes across the world are just that. It is in the United Kingdom's interests to alleviate poverty across the world, for a number of reasons. It does reduce economic migration, and it does offer increasing export markets for us, all of which is in British interests. I would also argue that, from a humanitarian point of view, it is right that we have poverty reduction programmes across the world, particularly involving education—especially girls' education—and health projects. All of that is in the world's interests. All of that is in our own British interests.

When the Prime Minister made his statement, he said:

“it is no use a British diplomat one day going in to see the leader of a country and urging him not to cut the head off his opponent and to do something for democracy in his country, if the next day another emanation of the British Government is going to arrive with a cheque for £250 million.”—[*Official Report*, 16 June 2020; Vol. 677, c. 675.]

I think everybody would agree with those sentiments, but as the hon. Member for Rotherham pointed out, the provision of aid is not quite that simple. Quite often, we give aid to charities and non-government organisations working in countries. I do not think we provide budget support to countries any more—if I am wrong on that, I will be corrected, but it is certainly very small if we do. The bilateral aid we give amounts to only 63% of our whole budget. The remaining 37% is multilateral aid going to things such as the World Food Programme. We do not have the ability to influence evil dictators in the way that we might want to, because our focus, quite rightly, is on poverty reduction. As has been pointed out, not all the aid is spent by DFID. In fact, if we add up DFID and Foreign Office aid, it comes to something like 80%, with the remainder being spent by other Departments. Merging DFID and the Foreign Office does not necessarily mean that we have full control over all that money.

An important point I want to make is that countries with the worst types of government often house the world's poorest people. The people in those countries are the neediest, and we must not lose sight of that fact. I understand where we are coming from. We want to provide opportunities for British companies via our aid programmes. We want to try to bring about better government across the world, and if our aid can do that, it is well spent. But we must ensure that each Department retains the focus that it has had for many years—for the FCO, diplomacy and its very useful work in other areas, and for DFID, aid and development. I hope that that focus is not lost, because people a lot less fortunate than ourselves depend on us.

2.21 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): It is incredibly important that we are using this estimates day to debate this subject, because it is an opportunity for us to scrutinise not only spend but the issues behind the decision on this merger, which my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) summarised eloquently.

It will not surprise the House that, as a member of an internationalist party, I am both surprised and horrified by the announcement of the merger of DFID and the

FCO and am arguing for the maintenance of the ODA floor at 0.7%. The House will be aware of the importance of protecting this funding for a wide range of reasons, including tackling disparities facing children, women and girls and those with disabilities and in health and education—so important that this floor was part of the Conservative party's 2019 manifesto.

We have seen across the world failures where diplomacy and development departments have merged, as my hon. Friend outlined. That is probably due to the difference in expertise and practice of civil servants in those two vocations. While complementary, they are distinct and different. It is important to shine a light on the new responsibilities that this new Department should have, which include ensuring that funding is available for sustainable and green investment to support the countries that will be put most at risk from our own pollution, and the climate justice that needs to emerge.

The cynic in me thinks that this decision has been ideologically driven. The concerns of my constituents who have been in touch to express their frustration and confusion over this decision are valid. As a city of sanctuary, we are an internationalist city, which may explain the difference in my experience on the doorstep from that of Government Members. I am concerned by the Secretary of State's comments about the Government looking to cut £2 billion from the new Department's budget, with a 30% cut in aid spend across all Departments. That is not what my constituents will be expecting. The reason I am cynical is the vast number of fringe right-wing organisations that have been looking to cut aid budgets, scrap DFID and pull the UK out of the OECD altogether, but no think-tank, thinkpiece or comment can take away the UK's responsibilities.

Finally, the lack of consultation with the aid sector and staff of DFID and the FCO must call this decision into question. To take this decision during a global pandemic is also questionable, when all minds in the sector are focused on tackling this terrible crisis. Any decision about jobs that is found out via a tweet is very destructive to staff. It leads civil servants to feel irrelevant and that their work is undervalued. I hope that the Department has taken the time to discuss this with trade unions, and that we do not lose this world-class Department.

2.24 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I start by making it absolutely clear that I regard the decision to dismantle DFID as a quite extraordinary mistake. First, it will destroy one of the most effective and respected engines of international development in the world. Secondly, many of the senior figures who are key to Britain's role as a development superpower are likely to leave and work elsewhere in the international system, destroying at a stroke a key aspect of global Britain. Thirdly, it is completely unnecessary, as the Prime Minister exercises full control and line of sight over DFID's strategy and priorities through the National Security Council. Churches, faith communities and hundreds—thousands—of supporters up and down the country of Oxfam, Save the Children, Christian Aid and CAFOD are dismayed, as are our many friends around the world, who are shaking their heads in disbelief at this extraordinary act.

Both the Foreign Office and DFID work ceaselessly in Britain's national interest, but foreign affairs and development, while totally complementary, are not the same thing. I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to the 0.7%, but that involves both the money and the OECD rules on what constitutes legitimate aid and official development assistance, and I fear that we will shortly hear that the rules are not quite right for the United Kingdom and we need our own rules. With that, the 0.7% will go up in smoke as the stronger interests plunder the budget and Britain's development effectiveness dissolves, and with it our international reputation as a world leader in the field.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I absolutely respect my right hon. Friend's experience. Does he accept that currently, including ODA and non-ODA, we spend nearly 0.8% funding overseas operations in Iraq?

Mr Mitchell: The House will understand why I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving me an extra minute, but I have learned during my 30 years in Parliament that, in politics, there is limited point in spending one's time howling at the moon. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the decision, it has been made, so I will turn now to how best it can be implemented, with the least damage to Britain's brilliant work and reputation.

I draw the Minister's attention to the excellent paper produced by Stefan Dercon, who was the chief economist in the Department when I was Secretary of State. I know the Foreign Secretary has had a chance to look at it. I hope the Foreign Office will bear in mind the constructive comments made in that wise and thoughtful paper on how to make the merger work. First, it is important to ensure a whole-of-Government approach to the spending of development money. Different Departments spend it, but not consistently, and most of the spend that attracts hostile comment in the press—the spend in China, for example, or the Newton fund—is not spent by DFID. In my first hour as Secretary of State, I stopped all spending to China, unless it was legally incurred. There is a danger that mis-spending by other Departments brings the budget into disrepute with our constituents, and I urge the Government to focus on that point.

Secondly, to ensure an emphasis on the quality of the spend, ICAI looks at all spending. Its annual report comes out tomorrow, and I urge colleagues to read it. ICAI was set up in the teeth of opposition from the development sector, but it is extremely important for holding to account the quality of spending. It is the taxpayers' friend, and we must drive up the quality of ODA spend across Government.

Sir Oliver Heald: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Mitchell: I am sorry, but I cannot.

Thirdly, DFID's skill is money. With the best will in the world, the Foreign Office is not that; although it is populated by the most brilliant diplomats, they are not very good with money and it is not fair to expect Foreign Office officials to take responsibility for running multimillion-pound projects.

The final example I will give is that, to his credit, the Prime Minister has made getting girls into school a priority. I strongly agree. To change our world, educate

[Mr Mitchell]

girls. That is why I set up the girls' education challenge fund, which was designed to get 1 million girls into school, but looking at the right structures to deliver that is a DFID skill.

2.28 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): The announcement that the Government plan to merge FCO and DFID has rightly been met with widespread concern, from global aid organisations and poverty charities to former Prime Ministers. As a member of the International Development Committee, I can say that my position is no different. I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), my fellow Committee members and, most importantly, the Committee staff, who are going through a turbulent time.

The merger will almost certainly end Britain's ring-fenced £15 billion aid budget, not to mention the fact that the timing is incredibly poor, given that we are in the middle of a global pandemic, when such funding is essential to alleviating the impact on some of the vulnerable people in the world. That is before we even take into consideration the Whitehall redundancies that the merger makes inevitable, without any form of consultation, despite what the Prime Minister claims.

Most worryingly, it appears that the Government are using the current crisis to railroad through their long-held plans to scrap DFID. The proposed merger would be catastrophic on many levels, leading to the reversal of the progress made by successive Governments, in the more than two decades since it was first established in 1997, in everything from health and education to poverty.

Several former Prime Ministers who understand more than most the role that Britain plays on the world stage with its aid commitment have been critical of the Government's decision. Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron have called this move a "mistake", which will result in

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

The charity sector is equally outraged by the decision. Appearing before the International Development Committee last month, Oxfam UK's chief executive communicated his fears, saying that with half a billion people at risk of being pushed into poverty as a result of covid-19, the move was unbelievable. Similar comments were expressed by Save the Children, Christian Aid and Concern Worldwide.

The foundation has hit out at the planned merger, with its chief executive labelling this move a "backward step" that reduces

"Britain's aims and ambitions on the world stage."

The Fairtrade Foundation is also concerned about the real intention of this merger, and it has stated that UK aid

"must remain focused on poverty reduction, not diverted for security interests or in return for favourable trade terms."

Our aid not only helps save lives, but creates opportunities for people to improve their circumstances and life chances. It has lifted millions of people out of poverty, educated them, and saved millions more. To cite one example of DFID's importance, since 2015 the Department's nutrition

programme has reached more than 60 million women, under-fives and adolescent girls, who are among some of the poorest people when it comes to hunger and malnutrition.

I appreciate that time is running out, so I will finish on this point. It is vital that DFID be allowed to continue and that the scrutiny mechanisms that go alongside it, such as the International Development Committee, are kept in place.

2.31 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I am very pleased to be speaking after my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). Nobody on the Government Benches has done more to improve the lives of girls around the world or to support the world's poorest, and he has been a real champion of development.

It is clear from the debate and the fact that it is happening that many people disagree with this decision or have serious concerns. I welcome the positive approach that Scotland's International Development Alliance has taken on this issue in coming forward with a specific request for four commitments from the Government in relation to how the new organisation goes forward. I want to use my time to run through them.

The first is a commitment to poverty eradication and aid effectiveness. That, of course, partly means having the 0.7% target, and it is good that that has been confirmed, but it must be focused on the poorest and those in most need. My own particular interest, as I am a member of the all-party group on nutrition for growth, is nutrition. In the period since 2015, DFID has seen 50.6 million women and girls reached by the UK's nutrition programme. The commitment to that programme ends this year, and I would like to see the Minister today or shortly renewing that commitment. It is very important and making a huge difference.

The other three commitments have already been touched on. There is the commitment to accountability, transparency and scrutiny, which means keeping a Committee that scrutinises not only ODA spending, but the Department's responsibility to ICAI. It is essential that that continues, and if that matter comes before this House, I will be voting to support the retention of such a Committee. Scotland's International Development Alliance is also concerned to see the retention of the commitment to the strategic development goals and the Paris agreement on climate change. Again, I think the more affirmation of that is possible, the more it will be welcome.

Finally, as others have mentioned, there is the commitment to safeguarding DFID's expertise. As the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) referenced, in East Kilbride, which is in the neighbouring constituency to mine, the Abercrombie House operation is a huge asset to DFID and to Scotland, and we want to see it continue.

2.34 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing this debate. I wonder whether the title of "estimates day debate" has ever been so appropriate, given the uncertainty surrounding official development assistance over the next two years.

The Secretary of State for International Development said on Monday that there would be £2 billion of cuts, but we do not know where they will fall, and I know from my engagement that there is huge concern across the sector about what criteria are being used to make the cuts. And this is playing out at a time when, according to the Secretary of State herself, coronavirus could undo 30 years of the UK's international development work. We are only as covid-secure here in the UK as the most affected country globally. The failure to ring-fence the programmes that protect the most vulnerable in this moment of crisis should be a legacy that no member of the Government can take pride in.

I am afraid that this lack of clarity typifies the Government's approach to this deeply misguided merger. There is so little consistency in their rhetoric. The Foreign Secretary tells us that we are committed to DAC rules, while the Prime Minister says we are giving too much aid to Tanzania and Zambia. We are told that poverty reduction will remain a central focus, but the Government will not rule out making changes to the primary legislation that underpins the direction of ODA spending. They make noises in favour of transparency yet will not commit to ICAI, and the hon. Member for Rotherham is informed that her Committee will shut down in September. My worry is that the Government's manner in conducting the merger typifies how they will seek to direct ODA in the future: little transparency and no accountability, departments unable to articulate how their ODA spend is allocated, decisions taken by a tiny executive with no consultation.

This really matters. The 0.7%, enshrined in law by a Liberal Democrat private Member's Bill, represents a huge commitment of taxpayers' money, and it is vital that it is spent properly, because that means value for money for people in the UK, and it means that where our aid is delivered, we know it actually delivers. The Prime Minister chose to denigrate DFID as a "cashpoint in the sky", but that talk is cheap and betrays a total lack of understanding of the expertise within DFID and of what Professor Myles Wickstead called

"the thought, effort and commitment that has gone into aid and development programmes".

That expertise must be maintained.

Of course, ensuring our aid spending is effective is about more than just value for money; there are real concerns about safeguarding, and we have heard nothing about what that will look like. We are rightly appalled at the lapses in behaviour from senior people in NGOs, and we need to be reassured that such things will not reoccur. These are exactly the kind of things that disengage taxpayers from aid in the first place.

I have spoken about the frameworks that need to be in place in order to ensure that our aid spending is world-leading—that it is transparent, subject to scrutiny, driven by expertise, and with safeguarding at its heart—but there is also the question of what we choose to prioritise within our aid budget. Poverty reduction is crucial. Will the Government commit to spending at least 50% of aid in the most vulnerable countries?

As my recent urgent question made clear, I think this merger is totally unnecessary. There are a number of commitments that the Government have yet to make, and I hope that the Minister will offer some further assurances.

2.37 pm

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this debate. I want to speak from the perspective of someone who had the privilege of being a joint Minister: Minister for Africa in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and a Minister within DFID. I could not have done either job as well without the other. It was incredibly valuable to have the overall perspective.

I am old enough to know that it is not organisational structures here in Whitehall that matter, but the purpose of what we are doing on the ground. We have a very good framework, with the sustainable development goals, which we are working towards in this decade of action up to 2030, and we should focus, as many posts do across the world, on what we are seeking to achieve. When I held those joint roles, I was able to achieve a lot of the things that we will want to be doing, such as stepping up the money being spent on anti-corruption and governance, including good governance in Ukraine and the western Balkans. These things were all feasible because I had that joint role, and I am willing to believe that, provided we continue to focus on the true purpose, this can work well.

On the issue at hand, I want the Minister to give three reassurances when he responds to the debate. First, will he reassure the House that there will still be a strong voice at Cabinet for the very poorest in the world? We will leave a better world to our children if we can have a healthier, more educated, a more peaceful, freer, more democratic and more climate-resilient world.

Secondly, as the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) just said, we need to make sure that the vast majority of the 0.7% continues to be spent in the very poorest and most conflict-affected parts of the world.

Thirdly, as colleagues will know, I am passionate about the importance of girls' education and the 12 years of quality education. It is wonderful that the Prime Minister has been such an effective advocate for that cause. It will increase the size of the economy, increase health, reduce poverty, make the world more secure and help our climate, as it reduces population pressures. As the Prime Minister himself has put it, it is the Swiss army knife of development; will the Minister assure me that the Government will continue to emphasise it in their funding as much as they have previously?

In conclusion, I can be open-minded on the structures, as long as the purpose is there. However, in respect of scrutiny in this place, it would be right to have a separate Committee to look at international development.

2.40 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): An awful lot of stuff has been said this afternoon, most of which I agree with. I come at this issue from two perspectives; the first is as the co-chair of the Conservative Friends of International Development. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), I would not have wanted us to be in this position, but, also like him, I do appreciate that we have to deal with the landscape as we find it. We have one or two suggestions. Following on from what my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) said, Cabinet representation is incredibly important. It might be a

[Mark Garnier]

good idea to have a chief secretary of international development, in the same way that we have a Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Similarly, a permanent secretary for international development in the FCDO might be helpful.

More important is the question of scrutiny, which the Chairman of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), was absolutely right to raise—and she was right to bring about this debate. As of Tuesday, I have taken over as the Chair of the Committees on Arms Export Controls. Although this is a slightly techie area of the whole thing, it is incredibly important to remember that DFID has a role to play in our arms export control process. Four Government Departments feed into our decisions as to whether to issue export licences: the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, DFID and the Ministry of Defence all feed up into the Export Control Joint Unit, which sits in the Department for International Trade. DFID has a role to play in deciding whether we issue arms export licences, and that is to make sure that those people who receive our aid are not going to be spending that money on fancy fast jets and diverting it away from what it should be doing. It is incredibly important to have that DFID role; I hope that the Minister will be able to define exactly what is happening to make sure that that happens correctly in the new FCDO.

There is also the issue of scrutiny by Parliament. One thing that troubles me is that the Committees on Arms Export Controls—CAEC—is made up of members of the four Select Committees that represent or analyse each of those four Departments that I mentioned. The problem we have now is that as the International Development Committee will no longer exist, it will no longer be able to feed into CAEC. Wide Committees like CAEC include a number of Members who bring different perspectives to the analysis of this very controversial policy area. People from the Defence Committee see it from a military point of view, and there are those from the Foreign Affairs Committee and the International Trade Committee, but those people from the International Development Committee see it from a humanitarian position, an aid position, a compassionate position. We need to think carefully about how we get that element of membership of people who are passionate about international development and who can look at representations with regard to—if anyone is interested—criterion 8 of the joint consolidated criteria for export licensing. How can we get that specific expertise into CAEC?

2.43 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I was hugely disappointed to hear that the Department for International Development is to merge with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. It is an internationally recognised development agency, with serious, heavyweight power and a committed and expert team. There is no doubt that DFID has led the world in its commitments to reducing poverty, saving lives and transforming countries around the world. It is consistently the best-performing Department, delivering real value for British taxpayers.

Not only does the Department provide humanitarian support, but it ensures access to clean water and sanitation; responds to global health threats by contributing to

disease surveillance—something we must certainly appreciate, given our current situation; and fosters strong governance across the globe, tackling corruption and supporting peace efforts worldwide.

In addition, aid is paramount in tackling climate change in some of the world's poorest countries, from small-scale renewable energy projects in Uganda to conservation in Latin America. Climate justice comes as a priority and must certainly be recognised. I worry that this merger will water down some of those rights and will detract from the use of our aid budget.

I am deeply concerned by the calls from some Members on the Government side for us to scrap the 0.7% commitment, and very pleased to hear from those taking part in this debate that there is that commitment still. I am very pleased to hear so many Members state that. The UK provides an enormous amount of aid for this money and, for the reasons I have just highlighted, gives a lot of bang for its buck.

I want to talk about fair trade as well, because it is hugely important and it has made such a huge difference, especially to women in developing countries. That is why I listen to the words of the Fairtrade Foundation chief executive, Michael Gidney, who has said that now is not the time to reduce Britain's aims and ambitions on the world stage, and that downgrading the role of the internationally respected, global aid powerhouse that is DFID is a backward step.

I conclude by calling on the Government to protect the aid budget and give priority to protecting programmes and achieving the best and greatest results in reducing poverty. This country and, indeed, the world are changing rapidly, and two decades' worth of experience must not be thrown to the wayside. I urge the Government to retain the Select Committee to scrutinise the work and expenditure in that field.

2.46 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I rise to speak on the merger of DFID with the Foreign Office. This is an estimates debate, but the decision as to whether International Development and the Foreign Office should be one Department or two is not about money. Even if it were, to expect it to happen now, at the height of the pandemic when civil servants should be focusing on the UK and world recovery, is an appalling waste of already overstretched resources. No, it is not about money: it is fundamentally about how the UK views its role in the world. It is about values and whether we pursue our obligations as a relatively wealthy country to do right by the poor and most marginalised of the world, while also pursuing our foreign policy, but as distinct objectives. I fear we will subsume those obligations to the poor of the world into the Foreign Office, whose priorities are not about development.

The Prime Minister indicated recently that there is now likely to be a reprioritisation of aid spending. He said:

“We give as much aid to Zambia as we do to Ukraine, although the latter is vital for European security”.

He added that the UK must use its

“aid budget and expertise, to safeguard British interests and values overseas.”—[*Official Report*, 16 June 2020; Vol. 677, c. 667-8.]

What are those values? To me, development is not about national security interests. I believe it is about how we demonstrate our moral compass in the world—

Harriett Baldwin: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ruth Cadbury: I am not going to give way, because many others want to speak.

The Labour Government of 1997 to 2010 created DFID, following the Pergau dam scandal. It demonstrated our Labour values in its record subsequently on international development and poverty reduction, improving sanitation for over 1.5 million and lifting 40 million children out of poverty. But in the past 10 years DFID's role in overseas development aid has gradually been reduced. Now DFID spends only 73% of ODA, the rest being spent by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, BEIS and so on. To be fair, DFID has been a shining light and demonstration of the UK's moral values around the world. DFID has also been rated as the most effective and transparent of Government Departments, delivering real value for money and spending only 2% of its total spend on administration. Meanwhile almost half of the FCO's spend on ODA goes on administration.

So many key people have criticised this move, including three former Prime Ministers and all the NGOs, bar one, in the field. DFID was created by the incoming Labour Government in 1997 to create a distinct policy line. I am proud of our experience, which has provided life-changing and life-saving support.

2.50 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this debate. I stand here as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative. I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for her work as the Chair of the International Development Committee, including the recent work on the effectiveness of aid, which has been an exceptional insight into how we can provide better resources for our overseas projects. I am also acutely aware of the extraordinary levels of knowledge and influence in this House, from previous Secretaries of State to perhaps forthcoming Secretaries of State—I thought that was a fine interview.

Let me discuss something that my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) started with. In this House we are all discussing the value of aid. We have to go back to the doorstep to defend this at a time when we are in debt, almost to second world war levels. We have to be able to go out there to help define and make people understand the value of what we are trying to achieve overseas. That is a very difficult task at present. So we should not be afraid of the forthcoming changes in terms of this merger, and I say that as a sceptic: I was very sceptical about the benefits it might have for our country.

If we can harness the ability and knowledge of all those who work in DFID, with the experience of those in the Foreign Office, we can end this Janus-esque approach, where we give with one hand and take with the other—where a country may have multiple delegations of British diplomats visiting and helping on a diplomatic level, but we are then giving or taking away on an aid project, whichever the case may be.

The other point to make relates to the need for ICAI and the International Development Committee to continue. My hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) made an apt point about the value of accountability and harnessing the understanding and knowledge of different Members of this House on different Committees. I propose that we continue to see ICAI operate, to have the IDC sitting and to have regular meetings of the IDC and the Foreign Affairs Committee every quarter—or however often they decide it should be—to discuss the projects that have been undertaken.

The last point I wish to make is about gender-based violence. During the covid crisis, we have seen this violence rise, both in the UK and abroad. This is the area where I am undertaking work in this House, so I hope the House can forgive me for being blatantly opportunistic in raising it, but we have an opportunity to start ring-fencing spending and funding on this issue. If there is one problem that I have always identified with DFID, it has been its shortcomings on multi-year funding for projects that could make a huge difference. We have the opportunity now to be strategically forward-thinking in delivering projects that I believe will make a significant difference, and we can start by tackling gender-based violence.

2.53 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Ten days ago, a Royal Air Force C-17 left Brize Norton in my constituency, carrying parts of a field hospital destined for west Africa. Over the course of another five flights, the 130 tonnes of that field hospital will be taken to west Africa, where members of the UN and others are doing crucial, outstanding work in tackling coronavirus. That shows this country at its best. It shows the expertise of our armed forces, together with an outward-looking foreign policy, and the expertise of DFID, which funded that mission. It helps this country spread its good name around the world. I 100% welcome this, and the fact that the Government have made it clear that there is a total commitment to our international aid. There is no rolling back from it. It remains world-leading and the 0.7% target is to be maintained.

It is morally and ethically right that we help others, particularly the poorest around the world. But these aid flights also show that in helping others we are helping ourselves, because when facing a virus we are none of us safe until all of us are safe. In making that point, I also indicate that it would be naive to pretend that these flights are not also an expression of soft power and in pursuance of the British national interest. The merger that has been proposed gives us the opportunity to ensure that British aid money is always spent wisely and well. Too often, despite the good intentions, there has been a feeling that the two Departments are not acting in concert. Sir Malcolm Rifkind, who was of course Foreign Secretary, has said:

“The Foreign Secretary may not wish to help a particular country because of its poor human rights record. The DFID Secretary might take the view that the aid that is to be provided is more important and is, in any event, not directly relevant to the human rights situation. The outcome is confusion, both in this country and in the recipient country, as to what the policies and priorities of Her Majesty's Government are.”

[Robert Courts]

Lord Hague has made a similar point, saying that when he was Foreign Secretary he would often be listened to politely by those abroad, but they really wanted to talk to the DFID Secretary, whose chequebook was four times bigger. That rather proves that in the real world, whether we like it or not, diplomacy and development are intertwined.

We could learn some lessons from how other countries do things. Norway and Denmark do things in a similar way; they are often held up as the gold standard of aid. France, a close western European ally, also has her aid distributed according to a set of pre-set policy goals. This does not mean, I stress, that it is “trade for aid”. We can decide that altruistic alleviation of poverty is exactly what we want to do, provided that that is the foreign policy that we have thought about in advance. There is no sinister plot to decimate Britain’s aid contribution around the world. It is no good being moral and ethical if we are not also effective, and that is why I applaud this.

2.56 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing this debate, and on her superb leadership of the International Development Committee, which she chairs.

In 1997, there were only 165 Conservatives sitting on these Benches. When the incoming Labour Government announced that they were going to set up this new Department, I have to say that I was against it. However, without any doubt at all, Clare Short did a magnificent job as the first Secretary of State, and even though she led in Northern Ireland, I think she would say that that was what gave her the most pleasure in government.

I was particularly taken by what the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), said. We have the letter from the Prime Minister dated 16 June, and I just hope it does turn out to be like that. I certainly do not want to see the present Secretary of State no longer sitting around the Cabinet table. It is very important that her voice continues to be heard.

We all know that some constituents will have said that what David Cameron did in dedicating the 0.7% figure was not on, because more money could be spent elsewhere instead, and that some people would say, “You shouldn’t bother about what goes on overseas.” Well, I have learned at first hand that investing in other countries where they face challenges brings us huge bonuses and we should continue to do that. I was very grateful for the briefing that UNICEF sent me.

I want to end with some special pleading. I have my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) sitting behind me. When he was Secretary of State, I remember going to see him to ask him for a bit of money, and in a very nice way he said no. I speak as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Maldives and the all-party parliamentary group on the Philippines; any trips we have done are all in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. The Maldives have tremendous challenges at the moment, and not only with coronavirus; they are also treated badly in terms of

tuna—whereas other countries are getting a 5% tariff, they are still stuck with a 20% tariff, which is not acceptable—and in terms of air bridges that the Government have announced, in which they have not been included. This is hitting the Maldivian people terribly hard in the two sectors they depend on.

As for the Philippines, what would we do in this country, during this coronavirus crisis, without all the Filipino nurses and doctors working everywhere to help us? That country has been hit very hard by hurricanes and other challenges. I do hope that we will intervene and see if we could just give a bit more development money to the Philippines.

2.58 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on calling this debate. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess). I will try to make three or four points as briefly as possible.

The idea that foreign policy is separate from aid has been well and truly kicked into touch by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts). Whether we like it or not, there is a link between them, and it is better to recognise that, to understand that foreign policy as well as aid should be moral and to understand their combination.

I would ask the Minister three things. First, can we look at strategy as part of global Britain? We have the National Security Council. However, I feel that since the end of the cold war we have been a little complacent in preparing for future problems. We need a national strategy council to permanently look five and 10 years ahead, whether into pandemics, the behaviour of nation states such as China and Russia, or climate change. We are not forward-thinking enough, and that is one of the contributions I would like us to make to understand how we can bring strategy more into our forward-looking policy.

Secondly, when it comes to overseas spending, when I was writing the “Global Britain” document last year for which the Prime Minister very kindly wrote the foreword, we tried to understand where our overseas money was going. Some of it was being spent by the Department for International Development, some by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, some by the Home Office and some by the Foreign Office—quite badly, often. I can congratulate DFID on the quality of its spending, no doubt about it. We do not have an audit of our overseas spending, and I believe that we badly need one. There is no doubt in this House that poverty alleviation is critical—it is moral; it is right; it is good. Grassroots development is critical—it is moral, right and good.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) talked about gender-based violence. I was involved in the campaign against ISIS when we were trying to liberate Mosul and it haunts me still, and makes me deeply upset still, that we knew that we were trying to liberate a city where not only were people being tortured, but women were being raped until their internal organs were collapsing and dying. These things are deeply worrying, and we need strategy. We need DFID and the Foreign Office to be working together on

this, but there is a lot of DFID spending that is not on priority areas and spending that is justifiably questionable, so can we please have an audit of overseas spending?

In the 30 seconds I have left, I say that we do need to look again at ODA. We are permanently trying to revise the rules on ODA and we should not be ashamed to do so. For example, we can fund a coal-fired power station but we cannot fund the BBC to develop civil society. I believe that the BBC World Service should be funded from ODA.

Harriett Baldwin: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Bob Seely: I would love to, but Madam Deputy Speaker, you are indicating that I should not—I have 10 seconds left. Peacekeeping—MOD peacekeeping—and the BBC should also be funded more than they are from ODA.

3.2 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing the debate. The Prime Minister has had his sights on scrapping DFID for some time. In fact, it has always been an easy target for some on the right, but it is thanks to the good men and women across political parties who helped to build a cross-party consensus that we have sustained our focus on tackling global poverty.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman and former Prime Ministers Cameron, Blair and Brown, and many others across different parties, who have supported our effort to tackle global poverty. It has saved millions of lives. We have seen this effort show great leadership around the world. Our investment of 0.7% of GNI to eradicate poverty has built good will around the world. We are an international leader because of the work that we have been able to do together, and that is what is at stake and at risk with the focus on downgrading DFID, on blurring the boundaries, on the militarisation of DFID spending—which is what is coming—and on downgrading the focus on poverty alleviation. *[Interruption.]* The Minister is shaking his head. I ask him to commit today to continuing the legislative commitment to eradicating poverty and keeping it enshrined in law, so that we do not see the diluting of poverty alleviation, which has built our reputation and soft power around the world. What is happening is a retrograde step.

I have spent many years visiting places to see the work of DFID officials and the NGOs that we support—British NGOs, which are the pride of our country. Of course there have been mistakes but overall, with our DFID, they have made an enormous difference, supporting refugees after the genocide caused by the military attacks on the Rohingya population who sought refuge in Cox's Bazar and the Syrian refugees on the border of Lebanon and Syria, helping with the situation in camps in Jordan and many other countries where our aid effort has saved lives, and protecting women against violence and rape used as a weapon of war. Our DFID has protected those people. My plea to the Minister is to ensure that, as we move forward, we do not see a downgrading and diluting and we do not see the bad old days of aid for trade—a situation where we damage our global interests. In the middle of this pandemic, when our relationships and our need to work together globally are more important

than ever, we must focus on what works, and what has worked is that focus on humanitarian support—on protecting people and saving lives. That is what builds good will, that is what builds our power around the world, that is what builds and strengthens our relationships—that is what will build global Britain, in the best sense of the phrase. As a former colonial power, we must remember our responsibilities to the world.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We will have a two-minute limit for the last two Back-Bench speakers.

3.5 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing this important debate. I have worked in the international development sector for 25 years—before DFID and during DFID—and I have seen the effects of DFID's work around the world. I believe this is the wrong action at the wrong time.

I welcome the commitment from those on the Government Benches to the 0.7% support. We must keep the focus on the poorest, who have been campaigned for by people up and down this country for so many years. This is the wrong time because we have not yet seen the peak of the coronavirus in countries around the world. We should be working flat out with countries, not on accounting changes and organisational charts.

The Government are engaging in organisational navel-gazing instead of taking and shaping our place in the world at this important time. We have COP 26 and the G7 presidency coming up. We should be concerned about these huge issues, not about transforming and merging Departments, which will take two to three years to bed in. We should learn from Norway; at the same time as doing its merger, it increased its aid budget. That contributed to the merger's success, but also it was not a full merger; it was a light-touch merger. Given the timing of these changes, I think that is what we need.

We should not rely only on more and more multilateral grants, but on local, trusted, adaptive, speedy aid agencies. That is why we have seen over 200 aid agencies complain that this is not the right move. We should listen to them and work with them, especially in response to the pandemic.

We need Cabinet-level representation—a permanent secretary just for this Department. The International Development Committee and ICAI must be maintained. The UK public must see the accountability of this move. They must see that the spending is on the poorest, if there really are to be trade-offs between Zambia and Ukraine. It is in our national interest—our British interest—to eradicate poverty, and we must spend our resources on global changes that we can all be proud of.

3.7 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) on securing this important debate. The merger of DFID and the Foreign Office, without consultation with stakeholders or any clear plan on aid transparency, has caused great concern. To allay that concern, I have three asks of the Minister.

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

First, transparency in aid spend is crucial to building confidence and international credibility. The latest aid transparency index ranks DFID very highly in comparison with how the Foreign Office spends its aid budget. There are serious concerns about how the recommendations of the index will be implemented in the new, merged Department, so I ask the Minister for assurances that those recommendations will be implemented in the new Department.

Secondly, the International Development Act 2002 requires the Government to be satisfied that their aid spend will contribute to a reduction in poverty. We need clarity and binding commitments from the Government that that will continue. Developing countries are threatened by the coronavirus pandemic owing to pressures on already vulnerable healthcare systems, so this is no time for uncertainty over aid programmes. There are fears that the commitment to spending 0.7% of GNI on international aid will be removed. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will continue to fund aid at 0.7% of GNI, and that they will commit to allocating resources to promote gender equality and publish reports on those efforts, as DFID does now?

Finally, DFID's reputation and influence is greater than the sum of its parts. There is a real risk that the UK's reputation in the aid sector will be diminished as a result of the loss of focus on international aid. We should be leading the call for the cancellation of debt and speaking up for developing countries such as Ghana, where DFID has 34 active projects. Ghana spends 11 times more on servicing its debts than on its healthcare system. Will the Minister confirm the Government's commitment to debt cancellation?

Unless we have firm guarantees and a long-term commitment from the Government to transparency, direction and influence for international aid, the world's most vulnerable will suffer.

3.9 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) would normally lead for the Scottish National party on this issue. He is unable to attend because of the pandemic and because the Government have refused to provide for Members to participate virtually in substantive debates, but he fully supported the bid to secure this debate.

Today has shown the value of debates on the estimates. Fortunately, the days of SNP Members getting called to order during estimates debates for discussing the estimates are long gone, and this debate has demonstrated why debates on Government spending are so important and can work so effectively. Sometimes the SNP divides the House on the estimates. We will not do that today, but we reserve our right to do so in future.

The Prime Minister's announcement of the merger has broken a 20-year cross-party consensus on the nature and purpose of aid. He might feel that he has the mandate to do that, but in that case, those of us who oppose the decision have the mandate to scrutinise it in considerable depth and ask the forceful questions that have been raised on both the Opposition and Government Benches today about the reasons behind it and the implications.

There is a case to be made for aid. Aid works—it saves lives, as we have heard time and again throughout the debate. As the world responds to covid-19, it is needed now more than ever. The SNP opposes the merger full stop. Our manifesto committed us to fighting for the maintenance of the two Departments, despite what the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) seems to think about our position on this matter. The 0.7% commitment must be maintained. In fact, we need to discuss whether the current amount should be frozen in cash terms, because GDP will go down, and therefore the quantity that 0.7% represents will go down. It must be spent according to the OECD definitions. It is not for royal yachts. It is not for trade envoys. It is not for tied deals and investment in the UK. Every penny of aid money that the Government spend on vanity projects like that is aid money not being spent on saving the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable people.

DFID remains one of the most scrutinised Departments and, consequently, one of the most effective and transparent Departments in the global aid index, as opposed to the FCO, which came out as one of the least so. The mechanisms for scrutiny that already exist—a dedicated cross-departmental Select Committee, the ICAI and a dedicated Cabinet-level Minister, not just these country portfolios—must be maintained. As the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale said, these points are being made by international development alliances.

The Minister has to answer the questions that have been raised. What will happen to the legislative framework that is in place for aid? Will there be new Green or White Papers? Will there be a new international development Act? How will the expertise that exists in DFID be safeguarded? My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) raised precisely those points. In 2014, we were told that the jobs in East Kilbride were an argument for the Union, so the Government are undermining their own argument for the Union by scrapping this Department.

Aid and development leadership is needed now more than ever, so the Government have to show us how they will continue to demonstrate that when key opportunities are presented to us. We have 10 years to meet the sustainable development goals, which, of course, were a legacy of the Conservative Government—David Cameron's Government helped to shape the SDGs, and they have been promptly forgotten about. That kind of iconoclasm seems to suit No. 10. I think they are quite pleased that three former Prime Ministers have opposed this move, because it suits their anti-establishment rhetoric, but it is simply not good enough. Next year Glasgow will host the international climate summit, and we cannot tackle the climate emergency without tackling global poverty at the same time.

The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), was prophetic in saying that I would talk about Malawi, so perhaps his prophecy about the quality of candidates needed to fill the new ministerial positions that will arise from the merger will also prove true. I congratulate the newly elected President and vice-president, Doctors Lazarus Chakwera and Saulos Chilima. I had the pleasure of meeting both of them in Westminster in recent years and have every confidence in their commitment to the development of their country.

The people of Malawi have benefited from DFID support over the years. The use of ODA to meet long-term goals has built an African country that can have a stable, peaceful transfer of power, because that investment is not just about hitting targets and delivering so many mosquito nets, but about long-term development. In turn, people in Scotland and across the UK have benefited from fruitful economic and cultural exchanges and partnerships. The country of Malawi is full of living and breathing examples of everything that can and should be achieved by a dedicated aid budget and development Department, and, sadly, it is full of examples of things that still have to be achieved.

I will end on a cautionary note for the Minister. For all the challenges that Malawi and countries like it face, not once has it considered returning to the bosom of mother Britannia. On Monday, the people of Malawi celebrated 56 years of independence. Countries that become independent from the United Kingdom do not regret the decision. If the UK drifts ever further from the vision that the people of Scotland have of our country as a good global citizen, one of the first countries that the new FCDO will have to build diplomatic links with will be its next-door neighbour across the border.

3.15 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Before I start, I want to reiterate the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy). On 16 June, the Prime Minister said that there had been

“massive consultation over a long period.”—[*Official Report*, 16 June 2020; Vol. 677, c. 678.]

before the decision to axe DFID was made. On 6 July, the Secretary of State for International Development told the International Development Committee that the announcement came first to Parliament, and the permanent secretary said that the first non-governmental organisation steering group meeting was last week. Can the Minister therefore tell the House: did the Prime Minister mislead the House, or did the Secretary of State mislead the Committee? If so, when will they come to apologise to the House and correct the record?

British people are rightly proud of the humanitarian and development work that DFID has done over the past 23 years. We have heard today numerous concrete examples of things that the independent DFID has done for some of the world's poorest and most vulnerable. We heard from my hon. Friends the Members for City of Durham, for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) and for Stockport (Navendu Mishra), the hon. Members for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), and my hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon (Liz Twist), for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous). They all made excellent points.

However, this fault stretches far across the political spectrum. That reflects much of what has been said both today and in recent years. The hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) made some excellent points. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) has been a fierce and outspoken opponent of this decision and I know he has been dismayed by the Prime

Minister's decision. The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), previously said that he is

“not a believer that we should regroup Departments”

as DFID plays a critical specialist role. The hon. Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke) has said:

“It's...paramount that DFID remains an independent department.”

owing to its global expertise and aid work, its position as one of the world's most transparent aid donors, and the vital role it plays in

“projecting soft power abroad and in bolstering our prestige on the world stage.”

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) has written:

“We all want taxpayers money to be spent well, and that's why we must keep an independent DFID”

because it ranks as

“one of the world's most effective and transparent aid donors.”

The Secretary of State for International Development has said:

“the effectiveness with which DFID is able to deliver aid is because the Department has decades of honed experience in understanding the most effective and targeted ways of spending taxpayers' money”—[*Official Report*, 10 June 2020; Vol. 677, c. 276.]

It is astonishing, then, that the Prime Minister has, in the middle of a global pandemic, decided not only to ignore voices from people in the global south, Opposition Members and UK-based international charities, but to totally disregard Members of his own party who have, time and again, laid out the compelling case for an independent Department for International Development. Instead, he has chosen to engage in a very expensive Whitehall restructure. Even before any of the waste of taxpayers' money from overseas development aid being spent by other Government Departments that have consistently displayed poor value for money when compared to DFID's spend, the cost of the merger will be at least £50 million. When people are facing the prospect of an economy in dire straits, does the Minister support his Prime Minister throwing £50 million of British taxpayers' money to boost his own ego?

The Secretary of State herself acknowledged how difficult the process would be, and that her Government would not be ready for a fully functioning Department to exist by September. With no organisational plan yet in place, the Institute for Government estimates that it will take at least two years for the new Department to be properly bedded in. Does the Minister agree that it would have made more sense to focus on the issues at hand: the global pandemic, the upcoming G7 chair, hosting COP26 as part of tackling the climate disaster, global poverty, inequality and conflict?

In 1997, the Labour Government established the Department as a stand-alone, independent Department to move away from the scandals that had occurred when it was part of the Foreign Office and aid was used to oil the wheels of trade deals. The Pergau dam scandal happened because the British Government under Margaret Thatcher used UK aid to fund a costly dam in Malaysia in exchange for a major arms deal. Although those responsible for aid were against the deal, the Department that they were part of—namely, the Foreign Office—ignored

[Preet Kaur Gill]

their protestations. I hope that the timing of the Prime Minister's decision, in the midst of the UK's attempts to negotiate numerous trade deals, is merely a coincidence. I urge the Government to resist returning to those times.

I thank everyone who has today made the positive moral case for the work that DFID has done over the last 23 years. I know that the British public are incredibly proud of the important poverty reduction work that our money has supported in recent decades. According to the World Bank, the pandemic will erase all the poverty alleviation progress that has been made over the past three years, and it will push into poverty 176 million people who live at the \$3.20 poverty line. It reveals and exacerbates inequalities that already existed for people in precarious positions. The answer lies not just in short-term projects and programmes, but in longer-term support from the UK to help those countries to develop public health, education and social protections.

Yesterday, the Chancellor acknowledged that we expect the deepest global recession since records began. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Government have so far disbursed a fraction of the funding that they have committed to using to support the world's poorest and most vulnerable people in the face of the worst global pandemic for over a century. The Secretary of State has repeatedly said that none of us is safe until we are all safe. With cuts of at least £2 billion due to the aid budget because of the collapse of the UK economy, will the Minister ensure that any cuts are made to aid that is given to middle and upper-income countries, and that aid spending is removed first from projects and programmes that have scored red or amber-red in Independent Commission for Aid Impact evaluations? The Secretary of State told the International Development Committee on Monday that the 0.7% figure would, sadly, be smaller this year and probably next. Does the Minister agree, and would the Government like the cash figure of UK ODA to be higher?

Many of my colleagues have touched on the key decisions that will be necessary to ensure transparency, accountability and value for money in the new Department. The Chair of the International Development Committee has laid out a clear set of measures, including the commitment to 0.7% with a poverty focus. Other Departments are not bound by the International Development Act 2002, so can the Minister confirm whether the Secretary of State is planning any amendments or appropriate legislation to ensure that we retain ICAI and resource it; that we have an ODA scrutiny committee, given that 30% of ODA is spent by other Departments; and that there is no tying of aid? Will the Minister commit himself to accepting those reasonable measures to guarantee scrutiny for UK development work? I remind the Government that the easiest and cheapest way to do that would be to retain a Department that has consistently been rated a world leader in all of the above.

I want to point to the positives that the UK can achieve in pushing for change at an international level. Following intensive lobbying from the Opposition, the UK was able to use some of its leverage to get the United Nations Security Council to adopt a resolution concerning a global ceasefire. It is a shame that that did

not come sooner, but it is an important springboard to ensure that countries focus on tackling the primary and secondary impacts of covid-19.

This takeover is a distraction—a distraction from a Prime Minister who has failed to step up domestically or internationally. The UK has failed to play a serious role in promoting global collaboration and co-operation, and the Government have not used the UK's privileged position on the world stage to bring together parties to overcome the pandemic. The distraction of a rushed Whitehall restructure has further weakened our capacity to respond.

Even with a reduced ODA budget, there are things that I urge the Government to commit to. I encourage them to use their influence to urge the cancellation of debt repayments for low-income countries and attach conditions to UK public money to guarantee equitable access to diagnostics and vaccines. I urge them to commit to actively supporting universal healthcare around the world, and pledge to build back better with the principles of climate justice, human rights and gender equality at the core of what they do.

3.23 pm

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa (James Cleverly): I am very grateful indeed to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this debate on an incredibly important issue at an important time. There were a number of contributions, from Members from all parts of the House, which were thoughtful and constructive. I made extensive notes. Unfortunately, because of the time constraints, I will not be able to deal in this closing speech with all the points raised, but I can assure the House that I, and my parliamentary colleagues, will have made notes of any if I am not able to cover them.

I was struck by the tone of a number of the contributions from Opposition Members. They spoke in glowing terms of DFID, and they were absolutely right to do so. We are incredibly proud of the people in the Department and the work that it does. However, tonally, a number of Members spoke about DFID as if it were an NGO or some independent body. It is not. It is a Department of Government, and has, for over a decade, been part of a Conservative-led Government. I completely understand Labour Members who are passionate about the creation of DFID as an independent Department 20 years ago, and who maintain a romantic attachment to the structure—the machinery of government—but I can assure Members on both sides of the House that it is the function of DFID, the output of DFID and the positive impact that DFID has on some of the poorest people around the world that are the things that we should value. We do value them, and we will protect them—they will be protected and enhanced through and beyond the merger that takes place.

The Government remain completely committed to the 0.7% of GNI to ODA. That has been called into question a number of times, so I will repeat myself, despite the fact that my time is short: the Government are completely committed to the 0.7% target.

Members were right to highlight the fact that ODA is spent by a number of Government Departments. Again, because time is tight, I will not comment too widely, and will limit myself to the spending of ODA through

DFID, the FCO and the future FCDO. However, certain things are clearly close to the hearts of many Members. One that came up over and over again was the importance of safeguarding. I am the Minister with responsibility for safeguarding, and I can assure the House that it is and will remain an absolute cornerstone of the work of the FCDO. The UK is a global leader in safeguarding in the development space, and we intend to retain that position.

A number of my predecessors who were joint Ministers have highlighted—indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) highlighted—the impossibility of disaggregating the functions of our international-facing work where both the FCO and DFID work closely together. The Gavi summit was highlighted as an example of that, and the UK should be incredibly proud of the work we did convening the international community to commit to \$8.8 billion to fight global disease. However, when my ministerial colleagues and I made telephone calls to our interlocutors around the world encouraging them to engage and commit, they did not once ask any of us whether we were speaking to them with our DFID hat or our FCO hat on. The relationships that my ministerial colleagues and I have built with interlocutors around the world were used to ensure that the Gavi summit was a success. That is an example of the close, integrated work of the FCO function and the DFID function, and it is a model that will be replicated when DFID and the FCO merge.

The Department for International Development was responsible last year for three quarters of aid spending, and has strong systems to make sure that that spending is effective. Those systems will be replicated—they will be embedded—in the new FCDA. A number of Members on both sides of the House spoke about scrutiny, and I agree. Scrutiny, for a Minister, is a bit like a trip to the dentist: it is sometimes painful, but it is absolutely necessary, and it is for the greater good. We welcome scrutiny. I have no doubt that our ODA spend in the future will be scrutinised effectively, and we welcome that scrutiny because we are proud of the work that we do.

A number of people asked about our commitment to the poorest people in the world—the bottom billion. The Centre for Global Development rates the UK's commitment to development as one of the highest in the world; we are among the most transparent donors. Our existing commitment to use at least 50% of aid in fragile and conflict-affected states will be an enduring commitment. I remind all Members that the UK is one of the few countries in the world that spend 0.7% or

more; we are the only country in the G7 that does so. That commitment is embedded in law, but we do not spend 0.7% because it is embedded in law—we spend 0.7% because it is the right thing to do. Being a global force for good will absolutely be at the heart of the UK's foreign policy and that will be displayed through both the FCO work and the ODA work.

A number of colleagues asked about the timing of this change, implying that because coronavirus brings about uncertainty around the world, this is the wrong time. The sad truth of the matter is that I do not envisage a point in time when there will be no major significant challenges around the world to give us the breathing space and headroom to make changes. We make changes when it is the right time. The Prime Minister has made it clear that he feels that now is right for the bringing together of ODA spending and wider diplomatic functions, as has been the case in a number of other very effective donors around the world. That is why we are doing it.

Both Departments have been learning to do things very differently through the coronavirus crisis and have displayed an admirable level of agility, innovation and adaptability. I have no doubt that those attributes will ensure the merger of the two Departments—and it is a merger. My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) implied that if anything, it might be a reverse takeover by DFID of the FCO. I assure him, and those colleagues and civil servants in the FCO who might be fearful that the ravenous beast that is DFID is coming to gobble them up, that that is not the case. This is a merger—a bringing together of equals.

Unfortunately, the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) is no longer in her place, but I assure her that just as we love, respect and wish to remain intimately connected with the whole of Scotland, that is our view of our people in Abercrombie House. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that their expertise, and that of other members within DFID, is retained.

We should be Bauhausian in our thoughts—form should follow function. Our Government are committed to 0.7% of GNI. We will protect the poorest and most dispossessed in the world, and we will ensure that we can always be proud of this country's development spend.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

3.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

Housing, Communities and Local Government: Departmental Spending

[*Relevant Documents: Oral evidence taken before the Public Accounts Committee on 6 July 2020, on Progress in remediating dangerous cladding, HC 406, Oral evidence taken before the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on 27 April and 4 May 2020, on the Work of the Department, HC 302; the Eighteenth Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2017-19, Local government finance and the 2019 Spending Review, HC 2036, and the Government response, CP 185; and the Second Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2019-20, Cladding: Progress of Remediation, HC 172.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That for the year ending with 31 March 2021, for expenditure by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £24,454,372,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 293 of Session 2019-21,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £7,922,389,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £22,567,364,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament—(*James Morris.*)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

Before I call Clive Betts, I give notice that, again, there is time pressure on the debate, so I am likely to introduce an immediate three-minute time limit because we must finish by 5 pm.

3.36 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): First, I will look at the covid crisis and how local government has responded to it. I think I speak for every Member of this House when I say that local councils, collectively across the piece, whatever their party, have responded magnificently. We do things virtually these days, so perhaps a virtual round of applause for local councils from Parliament would not go amiss.

What local councils have done is deliver social care; rehouse rough sleepers; work with the voluntary sector to help vulnerable people; administer the business grants scheme that the Government introduced; get the director of public health working at a local level on testing, tracking and tracing; and, of course, keep essential services, such as refuse collection, up and running for our constituents. They have done all that against the background of austerity. Local councils have had bigger cuts to their funding than any other part of the public sector in the past 10 years. The National Audit Office figures show an 80% cut in grants and an almost 30% cut in spending power over that 10-year period. Of course, the councils in the poorest areas have, by and large, had the largest cuts in grant, because they had the largest grants in the first place.

Despite that situation and despite the fact that they have had to try to prioritise social care spending for both adults and children, councils have kept services going. When we look at some of the cuts that they have had to make in other services, we see that it was nearly 50% on housing services, 50% on health and safety, and 20%

in five years in real terms in public health grants. Those services—housing, health and safety and public health—are exactly the sorts of services that have been required to deliver in response to covid. None the less, they have stepped up to the mark and done extremely well.

What have the Government done in response? I think that we have had a change of language from Ministers, which is a bit concerning. On 16 March, the Secretary of State said that the Government would do whatever was necessary to support these efforts—very similar words to the ones that were used in relation to the health service.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Betts: I will give way, but just once I think.

Lilian Greenwood: I will be very brief. Did my hon. Friend share my sense of déjà vu when councils were promised “whatever funding is needed”? Nottingham City Council spent £8 million on fire safety improvement post-Grenfell and it did not receive a single penny from central Government, despite exactly the same sort of comments being made at the time.

Mr Betts: That leads into another area. The Select Committee has just produced a report about cladding and other such issues. We have challenged the Government to produce funding in that report, so I am sure that we will take up that issue as well.

The change came when the Secretary of State appeared before the Select Committee. Suddenly, he was saying that the Government had asked councils to do things, but that they would be fully compensated for the things that they had been asked to do. Then there was a very general list. The Public Accounts Committee and the Select Committee, as well as the Local Government Association, have been trying to get more information on that. There is still a lack of clarity about precisely what will be funded. That is important, and quite different from the national health service, which seems to be given, rightly, “everything that it takes”—the commitment given to local councils.

We have had tranches of money—£2.16 billion, then £500 million—given to councils to cover both extra costs and lost revenue, which is just as important for many councils as the extra costs they have incurred. However, the LGA is saying that by the end of June, according to the returns that went to the Ministry, the costs were £4.8 billion against the £3.7 billion received—a gap of £1 billion. The Government said they would give some help with lost income by compensating councils for 75% of the amount after the first 5% of losses, which is welcome, and somehow apportioning the lost revenue from council tax and business rates. There are two questions to ask about this. The Government have already included loss of income in the £3.7 billion compensation, so will the commitment to cover 75% be reduced? I see the Minister shaking his head; it would help if that was explained very clearly indeed.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Mr Betts: Normally I would give way, but Madam Deputy Speaker is looking askance at me, so I think I had better move on.

The second question is, can the Government not bring forward a bit sooner the apportionment of losses from council tax and business rates? Waiting until the spending review introduces an extra element of uncertainty.

I have another question about compensation for losses in the leisure sector. Many authorities—about 60, I think—of all political persuasions do not provide leisure services directly; instead, they provide them through arm's length arrangements. Sheffield does it through Sheffield International Venues and has some magnificent facilities, including Sheffield Arena and Ponds Forge, which is an international-class swimming pool, and lots of community facilities. What we need is an assurance that income losses for councils in that situation will be treated the same as income losses for councils that provide the services directly. That is an important point for many councils up and down the country.

It still feels as if local government is on a life support machine, waiting for the next bit of revenue to trickle down from the next ministerial statement, rather than having the certainty that it needs to plan. Many councils are now looking at making cuts and emergency budgets and talking openly about section 114 notices. Yes, okay, the Ministry has said, "Come and see us before you issue a 114 notice," but that is too late. We do not want councils to reach the point where they are thinking about a 114 and planning for it. We want them to have the certainty of getting funding so they are not driven into that position.

This is not just about funding for this year; it is about funding for next year as well. Many councils, including Sheffield Council, have reserves to see them through this year, but using them will just postpone the problem until next year. Also, many councils had plans for efficiency savings, which have been put on hold as managerial expertise is put into dealing with the current crisis. Efficiency measures that have had to be put to one side for the time being are another loss for councils that needs to be recognised properly.

Let us have more certainty that all the costs that local authorities incur in covid-related matters will be covered by the Government. Let us have another discussion with the LGA and consider whether it is fair that councils should have to stand even 25% of income losses. Let us have an assurance that arm's length arrangements for leisure will be covered. Let us bring forward the commitment on council tax and business rates to before the spending review. Let us not get to the point of discussions about section 114 notices by providing certainty of funding.

Finally, there is the future. What local authorities need is a proper long-term sustainable financial settlement. The covid crisis offers a watershed, a turning point, an opportunity to change things, but I want to put down five markers for the Government, drawing on the Select Committee's report in 2019. First, we want at least a multi-year settlement, to give that certainty. The last four-year settlement was welcome. I understand why it has not been repeated in the current crisis, but it is certainly needed.

Secondly, we want a recognition that local authorities need a significant real-terms increase in their funding. The Local Government Association's calculation of an £8 billion gap, even before covid came along, has to be recognised. Thirdly, if we really are to end austerity, it is

not just about funding local councils so they do not have to make more cuts; it is about giving them the money to restore many of the essential services they have had to cut.

Fourthly, we have to devolve to councils the power not merely to spend but to raise resources in the first place. If we do that, however, we must recognise that some councils are less able to raise resources than others, so if we devolve more spending arrangements to councils, we will need a fall-back position—a central fund for councils to deal with the equalisation problem.

Finally, let us have a proper, cross-party, long-term funding agreement for social care. The two Select Committees proposed a solution with a social care premium three years ago. Let us reactivate that. Giving councils that direct source of funding for social care will also release funding for other essential services. I say to the Minister: think of MPs here today arguing for extra funding as allies in the battle with the Treasury to get the money that councils need to fight the covid crisis, but to fight it in a way that does not produce extra cuts in essential council services already devastated by 10 years of austerity.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We will start with a time limit of four minutes.

3.46 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I echo many of the comments made by the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts): local government has done remarkable work to help our communities get through coronavirus, and I am thankful for the emergency financial support provided to councils by the Department. Stoke-on-Trent has received more than £16 million as part of this, and it is very welcome. Under the Conservative leadership of Councillor Abi Brown, the council has managed its finances very well—I know that other areas of the country have not had such responsible leadership—but we will still have costs locally that are not fully met by this emergency funding, and I am concerned about the implications of what might be required to meet these in-year pressures.

This is especially significant in areas such as Stoke-on-Trent that have higher levels of multiple deprivation and need. I know the Minister fully recognises these challenges and is well attuned to the further support necessary. Stoke-on-Trent is the 12th highest local authority in terms of the proportion of neighbourhoods in the most deprived 10%. The council tax base is indeed very low—the second lowest in the country, next to Hull—and while, in one sense, lower house prices can be an opportunity, they are a massive barrier when it comes to the viability of development and the ability to generate revenues locally.

It is crucial that the Government's agenda for business rates retention also be maintained. There are challenges in the city with the rising need for social care and children's services. While improving, children's services in Stoke-on-Trent are still inadequate. Initiatives to allow for nationally led financing reform are ever more needed. I know the Government are aware of that, and I hope we can find sensible and long-lasting solutions.

[Jack Brereton]

Stoke-on-Trent City Council and VAST, working with local voluntary organisations, quickly set up the Stoke-on-Trent covid support network. I have seen amazing work being done by organisations such as Bethel church in Longton and Temple Street Methodist church in Fenton. I again thank all our local volunteers and council officers for their work. Be they voluntary organisations or local businesses, many have been impacted. Bethel church, for example, receives much of its income from its charity shop on the Strand in Longton, which of course has had to close. The £10,000 grant it received has been a huge relief, as it has been for many. As I said yesterday in the debate on the economy, businesses in Stoke-on-Trent South are extremely grateful for the support put in place by the Government.

I would ask the Government, however, to look further at sectors such as ceramics, where many producers are dependent on retail and hospitality. After years of being left behind, cities such as Stoke-on-Trent are excited that the Government are committed to levelling up, and great strides are being made to demonstrate that the city council is a good and wise spender of funding awarded. The huge success of Ceramic Valley enterprise zone is an excellent example of this. However, as the Secretary of State and Ministers well know, we were incredibly disappointed not to have received funding following our future high streets fund bid or our proposal for a towns deal. Other areas have been lucky, securing multiple pots, but our high streets have been especially hard hit by coronavirus, and many were in a bad state already.

I am thankful that many local businesses are reopening, but it is essential for the communities I represent in Fenton, Longton and Mere that our high streets are supported to evolve and survive. Things must change, and more empty units must be converted into alternative commercial or residential uses. Viability issues in particular disincentivise local investment in many towns in the midlands and the north. A scheme to match fund conversions and building improvements would help to remove some of the barriers. However, this is not just about money, but about the reform of planning laws and making it easier for conversions to happen in towns like Longton and Fenton.

3.51 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It comes to something when the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee joins forces with my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, to ask for more money. It is perhaps not a surprise that his Committee would do that, but it is not something that the Public Accounts Committee does.

However, I echo everything my hon. Friend said. Given the time, I will not repeat it, but we know that local government is actually very efficient at spending money, so I reiterate what he said to the Minister about being on his side on this. We have seen the Treasury first offer all the money, and then massively backtrack, so we have been playing this game of chase with the permanent secretary to get information about exactly and precisely which elements of spending will be refunded as a result of covid-19. I urge the Minister to look at the

information that has been sent both jointly and separately to the two Committees and at what his permanent secretary has said to see whether he can push things a bit faster. We will be behind him in getting that detail from the Treasury, because we are very much on the same side on this.

In my role as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, let me say that we often look at where money is supposedly saved and efficiencies made, but the cost is often actually shunted to another part of the public sector. There is no more accurate description of that than when money is taken out of local government, because that shoves the cost somewhere else. If local government is doing its job properly and doing it well, that will often prevent further expenditure down the line by preventing problems that cost society, communities and the taxpayer a lot in the long term.

We know, given the current climate, that there is no long-term certainty over funding, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East said, and there is a gap of £1 billion on covid spending alone. There is real pressure right now. Budgets are being looked at and decisions are being made. A long time ago—25 years ago—I was a councillor making these very decisions about spending, and we would be looking now at cuts for the following year. That was under a Government of the same party as the Minister's, albeit a long time ago, so I will forgive him that if he can get the money from the Treasury now. The concern is that such decisions will be irreversible.

We are also seeing challenges to commercial funding, with Luton Borough Council being a bad example of a lot of money suddenly draining from a council budget because of Government policies that encouraged it to borrow more. The Public Accounts Committee has been looking at that and will be issuing a report next week. We have also seen new laws creating new burdens on local government. I have been quite vocal in my concerns about the Business and Planning Bill, which frees up licensing so much that it will cost councils a lot of money both to manage the licences and to manage the resulting antisocial behaviour, and it will cause problems for the police. Those budgets will be stretched on top of this gap in funding, which represents a 40% cut over the past decade for my council.

Local government is on the ground, it knows its communities, and it has been effective at delivery. It has been a crucial partner in delivering on covid responses, and yet councils are not getting the funding. Some estimates suggest that eight out of 10 councils have been looking at section 114 notices, and we know that several councils are technically bankrupt now. We need a clear answer from the Minister today. This is an estimates day debate, not just a general debate, and we are looking at the budget and we want clear answers. We campaigned to get this discussion so that we could get answers in this way.

We want to know about the timing of any financial settlement, but I appreciate that the Minister may not be able to announce the spending review. We need to know the split of funding on the issues that my hon. Friend has already raised and where there will be a shortfall on certain types of income, particularly around council tax. We need to know what the Government are planning for the loss of commercial income, because that can be devastating for some councils.

I add, in my final few seconds, that the £1 billion to remediate cladding will be nowhere near enough, and we need clarity for the many homeowners in really difficult situations as to how they will be supported to live their lives and how councils will be supported to fund that.

3.54 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): I welcome the support from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, a Department that has really come into its own for diligent evangelism during the pandemic. I pay tribute in particular to the Minister for his angelic support over this time, which for many of us has been very difficult. He will know that full well, and I am very grateful for his support helping with crematorium chapels.

The work of local government in Dorset has shown its true value during the pandemic, and I want to take this opportunity to ensure that Dorset is properly recognised and that the Government ensure that it has its fair share of funding and investment, which has not always been the case.

I start by paying tribute to Dorset Council. Under the leadership of Councillor Spencer Flower and chief executive Matthew Prosser, it has distributed thousands of grants totalling well over £100 million, which has been hugely supportive to our community. Prior to coronavirus, Dorset Council's budget performance was sound. MHCLG must ensure that the council is properly reimbursed for the costs of responding to the pandemic, but we also need to grasp the issues surrounding the escalating costs from things such as social care, which are not going away. The response to coronavirus is forecast to cause a budget gap of some £60 million this financial year for Dorset Council. As I have said, rural Dorset does not receive its fair share, nor has it done for some time. We need to make sure that sensible and diligent financial management is not used as an excuse to say that Dorset does not need support.

Equally, we have very proactive town councils in West Dorset, and I pay particular tribute to our mayors, town councillors and town clerks. Town councils come in all shapes and sizes, and I urge the Minister to ensure that our town councils hit hardest by coronavirus receive the financial support that they need, such as Lyme Regis. It has a permanent population of just under 3,800, but that jumps to 20,000 in a typical summer season. Lyme Regis Town Council provides extensive amenities for holidaymakers, and income from commercial and tourism activity is absolutely vital. The council needs additional support to weather the coronavirus storm, and I very much invite the Minister to consider that.

As I mentioned yesterday in the House, my experience of local enterprise partnerships, which are charged with directing investment priorities and stimulating growth, is that they have varying records of capability and success. As I did yesterday with the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, I urge this Minister to work closely with his BEIS colleagues to ensure that LEPs are delivering on their mandate. They are needed now more than ever. If they are not delivering, we need radical reform to ensure that the Government's agenda is delivered.

Finally, demand for social care has been increasing for years. Local authorities have too often not seen their budgets grow at a commensurate rate. It is my sincere hope that we may soon see an integrated system of health and social care, but I also think that the pandemic has demonstrated how we the public care for others in the community, just as we did in times past. Grassroots initiatives are flexible, kind and neighbourly, and we need to embrace them for the future. It is my hope that the importance of local government will be fully recognised by the Minister, and I very much hope he will support Dorset going forward.

3.59 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) on securing this debate today. I also congratulate him on his joint work with my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) on the Public Accounts Committee, of which I am a member. I want to focus today on the private rental sector, but before I do, I would like to urge the Government to ensure that the support they are providing to local authorities is sensitive to both the social and the regional inequalities that exist. Throughout the public health crisis, we have seen that, far from the virus being a great leveller, it has disproportionately impacted those with lower incomes, those experiencing insecure working conditions and, of course, those from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, as the Public Health England report has confirmed. The formulae for allocating covid funds should be weighted according to deprivation factors, reflecting the different needs of the populations served by councils. We know that housing and health are intrinsically linked, which is why I want to talk about housing today.

Members of the House will be aware of the Shelter poll published this week, and the shocking figures that it contains. The number of respondents who usually report being in arrears has doubled, and estimations based on the polling mean that roughly 220,000 people across the country are facing possible eviction. It is easy to see this as a consequence of the pandemic alone, but that would be short-sighted, because we have not discussed the whole picture. In November last year, Shelter briefed that the average percentage of income taken up by private renting was 41%: that is, 41% of those people's income is going purely to pay the rent. The New Economics Foundation has said that 1.2 million of the 5.6 million people at risk of losing their jobs live in private rented accommodation.

We can see the increased vulnerability of private renters in this week's polling from Shelter. A breakdown of those figures shows that people in blue-collar jobs are twice as likely to report being in rent arrears. Also, thanks to movements such as Black Lives Matter, we have been talking about the racial injustice of the pandemic, and housing and private renting are not immune to this. BAME people are twice as likely to face rent arrears as other renters. Importantly, I have seen a breakdown of Shelter's figures that suggests that those who have been furloughed are also more likely to experience problems. A 20% salary reduction will of course lead to the choice between eating and paying the rent.

We clearly have a structural problem where wages are too low and rents are too high, and covid-19 has made that situation even worse. I realise that it is not the role

[*Olivia Blake*]

of MHCLG, as a budget-setter, to raise wages, although many Labour councils, including Sheffield City Council, have implemented real living wages. Perhaps that is something the Ministry could look at funding. Whatever the limitations on the Ministry's ability to raise wages, however, there are solutions that can come from action taken. It can do something about the cost of rents. We know that 63% of renters have no savings; in fact, many have debts. One of the reasons that rents are so high is high demand. People cannot afford to get on to the housing ladder. We need more affordable housing, and local councils need the funds to be able to deliver that and the powers to hold developers to account. Coronavirus has exposed how precarious the housing situation is for so many people, but to build back better, we must provide proper funding for social housing and take action on housing crisis.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am afraid that I have to reduce the time limit to three minutes in order to give everyone a chance to speak.

4.3 pm

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), my colleague on the Select Committee, on securing this debate. I want to echo his sentiments by acknowledging how hard the local government staff in my constituency and around the country have worked during the coronavirus.

I want to talk briefly about two things. The first is the effect that this extra funding over the past few months has had on Eastleigh Borough Council in my constituency. Secondly, and more importantly, I want to talk about the dangerous clot that is rumbling in the local government funding situation and that is coming down the line, particularly because of the abuse of the leadership of my local authority in borrowing for commercial property rents.

I welcome, of course, the somewhat inevitable fact that the local government resource departmental expenditure limit has increased by 226% in the past year, and that spending power generally has gone up among local authorities. In Eastleigh, we have seen a total package over the last month of around £42.25 million, which I must say is very welcome in helping out my constituents. It is also welcome that so far the Government have announced more than £27 billion-worth of support for local authorities. It has made all the difference.

More important to me is the situation faced by my constituents in Eastleigh: the reckless decisions of the Lib Dem administration in Eastleigh and its lack of good governance compared with that shown by MHCLG Ministers. Over the past 10 years, the Liberal Democrat administration has decided to build a property portfolio that places the future viability of the local authority at risk, and proposes that it will eventually have to come to the Government for support.

To give some context, the annual budget of Eastleigh Borough Council is £31 million, but the council has borrowed more than £494 million to fund reckless spending decisions on commercial properties. The council owns the Ageas Bowl, where a really good cricket match is currently going on; the Hilton hotel; Travelodges; industrial sites; and offices. The chief executive has

himself admitted that if the economic downturn continues, the effect on commercial rents will place the council in an invidious position.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies lists Eastleigh as vulnerable in three areas. First, it is vulnerable in respect of interest and investment income as a proportion of revenue expenditure and the potential risks of commercial property income. At the behest of the council's leaders, every constituent of mine in Eastleigh has a debt of £4,500, equivalent to the amount that the council has in debt.

Eventually, the council will come to the Government to be bailed out. That is why I welcome the Government's decision in respect of the Public Works Loan Board, but there will be a situation wherein councils—Eastleigh being one of them—will have to come to the Government to be bailed out, and ultimately my constituents will suffer because of services being downgraded. That will also damage their confidence in not only local government but national Government as a whole.

4.6 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I pay tribute to the amazing work of councillors and council officials in St Albans City and District Council and Three Rivers District Council. They have worked evenings and weekends and moved heaven and earth to get payments out to businesses; sort out urgent housing repairs and hardship funds; sort out the homelessness situation—and much, much more. I also pay tribute to officials at Hertfordshire County Council, especially those in the public health team, as well as those working in schools and adult social care. They have really stepped up to the mark, but the future is by no means certain.

St Albans City and District Council has had a devastating loss of income, largely because it does not receive any revenue support grant, and so relies on fees and charges from other services. We have been in receipt of emergency grants from the Government, but they fall a long way short.

The Government know the situation with each individual council, because councils are sending in their returns to the Government. I wish to ask the Government to consider four things urgently. First, they should give councils more flexibility to borrow to fund their revenue budgets, and the Government should help with the repayment of the money in future years.

Secondly, there should be opportunities for cheaper borrowing, including from the Public Works Loan Board. If councils can borrow with lower interest rates, that will help to drive inward investment.

Thirdly, the Government should turbocharge the business rates review. The Government were due to start to take evidence in March; that has been understandably delayed, but it is now crucial that they get on with the job. The broken business rates system has been breaking our high streets for years and we need to fix it as soon as possible.

Fourthly, on cladding, I echo the comments from the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier). Having served on the Fire Safety Bill Committee, I know as the constituency MP for St Albans that there are homes in my constituency that are not safe. It is all very well for the Government to announce funds to insulate homes and make them warm, but homes need to be both warm and safe. We need billions of pounds

of investment to make sure that remediation works can happen—and happen soon—and to train up the fire safety assessors who can certify that homes are indeed safe.

Liberal Democrats believe that people should have control over their own lives and that decisions that affect their lives should be taken as close to them as possible—not by 10 Ministers sitting in a room in Westminster, but by local councillors who live around the corner and who can see with their own eyes the impact that a decision will have on their doorstep. That is why the Government must give councils the certainty, the resources and, crucially, the powers that they need so that decisions about the recovery of our communities are made by our communities.

4.9 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I am very aware that this is an estimates day debate, and I just want to briefly pick up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Paul Holmes) about borrowing and councils. I only wish we had £400,000-worth of borrowing: we are at £1.4 billion in Warrington, one of the highest levels in the UK. I hope we can come back and debate that further, because it is a real problem for local councils and local council tax payers that we have to address.

I wish to spend some time paying tribute to those in Warrington who have selflessly contributed to the local efforts to defeat covid-19. This is, after all, a debate on communities, and people make communities. It is a tremendously broad group of people who have stepped up and stepped out to help us. I met Paul and Helen from Bewsey at the weekend, who were out shopping for their 83-year-old neighbour: it was the first time they had spent time talking to him, having lived next door for three years. I am incredibly grateful for the work that people are doing in their communities to support one another.

Support workers at Warrington youth club have found new ways to engage with young people online during the lockdown. I also want to mention one particular young lady, an 11-year-old called Macy Owen from Grappenhall, ably assisted by her mum Lindsay and her dad Don, who has used her time off school to make bead rainbows. They have sold them on social media to raise funds to support the staff at Warrington Hospital. I looked just before I came into the Chamber and saw that they have now raised more than £7,000 for staff—a fantastic example of doing good in our community.

The message for us to stay at home has meant that we have been able to re-engage with those communities, with our local shops and services, and I thank those who have worked on the high street and those who continue to provide local services through parish and borough councils. MHCLG is at the heart of post-covid recovery. This three-month lockdown has slammed the brakes on economic activity on our high streets, and it is the high street in towns such as Warrington that needs more investment and regeneration than ever before. Reform of the planning regime, which makes it difficult for businesses to change the use of premises quickly, is urgently needed. I know that that is something the Minister and Secretary of State are looking at very closely.

There are also areas that we need to maintain in terms of planning reform. I want to send a special message to the Minister to ensure that we protect the green belt, which is fundamental in places such as Warrington to ensure that urban sprawl does not extend beyond the boundaries of the borough.

The Government, to their credit, have made incredible efforts in Warrington—in excess of £47 million to support local businesses and emergency funding for the local authority. We are incredibly grateful for the work that the Minister, the Secretary of State and the team at MHCLG have done.

4.12 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I would like to start, as others have, by praising our local authorities rather than burying them, as perhaps the Government would wish. In the last few months, we have seen an extraordinary effort, contrasting very favourably with the work of our national Government. We have seen real professionalism: we have seen them deliver, whether it be business grants or addressing business rates, and we have seen them delivering on the shielding programme as well. But of course, as we have heard, no other Department has faced the same scale of cuts as local authorities. After 10 years, £15 billion has been cut and now with coronavirus, we are seeing an £11 billion hit to those authorities, but the Government are providing them with only £3.2 billion. Contrast that with what the Government said on 16 March, which was “Whatever it takes, we will stand by you”. That does not seem to be the case, and that is really hurting the authorities.

I commend my local authority, Warwick District Council, for what it has done. It has been agile, it has been active and it has delivered, and I praise it publicly for what it has done. But the challenges are great in social care, as we have heard; youth services; women’s refuges; and the enforcement that is now required of those authorities in making sure that we meet the challenge of coronavirus.

I want to talk about housing, because there is no greater priority. We know that there is a huge amount of homelessness in the UK. We need to build social homes on a massive scale. We need to build 300,000 houses a year, and of those 150,000 need to be social rented properties. Last year, only 6,300 were built, and in my constituency only 21 council homes—social rent properties—have been built.

The Help to Buy scheme is costing Government £4 billion. The Government are also spending £23 billion a year on housing benefit and paying £8 billion to private landlords. That is why we need to get hold of the issue of social rent properties and what councils can actually deliver in that field.

The Government say they want to build, but they should start with rebuilding trust in our Government, and they can take a leaf out of the book of local government on how to deliver that. For 10 years, this Government and their predecessors have taken a wrecking ball to local authorities, but they have shown in the last few months what they can do and they are trusted by our public. We have seen that with covid-19, but we need to address issues such as knife crime and the issues among our social services.

[*Matt Western*]

Family, the Government told us that they could not address the issue of rough sleepers until 2027, but they have managed to do so in a matter of months. It is now time that they delivered elsewhere.

4.15 pm

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): I should start by drawing the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

We must reform local government finance. The formula grant system is unbalanced, outdated and unfair. It is a shame that we have delayed the review of local government finance, although that was for perfectly obvious reasons. But as well as reforming it, we must increase the quantum of funding, and I think this needs a grown-up conversation on localisation of revenue raising.

The current settlement is not ungenerous. Indeed, the increase in core spending power of 4.4%, which is £49.2 billion for local authorities, was the biggest in a decade. Milton Keynes received an increase of 6.6% in core spending power. This, of course, was all in February, before the world changed and before funding changed. Since then, £4.3 billion in support for councils has been issued by the Department for their additional pressures, for lost income and for the extra costs. The entire package for councils, businesses and communities comes to £27 billion. In my own local authority of Milton Keynes, we have received £137.6 million, which includes over £77 million for business rates relief.

Councils are our frontline. They deserve certainty and they deserve fairness. So it is very promising that the aforementioned review of local government finance is called the fairer funding review. This review should not, though, be an exercise in reslicing the cake. We need to level up local government finance—a phrase that I think may stick—but we also need to address the elephant in the room, which is social care. The rising costs of delivering social care are well known and recognised, but these costs are magnified by the unfairness of the current formula grant system.

We need to level up local government finance. We need to have a grown-up conversation about localised revenue raising. We need to increase the quantum. We need to remove the unfairness. We need to bake in a cross-party solution to social care. We need to deliver the fairer funding review.

4.18pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): My contribution to today's debate is on the eye-watering £1 billion spend by the Ministry on temporary accommodation. There are now 88,330 families trapped in temporary accommodation, including 128,340 children. These families have spent lockdown in hostels, warehouses and B&Bs, including 530 children who have been stuck in the latter for longer than the six-week legal limit. The scale of our housing crisis means that local authorities cannot even find temporary accommodation locally: 28% of families are sent far away from home, and away from friends, work and school. That is 24,430 households being moved from one borough to another, with local authorities playing chequers with people's lives.

But the question is not how many, but who, where and how far away. So I commend the extraordinary investigation by ITV's "Ross Kemp: Living with..." programme last Thursday, which revealed the detail behind these statistics and the impact that being sent across the country has on families' lives.

In the past two years, homeless families have moved 400,000 miles across the country, which is the equivalent of 16 times around the planet. Councils in every region are sending families hundreds of miles away from home. There is a statutory duty for households in temporary accommodation to be housed in their home borough, or as close to it as possible. There is also a statutory duty on local authorities to inform receiving councils when they send homeless families to their borough. That groundbreaking programme found at least 60 councils that had failed to do so. The leader of Basildon Council even stated that 58% of the time a family arrives in his borough his council is not notified. That means that in the past four years more than 700 children have arrived in Basildon from London, putting the most extraordinary pressure on schools, GPs and hospitals, but putting even more pressure on these individual families, who are cut off from the support and help that they need. When will the Government enforce the law that already exists?

4.21 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I was shocked to read in the evening *Echo* that, apparently, a new super council is to be created in Essex and that everybody had been told about it. I certainly had not heard anything about it, and I am one of the local Members of Parliament. Apparently, the leader of Essex County Council had a meeting with the chief executive of Southend-on-Sea Borough Council. They had a discussion but apparently she was not able to answer any questions. I am not surprised. There are many questions I would like to have answered, because this seems like a white elephant.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is a white elephant, but what is worse, it has been cooked up in private for two years by six council leaders—six chief executives. The Essex MPs are against it and did not know. So are all the back benchers on the six councils. The whole thing is a farce.

Sir David Amess: It is disgraceful. I want to know where this new super local authority would be and who would be running it. There are so many questions. We already have the police and crime commissioners, who are paid a bit more than Members of Parliament, with their layer of bureaucracy. The last thing I want is another layer of bureaucracy with this new super council and the break-up of Essex County Council. So I hope the Minister will reflect on what my right hon. Friend and I have said about this issue.

I want to praise Southend-on-Sea Borough Council's registry office and, in particular, the chief registrar, Nicole Rogerson, who has done a marvellous job, and I am delighted that Matthew and Louise will be getting married on 18 July at Porters lodge in Southend—well done to them.

I am getting lots of complaints about parking and speeding in Southend, and, extraordinarily, Southend council is not having any meetings at all to regulate

those things. I am not mad keen on cycling and I am sick to death of people riding their bikes on pavements, so I very much want the Government to do something about that issue. I love Old Leigh, where we have wonderful retail outlets, but to have another licensed bar there is totally unacceptable, and I hope the Minister will have a review of licensing laws.

On council tax, money is very tight. This year our council tax went up by 3.99%. I do not know whether the Government are thinking of a freeze next year, but it would be very welcome. I was delighted with the stamp duty changes announced yesterday, but in Southend we have a particular problem with leasehold properties in the Ekco Park development. I wonder whether the Minister will look at that issue. Homelessness is obviously a crisis in so many of our constituencies. I pay tribute to HARP and Off the Streets for all the work that they have done. Will the Minister commit to reviewing the guidance for social housing waiting lists, to ensure that those most in need are prioritised?

Many Members are fed up with illegal Traveller sites. We have had umpteen meetings with Ministers about this issue. The point has been reached where we really need some action.

Finally, I think we need to be cheered up. Next year the Duke of Edinburgh will be 100. The year after, Her Majesty the Queen will have been on the throne for 70 years. We need a city status competition, and what would give the nation greater pleasure than Southend being declared a city?

4.25 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is genuinely a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess).

I want to draw the House's attention to a very serious issue, which is fire safety in flats and shared housing following the Grenfell disaster. This is linked to the funding of councils such as Reading Borough Council in my area and Wokingham Borough Council, and the funding of fire services such as the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service.

I would like to start by paying tribute to the Grenfell families. It is utterly impossible to imagine what they have been through both on the night of the disaster and in the three years since that dreadful time. We all want to find a timely and effective response to the problem of removing dangerous cladding and to other fire risks, and progress has been made. Many local councils and some owners of private blocks have removed cladding. Temporary fire safety measures have also been taken, such as regular patrols at night by either residents or security staff. However, this problem is on a vast scale, and there are significant obstacles that make removing cladding very challenging.

It is sad and deeply worrying that most dangerous cladding remains in place three years after the disaster. That includes the type of cladding used in Grenfell and a range of other highly flammable materials, such as wooden cladding and laminate. All these materials are found in Reading town centre in my constituency, and there are deep concerns about a wide range of other buildings across the area. Fire services have real concerns that temporary measures may no longer be effective because they rely on human behaviour, and they are

seriously worried that human error will start to creep in and that measures such as patrols will lapse or cease to be fully effective.

I would like to draw the House's attention to some of the issues in my constituency, to illustrate the scale of the problem. We have a number of large blocks over six storeys high that have these types of cladding. We have difficulties in getting owners to remove the cladding because of the complexities of the process. There are also a huge number of blocks of under six storeys, with hundreds of people living in them across Reading and Woodley, and many thousands of houses in multiple occupation, which may be terraced houses or flats above chippies or other takeaway restaurants, where there could be serious fire safety risks. New resources are needed to inspect all these premises, and more powers are needed for local authority building control departments and fire services to take action to speed up this process. I urge the Minister to work with me and other colleagues to address this important matter, and I look forward to hearing from him.

4.28 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I thank the Ministry for everything it has done during the pandemic to support so many businesses and individuals in our communities. My constituency has a huge number of small businesses, and the district council has now paid out over £41 million to 3,638 businesses, which is a huge undertaking. North Devon boasts a stunning coastline and beautiful countryside, served by market towns whose high streets, like so many, have been transformed by the pandemic. Market towns such as Barnstaple rely on those working in town to pop out at lunch time for a sandwich or a quick bit of retail therapy. The move for so many to work from home, so many businesses remaining closed and tourists not being back in their normal numbers have meant that, while our shops are open, they are seeing less than 50% of the customers and takings they would expect at this time.

Barnstaple is currently working on its revised submission to the future high streets fund, which is another great initiative from the Ministry. A huge amount of work has gone into this locally from our economic development team in North Devon. I thank Sarah-Jane Mackenzie-Shapland, Dominic Dunbrook and the whole team led by Michael Titchford. However, in this fund application, Barnstaple, which has a population of just 31,000, is up against major towns—indeed, one could describe them as small cities—with populations that far exceed Barnstaple's, and their council resources swamp those of my hard-working district council team.

If Barnstaple is not successful, having already missed out on the towns fund because the structure of the town centre management does not match the required business improvement district, I fear that there will be no funding and our high street will continue with the rapid decline it has seen throughout this pandemic.

Moreover, if Barnstaple cannot secure funding, as the largest town in my constituency, what hope is there for Ilfracombe, the next largest, with a population of just 11,000, and listed as one of the 40 most deprived English seaside towns in the recent Radius Data Exchange report, "Turning the tide: seaside regeneration"? The report highlights the decades of under-investment in

[Selaine Saxby]

towns like Ilfracombe, and how solutions are available. However, without some funding to help smaller market and coastal towns, our levelling-up agenda will only stretch to major urban conurbations.

The situation is further exacerbated in areas like mine, where the district council is small and one of multiple layers of local decision making. This can make applying for and then implementing schemes designed to assist near impossible, given the limited local resource combined with multiple layers of local government, often with their own competing projects and visions. Indeed, the issues that I highlight are replicated across the south-west peninsula. To enable all of them to succeed, the entire region needs further consideration. We have repeatedly requested to become the “great south-west” and for Devon, Cornwall, Dorset and Somerset to be recognised as a single region so that we can work at a much greater scale in future.

4.31 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I first need to draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests as a serving councillor.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister would agree that the story of local government throughout this covid crisis, and for the past decade, has been one of extraordinary financial resilience. A number of Members have made reference to the NHS. We should ask ourselves whether the NHS could have managed a 60% reduction in the funding that it receives from central Government and still have seen the satisfaction of its users increase, as our local authorities have done over that period. How do we get more people into politics who come from business and professional backgrounds and who represent their communities? Clearly, if we look at the cabinets—the leadership—of our local authorities, that is exactly where we find those people. I pay particular tribute to my excellent colleague, Ray Puddifoot of Hillingdon Council, who has just entered his 21st year as leader of that authority, having spent a lifetime as a highly experienced and senior chartered accountant. He is one of the many local government people who have brought stability to the finances of our councils.

I want to pick up three issues that I invite my hon. Friend to consider and that I think this House needs to pay particular attention to. The first concerns housing and planning. We hear a good deal about the impact that our planning system has, but we need to recognise that more than half a million consented developments are as yet uncommenced. Local authorities are doing an outstanding job in ensuring that housing opportunity is moving through the system, yet, all over the country, developers are playing off different parts of the system. Perhaps it is time to consider simply abolishing the Planning Inspectorate and Secretary of State call-ins, making sure that the local authority’s decision is final so that developers know who they have to negotiate with, the decision is made, and they can get their spades and shovels in the ground to develop the houses that we need.

The second issue that I would like my hon. Friend to consider is social care, which has been touched on extensively. Many of our constituents are astounded to

discover that social care accounts for about 70% of all the money that our local authorities spend. Indeed, children’s social care is the only area of council spending to have increased, on average, in the past decade, yet it is a service that touches barely one in five of our constituents. We need to make sure that we have a financial solution that opens this up to the widest possible group of people to get their support.

Finally, I would ask us to learn lessons from what we have done with delayed discharges, where we need to see that local authorities and the NHS work together. Local authorities brought about a massive improvement in delayed discharges; the NHS strolled. We know where the opportunity lies.

4.34 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) for securing this important debate. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), who as ever, on this and many other issues, talks extremely good sense.

I want to start with a couple of thank yous and then move on to some Island-specific points. First, I thank the Isle of Wight Council and all its staff for their exceptional work in looking after Islanders during this dreadful pandemic. On behalf of Islanders, I thank John Metcalfe and Wendy Perera and all their teams, and council leader Dave Stewart and his senior team, Councillors Stuart Hutchinson and Wayne Whittle. I mention those people because it is important to give recognition where recognition is due.

I also thank the Government. I understand that local government has now received £4.3 billion from the Government. In the Isle of Wight, we have received about £105 million. That has gone through largely to our local businesses, and some has gone to the council. We are keen to try to keep the final £8 million for reasons that, in the next 120 seconds, I will briefly outline.

I was going to talk about housing, which, as the Minister knows, is a big issue on the Island. However, because he is here and the Housing Minister is not, I will talk about the Island deal, which, as he knows, is in six areas. I am delighted to say that we are already getting a better deal on the Island. We got £100 million of extra capital investment last year—£48 million in the NHS to drive forward reform, some great pilot schemes, and about £46 million for Ryde railway pier and Ryde railway—so we are getting there.

There are six other areas that I would like to talk about—but not now; I am only going to do one now. Those include NHS provision; unavoidably small hospitals have different economies of scale from significant hospitals, in the district general hospital model, that have the required or approved number of users. We also have agricultural issues, transport issues and, as I say, housing issues.

However, on local government funding specifically, I say to the Minister and his officials—I know they are working up some options, which I am delighted about—that any support for the Island must consider the additional costs of providing public services on an island. It is academically proven, beyond reasonable doubt, that it costs more to provide public services on an island—in

isolated communities—than elsewhere. There is no serious debate about the additional costs. None of this will set a precedent, because the Isle of Wight is the only island of any significant size in the local government structure in England and Wales. There is no precedent being set at all.

We have an ambitious council. I very much hope that it is going to buy a critical site in East Cowes this evening as part of a jobs hub and jobs investment programme, and I look forward to that. However, when I meet the Minister and his officials to talk about the Island deal, can we please do so understanding that there will be no precedent being set? There are additional costs of providing public services on an island, which sadly have not been recognised in the past half-century.

4.37 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for opening today's debate, which has certainly been wide-ranging and informative in terms of scrutinising MHCLG policy. I want to use my speech to touch on three areas of policy and spending, relating mainly to the shared prosperity fund, the stronger towns fund and, latterly, homelessness.

Yesterday was a set-piece day on which the Chancellor came forward and made some big spending commitments, some of which I certainly welcome. However, as always with this Government, they are very good at announcements but less so on the delivery and the detail. There is perhaps no greater example of that than the much-vaunted UK shared prosperity fund, details of which have been conspicuous by their absence, to say the least.

The reality is that we face the very real prospect of crashing out of the European Union at the turn of the year, and still no meaningful details have been outlined about the future of funding for our communities. As a member of the European Union, the UK received structural funding worth about £2.1 billion per year. Scotland itself has benefited from billions in European structural fund money since joining the EU in 1973. These funds have been used to support getting people into work and out of poverty, improving their education and skills, and investing in our infrastructure and our communities. They have come from the regional development fund, which promotes balanced development across the EU, and the European social fund, which invests in employment-related projects.

Analysis from the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions estimates that the UK would have been entitled to approximately €13 billion of regional development funding in the 2021 to 2027 period if it had stayed in the EU. The same analysis shows that Scotland will lose over €840 million by 2027, with the highlands and islands alone losing €130 million. It is therefore urgent that the UK Government outline what the shared prosperity fund will look like, how it will operate, the level of funding it will manage and whether that funding will be allocated. It is essential that the fund is no less in real terms than the EU funding it replaces. I hope when he sums up that the Minister will be able to update us on the future of the shared prosperity fund, because communities cannot be left in the dark any longer.

I want to touch on the stronger towns fund, which I raised with the Secretary of State in the last round of departmental questions. As I reminded him then, back

when there were considerably more Scottish Conservatives in the House, his predecessor, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) was keen to inform them that Scotland could benefit from this stronger towns funding. However, again, details have been slow in coming forward. The stronger towns fund needs to be clarified and expanded and made fair for all parts of the UK.

The £1.6 billion fund ring-fences £1 billion for England and makes the other £0.6 billion available for bidding directly from local authorities. In doing so, the fund bypasses the Barnett formula entirely; it relies on the £0.6 billion that is biddable to negate the fact that there is no dedicated funding for devolved nations and therefore there are no direct Barnett consequential for the £1 billion to be spent in England. Is this yet another example of Whitehall short-changing Scotland or will the Minister finally outline Scotland's share of the stronger towns fund today? I am always quite struck by the number of Members in this House who can stand up and say how much money they are getting for their constituencies from stronger towns funding, but in Scotland we are no clearer.

I want to finish on a topic that impacts on every town and city the length and breadth of the British Isles, which is homelessness. Despite the insistence of the previous Tory Government that cash injections would not solve rough sleeping, the coronavirus pandemic has shown that if there is a political will, there is a way.

In March, the Government announced £3.2 million emergency funding for local authorities to provide accommodation services to enable rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping to self-isolate during the covid-19 outbreak. By May, a total of 14,610 people in England who were sleeping rough or were at risk of sleeping rough had been provided with emergency accommodation. Impressively, 90% of homeless people known to councils at the beginning of the pandemic have now been offered accommodation. That is obviously wonderful, but it needs to be taken on after the pandemic. We should be offering the homeless a place to stay not just to avoid the transmission of covid, but to end rough sleeping as an objective in itself. I hope that the Minister can offer some thoughts about how the Government plan to keep up this genuinely good work and ensure that one positive legacy from covid is that we support the homeless and make sure that we are looking after the most vulnerable in our society.

4.42 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): I thank everyone in the Chamber for their contributions, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) who introduced the debate, and my hon. Friends the Members for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake), for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and for Reading East (Matt Rodda).

Everyone has recognised the fantastic contribution of local councils and it is well deserved praise. Local councils have stood up to the challenge. They have continued to provide and support social care for elderly and disabled people under very difficult circumstances, have found accommodation for 90% of rough sleepers

[Kate Hollern]

at extremely short notice, have administered more than £10 billion in business rates relief in grants for local businesses and co-ordinated support for people in vulnerable groups who have been shielding.

The response has been all the more impressive because local government has seen unprecedented levels of funding cuts over the last decade. It is interesting to hear Members talking about the last two years. I was a councillor for 20 years. In the last decade, under the current Government, local government has lost £51 billion. Just think about that—£51 billion in a decade. As a consequence, people have lost their jobs—street cleaners, park attendants, librarians, key workers, social workers, youth workers—and services have been lost at a great level. Councils are now facing a very difficult decision, because the key workers that we have clapped and cheered over the past few weeks could be at risk of losing their jobs, unless the Government keep their promise.

The Government have devolved responsibility for key elements of social care spending, such as crisis grants, the independent living fund and council tax. Councils are the mechanism that holds communities together. My local council—Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council—has done an absolutely amazing job. The council leader, Mohammed Khan, has been totally committed to keeping stability in the town, keeping people safe and delivering the services they need. But Blackburn with Darwen has lost 30% of its funding in a decade—the second highest figure in the north-west, beaten only by Liverpool.

Blackburn with Darwen has lost £51.7 million, and I am ashamed that we can sit here cheering councils and saying what a fantastic job they have done, while totally ignoring the cuts they have had over the last 10 years. The council has done everything in its power to support people through this pandemic. We have seen more than 30,000 food parcels, 3,500 vulnerable people supported and £40 million issued in business grants, all of which has helped Blackburn with Darwen through a difficult time. I would also like to recognise the 1,700 volunteers in my constituency, who have proudly played their part in helping vulnerable people through.

It has been quite clear that the Government's stuttering over national decisions has placed even more burdens on local councils. As has been widely publicised, there were shortages of PPE, particularly in care homes. I have spoken to many care homes in my constituency that were at their wits' end because they could not get the equipment they needed to keep their residents safe. Of course, it was councils that stepped in when the Government failed. The Government just acted too slowly. As a consequence, people lost their lives.

The school voucher scheme—another area where councils had to step in—was riddled with problems. Parents and children were left abandoned when the Government failed, and councils stepped in, giving children the food they needed. It is shameful that the Government extended the scheme only after a premier league footballer campaigned on the issue. Maybe what we need, rather than proper debate, are glossy headlines to make the Government move.

Test and track is an absolute joke—[*Interruption.*] I am sorry, but it is. Local directors have been given no information—

The Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mr Simon Clarke): Not true.

Kate Hollern: I can actually prove it, Minister. They have been given no information or have been given information too late to implement any changes. As for the app, I am sure we will see it some day.

All of this has been a recipe for disaster, but councils have kept their promises, because they are committed to serving their residents. Yet again, councils will be given no comfort in this estimates debate today. How long must council services—those on the frontline in our hard-hit communities—be treated as Cinderella services? On 16 March, the Secretary of State told councils that the Government stood ready to do whatever was necessary to support them in their response to coronavirus. By 4 May, he was back-peddalling on that pledge, and he gave a grim warning:

“We would not want anyone to labour under a false impression that what they are doing is guaranteed to be funded by central Government.”

Interestingly, the Chancellor said the exact opposite yesterday. He says they agreed “Whatever it takes”. Perhaps we again have an example of a headline not being a true reflection of what is happening in debates.

It is true that the Government have provided councils with funding of £3.7 billion in three tranches to meet the costs of the crisis. The first was mainly for adult social care and was allotted on the basis of relative need. However, the second was allocated on a per capita basis and did not take into account deprivation, despite the mortality rate from the virus in the most deprived areas being more than double that in the least deprived areas. As a result, the funding for metropolitan councils in deprived areas was substantially lower in the second tranche, whereas the allocation for many Conservative-controlled shire councils miraculously increased. Funding for Surrey rose by 32%, whereas that for Liverpool fell by the same percentage—so much for the promise of levelling up.

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council received a little over £9 million, yet it has been well publicised that, with the anticipated loss of income, the council could face a deficit double the size by the end of the financial year. In March, April and May, councils lost £470 million in business rates and £506 million in council tax as businesses were forced to close and people lost their jobs.

Councils across the country are already making cuts in services and will inevitably be looking at serving section 114 notices. Last week, the Secretary of State announced just £500 million in further funding for councils and a yet-to-be-worked-out sum for loss of income, fees and charges. I say “yet-to-be-worked-out”, because once again, there is no detail.

I recognise that time has marched on. I just ask the Minister to urge the Secretary of State to live up to his promise and, perhaps if that does not work, we can get the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) to get the Prime Minister's adviser to make a difference.

4.51 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mr Simon Clarke): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) on securing today's debate and I thank hon. Members

across the House for their contributions. I entirely echo the tributes that have been paid to the hard work and sacrifice of local government officials and elected representatives around the country. It is a good chance to pay tribute to the frontline workers—the carers, the teachers, the mortuary staff, the social workers, the emergency planners, the refuse collectors and so many others who have done their utmost to make sure that our society continues to function at such a difficult time. Every tier of local government has come together to rise to the enormous challenges that covid-19 has created.

Time is very short, so I will be brief. From the outset of covid-19, the Government have said that we would ensure that councils have the resources that they need. We have already delivered a multibillion-pound infusion of support. Last week, we announced a further comprehensive package of support with several important components. First, we are providing a further £500 million of funding to cover additional local authority spending pressures. That means that since the crisis began, the total unring-fenced grant funding that has been provided to local authorities for their spending pressures now stands at £3.7 billion, and that is without including the £600 million that we provided for care homes to relieve the strain on social care services.

We have particularly asked councils to prioritise some core aspects of their work. The hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who chairs the Public Accounts Committee, pressed me for detail on this, and those are: adult social care, children's services, public health services, fire and rescue services, household waste services, shielding the clinically vulnerable, homelessness and rough sleeping, domestic abuse and managing excess mortality. I am very happy to provide any further clarity that would be helpful—

Meg Hillier *rose*—

Mr Clarke: As time is extremely tight, I had better make progress.

We have provided in total almost £28 billion to local councils, businesses and communities to help to support them through the virus. That includes £300 million for the new test and trace service. Unlike the hon. Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern), who spoke for the Opposition, I will not talk that down. I think it is making immense strides. I pay huge tribute to the work of Tom Riordan, the chief executive of Labour-controlled Leeds City Council, who has done a fantastic job in helping us to bring that tool together.

The second element of our comprehensive package is a specific mechanism to address councils' income losses. It includes a co-payment scheme to cover irrecoverable losses from sales, fees and charges income in financial year 2020-21. That includes such things as car parking fees or revenue from cultural assets. The hon. Lady said that it is not defined, but it is not defined precisely to enable flexing according to the extent of those losses as they crystallise, so it is capable of being as generous as is required to meet the eventual losses that we face.

Through that co-payment scheme, the Government will cover 75% of losses beyond the first 5% of planned income. This will help to address the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) alluded to. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Secretary

of State has committed to extending from one year to three years the period over which councils can manage shortfalls and local tax income relating to this year, as was specifically requested by the LGA.

The Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee referred to leisure centres. We are working with the Treasury and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on this issue. We recognise its complexities and I can assure him that we are very serious about tackling it. In the autumn spending review, the Government will agree an apportionment of irrecoverable council tax and business rate losses between central and local government for 2020 and 2021.

Taken together, the support offered here will safeguard a range of essential public services, from social care to public health, shielding the vulnerable and now helping to safely reopen our economy and wider society. There will always be scope for specific, bespoke discussions with individual councils that find themselves in difficulty. The shadow Minister referred to Luton Council and its airport. I can assure her that we are very aware of that issue and continue to work closely with them.

On the wider work we are doing, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor gave an excellent statement yesterday underscoring our commitment to saving jobs and boosting growth. Clearly, levelling up is a massive responsibility that the Government are intensely serious about. We heard several colleagues refer to the £3.6 billion towns fund, including the future high streets fund. Be that Barnstaple or Warrington, we want to make sure these funds are paid out quickly and help to make a real difference and deliver for our society. That comes on top of the £5 billion stimulus from the accelerated getting building fund that the Prime Minister announced last week.

We also want to work closely with council leaders from all political parties in delivering our ambitious devolution agenda. This is appropriate, given the hon. Members for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) and their role in this, as we have the parliamentary order coming up next week to unlock £900 million of investment for the Sheffield city region, which is great. We have also negotiated the £1.1 billion of investment for West Yorkshire announced in the Budget. With West Yorkshire's new Mayor in place, 41% of residents in England and 63% in the north of England will be served by directly elected city region Mayors.

I heard the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), and I look forward to meeting them to discuss the situation in Essex, but I can assure them that we will not be pressing ahead with proposals that do not command popular consent. That is always at the forefront of our mind.

On the comments from the SNP Front Bench, I can also confirm that we will publish our White Paper on devolution and local recovery in the autumn, which will address issues concerning the UK shared prosperity fund, which I should point out is our money, top-sliced and sent back to us by the EU. None the less, we will provide detail on that. Clearly, it is very important and the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linde) can rest assured that we are working hard to work out how we can safely allocate that money, but we made a

[Mr Simon Clarke]

commitment in our manifesto at the general election that no parts of the UK would receive less from the shared prosperity fund than they currently do under EU structural funds.

I am conscious that time is very tight, so I will conclude by pointing out that levelling up is not specific to the north and the midlands of England. I had good talks with my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) and we continue to look at his island deal. The whole country—all the nations and regions of the United Kingdom—should look forward to our work on levelling up. We are committed to making it happen and making it happen soon.

4.58 pm

Mr Betts: I thank the Minister for his comments, although I still think there are issues to be worked through. My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), the Chair of the PAC, raised a point about clarity. We still need that clarity from the Government. I would still like it on the record, too, that the £3.7 billion will not be reduced by the commitment to cover 75% of income losses. That needs to be clear. [Interruption.] The Minister is nodding, which is very helpful.

Finally, I want to pick up on the shared prosperity fund. No area should get less than it gets now, but no area should get less than it would have got under the new arrangements that would have come into place if we had remained in the EU. That is a very important point for South Yorkshire, and I hope that the Minister will consider it.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

5 pm

The Deputy Speaker put the deferred Questions (Standing Order No. 54).

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2021, for expenditure by the Department for Education:

- (1) further resources, not exceeding £33,747,284,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 293 of Session 2019–21,
- (2) further resources, not exceeding £16,006,682,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
- (3) a further sum, not exceeding £50,339,978,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

HM REVENUE AND CUSTOMS

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2021, for expenditure by HM Revenue and Customs:

- (1) further resources, not exceeding £61,844,066,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 293 of Session 2019–21,
- (2) further resources, not exceeding £227,474,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
- (3) a further sum, not exceeding £61,860,408,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2021, for expenditure by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy:

- (1) further resources, not exceeding £28,238,529,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 293 of Session 2019–21,
- (2) further resources, not exceeding £8,707,662,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
- (3) a further sum, not exceeding £23,687,553,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

DEPARTMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Resolved,

That

(1) for the year ending with 31 March 2021, for expenditure by the Department for International Development:

- (a) further resources, not exceeding £3,706,011,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 293 of Session 2019–21,
- (b) further resources, not exceeding £2,258,300,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
- (c) a further sum, not exceeding £6,179,917,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament; and

(2) for the year ending with 31 March 2021, for expenditure by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office:

- (a) further resources, not exceeding £1,633,176,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 293 of Session 2019–21,
- (b) further resources, not exceeding £51,513,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
- (c) a further sum, not exceeding £1,699,106,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

MINISTRY OF HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Resolved,

That for the year ending with 31 March 2021, for expenditure by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government:

- (1) further resources, not exceeding £24,454,372,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 293 of Session 2019–21,
- (2) further resources, not exceeding £7,922,389,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
- (3) a further sum, not exceeding £22,567,364,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

The Deputy Speaker then put the Questions on the outstanding Estimate (Standing Order No. 55).

MAIN ESTIMATES 2020-21

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2021:

- (1) further resources, not exceeding £297,834,462,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 288, HC 290, HC 293, HC 297, HC 303, HC 326 and HC 328 of Session 2019–21,
- (2) further resources, not exceeding £28,473,592,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £281,696,026,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Jesse Norman.*)

Ordered, That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolutions relating to Main Estimates 2020-2021;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Steve Barclay, Jesse Norman, John Glen and Kemi Badenoch bring in the Bill.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (MAIN ESTIMATES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading

Jesse Norman accordingly presented a Bill to authorise the use of resources for the years ending with 31 March 2020 and 31 March 2021; to authorise the issue of sums out of the Consolidated Fund for those years; and to appropriate the supply authorised by this Act for the year ending with 31 March 2020.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 13 July, and to be printed (Bill 159).

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 3 to 6 together.

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

COMPETITION

That the draft Enterprise Act 2002 (EU Foreign Direct Investment) (Modifications) Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 8 June, be approved.

That the Enterprise Act 2002 (Specification of Additional Section 58 Consideration) Order 2020 (S.I., 2020, No. 627), dated 22 June 2020, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22 June, be approved.

NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

That the draft NHS Counter Fraud Authority (Establishment, Constitution, and Staff and Other Transfer Provisions) (Amendment) Order 2020, which was laid before this House on 11 June, be approved.

PREVENTION AND SUPPRESSION OF TERRORISM

That the draft Port Examination Codes of Practice and National Security Determinations Guidance Regulations 2020, which were laid before this House on 8 June, be approved.—(*Tom Pursglove.*)

Question put and agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I will not suspend the House, because we are near the end of proceedings and I trust Members who are here this afternoon to leave in an orderly fashion 2 metres apart.

PETITION

Establishment of a Food Standards Commission

5.4 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. It has been quite some time since I cleared a room that fast.

I am grateful for the opportunity to present this petition. A great many of my constituents have been in touch with me and are genuinely concerned about the post-Brexit future for food standards, which are clearly on the chopping block for this Tory Government. I therefore rise to present the petition on behalf of my east end constituents who wish to see the establishment of a food standards commission.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the establishment of a Food Standards Commission to monitor any trade deals involving food and drink products and to protect UK welfare standards and value our farmers and growers who produce in Scotland and the wider UK.

Following is the full text of the Petition:

[The Petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the UK Government has not put proper safeguards in place to protect food standards post the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union; notes that the Government has rejected cross party amendments to the Agricultural Bill that aimed to protect standards of imports and ensure that any imports would not be able to undercut UK producers; further notes that leaving the European Union without a deal on 31 December 2020 will mean trading on World Trade Organisation (WTO) terms, and that the most favoured nation status will mean that the UK cannot prevent the import of hormone injected beef or chlorinated chicken from the US; further notes that the consumer group Which? has stated that a US trade deal poses the biggest risk to food standards since the BSE crisis and notes that the current deals struck by the EU provide the necessary protections; further declares that an extension to the transition period would create a short term protection against low standard imports, and that a Food Standards Commission with the remit of ensuring quality and welfare standards of food and drink imports in any trade deals could provide longer term protections for our farmers and growers in Scotland and the wider UK.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the establishment of a Food Standards Commission to monitor any trade deals involving food and drink products and to protect UK welfare standards and value our farmers and growers who produce in Scotland and the wider UK.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002588]

RAF Croughton Expansion: Diplomatic Implications

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

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), I should remind all Members—although I perceive that there are no other Members seeking to take part in this debate, but in case anyone should—that the matter of criminal charges against Anne Sacoolas is sub judice under the terms of this House’s resolution. Therefore, reference should not be made to the detail of the alleged offences or the other aspects of the case. I thank the right hon. Member for her courtesy in consulting the Speaker’s office in advance of her debate, and I remind any other Member who seeks to participate in the debate to be equally mindful of the sub judice resolution and matters still before the court.

5.6 pm

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting this important Adjournment debate today.

RAF Croughton, based in my constituency, was built in 1938 and is home to a United States air force communications station. For many decades, RAF Croughton’s strong links to our local community have been clear. It has regularly held community events and many children of base employees attend local schools. American citizens working at the base have become neighbours and friends of my constituents. In 2015, I was made aware of a US plan to consolidate some of its UK military and communications operations. RAF Croughton was earmarked for expansion, and the then Secretary of State for Defence wrote to me on 8 January 2015, saying:

“approximately 1300 of the 1900 US Service personnel leaving RAF Alconbury and RAF Molesworth are expected to transfer to Croughton, with all the benefits to the local economy at Croughton this should bring.”

As the local MP, I was given a helpful tour of RAF Croughton and its plans to build new facilities, including housing, a school and a new health centre for its staff. I was pleased to support its proposals and its need for temporary direct access for HGVs from the A43, which is a fast-moving dual carriageway that runs through my constituency. However, four years on, and before any of those plans got under way, on 27 August 2019 my 19-year-old constituent Harry Dunn tragically died when a car driven by an American citizen from the base hit his motorbike head-on, because she was unintentionally driving on the wrong side of the road. A few weeks later, she returned to the USA claiming diplomatic immunity. She has since been charged by the Crown Prosecution Service, and our Home Office has made a request to the US for her extradition to face charges and provide some closure for Harry’s family. This has been denied.

Harry’s mother Charlotte, his father Tim, their whole family and a local network of friends remain in shock and are devastated by their loss. Charlotte asked me to share her words with the House:

“Then on 27th August 2019, I got the worst possible news any parent could get, that no parent should ever receive. I lost my gorgeous 19-year-old son Harry. He was doing what he loved best, riding his motorcycle. As he was approaching RAF Croughton, about 3 miles from where we live, riding perfectly safely, he was struck by a car being driven on the wrong side of the road.

He died an unimaginably slow, painful, agonising and distressing death, having landed on the verge by the side of the road and broken just about every bone in his body. By the time I got to hospital it was too late. He had already passed and I didn’t get to say goodbye to him or to comfort him. That will tear me apart for the rest of my life. I did however promise him that I would get him justice and as his mother I will not let him down.

I know there is nothing I can do to turn the clock back. I won’t see his happy face again walking through the door, get a hug or a text.

Harry was a wonderful young man with all of his life ahead of him.”

Those are very moving words. The fact is, Madam Deputy Speaker, that if you or I unintentionally killed someone by driving on the wrong side of the road, we would face the UK judicial system, one of the best in the world, designed to deliver justice to victims and fairness to perpetrators.

At a recent meeting with senior representatives of RAF Croughton and the US embassy, they made clear to me their deep sense of sympathy and sorrow for Harry’s family and friends. Nevertheless, we are just not making any progress in achieving justice and closure for Harry. It is now six months from the day that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary put in the request for extradition and almost a year that Harry’s family and friends have been trying to deal with their unimaginable loss.

Let me turn now to the point of my Adjournment debate. May I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, on behalf of Harry’s family, for permitting the debate? There have recently been planning applications submitted to South Northamptonshire Council on behalf of RAF Croughton, presumably to begin the work on its expansion. One of the applications is to change the entrance to the base—the point at which American citizens leave or arrive by car. It proposes to keep its entrance on a quiet B road. It is not proposing to move the entrance to the A43, which is a busy road with a central reservation that would ensure that all vehicles leave and arrive on the correct side of the road. But speaking frankly, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is unthinkable under the circumstances that any planning applications from the base can be treated as business as usual between two long-standing allies. Many constituents, and other people right across the country and even from the United States itself, have written to me to say, “So if I, or a member of my family, am driving or walking near the base and an American citizen accidentally harms or kills us, that person can simply go back to the United States and there is nothing that the UK can do about it, even though the United States of America is our greatest ally and one half of a special relationship.” It is utterly intolerable.

I have discussed this issue at length with the leader of South Northamptonshire Council. He has taken every possible step to ensure improvements to signage and road markings near the base in order to prevent any other tragedy in the future. He quite rightly points out that our local council is permitted to take only a planning decision based on planning law. However, he has also pointed out to me that, whereas the powers of a local planning authority are limited, the Secretary of State is able to call in any applications under the rules that are permitted on applications that

“could have significant effects beyond their immediate locality; give rise to substantial regional or national controversy...or may involve the interests of national security or of foreign Governments.”

In my view and in the view of many residents of South Northamptonshire, it is essential that the Secretary of State calls in all planning applications that could leave my constituents vulnerable to future tragedies.

When Harry’s parents, Charlotte and Tim, came to see me for the first time, in October 2019, it was an emotional meeting, and I assured them that I would do everything possible to achieve justice for Harry and to ensure that the tragedy that happened to their family will not happen to another. Since then, I have worked with my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary, the Home Secretary, the Attorney General, the Health Secretary and the Transport Secretary, as well as the Crown Prosecution Service, the police and crime commissioner for Northamptonshire, the US embassy and the base commander at RAF Croughton. At every stage, the focus has been on achieving justice for Harry and making sure that this tragedy is never repeated. And yet, I am sorry to say, despite all the local efforts to improve signage, the efforts at the base to improve driver training, and the efforts of Northamptonshire police to enforce and follow up all incidents in recent months, we continue to see near misses. Just last week, two young men recorded a car travelling towards them on their side of the road, just near the base. Who knows if this was another American citizen forgetting to drive on the left? Is it not terrible that so many of my constituents are now fearful of the base?

I know that my colleagues in Government share my desire for justice to be done and to prevent any repeat of this terrible tragedy. It seems to me that for any potential expansion or changes to be agreed at RAF Croughton, we need our greatest allies, the United States of America, to demonstrate their empathy for this devastated family by allowing justice to be done for Harry. RAF Croughton is a key part of the 501st combat support wing, whose vision includes the phrase, “Focused on strong communities where families thrive”. If they do not live their vision, they cannot expect the residents of Brackley, Croughton and the surrounding villages to support the prospect of hundreds more US citizens moving to the base.

I have three requests of the Government. First, they should make it very clear to the US Government that they, as our key ally, should not be denying justice to Harry’s family, and that we will never accept this treatment of a UK citizen. Secondly, any expansion at RAF Croughton should not be permitted while this issue remains unresolved. The Secretary of State should call in every application from the base to consider it from a national perspective, as well as to protect UK citizens from future tragedies. Thirdly, the Secretary of State should consider requiring the base to move its access point to the A43, which has a central reservation. That would ensure that RAF Croughton’s personnel drive on the correct side of the road, which could prevent tragedies like the death of Harry Dunn from happening again.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Luke Hall): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) on securing this debate and bringing it to the House, and on raising

this issue as she has. I pay tribute to her for her constant and consistent work to support the family of Harry Dunn and the whole community across Croughton and the surrounding towns and villages. This is clearly a hugely emotive issue, as she illustrated clearly with the passionate and powerful quote from Harry Dunn’s parents. I pay tribute also to the people of Croughton for the determined way they have raised this matter and highlighted their concerns about an issue that is important to the whole community.

I hope my right hon. Friend understands that I am unable to comment on any of the events surrounding the tragic death of Harry Dunn, because it is subject to a judicial review, but I am able to address the concerns about expansion at RAF Croughton and road safety. I should also state on the record that the Secretary of State uses his call-in powers for planning applications very selectively. Each case that comes before him is decided on the basis of the individual facts, and I cannot this evening provide a judgment on where or whether he is likely to exercise his powers in the cases we are discussing. As an application may come before the Secretary of State at some stage, I must be careful not to prejudice the process. However, I will use this opportunity to update my right hon. Friend and the House on the status of the current planning proposals for RAF Croughton and set out where the Government may have a role in the process.

I will be clear from the start that there are no plans to increase the number of personnel on site at RAF Croughton. The decisions taken under the previous US Administration in 2015 have now been reversed. The previous proposals, set out in a written statement at the time and described in the letter to my right hon. Friend, stated a desire to expand the base substantially in order to incorporate the building of a new joint intelligence analysis centre, which was anticipated to increase the number of staff on the base by over 1,200, as my right hon. Friend described. The plans were later placed on hold and have subsequently been reversed.

Consequently, there are no plans for the US to expand personnel at RAF Croughton. The number of personnel at the base has not increased since that original written statement and the letter she received, and there are no plans for such expansion. Any new US proposals to expand at RAF Croughton would require the agreement of the UK Government, and we would of course engage with my right hon. Friend in her role as the constituency Member of Parliament. There are two proposals to update some infrastructure on the site, including upgrading the main gate and renewing technical equipment within the current base perimeter, both of which the US has stated it deems necessary, regardless of the future strategic plans for the base.

Let me take each proposal in turn. The first is to upgrade communications equipment at the base. South Northamptonshire Council has received a full application from the Ministry of Defence for the construction of two fixed-antenna satellite communications earth terminals, including foundations, the construction of two new radomes, including foundations, and the installation of new security system components. The US authorities consider that the existing antenna and radomes on the base are no longer supportable and exceed the standard 15 to 20-year lifespan. They have stated that the proposed replacement is required to maintain their communications capabilities at RAF Croughton. South Northamptonshire

[Luke Hall]

Council received this application only recently and—I checked this morning—it has a target date of 12 August for its determination.

The second proposal is, as was described, a new entrance on to the B4031 and is currently at a much earlier stage in the process. At this stage, there is not yet a planning application, but the proposal itself includes the development of a main gate comprising four new buildings, a visitor centre, a large vehicle inspection site, and a commercial vehicle inspection building, guardhouse and overwatch. It also includes utilities, limited parking provision at each of the four new buildings, and roads linking the control entry points at the B4031 to the new buildings. It includes security features, including fencing, CCTV additional lighting, and some junction alterations to the B4031. The proposed new entrance will be an additional installation and has been described by the Ministry of Defence as a mechanism to ensure that the base can continue to meet US security standards, while also addressing the queuing capacity for vehicles.

When the new entrance is completed, I understand that the current entrance would become emergency-only access, which would be used only when required. I also understand that the design has been amended to enhance road safety features at the request of numerous local stakeholders, and that the base recently took part in several Zoom calls with the local parish councils, first with Croughton parish council on 8 June and subsequently with Evenley parish council on 15 June, to talk through the early initial proposals.

My right hon. Friend is aware that there is a request for a screening opinion, which has been made to the council, and the purpose of that screening is to decide whether the proposal will require a full environmental impact assessment. If it does, the assessment will provide detailed information about a range of matters to inform the subsequent planning application, including—crucially to the safety of my right hon. Friend's constituents—safety and road safety in the area. The council was due to decide that on or by 15 July, which is next Wednesday, so that decision will be made shortly. To ensure that the proposal receives the unbiased and impartial treatment that it requires through the planning system, it is reasonable to give the council the discretion to continue to follow due process and to form its own independent view on whether that environmental impact assessment is required.

If no environmental impact assessment is included after that point, my right hon. Friend can write to the Secretary of State, should she wish, setting out the case against the verdict and requesting that he issue a screening direction in order that he gives due consideration to making that assessment a requirement. If a substantive decision on a planning application has not been issued by a council, there is the opportunity for the Secretary of State, as has been alluded to, to intervene by calling in that application for decision. Should any requests be received by the Secretary of State from my right hon. Friend, they would be considered in the usual way, based on consideration of the facts before him at the time. I certainly reassure my right hon. Friend that

whether that application, if it is forthcoming, is decided by the Secretary of State or by the local planning authority, all the planning considerations, including those on road safety, will apply regardless of who it is determined by.

I just want to take a moment to reflect on some of the road safety issues that I know are very close to the heart of my right hon. Friend and her constituents. It has already been acknowledged that the council has put in place some improvements in response to the collision. Driver training safety programmes have been expanded and the additional signage has been put in place. I also understand that the Secretary of State for Transport has instigated a safety review of the roads around the 10 US visiting forces bases in England in association with Highways England and the respective local authorities, including, in this case, South Northamptonshire Council.

Officials from across Whitehall will continue to work in conjunction with the US, RAF Croughton and the community to address the extremely important outstanding concerns that have been expressed. I know that, as part of the planning process, my right hon. Friend and the community she represents will be looking carefully and closely at the proposal that is currently submitted and at any forthcoming proposals to assess the impact they could have on road safety and all the other measures.

I would also like to reassure my right hon. Friend and the community in Croughton that the safety of our highways road network is a key part of our planning system. Planning decision makers at all levels of the process can and do take the safety evidence into account when reaching their decisions. For example, our national planning policy framework states that planning permission may be refused when there is an unacceptable impact on highway safety. Of course, that applies whether the decision is taken by the Secretary of State or by the local planning authority. We are certainly confident that the concerns of local people and any evidence of risks will be fully taken into account in the consideration of any current or future planning applications.

I completely understand how sensitive, emotive and important this issue is for such a large number of my right hon. Friend's constituents. It is a hugely emotive matter and we are certainly determined, as I know she is, to make every effort to find a way through to the right resolution. I know how passionately and strongly the community feels about this issue. Although the previous US proposals sought to increase substantially the personnel situated at RAF Croughton, the reversal of those plans means that the numbers of staff present will not increase in the way that was previously suggested.

I am always happy to discuss the planning system with my right hon. Friend, and I hope that I have helped to reassure her and the community in Croughton that the proposed expansion will not take place. I look forward to working with her and colleagues to answer any questions about this hugely important matter in the coming weeks and months.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 9 July 2020

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Companies House Targets

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): My right hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Climate Change and Corporate Responsibility) Lord Callanan has today made the following statement:

I have set Companies House the following targets for the year 2020-21:

Public Targets

Digital services will be available for a minimum of 99.9% of the time.

97% of companies on the register will have an up to date confirmation statement.

We will manage expenditure set out within budgetary limits.

We will be in the top quartile of public service organisations for customer satisfaction.

We will maintain the proportion of external applications from underrepresented groups.

We will withdraw the paper channel for reminders by the end of March 2021.

[HCWS350]

Contingencies Fund Advance: Vaccines Programme

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): I hereby give notice of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's intention to seek an advance from the contingencies fund totalling £3,360,000 to enable expenditure on the covid-19 vaccines programme to be spent ahead of the passage of the Supply and Appropriation Act.

The funding is urgently required for HM Government to secure manufacturing capability for a possible antibody treatment.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £3,360,000 for this new expenditure will be sought in a main estimate for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £3,360,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the contingencies fund.

The cash advances will be repaid upon receiving Royal Assent on the Supply and Appropriation Bill.

[HCWS354]

Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects

The Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth (Kwasi Quarteng): This statement concerns an application made by Norfolk Boreas Ltd for development consent for the installation, operation and maintenance of the

proposed Norfolk Boreas offshore wind farm, their related offshore infrastructure off the coast of Norfolk and their related onshore electrical connections within this county.

Under section 98(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the examining authority must complete its examination of an application by the end of the period of six months beginning with the day after the start day of the examination unless the Secretary of State sets a new deadline under section 98(4) of that Act. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it.

A request has been made by the Planning Inspectorate to extend the examination period—for five months—for the proposed Norfolk Boreas offshore wind farm development. The reasons given for this request were:

due to Government guidelines in relation to coronavirus ("covid-19") several hearings needed to be cancelled, potentially resulting in interested parties not being given a fair opportunity to participate in the examination;

a number of interested parties no longer had the capacity to participate in the examination process as a result of covid-19 resource prioritisation.

Taking these reasons into account and, after careful consideration, the Secretary of State has decided to reset the statutory timescale for the examination as requested. This means that the examination period is now extended to 12 October 2020.

As a consequence, the date for receipt of the examining authority's report to BEIS is extended to 12 January 2021 and the statutory deadline for the Secretary of State's decision is extended to 12 April 2021.

However, mindful of the need to avoid unnecessary delays to the development consent process, the Secretary of State requests the examining authority to make best efforts to complete the examination process as soon as is reasonably practicable within the extended period. He has requested that a new timetable for the examination should be published which demonstrates the actions to be taken to complete the examination as quickly as possible in this period. He also expects the examination authority to provide his Department with regular updates on progress.

The decision to set the new deadlines for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS349]

Industrial Development Act 1982: Coronavirus-related Assistance

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Alok Sharma): I am tabling this statement for the benefit of Hon. and Right Hon. Members to bring to their attention spend under the Industrial Development Act 1982. In addition to the obligation to report on spend under the Industrial Development Act annually, the Coronavirus Act 2020 created a new quarterly reporting requirement for spend which has been designated as addressing the effects of coronavirus. This statement is intended to fulfil that purpose.

This report reflects the first quarter of 2020, covering the period from the introduction of the Coronavirus Act 2020 on 25 March 2020 to 31 March 2020.

Spend under the Coronavirus Act 2020

Under the Coronavirus Act 2020, there is a requirement to lay before Parliament details of the amount of coronavirus-related designated assistance provided in each relevant quarter.

In the period to 31 March 2020 (from the Act's introduction on 25 March 2020 to 31 March 2020) 983 loans worth £90.5 million were committed for covid-related purposes by lenders accredited to deliver the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme. Under this scheme, BEIS through the British Business Bank provides an 80% guarantee. The contingent liability incurred was therefore £72.4 million. The actual expenditure to 31 March 2020 was zero.

Actual expenditure of assistance provided by the Secretary of State from 25 March 2020 to 31 March 2020 = £0

All expenditure of assistance provided by the Secretary of State from 25 March 2020 to 31 March 2020 = £0

Contingent liability of assistance provided by the Secretary of State from 25 March 2020 to 31 March 2020 = £72.4 million

All contingent liability of assistance provided by the Secretary of State from 25 March 2020 to 31 March 2020 = £72.4 million

[HCWS351]

TREASURY

Covid-19 Antigen Tests: Tax and National Insurance

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):

The Government are introducing an income tax exemption and national insurance (NICs) disregard to ensure that coronavirus antigen testing provided to employees outside the Government's national testing scheme will not attract tax and NICs liabilities.

The Government recognise the importance of covid-19 testing. Currently, regular tests are available through the Government testing programme to a wide range of employees, including NHS workers. If an individual is tested through the Government testing programme, no tax liability will arise.

Under normal rules, the provision of a test by an employer to an employee, either directly or by purchasing tests that are carried out by a third party, would constitute a benefit in kind, and the cost of providing the test would be subject to income tax and class 1A NICs as a result. However, the Government will introduce an exemption to ensure that no tax liabilities arise.

This exemption will ensure that income tax and NICs will not be due on employer-provided antigen tests carried out during the current tax year 2020-21.

[HCWS352]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Health Transformation Programme Update

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work

(Justin Tomlinson): I would like to update the House on the Department's plans and progress, under the health transformation programme, to reform assessment services for employment and support allowance, universal credit and personal independence payment (PIP). Owing to covid-19, we have had to review our commercial approach and our revised approach is set out below.

There is no change to our ambition: the Government remain committed to developing a transformed service that will support those with disabilities and health conditions, through:

- the creation of a single, integrated health assessment service;
- a single digital platform developed by DWP;
- developing this new service on a small scale in a defined part of the country, by creating a transformation area, which would be a safe environment to test, adapt and learn from new ideas and processes.

These measures will make a real difference to the millions of claimants who use our services.

We had previously announced that we would be undertaking a procurement exercise to establish contracts for conducting work and capability assessments (WCA) and PIP health assessments from 1 August 2021. The impact of covid-19 means it is not possible to launch that procurement at this time.

We recognise that it is vital for our claimants to have a safe and stable service. Consequently, my Department intends to explore options to extend the current contracts for up to two years, which will ensure continuity of services when the current contracts end on 31 July 2021. We will continue to review these extensions to ensure we only extend for the time we need to effectively respond to the consequences of covid-19.

The extension period will provide time to fully understand and evaluate the impacts of covid-19 on these critical services, ahead of future procurements.

We recognise that there are positive lessons to be learned from our experience of delivering our services during covid-19, and the changes we introduced. We are reviewing these and they will inform future delivery, where appropriate. We expect these to be reflected in our wider transformation plans, including the forthcoming Green Paper and subsequent policy decisions regarding the delivery of health assessments.

A key objective of the health transformation programme is to improve the trust and transparency in the assessment process. We remain focused on improving the claimant experience and we will continue to work with stakeholders to ensure their insights and experiences are incorporated into the development of the new single, integrated health assessment service and to ensure we are delivering the high quality service claimants rightly expect and deserve.

[HCWS353]

Petition

Thursday 9 July 2020

OBSERVATIONS

CABINET OFFICE

Extension of the Brexit transition period

The Petition of residents of the constituency of North Ayrshire & Arran,

Declares that the current covid-19 pandemic should be the primary focus of the Government at this time rather than the withdrawal talks with the European Union; notes that the Office for Budget Responsibility has forecast that the covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown could shrink the UK economy by 35% and that unemployment could rise by two million; further notes that the International Monetary Fund has stated that the crisis “dwarfs the losses that triggered the global financial crisis”, and that it is “very likely that this year the global economy will experience its worst recession since the Great Depression”; further notes that the Brexit transition timetable requires agreements to be reached with the European Union by 30 June; declares that the prospect of a “No Deal Brexit” remains and that this poses additional challenges to businesses already facing significant economic challenges posed by the covid-19 pandemic; and further declares that any decision to stick to the current timetable, given the huge economic challenges posed by the covid-19 pandemic, will have a devastating impact on people’s livelihoods, prosperity and the national good.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to seek an immediate extension to the Brexit transition period to avoid further unnecessary and severe economic harm to Scotland the entire UK.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Patricia Gibson, *Official Report*, 24 June 2020, Vol. 677, c. 1420.]

[P002584]

Observations from the Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt):

The transition period ends on 31 December 2020, as enshrined in UK law. The Government will not be extending the transition period.

An extension would bind us into future EU legislation, without us having any say in designing it. We would continue to have to make large payments to the EU. We need to be able to design our own rules, in our best interests, to manage our response to coronavirus—without the constraints of following EU rules.

Clearly, as the EU looks to deal with the impacts of coronavirus on the 27 member states, they will need to propose all kinds of new legislation which will obviously be designed for the 27, rather than being tailored in a way to suit the interests of the UK. We would still have to make payments into the EU budget during an extension to the transition period, instead of making that money available for our own recovery on the basis of what we decide is needed.

We left the EU on 31 January on the basis of a deal—the withdrawal agreement. The issue that now faces both us and the EU is what kind of trading relationship, and other forms of co-operation, we will have in future.

At the high-level meeting on Monday 15 June the Prime Minister and the three EU leaders took stock of progress, and they recognised the UK’s decision not to request an extension to the transition period.

They agreed that new momentum was required, and they supported the chief negotiators’ plans to intensify talks in July and create the most conducive conditions for concluding and ratifying a deal before the end of 2020.

They agreed to work hard to deliver a relationship that works for all UK and EU citizens, and confirmed their commitment to the full and timely implementation of the withdrawal agreement.

We need to conclude this negotiation in good time to enable people and businesses to have certainty about the trading terms that will follow the end of the transition period at the end of this year, and, if necessary, to allow ratification of any agreements reached.

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 9 July 2020

EDUCATION

Education Settings: Autumn Opening

The following is an extract from the statement on Education Settings: Autumn Opening by the Secretary of State for Education on 2 July 2020

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, but I would be grateful if he could set out the financial support that will be provided to further education and sixth-form colleges such as East Coast College in my constituency. That is vital, particularly to coastal towns, if we are not to let down a whole generation.

Gavin Williamson: As I am sure my hon. Friend will be aware, over the last year we have seen lots of additional support going into the college sector, including an increase of **£450 million** for this financial year in the basic level of money that every college gets, plus the £1.5 billion that is going into capital funding in the college sector,

£200 million of which has been brought forward into this financial year. We will continue to work closely with the college sector—both further education colleges and sixth forms—on what additional support we can give it as we move into the next phase of dealing with this global pandemic and ensuring that every child is able to catch up.

[Official Report, 2 July 2020, Vol. 678, c. 552.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Education:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous).

The correct response should have been:

Gavin Williamson: As I am sure my hon. Friend will be aware, over the last year we have seen lots of additional support going into the college sector, including an increase of **£400 million** for this financial year in the basic level of money that every college gets, plus the £1.5 billion that is going into capital funding in the college sector, £200 million of which has been brought forward into this financial year. We will continue to work closely with the college sector—both further education colleges and sixth forms—on what additional support we can give it as we move into the next phase of dealing with this global pandemic and ensuring that every child is able to catch up.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 9 July 2020

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ATTORNEY GENERAL	1107	DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	1095
Belly Mujinga	1110	Broadband Delivery	1098
Burglary: Prosecution Rates	1112	Covid-19: Creative Industries and Freelancers	1101
Contempt of Court: Media Reporting	1108	Cultural Sector: Reopening	1100
Crown Prosecution Service: Case Backlog	1107	Rural Gigabit Connectivity Programme	1099
Crown Prosecution Service: Covid-19	1109	Topical Questions	1104
Domestic Abuse Prosecutions	1111	Tourism Sector: Reopening	1095
Human Rights Act 1998	1112	Voluntary and Community Sector: Covid-19	1096
Support for Law Firms: Covid-19	1114	Youth Projects.....	1103
Unduly Lenient Sentence Scheme	1113		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 9 July 2020

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL		TREASURY	39WS
STRATEGY	37WS	Covid-19 Antigen Tests: Tax and National	
Companies House Targets.....	37WS	Insurance	39WS
Contingencies Fund Advance: Vaccines			
Programme	37WS		
Energy Infrastructure Planning Projects	37WS		
Industrial Development Act 1982:		WORK AND PENSIONS	40WS
Coronavirus-related Assistance	38WS	Health Transformation Programme Update.....	40WS

PETITION

Thursday 9 July 2020

	<i>Col. No.</i>	<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	7P	
Extension of the Brexit transition period	7P	

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Thursday 9 July 2020

	<i>Col. No.</i>
EDUCATION	5MC
Education Settings: Autumn Opening	5MC

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**not later than
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CONTENTS

Thursday 9 July 2020

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1095] [see index inside back page]

*Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport
Attorney General*

Bahrain: Prisoners Under Sentence of Death [Col. 1115]

Answer to urgent question—(James Cleverly)

Business of the House [Col. 1127]

Statement—(Mr Rees-Mogg)

Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review [Col. 1147]

Statement—(Nadine Dorries)

Estimates Day (2nd allotted day)

Official Development Assistance [Col. 1166]

MHCLG: Departmental Spending [Col. 1201]

Estimates agreed [Col. 1225]

Petition [Col. 1228]

RAF Croughton Expansion: Diplomatic Implications [Col. 1229]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Written Statements [Col. 37WS]

Petition [Col. 7P]

Ministerial Correction [Col. 5MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
