

Monday
7 September 2020

Volume 679
No. 95



HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 7 September 2020

House of Commons

Monday 7 September 2020

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Virtual participation in proceedings commenced (Order, 2 September).

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

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Free Speech: Universities

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure free speech in universities. [905489]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): We are all shocked and saddened to learn of the incident in which a young person was seriously hurt on their way to school in Suffolk today. Our thoughts are very much with the young person, their family and the whole school community at this difficult time.

Free speech is a fundamental underpinning of Britain's liberal democracy, and universities should always do as much as possible to champion it, ensuring that students, staff and visiting speakers are free to explore a range of ideas and challenge perceived wisdom. We are exploring a range of legislative and non-legislative options to ensure that this is the case.

Felicity Buchan: If universities are not prepared to enforce free speech, is my right hon. Friend prepared to legislate to ensure they do?

Gavin Williamson: Many of us take free speech as an absolute given and expect it to be an absolute given in every part of this country, and if legislation is required, that is what we will do. But it is not just at universities that we sometimes see a challenge to free speech. Conservative Members understand the importance of free speech, whether in universities or a free press, and that is why we will always be the ones who stand up for a free press so that people can enjoy their newspapers every single day.

University Student Numbers

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What steps the Government is taking to support universities accepting higher numbers of domestic students as a result of the recent policy change on predicted A-level grades. [905490]

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): What steps the Government is taking to support universities accepting higher numbers of domestic students as a result of the change in policy on predicted A-level grades. [905503]

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help universities increase the number of places available to students in 2020-21. [905512]

The Minister for Universities (Michelle Donelan): We are working across government and closely with the higher education sector, utilising the higher education taskforce I have created, to ensure that the vast majority of students who want to go to university this year can do so at the university their grades unlock.

Mr Sharma [V]: Universities need financial support to expand physical buildings and facilities and to fund the expansion of wellbeing and support services and other important areas of university life. Will the Secretary of State confirm that this additional support will be granted to ensure that his algorithm does not cost thousands of students their futures, and when will he do this?

Michelle Donelan: Last week in fact, we announced a £10 million capital fund to cover capital as well as equipment. This is on top of our announcement for additional funding to support high-cost subjects and the announcements we made in May for the sustainability of the sector and is supported by the package of £280 million from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Mr Dhesi: In a recent National Union of Students survey, 55% of students reported that the income of their parents or those who provided financial support to them had been negatively impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, and 80% were worried about how they would cope financially, not to mention since part-time jobs will be in short supply. Given that the university hardship funds were not designed for such demand, what extra provision will the Government make to ensure that universities can properly support students facing hardship?

Michelle Donelan: If a student is not already accessing the maximum loan and the income of their parents or carers has changed, they should fill in a change of income form with the Student Loans Company. On the hardship funds, we have worked with the Office for Students so that they can show more flexibility, and this will amount to £256 million for the coming academic year.

Holly Mumby-Croft: My constituent, Hannah Moat, is one of the top high-jump athletes in the UK and was on track to study psychology and criminology at Loughborough University. Unfortunately, owing to a clerical error that someone made when inputting her centre-assessed grade, she has so far been denied her place on that course. Will the Minister work with me to make sure that students such as Hannah who have been affected by administrative errors made by their schools will not be denied their place at university?

Michelle Donelan: I am really sorry to hear about the problems that Hannah is experiencing. The exam boards have committed to turning around appeals quickly, and Hannah and her school should inform the university of the situation. I have agreed with all universities that all students, including those successful on appeal, with the required grades will be offered a place at their first-choice university and that deferred places will be offered only as a last resort. Specific admissions cases are the responsibility of individual institutions, but I will alert Loughborough to this case.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I share the serious concerns of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies that the annual mass migration of millions of students to university means that significant outbreaks of covid-19 are “highly likely”. Universities have worked hard to make campuses covid secure, but the Department must take responsibility and ownership of this crisis and recognise that most students live, work and socialise outside the campuses. When will universities and communities receive the updated guidance on safe reopening promised in a DFE press release late on Friday night? What additional testing capacity is being deployed to keep staff, students and communities safe, and will the Minister make a statement this week on the safe reopening of universities?

Michelle Donelan: SAGE did indeed publish its updated guidance on Friday, and the Government will issue updated guidance this week that supplements our original guidance of months ago. The safety and wellbeing of university staff and students is always our priority. As SAGE pointed out, there is also evidence that physical and mental health will be impacted if universities do not open. Universities have worked hard to ensure that they are well prepared for covid and have prioritised safety and wellbeing, including by introducing numerous social distancing and covid-secure measures.

School Exercise: Covid-19

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to prioritise access to exercise in schools as part of catch-up education as covid-19 restrictions are eased. [905491]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): The return to school is an important opportunity to support pupils to increase their physical activity. The Department’s guidance includes information on how schools can provide physical education and opportunities for pupils to be active, including links to detailed advice from the subject organisations.

Alison McGovern: I think that is a disappointing answer because we know that, going into this crisis, councils were already having to deal with the fact that they had had £42 million cut from their sports budget, which has a knock-on impact on schools. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to put on record what he personally is going to do to increase funding support to make sure our kids are physically active at school?

Gavin Williamson: It was a Conservative Government who introduced the sports premium, and it is a Conservative Government who are ensuring that £320 million is going out to schools so they can ensure that youngsters

have the kind of activity they want to see. Returning to school, yes, is incredibly important for the learning that all children benefit from, but it is also about the physical health they will get from being back at school. We are backing this with that money and ensuring there are great sports activities in all schools right across the country.

Home Education: Grades/Covid-19

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to allocate grades to home-educated students who were unable to take public examinations as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [905492]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Exams will be available in all GCSE, AS and A-level subjects in the autumn. Schools and colleges that accepted entries from private candidates, including home-educated students, in the summer should enter those who wish to sit an exam, and there should be no financial barriers to doing so.

Mark Pawsey: I thank the Minister for his reply, but I want to raise with him the issue of my constituent Ella Hampson, a year 10 home-educated student. She was due to take several GCSEs a year early, but the decision to withdraw private candidates meant that, unlike her friends and her peers, she was not given estimated grades on GCSE day. That caused a delay, and she has not been able to move on to college in the way that she had hoped. In any event, she has been told by her exam centre that she needs to be 16 on 31 August, so is not eligible for the autumn examinations as she is only 15. What advice can the Minister give Ella about how to get the grades to recognise the work she has done this year?

Nick Gibb: Private candidates who were entered for the summer series or where the school intended to enter them for the summer are eligible to enter the autumn series. The candidate’s age is actually not relevant. We expect the school or college that enters students for the summer series to enter them for the autumn.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Robert Halfon—and welcome back.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Many thousands of private candidates, including mature students and those undertaking resits, have been left without a grade under this year’s exam arrangements and unable to progress to the next stage of their education or employment. Will the Minister ensure that UCAS predicted grades are confirmed for all external candidates, provide them—just to confirm—with the option to sit autumn exams free of charge, ensure that the highest grade of the UCAS result and autumn resit will be awarded, and urge universities to honour their offers for a September 2021 start date? Will he allow those external candidates who have received a centre-assessed grade to appeal their results?

Nick Gibb: My right hon. Friend raises some important points. Of course, as my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities said, universities are being flexible on entry to universities this year. Schools, colleges and further education colleges are able to provide additional support to students sitting their exams in the autumn if they have the capacity to do so. Schools can also now use

their pupil premium funding to support these pupils. The autumn exams are an important backstop to the summer grade process, and we are helping schools to offer them to students by assisting with additional space and invigilators, where required.

Further Education College Finances

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of further education college finances. [905493]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): Colleges are facing financial uncertainty as a result of covid-19, and many face reductions in commercial income and uncertainty with apprenticeship starts. We have a team, including skilled finance professionals, who are working closely to support colleges, and we are also working with banks to ensure access to commercial lending where required. Since April, only five colleges have needed to access emergency funding.

Gill Furniss: Further education colleges provide lifelong learning, and they will be essential if we are to provide the levelling up agenda that the Prime Minister speaks so fondly of. However, coronavirus has left many with a black hole in their funding. We understand that it could be as much as £2 billion, and at the moment we are facing unprecedented demand. I fear that the Government do not understand the value of further education to the economy and the new skills we require in this country. FE colleges are flexible and adaptable, and they can help many young people who have been let down by this Government during the fiasco of the GCSE and A-level results. Will the Minister confirm today that she will look into this and provide the necessary funding, which, according to the Sixth Form Colleges Association, should be £4,760 per year for 16 to 17-year-olds and 18 year olds?

Gillian Keegan: Let me assure the hon. Lady that we absolutely have FE colleges at the very heart and centre. We are planning a big reform of the sector, and as somebody who went to FE college myself from the age of 16, I am absolutely passionate about this area. The colleges have done an amazing job in responding to covid-19 to support students throughout coronavirus. We continue to pay the grant funding and monthly payments for 2019-20, and will do so for 2020-21. We have also provided catch-up funding of £96 million for small group tutoring for those disadvantaged students who need it. On top of that, we have allocated £200 million to enable FE colleges to improve their buildings. We have a team of officials right now working with every college that needs that support. We are working with 40, and so far only five have needed financial assistance, but we will keep this under review.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Government's own commissioner for further education has warned that as many as 40 colleges are currently at risk of running out of cash, and despite the measures that the Minister has just spoken of, the Association of Colleges is warning of a £2 billion cash shortfall. We also know from the May report that the Government have inadequate mechanisms for identifying colleges in crisis, so the truth is that all those measures that the Minister speaks about simply are not enough. We need far greater

action if we are going to see our colleges and their pupils and staff not being let down and left in financial crisis this autumn.

Gillian Keegan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Just so we are clear, we have provided grant funding to the FE sector, with more than £3 billion for a full year, and it gratefully received that. We have also announced an increase of funding of £400 million for 2020-21, an increase of 7% in overall funding. As he rightly said—and I said in answer to the earlier question—we are working with 40 colleges to structure their finances and helping them to get the advice and support they need. If they need emergency funding, as has been available, it will be available to them as well. We have a team of people working on this all the time, and the colleges accept that we are putting our arms around them to ensure that they get through this period.

Testing, Marking and Examination Systems

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make an assessment of the adequacy of testing, marking and examination systems. [905494]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Exams are the best and fairest way of judging students' performance. Following the difficulties experienced with awarding grades this summer, we are determined that exams should go ahead next year. We are working with Ofqual, the exams boards and other stakeholders to consider our approach to ensure that they are fair.

Mr Sheerman [V]: The Minister is the one permanent feature in the Department for Education—he has been there for 10 years—but surely he must admit that many families and students were hurt by the chaos and instability in his Department. It is no good trying to blame Ofqual and Ofsted; the responsibility lies in the instability and lack of firm leadership in his Department. What is he going to do about it?

Nick Gibb: When we were aware of the problems with the A-level results, we took swift action. Ofqual decided to move to centre-assessment grades and within 48 hours of that decision being taken the recalculated A-level grades were sent to all schools. The GCSE results on the new basis were also given to schools to enable them to give them to their students on the scheduled day, 20 August. The model used to ensure we were able to give students qualifications, notwithstanding the fact that we had to cancel exams because of the pandemic, was supported in a wide-ranging consultation by the regulator. It was supported by 89% of respondents, and a similar model was used in all four nations of the United Kingdom.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The fiasco surrounding last month's exam results caused huge distress to students, their parents and teachers, and chaos for universities and colleges. Now it turns out that the Secretary of State was repeatedly warned of the dangers of the system of calculated grades and the flawed standardisation methodology he adopted. He was warned by a former senior official of the Department, he was warned by the regulator and he was warned by what happened in Scotland. Why did he ignore those warnings?

Nick Gibb: Those warnings were not ignored. Every time we heard from people such as Cambridge Assessment, Jon Coles and others, we raised those issues with Ofqual. All the various challenges made by individuals were raised with Ofqual. We were assured by the regulator that overall the model was fair. We pressed Ofqual strongly on the appeals arrangements that would address any issues for individual students which arose as a result of the operation of the model. No model is as accurate as young people taking the exams themselves, but when the A-level results were published on 13 August it became clear that there were anomalies and injustices in the results that went beyond the anomalies we had been made of aware and for which we had put in place an enhanced appeal process. As I said earlier, swift action was taken to ensure that all young people got the just and fair results they deserve.

Adult Education: Unemployed People

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the number of unemployed people accessing adult education. [905495]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): We understand that ensuring adults can access the training they need is vitally important and more important than ever. Latest figures show that between August 2019 and April 2020 over 195,000 learners, out of a total of 1,624,000 further education learners over 19, benefited from support for the unemployed. We are supporting people by investing £1.34 billion in 2020-21 in adult education and we are investing £2.5 billion over the course of the Parliament in the National Skills Fund.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the Minister for her response. The Centre for Ageing Better highlights that the number of older workers on unemployment-related benefits more than doubled to over 600,000 in July. The Minister will know that the core adult education budget is still frozen in cash terms at last year's amount. Those who are recently unemployed or redundant and who want to access training or retraining to upskill often cannot afford it, or risk losing universal credit if they do so. She will, I am sure, not want that to sum up the Government's approach to lifelong learning, so will she meet me, Ruskin College and West Thames College to hear about the issues we are facing in Hounslow, an aviation community, and to give people hope so that they, too, can have the opportunity to move forward and get back into work?

Gillian Keegan: We are, of course, absolutely committed to helping everybody who may find themselves looking for a job during this period through no fault of their own, to have access to training at any age, at any stage. That is why the Chancellor set out his plan for jobs to give businesses confidence to retain, hire and get careers back on track. That includes £1.6 billion of scale-up employment training support and apprenticeships. We are investing in high-quality careers provision, incentivising employers to hire new apprentices, tripling the number of sector-based work academy placements and doubling the number of work coaches. We are also investing £2.5 billion, which will be available in April 2021. I am sure the colleges will be very much looking forward to that. We are working to make sure that everyone has

access to training. I am, of course, very happy to meet colleges and will be very happy to do so with the hon. Lady.

Early Years Providers: Covid-19

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure the financial stability of early years providers during the covid-19 outbreak. [905496]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): The Government will fund local authorities for our free childcare entitlements for the rest of this calendar year at the pre-covid levels of attendance, even if fewer children are present, so early years providers will continue to benefit from the £3.6 billion investment in the provision this financial year. We have also announced supplementary funding of up to £23 million for maintained nursery schools, which often care for higher numbers of disadvantaged pupils, and will continue to work with local authorities to monitor the sector.

Ms Buck: I thank the Minister for that answer, but last week research was published by the TUC showing that four out of 10 working mothers either did not have or could not rely on childcare to enable them to return to work. Of those, a quarter could not rely on having a nursery place. Given that there is already a £660 million gap in early years funding, what is the Minister doing to make sure that we do not see a further loss of early years providers in the coming months?

Vicky Ford: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Childcare is vital for working parents, which is why this Government introduced the 30-hour entitlement and why we are investing £3.6 billion in early years this year. Breakfast and after-school clubs are also able to open and schools should be working to resume this provision from the start of this term. We have updated our guidance for providers. Any parent who may be struggling to find early years provision should contact their local authority, but I hope the hon. Lady will join me in welcoming the funding for maintained nursery schools, including three in her constituency.¹

School Finances: Covid-19

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with school leaders on providing financial support for costs incurred during the covid-19 outbreak. [905497]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Ministers and officials have been in regular contact with representatives of schools and academy trusts on all aspects of the Government's covid response, including financial issues. Schools have been able to claim funds to meet certain additional costs and we are providing £1 billion in catch-up funding.

Chi Onwurah: Schools in Newcastle went back this week and teachers have spent the summer working incredibly hard to make them covid secure while dealing with the exams debacle. Sacred Heart school in my constituency tells me that it has had to alter classrooms; it has bought visors, face masks and sanitisers; and it

1. [Official Report, 14 September 2020, Vol. 680, c. 2MC.]

has had to increase cleaning rotas and produce online video guidance for every year group. This has cost tens of thousands of pounds, following years of budget cuts. The Minister cannot give them their summer back, but he can give them their money back. Will he do so?

Nick Gibb: I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to the headteachers, teachers and other staff up and down the country who have worked tirelessly to get their schools ready to welcome back students in a safe way from this September. Schools have been able to claim for unavoidable costs incurred between March and July caused by the pandemic that cannot be met from the school's existing resources—up to £75,000, depending on the size of the school. Core schools funding this year has risen by an additional £2.6 billion. That is part of a three-year settlement, which is the biggest funding boost in a decade. Although of course we keep these issues under review, our priority for additional funding has been to put the maximum possible into catch-up funding—some £1 billion—to schools to enable them to help young people to catch up on their lost education.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The Minister's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) is disappointing. It is extraordinary that back in July the Schools Minister told me that the Government did not consider it necessary for schools to make significant adaptations to their sites to enable them to welcome children back to school this autumn. That is not what headteachers are saying. They have told me that they are very concerned about the extra costs that schools are facing in relation to covid-19 for hand sanitisers, signage, barriers, cleaning and the support and teaching staff that they may need to cover covid-related absences. What steps will the Government take to ensure that all schools can be reimbursed for covid-related costs, and what would he say to those headteachers who are now openly saying that they are having to weigh up pupil safety against financial stability?

Nick Gibb: We have, as I said, announced a generous three-year settlement for schools. It is the best funding settlement in 10 years, with £14.4 billion over three years. Schools that are in financial difficulties can approach their local authority and the Education and Skills Funding Agency, which will provide support for schools that are experiencing difficulties, including the deployment of school resource management advisers. Schools and academies have £4 billion of cumulative reserves, and we expect those to be used first, but we keep this issue under review, and our regional teams are constantly monitoring whether schools are struggling to provide the hygiene and all the other measures that schools are putting in place right across the country.

School Safety: Covid-19

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure the safety of (a) pupils and (b) staff in schools as covid-19 lockdown restrictions are eased. [905498]

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure the safety of (a) pupils and (b) staff in schools as covid-19 lockdown restrictions are eased. [905499]

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): What steps he has taken to ensure that schools are safe for children as they return to the classroom following the covid-19 outbreak. [905515]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): We continue to do everything in our power to ensure that all children and staff can be back in the classroom safely. Our guidance is clear that if schools implement the actions set out in the system of controls in our guidance, they will effectively reduce risks in their schools and create an inherently safer environment for all to operate in.

Matt Western: I want to place on record my thanks for the professionalism and efforts of all our teachers and senior leadership teams across the country, who have done such an amazing job over the weeks; I am sure that that is echoed across the Chamber. However, just in the last week after the start of term, we have had 46 cases in schools across the UK and 86 cases in Scotland. A total of 158 schools already have cases. In a Suffolk school—I think it is in the Health Secretary's constituency—five teachers have tested positive, and the school has had to close. Is the Secretary of State confident that the Government have this under control?

Gavin Williamson: Very much so. I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the joint letter by the chief medical officers of England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland in which they pointed out that children are best served by being in school, but he is right to highlight the risks and challenges of children returning to school. That is why, at every stage, working right across the sector, we have put in place the strictest level of controls and a system of controls, in order to create a safe environment for not just the children and those who work in schools but the community as a whole.

Taiwo Owatemi: Last week marked the long-awaited return to schools for many students and young people across Coventry North West. However, this was a time marked by anxiety for parents, students and teachers about what school would look like during the pandemic. I have had a number of constituents contact me about being cramped into small spaces and a lack of support for students with pre-existing medical conditions that put them at greater risk of contracting and responding badly to coronavirus. What allowances or provisions have the Government given schools to keep students with pre-existing medical conditions safe, and will they stop passing the buck to schools and make face coverings compulsory in communal areas in secondary schools?

Gavin Williamson: At every stage—when we saw over 1.6 million children return to school before the summer holidays, and as we see the full return after the summer holidays—every precautionary measure that can be taken has been taken to ensure that the needs of children of all ages, including those who suffer disabilities, are properly catered for. If the hon. Lady would like to write to me about specific issues, I would be happy to look at them in detail.

Paul Howell: Getting our children back to school is critical. It is vital that there is not just safety in school but safety and capacity within school transport. I know from talking to local family coach operators such as

J&C Coaches in Newton Aycliffe that the environment for coach operators is particularly challenging. While the postponement of the implementation of the Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations for school transport provides some relief, it is still a sword hanging over coach operators and their future viability. If a longer-term viable option is not signposted, this could result in them withdrawing from the market, reducing capacity when precisely the opposite is needed. The current approach drives excessive costs for coach operators and, by extension, local authorities. While I endorse the need for accessible transport, can the Department work to make this more fit for purpose for school transport?

Gavin Williamson: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue and highlighting the concerns of his constituents and coach operators in his constituency. Dealing with the issue of children getting to school as schools fully return has been important. That is why the Department for Transport made over £10 million available to build capacity in local authorities, and that is why we made over £40 million available to local authorities to provide extra transport. The issue that he raises has been a concern for many MPs, and as a Member of Parliament in Staffordshire, I know that it is one we have highlighted with the Department for Transport. The DFT's decision to delay the implementation of these regulations was a positive move, but I will ask a Minister in that Department to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this further.

School Support: Increased Covid-19 Infection Areas

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support schools in areas with an increase in covid-19 infection levels. [905500]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): In local areas where restrictions have been implemented, we anticipate that schools will usually remain fully open to all. There may be exceptional circumstances in which some level of restriction to education or childcare is required in a local area. In those situations, local and national partners will carefully consider the most appropriate actions, with the aim of retaining as much face-to-face education as possible.

Bill Esterson: I presume that when the Secretary of State says "open to all", he does not mean people who have tested positive for covid.

There is a great deal of confusion among children, parents and our wonderful school staff about what the arrangements are in the event of a local lockdown or an isolated outbreak, and of course that extends to what the arrangements are for home learning. Will the Secretary of State please tell us where is the guarantee that all children who have to study from home will have access to broadband? Where is the guarantee that all staff will have the capacity to deliver home learning? Will he tell us what happened to the laptops that were promised months ago to enable that to happen?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman is probably aware that we distributed more than 200,000 laptops, as well as more than 40,000 internet router connections, for children from the most disadvantaged communities. They went to local authorities and multi-academy trusts—

[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman says, "They never arrived." I suggest that he takes it up with his local authority, to which they were sent directly.

The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the continuity of education. That is why, on 2 July, we outlined our expectations of what is required of schools in terms of the delivery of continuity of education. That is why we have made an investment of a further 150,000 laptops, which will be provided for communities that are not able to provide face-to-face teaching within schools. To be absolutely clear, schools will only ever be closed as an absolute last resort. We all understand, on both sides of this House, how important it is for children to be benefiting from being in school with their teachers and learning in the school environment.

Attainment Gap: Disadvantaged/Affluent Areas

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to close the attainment gap between students from disadvantaged and affluent areas. [905501]

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to close the attainment gap between students from disadvantaged and affluent areas. [905517]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): In addition to the pupil premium, the £350 million national tutoring programme will provide affordable, high-quality tuition to disadvantaged pupils in schools and colleges. The catch-up premium provides a further £650 million to schools to make up for the lost teaching time of all pupils.

Scott Benton [V]: My right hon. Friend will be aware that the recent data highlighting the learning gap between rich and poor secondary-age pupils demonstrated that the disparity is wider in Blackpool than in any other part of the country. I know the Government are determined to close the gap, so will he join me in calling for additional resources to schools in opportunity areas, such as Blackpool, that have particularly acute challenges?

Gavin Williamson: It was a great pleasure to join my hon. Friend in visiting St George's School in Blackpool South to see the amazing work being done there to raise educational attainment in his constituency. He is right to highlight the important role that opportunity areas can play. That is why we have already invested £6 million in the Blackpool opportunity area, and why it was a pleasure to announce, just a short time ago, that we are investing another almost £2 million in the Blackpool opportunity area, on top of all the extra investment we are making in terms of schools and the covid catch-up fund.

Nigel Mills: Does the Secretary of State agree that the key to tackling this issue is to start early? Will he commend the role of nursery schools in that provision, and can he find a way to give them a long-term sustainable funding settlement so that they can plan for the future?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend tempts me into a discussion that I probably have to have first with the Chancellor, but he is absolutely right to highlight the important role that early action and early support plays in children's lives. That is why I was delighted to see that we will take action to invest in the Nuffield early language

interventions, which have already shown that they can deliver so much for youngsters. Building on that into the future is an important part of the work that the Department is doing with our schools and so much more.

Missed Education: Covid-19

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help children and young people catch up on the education they missed during the previous school year as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [905502]

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help children and young people catch up on the education they missed during the previous school year as a result of the covid-19 outbreak. [905513]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): The Government have announced a catch-up package worth £1 billion, including a catch-up premium worth a total of £650 million, to support schools to make up for lost teaching time. That is in addition to the national tutoring programme, which is targeted at those children who are most disadvantaged in all our constituencies.

Andrew Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. There has been huge variation in the amount of school missed, often caused by the amount of online learning available and the capacity to access it. The amount of catch-up needed is therefore individual and diverse, and that is challenging for both families and teachers. How is my right hon. Friend supporting schools in their assessment of individual need and their response to it?

Gavin Williamson: I very much point to the work of the Education Endowment Foundation, which we issued with our guidance. It has undertaken evidence-based work to ensure that, while schools will make the assessment of the individual needs of children and what help and intervention can be put in place for them, there is clear guidance on what works in the classroom environment. That might mean extending the school day for some; it might mean Saturday classes for others. There are so many different interventions that can deliver significant results in terms of helping youngsters catch up on the learning they have lost.

Chris Skidmore: My local authority, South Gloucestershire Council, was the first in the country to implement a recovery curriculum to support schools, working with experts from a range of fields and taking in international examples to get children back into the classroom. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating South Gloucestershire Council and all the teachers on their hard work to provide vital support for local pupils, and encourage his Department and other local authorities to consider this model as potential best practice?

Gavin Williamson: I very much join my right hon. Friend in congratulating South Gloucestershire Council on the work that it has been doing and rolling out across schools in its area. I would be delighted to look at that work and maybe to meet my right hon. Friend

and colleagues from South Gloucestershire Council to understand some of the work that has been undertaken and what we can use from that to roll out in different parts of the country.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities: Covid-19

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support children with special educational needs and disabilities in returning to school as covid-19 restrictions are eased. [905504]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Vicky Ford): The pandemic has been challenging for all families, but it has been particularly challenging for children with special educational needs and disabilities and their families. We have published a range of guidance to support children, families, carers and educational settings, and I wrote an open letter to all children and those who support them last week. We are increasing high-needs funding by £730 million next year on top of this year's £780 million, which is an increase of nearly a quarter over the two years, and providing additional catch-up support on top of that.

Rob Butler: Special schools for physically disabled children, such as the superb Pace centre in my constituency, have faced especial challenges over the past few months. How will my hon. Friend ensure that, as term gets under way, they receive advice and support that is tailored to the specific physical needs and circumstances of their pupils and the wider circumstances of their families, so that all children, whether they are disabled or non-disabled, can benefit from a full and varied education?

Vicky Ford: I thank all the staff at Pace and special schools across the country for all that they do. We have worked with the sector to provide detailed guidance, which we continually update as needed, and we will continue to do so going forward. Those who need tailored support will be glad to hear that specialist therapists, clinicians and other support staff can attend school sites and provide those interventions as usual. In terms of our £1 billion of catch-up funding, there will be three times more going into special schools than into mainstream schools.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab) [V]: Many children with special educational needs and disabilities will find their return to school after a prolonged period of absence extremely challenging. The Children's Commissioner for England has warned that Government guidance on school exclusion could encourage a zero-tolerance approach to challenging behaviour that may result in children with SEND who are struggling to readjust being excluded in large numbers. Can the Minister reassure me that she will not allow this to happen, and will she commit to reporting to the House the number of children with SEND being excluded from school as the term progresses?

Vicky Ford: Permanent exclusion should only ever be used as a last resort and must be lawful, reasonable and fair, and that is why we have already asked all schools to be understanding of the needs of all children and young people, including those with SEND, especially as they return. That is exactly the point I covered in my open

letter last week to all children with SEND and their families. Off-rolling is never acceptable and will be monitored by Ofsted.

Topical Questions

[905599] **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): Since last week, schools across the country have begun welcoming children back into the classroom with a range of protective measures in place. I thank all teachers, support staff and the whole school community for making it such a positive and pleasurable experience for all children.

Felicity Buchan: Will my right hon. Friend update the House on what support his Department is giving to universities and schools to help them recruit foreign students?

Gavin Williamson: A great and important strength of our university sector has always been its ability to attract students from across the globe, and we have been working with Universities UK and all universities to ensure they are properly supported. We are supporting them with a campaign to attract more students to the UK and working across Government to make sure that students applying for visas can do so with ease. The Home Office has been incredibly supportive in ensuring that for those who want to come and study here it has been a positive experience.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Last month, the Prime Minister ordered parents back to work, and while it may not have occurred to the Prime Minister, I want to draw the Secretary of State's attention specifically to their need for wraparound care at the start and end of the school day, where parents tell me there remains a gaping hole. Can he set out precisely what he is doing to ensure that working parents' need for wraparound care will be met?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Lady raises an important point about the importance of wraparound care. We are working with all schools to ensure it is provided to parents. We have issued guidance setting out how this can be done safely and cautiously and in a way that works for those who work in schools and, importantly, for the children who benefit from this wraparound care as well as the parents who depend on it.

[905600] **Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con) [V]: Devastatingly, the return of students to Uppingham Community College has been delayed by a fire that seriously damaged the school buildings just as it planned to open. Nearby Casterton College is also in desperate need of investment, but because many students do not live in Rutland, funding does not automatically go to the local authority. What funding is available to help both those schools?

Gavin Williamson: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important case in her constituency. Uppingham Community College is actually covered by risk protection arrangements, and I know that officials in my Department

are working closely with it to see what is needed in order to ensure that there is provision. I know that Baroness Berridge would be delighted to meet with my hon. Friend to discuss in more detail some of the particular issues that she faces in Rutland and how we can best support her and, most importantly, the provision of education in her constituency.

[905604] **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): In Scotland, there is provision for the youngest children in the year group, including those born prematurely, to defer their school start. Some of them will fall into the wrong group because of their early birth, and I cannot believe that there is less flexibility for that in England. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet a delegation from the all-party parliamentary group on premature and sick babies to look at how we can support those families going forward?

Gavin Williamson: I would be more than happy to meet with such a delegation, and I know from my own experience of having a child who arrived prematurely some of the challenges that can come about. I would be very interested to listen and to see what more can be done to provide support in the future.

[905601] **Mr William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): I pay full tribute to all the schools in my constituency that have reopened on time and in full. As the Secretary of State will be no doubt aware, this is against a background of record investment, which of course, came into play in April. He will also know that this was mooted as but tranche 1 of a two-tranche funding settlement, so can he give us a reassurance this afternoon that the further investment will be introduced on time in the next financial year?

Gavin Williamson: I know that as a former teacher my hon. Friend was itching to get back into the classroom if there was a need for extra teaching support. He was ready, willing and most certainly able to do so had the call come. He will probably have seen that schools in his constituency are seeing a more than £47 million cash increase, which will be followed in the next financial year by a substantial cash increase, and then in the third financial year there will also be a substantial cash increase. Schools were one of the few areas, if not the only area, that were able to get a three-year deal, and I believe this will have a real impact in helping them plan for the future delivery of the best education.

T6. [905605] **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): I am also a former teacher, as the Secretary of State is raising the issue. Has he heard any reports from schools about making face masks part of school uniform, including school uniform requirements about the type of face masks that are worn? While it is acceptable to require nothing inappropriate, surely it is unacceptable to require a safety measure such as this to be part of uniform.

Gavin Williamson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his offer to step in for any supply needs schools may have, but he raises a very important point. I would be happy, if it is possible, for him to meet with the Minister for School Standards if he has particular details or concerns so that we can take them up. I am not aware of

the situation that he outlines, but it is important to keep an eye across all of this. We have been very clear in our guidance that we have issued to schools, and we need to ensure that that guidance is properly considered by all schools but that people do not develop it in ways in which it should not be developed.

[905602] **Dame Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con) [V]: During the course of the pandemic, we have seen an increase in people experiencing poor mental health and anxiety, and a new report from SAGE has warned of the serious implications of worsening mental health among students if education continues to be disrupted and universities do not fully open. Can the Minister reassure students and their families that universities are safe to open on the basis of blended learning and confirm that clear strategies and additional support will be in place to support the mental health of students when they return to university? This is most important to our young people embarking on their further education.

Gavin Williamson: My right hon. Friend raises the important point of young people's mental health and the benefits they get from going to back to school, college or university. That is why we have worked incredibly closely with not just the school sectors but the university sector to ensure that that return is done in a safe, cautious and planned way, and I give thanks for all the work done in the higher education sector. We do recognise that covid has presented some quite challenging mental health problems to many young people as well as staff, which is why we announced a £9 million fund to support additional enhanced mental health work to support those who work in and those who benefit from being in the education sector, students included.

[905608] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: On 2 July, I asked the Secretary of State if he would write to me to confirm what extra practical support was being provided to disabled pupils, such as laptops and other assistive technology. As of yet, I have not received a response. Will he please update the House now, or at least let me know when I might receive the promised letter?

Gavin Williamson: I will certainly go back to the Department and immediately check why the hon. Member has not received that letter. I can only apologise for it not arriving.

[905603] **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): From speaking with many individuals across Keighley and Ilkley who have or are involved with people with dyslexia, dyspraxia or other special educational needs, the message is that while support provision is often good, it is often uneven across schools. What additional support can my right hon. Friend provide to ensure high-quality provision across all schools in West Yorkshire and the rest of the country?

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): We have funded the National Association for Special Educational Needs on behalf of the Whole School SEND Consortium to work to recruit teachers to deliver high-quality teaching across all types of special educational needs, and that support is available to all schools. We also funded targeted support, focused on particular areas of concern flagged by Ofsted and the Care Quality

Commission. We are putting £730 million into high needs next year, coming on top of £780 million of additional funding this year, which means that high needs funding has increased by 24% in just two years.

[905612] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): Young people's futures cannot be put on hold because of Tory incompetence. With schools now returning, many parents in Slough, and particularly those who have been shielding and those living in multigenerational households or who have children with special educational needs or disabilities, remain concerned about sending their children back to school. Given that the Government have failed to put in place the necessary SEND support and have not provided enough reassurance for parents regarding safety, how does the Secretary of State intend to ensure that all children can get back to school safely?

Nick Gibb: We do want all children to return to school, and to return to school safely, including children with special educational needs and disability. We have given guidance to schools, and the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), has written an open letter to parents of children with special educational needs about returning. Where there are families who have particular concerns about the safety of returning, the advice we give is to talk to the headteacher, who hopefully will be able to provide them with reassurance.

[905606] **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): St Austell is the largest town in Cornwall and has some of the most deprived communities. Further education provision in the town is vital to our young people's life chances. Cornwall College is seeking to secure high-quality further education facilities in St Austell by redeveloping its St Austell campus. Will the Secretary of State commit to working with me and the college to bring forward the redevelopment as soon as possible?

Gavin Williamson: Maybe in anticipation of the question, Cornwall College has already been a beneficiary of £1.4 million of extra money heading towards it as a result of our commitment to putting more money into further education in capital build. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and the college to discuss further their plans for St Austell and to hear about how they want to transform educational outcomes for those not just in St Austell but more widely in Cornwall.

[905614] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister talked of a "mutant algorithm" and the Secretary of State disclaimed all knowledge of its decisions as if it was some kind of educational horoscope. Will he confirm for us today that he recognises that algorithms are neither biology nor astrology but complex data manipulation tools, which do what they are told to do, which cannot predict the performance of individuals, and which require a robust regulatory framework before being used in the public or private sector?

Gavin Williamson: I very much agree with the fact that there needs to be a robust regulatory framework around any use of algorithms. Algorithms are used every single year in the management of grade boundaries as youngsters are awarded both GCSEs and A-levels. That has always been the case and will always be the case.

[905609] **Ben Bradley** (Mansfield) (Con): I have written to my hon. Friend the Minister with responsibility for further education, about West Nottinghamshire College and how Education and Skills Funding Agency restrictions are limiting how it can support progress in my community. Will the Secretary of State commit to working with me to help the college find a way to navigate these barriers and fulfil its potential in delivering the best possible FE for our community in Mansfield?

Gavin Williamson: It has been incredibly impressive to see the turnaround at West Nottinghamshire College and the work that has already been undertaken. I would be more than happy to work with my hon. Friend to see what opportunities can be created in the future for this college, which has had some difficult times, but is very much looking to the future with optimism and with a real sense of purpose in delivering the very best for young people in his constituency.

[905616] **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: As I hope the Secretary of State already knows, there are about 20,000 private or home-schooled students who would normally have taken A-level, AS-level and GCSE exams this summer. These students were excluded from the U-turn on the assessment algorithm last month and are therefore still being penalised by this Government's arbitrary and discriminatory policies. Will he now agree properly to engage with this issue and meet me to discuss how this situation can be rectified so that no young person is left behind?

Nick Gibb: I am very happy to meet the hon. Member. This was an issue that we discussed at great length with the regulator. We wanted to find a way in which those students could be awarded grades, notwithstanding the fact that the summer series had to be cancelled. However,

for some students who do not have a relationship with a school, it was not possible for them to have centre-assessed grades. That is one of the reasons why we put on an autumn series of exams in all subjects across GCSEs, A-levels and AS-levels to ensure that they have the opportunity to take their exams this year.

[905610] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): The return to school is particularly challenging for those young people who are hard of hearing. Will my right hon. Friend congratulate Bungay High School, which has just opened a new specialist facility for students with hearing loss, and will he update one of those students, Daniel Jillings, whom he has met, on the development of the British Sign Language GCSE and assure him that it will not be delayed?

Gavin Williamson: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Bungay High School on its new specialist facility, and I pay tribute to him for his passion and his support for a GCSE in British Sign Language. I do remember meeting Daniel Jillings and his mother who made a compelling case. As this is a brand new subject at GCSE, we have been taking care to consult experts very closely on the detail of the subject content. The covid pandemic has affected the timeline for developing the GCSE, but my hon. Friend will be pleased to know that that work has now been resumed.

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.

3.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

International Travel

3.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about international travel corridors.

In June, 14 days' isolation was introduced for travellers arriving in the UK, with a small number of workers' exemptions. This action has helped to ensure that the sacrifices of our nationwide lockdown were not wasted, and it has played a part in keeping our infection rate lower than elsewhere. At the same time, we set up the Joint Biosecurity Centre and tasked it with pulling together intelligence in order to assess the risks of inbound travel from hundreds of territories. By July, the Joint Biosecurity Centre's analysis helped to inform our decisions to establish travel corridors, meaning that people could return to the UK from low-risk countries without quarantine.

Of course, we all know that this dreadful disease takes instructions from no one. Even with our increased understanding about how covid preys upon and capitalises on close human contact, we can still be taken aback by its speed of transmission, whether at home, through the imposition of local lockdowns, or abroad, where a country suddenly sees infection rates take off. I am the first to admit that the unpredictable nature of the virus can take us all, holidaymakers included, by surprise. As I landed in Spain on my family holiday, I was immediately joining a ministerial call during which I helped to impose 14 days' quarantine on Spain, thereby effectively terminating my break—but more importantly, sadly, disrupting the holidays of tens of thousands of Brits in Spain and elsewhere. I know how distressing this has been—but I also know that the hard-won gains from the earlier days of this crisis must not, cannot and will not be sacrificed. Ministers will continue to take proportionate action informed by JBC analysis.

During July and August, we did not have the means to accurately assess risks within countries and within regions. The kind of comprehensive Office for National Statistics data that we now have through their testing was never available overseas, and it was too easy for the virus to migrate between regions without borders or boundaries. However, as JBC resources have strengthened, we have been able to collaborate much more closely with other Governments and their health authorities. This has led to a more forensic picture. Now, for the first time, we are able to consider a granular approach to assessing detailed data abroad. I have looked at whether this means that we can implement regionalised systems for international travel corridors, but in many cases the international data is still simply too patchy, and in all cases there is next to nothing to prevent people from moving around within a country's border.

People will rightly point out that infection rates also vary across the United Kingdom—indeed they do—but the difference is that all the countries we are talking about have, by definition, higher rates of infection than we do. I hope the House understands that the JBC and the Government are therefore at present unable to introduce regional travel corridors from within the geographical boundaries of a nation state.

However, where a region has natural boundaries, such as an island, the risk diminishes significantly, and that presents us with a real opportunity. Our passenger

locator form, combined with NHS Test and Trace, will, and has started to, give us a clear picture of exactly where infections are coming from. As a result, I can today announce a new islands policy. For the first time, we have the data and the capacity to add and remove specific islands from quarantine, while still providing maximum protection to the UK public.

There are thousands of islands across the globe—far too many for JBC to monitor on a detailed level—but it may assist the House if I outline the four guiding principles that we intend to apply. First, the regionalised approach can only apply to land that has clear boundaries or a clear border—in other words, an island. Secondly, the data collected must be robust, reliable and internationally comparable. Thirdly, the island must have direct flights from the UK, or at the very minimum, transport must be able to take place through quarantine-exempt territories. Fourthly, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office travel advice should align as far as practicable with the policy.

The JBC methodology for islands that I have described has been developed in consultation with the chief medical officer and Public Health England. This new capability means we will now be able to nuance our decisions, first and foremost to safeguard the health of British citizens, but also to enable British tourists to enjoy trips to islands, even if the mainland is deemed too risky. However, it is worth noting that the policy will not necessarily open up additional islands immediately. For example, when we removed Spain from the travel corridor list, there were 24 cases per 100,000 people. Today there are 127 cases per 100,000, and the rate remains too high in the Balearic and Canary islands as well.

On the other hand, Greece remains within our travel corridor programme, but our new analysis shows that some of the islands are well outside the parameters. Indeed, despite overall Greek infection levels being lower than ours, Scotland has already felt compelled to add the entirety of Greece, including the mainland, to the quarantine. However, using our newly acquired JBC data, we are now in a position to remove Greek islands where holidaymakers are at risk of spreading new infections back home. Seven Greek islands will therefore be removed from the travel list at 4 am on Wednesday 9 September, while mainland Greece will be maintained.

I thank our medical experts, who have forged these professional relationships and improved capacity. However, I want to make one thing clear: travelling during coronavirus is not without risk, so those who do so should please go with their eyes open. Remember that breaching quarantine is not only an offence that can gain you a criminal record, but you are also putting the lives of your loved ones at risk, as well as the loved ones of those you have never met before.

I know there is considerable interest across the House on testing at borders to see whether we can remove the necessity to self-isolate at all. It sounds completely logical, yet, as the chief medical officer reminds us, it simply will not capture most of those who are asymptotically carrying coronavirus. As you know, Mr Speaker, those who are symptomatic should not be travelling in the first place.

The point was brought home to me in a conversation with the head of one of Britain's major airport groups. He decided to trial airport testing for himself and a group of eight returning holidaymakers. They all tested negative. After a week in quarantine, they took a further

[Grant Shapps]

test and one of their group was positive. This illustrates PHE's point that, due to the incubation period of this disease, and even using highly accurate tests, the capture rate of those carrying covid-19 may be as low as 7%, leaving 93% of people who are infected free to go about their business, more likely—most likely, under those circumstances—in the misguided belief that they do not carry coronavirus.

However, quarantine combined with testing is more promising. We are therefore working actively on the practicalities of using testing to release people from quarantine in fewer than 14 days. For the reasons described, this could not be a pure test-on-arrival option, which would not work. However, my officials are working with health experts with the aim of cutting the quarantine period without adding to the infection risk or infringing our overall NHS testing capacity, which now also needs to cater for schools going back and universities returning. The islands policy becomes active immediately, and I will of course update the House on quarantine testing in the coming weeks. I commend this statement to the House.

3.45 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Transport Secretary for prior sight of the statement, although I should say for the record that it arrived only five minutes before it was due to be made. I am not sure that is quite in the spirit of things, and it might be worth taking that back to officials to make sure it does not happen again. However, I should say that he made the effort to give me a call today, which is appreciated.

The Government's response to the covid-19 crisis has been nothing short of chaotic. At almost every turn they have lacked a clear strategy, and that failure has been acutely felt in aviation. For months, even when the virus was at its peak, millions of passengers were coming from all over the world without any restrictions placed on them at all. By the time restrictions were introduced, we were one of only a handful of countries in the world that up to that point had failed to take action to put them in place. It is this pattern of the Government being too slow to act, coupled with blunt interventions to overcompensate, that has dogged the handling of the pandemic right from the outset.

First, there was a blunt quarantine for all, bar France, but then France was back on. Then air corridors were on the table; then they were not. What we then saw was not really air corridors, air bridges or whatever name is given to them, but essentially a list produced by the Foreign Office, half of the countries on which had placed restrictions on British travellers going there—no travel corridor or air bridge at all. Now we are seeing countries coming and going off the list, with very little notice for those who have decided to go on holiday and incurred the cost of doing so.

It is all very well for the Government now to change position and tell people that they should travel with their eyes open. It was not that long ago that the Government were defending a very senior member of No. 10 for driving for an eye test, let alone going with eyes fully open. The British public are not stupid. They understand fully the pandemic and what it means to

everyday life, but people work hard, and they are desperate to return to a sense of normality. For many, that one holiday a year is something they save up for and look forward to, but they cannot afford a 14-day quarantine to be imposed with very little notice.

We need to see when the data was really made available. We all know that localised and regional data is made available across Europe, so why was it not reviewed when the decision was made in Spain, for instance, to have the restrictions on the islands? The point was made at the time and the Government did not move, but it strikes me that the evidence base was in place, so it makes sense to publish that evidence in the House of Commons Library, so that it can be reviewed.

We need to make sure that we do not take this intervention all the time. It appears chaotic because it is chaotic. There will not be a single intervention in itself that will keep this country safe; it will be a number of interventions taken together that make us safe, and a key part of that is testing. Frankly, it is beyond belief that people arrive in this country from all over the world without any tests being carried out, either at the airport or five days later. It is important that we now carry out a full review, not just of quarantine in the very blunt sense that the Government approach it, but also to ensure that a proper test and tracking system is in place. In my town, the national contact tracing system has failed to get through to half of those it should have made contact with. When we have that infrastructure and such weak performance, it is little surprise that the Government are constantly going from one crisis to another.

Aviation is on its knees. The limited support offered by the Government has meant job losses all over the place, in a sector that was always going to take longer to recover than other parts of the economy. The Government knew that, but even with the money given over to the airlines, where are the conditions to protect workers' rights? It is a scandal that hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money is being given out with no conditions to protect the workers at British Airways or easyJet, and the rights that they have built up.

Labour's position is clear. We have set out a plan for a sectoral deal, with six key conditions, supporting jobs, tackling climate change and providing fair play on tax. It is important that the Government now come forward with a proper sectoral deal. We will absolutely work in partnership, in the national interest, but the Government cannot continue to go from one crisis to another, because key to beating the virus is maintaining public support. I have to tell the Transport Secretary that we are in real danger of losing that support.

Grant Shapps: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for not getting the statement to him. I do not know why that happened, and I will make inquiries. As he mentions, I did call in advance, unrelated to the statement itself.

This is not a virus that any of us control, beyond the way in which we all behave individually and the extent to which we all have contact that we perhaps should not be having. It is easy to come to the Dispatch Box and be a professor of hindsight, saying, "You should have done this. You shouldn't have done that." If the hon. Gentleman could explain to me how he can find out that one week Jamaica will have three or five cases per 100,000 and the next week be breaching 20 cases per 100,000, even

though the Joint Biosecurity Centre, Public Health England and all the other experts were unable to predict it, I would be the first to welcome that kind of detailed information and knowledge. It does not exist. I believe that no country in the world has combined as much information as has been pulled together here in order to work on a detailed island policy. In fact, it is difficult to think of another country in Europe that is doing more testing than the UK now, with testing capacity of a third of a million tests per day, going up to half a million today. I was speaking to my opposite number from France, who told me that there they would reach 400,000 tests a week—in this country, we can do that in a day and a half.

Our NHS test and trace system, combined with the passenger locator form, has enabled us to extract very specific data to know where infections are coming back from, and that has been extraordinarily useful. I reiterate—I cannot say it any more clearly, and I am grateful for the opportunity to say it again—that in these times when we travel we must accept that we have to go with our eyes open. I gave the example of Jamaica, but, unfortunately, the same thing exists everywhere else. I am not sure what the hon. Gentleman is suggesting. Is he saying that we should not have travel corridors at all and we should prevent everybody from travelling? That cannot be the case, because he tells us that he wants to support the aviation sector. In which case, some kind of corridors must be open, otherwise we would not be supporting it.

That is why we have pumped an enormous amount of money, via the British taxpayer, into supporting the aviation sector. Off the top of my head, 56,400 members of staff are using the furlough scheme, which will add up to well over £1 billion. There is a £1.8 billion fund, the Bank of England's covid corporate financing facility, which has supported aviation-specific companies and there have been all manner of other funds, including the coronavirus job retention scheme, from which £283 million has gone to the aviation sector.

Of course we want the aviation sector to get going again. As I mentioned towards the end of my statement—I will come back to the House on this—testing is a part of that, but I also explained the complexity of testing on day zero. I did not hear whether that is what the Opposition Front-Bench team are calling for, but there are significant issues with testing on day zero in a manner that will not necessarily find those who are carrying the virus but that will convince lots of people that they are not. That approach is not the answer. We are working on all those things, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to work with us, rather than score points from us, when everybody is trying to the right thing, nationwide, to beat this virus.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's decision to look at islands separately from certain mainland territories. May I also ask him to give a little more detail on his thought processes with regards to testing? He is absolutely right that this has to be all about proportionality. On the one hand, there are many in this country who have forgone their holiday abroad, and it is right that they are not put at more risk of getting the virus than those who have gone abroad. Equally, there may well be the testing capability, not at day one, which we know does not work with any reliability, but perhaps a certain number

of days afterwards, which could allow quarantine to be ended and the aviation industry to get much needed support. So on the scale of zero to 14 days, is he looking at about the day eight period for where there will be that proportionality on safety? Also, he mentioned that the House would know more in the coming weeks; may I push him to be a little more specific about when the House is likely to see a different approach come in?

Grant Shapps: I pay tribute to the Chair of the Select Committee for his boundless work during this crisis in following up on all manner of transport issues, and aviation issues in particular. He is absolutely right that testing in all its senses is a large part of the solution to everything related, or at least it is an aid to everything related, to coronavirus, and it is extremely important that we get it right. We know that there is pressure on the testing system. Schools are going back and entire classes and years require testing, and the same goes for universities—Dido spoke about this last week. It means we need to ensure that we are prioritising that. We also know that it can be helpful for returning holidaymakers and other travellers. Day zero does not work at the airport, but testing later can work. That capacity will be an issue for the reasons NHS Test and Trace mentioned, and I can reassure my hon. Friend that I will return to the House with proposals, which are currently being worked on with the industry, for something that is both practical and workable and that people can rely on as much as the NHS test and trace system itself.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson, Gavin Newlands, who has two minutes.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, which we also received a minute after he was due to deliver it.

We can see from all the recent data that coronavirus is currently spreading far more rapidly throughout the UK and many parts of Europe than in recent months. As a result the red list of countries from which travellers must quarantine on their return has been increasing steadily in recent weeks. Often the UK's four Governments have come to the same conclusions on quarantining decisions at the same time. However, Scotland and Wales have occasionally made different decisions, as is their devolved right. Portugal was recently placed on the red list for Scotland and Wales, as it is now experiencing 23.2 cases per 100,000, but the Secretary of State accused the Scottish Government of creating confusion by placing Portugal on the quarantine list and of jumping the gun on Greece. Indeed, he doubled down on this in his statement today. The Scottish and Welsh First Ministers have not criticised him or his Government for their decisions on quarantine, so these are very unfortunate remarks that the Secretary of State should reflect on and perhaps apologise for.

The resurgence of coronavirus has shown that the trouble for the airline and tourism industries will persist for quite some time. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, what further support for the airline industry specifically can the Secretary of State commit to, and will he actually keep his promise to the industry of specific support? If there is a second wave of coronavirus that decimates international travel again, the industry could go back to square one in terms of the pandemic.

[Gavin Newlands]

Does he agree that that makes a strong case for the argument that targeted extensions of the furlough scheme are necessary?

Further to the point that the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), made, may I push the Secretary of State on the timeline for this aviation traveller quarantine testing programme? When will he bring that back to the House by? Finally, nobody travels more internationally than cabin crew and pilots, and recent weeks have seen many loyal British Airways cabin crew out of a job having refused to be fired and then rehired on slashed wages. Will the Secretary of State apologise to those workers for failing to protect them?

Grant Shapps: Once again, I will certainly be investigating the statement issue. I am very intolerant of things being dispatched late from my office. I will write to you, Mr Speaker, and to the Members concerned to let them know what happened.

I know that the hon. Gentleman shares my passion for aviation, and I want to answer his points, but it is important to mention the need not to believe everything you read in the newspapers. I know that this will come as a shock to Members across the House, but things are not always accurately reported. I did not criticise Scotland. I simply used the example to explain that it was unable to have the granular data and had to remove the whole of Greece as a result. On Portugal, as he may have heard me say, although the incident rate was higher, the percentage of positive tests had reduced, which is why we came to different decisions. That is within our right. I have spoken to my opposite number in Scotland today and explained that will be further sharing the data to make granular decisions on islands, if that is what the Scottish Government wish to do.

I want to stress our support for not just airlines but the whole aviation sector. It is interesting that this is frequently mischaracterised as being a lack of support, but when we add it up, it comes to billions of pounds. Billions of pounds is not a lack of support. This is taxpayers' money that we are giving to commercial organisations to try to keep them going.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about testing, I absolutely will return to the House. We have to have the science behind us to do this. It is the same with travel corridors and the island approach. We cannot return here until there is a test, for example, that will work under the circumstances described. So far, as far as I am aware, Porton Down has not approved any of the private tests that we read about every weekend in the newspaper—"It's solved; we can just do this." I can only work to the speed of the scientists, but I certainly will not delay.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): International visitors spend around half of the £10 billion generated in the west end alone, which is in the heart of my constituency. Will my right hon. Friend assure us that he will continue to monitor and consider taking more countries off the red list as and when it is safe to do so, in order for us to be able to welcome more overseas visitors back to our shores as soon as possible?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right. I am very concerned about not just the City but the cities and towns across the country that should be enjoying a far

greater number of tourists, visitors and business people than they are. I will certainly do exactly what she asks. It is a fact that, at the moment, numbers—particularly from European destinations—are, I am afraid, on the rise, which has led to countries coming off the list, but most weeks we add a territory or two as well.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Given the scale of the challenges faced by the aviation sector and the scale of job losses, today's announcement seems to fall woefully short of the integrated Government leadership that we need to get planes flying and give passengers the confidence to travel safely. Indeed, many local employers tell me that they do not feel the Government are really listening to the challenges that they are facing. Airports have been working on increased testing pilots for months, and they do not feel that the Government have listened to them either. When does the Secretary of State plan to update the House on increased testing, so that we can reduce quarantine times? Will he come back to the House to tell us when he can extend the measures announced today—for example, to trial flights from Heathrow to John F. Kennedy airport, with New York now having lower covid rates than other parts of the US?

Grant Shapps: I speak very regularly—including at least twice over the weekend—to the boss of Heathrow airport, John Holland-Kaye, and to businesses in the hon. Lady's constituency and all constituencies that are concerned about aviation and the issues that have been created. The simple fact of the matter is that, as I mentioned, until we have tests that are reliable enough and signed off through the PHE and Porton Down process, it is not possible to simply jump the gun, but I am very actively working with the airports. As I say, it has been a bit of a challenge to convince people on this—it sounds so simple and obvious that someone can just take a test on day zero when they land, a bit like pointing a temperature checker at someone's head, and then we have to work through the reasons why that will not actually protect us from coronavirus. It is about doing the right things as well as doing those things quickly, but she has my assurance that I am on it day and night, and we will continue to be until we get solutions.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): In Stockton South, we have seen a small rise in the number of confirmed covid cases. Can my right hon. Friend assure us that he will continue to keep the travel corridor list under constant and scrupulous review, allowing people to travel where it is safe to do so and, importantly, ensuring that we act to control the virus?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Without fear or favour is the answer. Yes.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Liverpool airport in my constituency is already losing 15% of jobs in operations—jobs in air traffic control, ground handling and security, and in the airlines operating from there, such as easyJet—because passenger numbers are about 65% down on where they would normally be. Even worse jobs carnage will result if furlough is ended without a sector-specific deal for aviation. If the Secretary of State is focusing on testing to release people earlier from quarantine—there will be an ongoing imposition and lifting of blanket 14-day quarantines, whether or not the islands are included—will he undertake to ensure

that there is support like furlough in place for the airports, the airlines and the aviation industry until those arrangements are put in place?

Grant Shapps: I assure the hon. Lady that we have worked very hard on the package, which is nothing that this country has ever seen before, in terms of size, scale and impact. It has saved literally hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of jobs in this country. As the Chancellor said, we have to balance that with making sure there are jobs to go back to. I respect what the hon. Lady said: airports such as John Lennon in her constituency are really struggling. I spoke earlier today to the boss of easyJet, which is one of the main carriers there and is desperate to get back in the air. We cannot detach policy from the reality, and this virus is very real. Nobody has a simple solution to deal with it until we get a vaccine, but I assure the hon. Lady that I will be working very hard with Liverpool airport and the carriers that come in and out of it, and with the Chancellor, who will be speaking more at this Dispatch Box at the autumn statement, to do everything we possibly can.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement of the islands policy, which seems like a pragmatic, sensible thing to do, but I am sure that a lot of people who are about to go away tonight or tomorrow must be wondering what will happen when they return from their trip. My point is about the testing regime and the possibility of introducing something far more robust at airports. If there is such great capacity available in the system, as the Secretary of State suggested, why is there not a mandatory test for everyone seven days after they return?

Grant Shapps: I just want to clarify the amount of testing in the system. We have a third of a million tests a day, and we are taking that up to half a million by the end of October, but Members will be aware—this has been discussed in the past few days—that schools and universities have gone back, and pressure on testing is very real at this moment in time. I am not sure we should be prioritising returning holidaymakers in the testing system over, for example, children going back to school. The simple solution is, of course, to create more testing—that is something that I absolutely want to see happen—but that will need to come through the private sector route, which means that the tests will need to be approved and signed off on a scientific basis. As soon as that is done and we can prove the whole thing will stack up, we will be in business.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con) [V]: The £160 billion of support that the Government have made available to businesses has helped many firms within the travel industry and will ensure that jobs are protected for the time being. However, many of those firms now face an extremely difficult winter period. Will my right hon. Friend commit to working with the Treasury to look at different ways in which businesses within the sector, such as Highfield Travel in my constituency, can receive additional support?

Grant Shapps: I can tell my hon. Friend that I most certainly will. The only thing I take issue is the amount of money, which is a lot bigger. There is £283 million just on the coronavirus job retention scheme, and a lot of the travel companies will have taken advantage of

the smaller loan schemes. On a smaller level again, there are things such as the bounce back loan, and that is before we get to the very, very large-scale covid corporate financing facility, at £1.6 billion, and the furlough. There have been an awful lot of projects that put money into businesses in my hon. Friend's constituency and elsewhere. He absolutely has my assurance that that will continue.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP) [V]: Two constituents have approached me who, like the Secretary of State, were already in Spain when that country was added to the quarantine list. Their employer chose not to pay the couple's statutory sick pay—he is not required to—and that is causing them considerable hardship. Is that not unfair, and does not that lack of sick pay make it less likely that people will comply with quarantine?

Grant Shapps: As I have mentioned, no one feels this more acutely than I do, given that I effectively put myself into quarantine with that decision. Travel is something that we must all do with a degree of eyes open, accepting the risk at this time. As I mentioned again from the Dispatch Box, people will need to think carefully when they travel about whether, if the country does suddenly end up in quarantine—I explained, with examples such as Jamaica, that this can happen very quickly—they are able to quarantine afterwards. Otherwise, it might be best not to travel, and that is a judgment that everybody will make. The hon. Gentleman knows that the Chancellor and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions have also made significant moves to assist, particularly where people are in local lockdown areas.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I am sure that my right hon. Friend has been contacted by dozens of his constituents, as have we all, asking whether one country or another is about to be added to the quarantine list. With that in mind, I wonder whether he might share his Department's thinking on whether some of the Joint Biosecurity Centre's data might be opened up, to inform those decisions by our constituents.

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and when people ask me whether such and such country will be added, I usually say, "I don't know why you are asking me. I couldn't get it right in Spain and I went there myself, so I am probably not the best guide." The virus moves in ways that are difficult to predict. I agree that the more information there is available, the better, and he may have seen that I have spent some time publicising and tweeting the various different measures that the JBC uses to assess the risk from each country. This goes way beyond the number of cases per 100,000 over seven days.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I appreciate what the Minister has said about the need for people to have holidays, and in my constituency, we appreciate the value of the aviation industry. Edinburgh airport has already confirmed that around a third of its staff are to be made redundant, so can the Minister assure us that the Government will take every opportunity to balance the need to shorten quarantine to support the aviation industry with following the medical evidence about what is best?

Grant Shapps: I absolutely can. I have spoken to the boss of Edinburgh airport during this crisis, and I know how difficult it is to run those businesses when people do not know what is going to happen next. Quarantine is of course a devolved matter for Scotland, and those decisions and discussions are ongoing between the Scottish Government and Edinburgh airport, but the hon. Lady has my assurance that this is certainly at the front of my mind.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that 900 Harlow residents are employed at Stansted airport, directly and indirectly. However, we have already seen many job losses at ABM Blue Handling and easyJet, which has also closed its Stansted airport base, so will he ensure that the measures that his Department is taking will protect the jobs of my constituents?

Grant Shapps: I know that my right hon. Friend fights hard for his constituents. I spoke to the boss of Stansted, Charlie Cornish, earlier today, and we discussed the measures that we have been taking and our hopes for the way that the policies can develop. One of the things he said would be helpful in this regard is the islands policy that we have announced today. This will help to protect jobs because, in time, it will enable islands to be added when the mainland would not have been flyable to, and I very much hope that that assists.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Secretary of State suggested three days ago that differences in quarantine rules between the UK nations led to confusion. The UK Government have had more than 20 years to get used to the fact that health is devolved in Wales. Will he therefore clarify that any confusion between the rules in England and Wales arises consistently from a failure on the part of his Government to communicate when their rules apply to England only?

Grant Shapps: No, that is factually incorrect. I speak to my counterparts from the other three parts of our nation every single week on various occasions, and each of us at different times has had cause to say to the other, “I’m sorry that we couldn’t have done this without you.” That that has happened with both the Welsh and the Scottish Governments at various times, so that is simply untrue; I do try to share the data. It is helpful for travellers if we can move in unison but it is not always possible. The right hon. Lady points out that there have been 20 years of devolution, but that has never meant decisions over things like quarantine in any past situation that I can think of. This has found new territory for devolution.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): Many of my constituents were very grateful to get away this summer after the introduction of travel corridors. I know it has not been easy for everybody all the time, with the decisions that had to be made—my right hon. Friend knows that better than anybody—but everyone who did make that choice, and it was a choice, went into it with their eyes open, as he says. They and I will welcome what he says about islands and further granularity. I hope we can get more granularity going forward. In the meantime, can he assure me that the list of countries and islands will be kept under constant review, so we can get to more destinations as soon as it is safe to do so?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and others have mentioned it, too. I know that everyone’s constituents will be in contact to ask whether certain places will be able to be added. I am always very happy to ask JBC to look at particular countries, which I do regularly on behalf of Members from across the House, and it will put some extra time into studying those countries. Of course, it is already looking at the entirety of the world on a week-by-week basis, and he has my assurance that that will continue.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Like many hon. Members, I have had frequent contact from bemused constituents who cannot understand why day after day they see on their television pictures of thousands of people streaming in through our airports with neither testing at the airport, which the Secretary of State said would not be effective, nor testing a number of days later, which the Secretary of State conceded would be effective, and nor, indeed, without, seemingly, tracing of where those people are going and who they are meeting. For hundreds of thousands of those journeys it is too late, and if those people were bringing coronavirus into the country then it has now happened, but we are responsible for what happens from today. Will the Secretary of State give a clear assurance that for every single person arriving at a UK airport we know where they are coming from, we know where they are going, we know whether they quarantine, and we know whether they have the coronavirus or not and, if so, we know who they met? If not, all the talk today is moot.

Grant Shapps: The passenger locator form has been introduced. That was an innovation. It had to be brought in at great speed during the crisis, but it is now ensuring that we know where passengers are coming from. If people do not fill it in, that is an offence and they can and are being fined. When people do not quarantine—I just want to make this very clear for the benefit of everybody in the House—that is a criminal offence. If you do not quarantine for 14 days and you spread the virus around, you are endangering the people you love and others you have never even met. You can get a criminal record for that. To answer the hon. Gentleman’s question directly, we will be stepping up enforcement. In particular, I know that phone calls are made to one in five people—my wife actually, separately, got a phone call—and text messages will be sent. People should be aware that enforcement will be increasingly stepped up.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for today’s statement and for being the strong voice for aviation that I know he is. No one wants to see a second spike, least of all one that arises from cases from overseas, but will he assure me that he will continue to explore with an open mind any opportunity, including testing, that will allow the aviation industry to return to the skies and get on with its vital role of unleashing much needed economic growth?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am a great champion of the aviation sector, as he is, and it breaks my heart to see it suffering, jobs being impacted, and the second or third greatest and biggest aviation sector economy in the world being affected. He is absolutely right to ask whether I will keep my eyes and ears open for absolutely everything that we can do. I have my officials working on that all the time, and I will return—a

number of Members have asked when—to the House the moment the scientists provide the information we need to be able to take further testing forward.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Finally, the Secretary of State, in this last answer, actually acknowledged that we have a major aviation sector which is hugely important to Britain and to Britain's place in the world. There was no acknowledgment of that in his statement, nor any acknowledgement of the 10,000 jobs that have already gone and the 100,000 jobs that are at risk. Also, frankly, the Secretary of State seems to be focusing on seeking complete risk avoidance rather than intelligent risk management. He needs to recognise that unemployment kills and poverty kills. We need to be getting Britain back to work as we go into autumn facing a national jobs crisis and, in particular, a crisis in the aviation industry. When he is going to get a move on?

Grant Shapps: I may have taken the rather presumptuous position of thinking that the House knew how much I love aviation, but I will put it on record again. As a qualified pilot for 25 years, I absolutely think it is a terrific industry. However, the right hon. Member is right about the balance between getting people back to work—he knows how hard we are working to persuade people to go back—and doing it in a safe way. I do slightly take issue with him over the idea he expressed when he talked about the risk-benefit ratio, and it is very important that we do not see another spike. We are seeing the numbers creeping up, and I think it would be unforgivable if, having got on top of this virus, we re-imported this disease back in again.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Iceland has a system whereby arrivals are tested at the airport and then five or six days later. Could that be viable in the UK?

Grant Shapps: The Iceland example is very interesting. I have seen some other countries where they have been doing day zero testing and will privately, in conversation with me, concede that it does not actually provide the answers they require. A test later—whether that is five days, seven days or eight days is to be calculated by the scientists—is a much more possible and probable solution. I gave the example earlier of what happened when one of the airport bosses had his group tested a week later, and he found somebody who already had the virus but was not picked up at the beginning, so I think my hon. Friend is absolutely on to something.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The University of York is going to extraordinary lengths to support international students arriving in the UK—from picking them up at airports to isolating them for two weeks at the university before teaching begins. However, this process could be significantly improved if a clear testing and tracing regime and testing infrastructure were put in place. The Secretary of State has said that there are capacity issues, but why has he not properly planned for this, having known the arrival programme of international students? It appears that he is shifting the responsibility on to universities to manage this situation, rather than sorting it out himself.

Grant Shapps: No, I do not accept that, because students actually come from lots of different places. Some of them will be in travel corridors and do not

need to self-isolate; others will require self-isolation. But in the context of being here—for perhaps a year, two or three years—this, I hope, will be a manageable situation for them. Again, let us not pretend this is all just straightforward, and that somehow we can magic tests that are signed off and work. I remind the House again: there are no tests—such private tests have been referred to many times—that are currently signed off as being usable, and we have to be led by the medicine first.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Many of my constituents work in the aviation and travel industries, with both Manchester airport and Leeds Bradford airport within an hour's travelling time. With that in mind, will the Secretary of State continue to do everything he can to introduce the testing regime that will not only support the aviation and travel industries, but give certainty to holidaymakers and business travellers alike?

Grant Shapps: Quite simply, yes, I will.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It has been incredibly heartening, during this pandemic, how our communities have come together and done the right thing. They have followed the rules, and it is great to see. However, during this quite chaotic conversation about tourism, with tourists coming back from Leeds Bradford and Manchester airports, I have constituents now contacting me on email and by telephone concerned that their neighbours are not doing the right thing. Is the Secretary of State aware of this, what is he going to put in place to protect those people—particularly in constituencies such as Batley and Spen, where, in Batley, we have enhanced restrictions—and what is he going to do to reassure constituents like mine?

Grant Shapps: I agree with the hon. Lady: it is not only wrong and frustrating; it is also illegal for people to do that—come back and break the quarantine. We absolutely will be stepping up measures, and I am working with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and others to secure that. Again, I will say more about it very soon. In the meantime, I send the message clearly from this Dispatch Box that when people break their quarantine, they are breaking the law and putting themselves in line for a criminal record, and it is not something that anyone should want to do.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The travel corridor policy, while clearly very upsetting for those affected who have worked very hard for a holiday, is absolutely the right thing to do to keep us all safe. Could I ask the Secretary of State to consider one change, though, which would be to move the weekly time for coming back from 4 am on a Saturday to midnight on a Sunday? Changeover, for most people, is on a Saturday or a Sunday, so most people could complete their week's holiday without having to buy expensive flights, which they do not have the money for, and ruin their holiday. Would he at least just consider that?

Grant Shapps: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is true that changeovers do indeed often take place on a Saturday. It might help if I explain the tensions that have to be measured off. The medical community would of course say, "Don't leave any time at all: do it immediately"—which is virtually what happened with

[Grant Shapps]

Spain, the very first country to be removed from a corridor—and the other view is to allow it to continue. It is a question of finding the best balance between the two that would satisfy the chief medical officer and his concerns as well as trying to get people home. I promise to undertake to continue to look at this, but I hope my hon. Friend understands and the House will appreciate the natural and proper tensions that are in place.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): My constituents want to make informed decisions about their travel arrangements, so will the Secretary of State consider publishing the evidence and criteria by which countries are deemed to be on or off the quarantine list?

Grant Shapps: Yes, I can help the hon. Lady, because I have already, several times, published the basis for the decision-making process. The easiest way to find it is on my Twitter feed, @grantshapps, which explains the measures put in place. The data is then available for somebody to look at. We have been quite clear about where people need to go to see exactly which measures are taken into account.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): When are the Government going to give the financial support package to the aviation sector, as the Chancellor promised in March, so that we can ensure the protection of workers' rights, particularly those at British Airways and EasyJet?

Grant Shapps: As I mentioned in previous answers, billions of pounds have gone into support for the sector, and even once all those schemes have been exhausted, there is a programme run specifically by the Treasury that enables bespoke support to the industry. I cannot go into details because those are confidential arrangements, but they do already exist.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend address international rail travel? He will know that Eurostar services from Ashford and Ebbsfleet have been suspended until 2022. Can he assure me that it remains the Government's intention that those services should be resumed as soon as possible and that the Government recognise the importance of Kent's international rail services?

Grant Shapps: Absolutely. I can assure my right hon. Friend that we are very concerned to see those stations closing and the lack of activity. As with our discussions about airlines, this is entirely driven by the progress, unfortunately, of the virus. We will continue to keep it under review and work very closely with HS1 and that line to get them reopened as soon as possible.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: The Prime Minister has ruled out testing at airports, claiming that it gives a "false sense of security". Does the Secretary of State agree with the Prime Minister about airport testing, or is this likely to be revisited when he updates the House on quarantine testing?

Grant Shapps: I mentioned a few moments ago the example from an airport boss relayed to me this morning where a day zero test failed to pick somebody up whereas a day seven or eight test was able to do that.

That shows why a single test on arrival is not the solution, much as it is not the solution to temperature-test somebody on arrival to see whether they have got coronavirus. We need to be more sophisticated than that, and we absolutely will be. I remind the hon. Gentleman that different parts of the devolved Administrations will need to come to their own decisions on it as well.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: I agree completely with my right hon. Friend on the need for testing to improve and to increase. Given that in most international travel, someone arrives at the airport sometimes many hours before travelling, will he give consideration, as the science moves forward, to enabling testing to take place before people get on aircraft so that if they are showing signs of symptoms, or they actually have the virus, they are not allowed to travel at all and not allowed to infect people on the plane they were travelling on?

Grant Shapps: A sort of pre-quarantine is something that other countries are using; my French counterpart is using a 72-hour test before people arrive in France, for example. Again, you need to be certain that somebody has quarantined during that period and be cognisant of the incubation period, which can be up to 14 days with coronavirus, so it is not an entirely straightforward solution, but I do think it is worth additional examination. Again, I look to the scientists to help advise on this, and they are being very forthcoming with that advice.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab) [V]: Heathrow airport has a large testing facility that is sitting idle, the UK economy is losing an estimated £60 million a day in tourism revenue, and constituencies near airports, such as mine, are in economic crisis due to covid. If equivalent countries with lower infection rates, such as Germany, can provide targeted support for their aviation sector, such as furlough extension in our case, and quick-turnaround tests—tests are getting more accurate all the time—why cannot the UK?

Grant Shapps: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady heard my previous comments about day zero testing, but Germany is one of the countries that I know has been carrying out some tests at the border, along with France, Iceland and others. Some of those countries have found that that on-the-day test is not the solution that we want it to be in terms of detecting the disease. As I said earlier, we are following the science and allowing the scientists, including at Porton Down, to look at the various tests and then provide advice about what would be a safe time, and I am working closely with the industry to try to get that in place.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): I welcome the statement and the pragmatic way that the Secretary of State is proceeding. My view is that the 14-day quarantine is a bit of a blunt instrument, and I am doubtful whether everybody does it. I think that if we moved to a seven-day double-test system, it would make people safer but could also encourage more travel, so we may get a double advantage from doing that. I welcome what the Secretary of State has said, and all speed to him.

Grant Shapps: I appreciate my hon. Friend's comments. The only thing on which I disagree with him is that I think the first test is not required and will lead people, if

they test negative, to think that they maybe do not need to quarantine. The test that helps to shorten would be the important one.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: How concerned is the Secretary of State about other countries placing quarantine restrictions on the UK because of the rising tide of coronavirus infection here?

Grant Shapps: I think the rises here and elsewhere are concerns for everybody. We saw with France, for example, that its case numbers went up and so far there has not been quarantine in return, but of course it remains a live issue. It is something that we in this country can all do something about by following the rules and by reminding others that this virus has not gone away and to make sure that we do not spread it.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): Just in recent days, Bolton has seen the highest infection rate in the country; today it stands at 115.8 per 100,000, with local media associating the dramatic spike in cases with a British holidaymaker who went on a pub crawl after returning from Spain. Will the Secretary of State join me in calling on everyone to do the right thing by staying home for the full quarantine period if mandated to do so after returning from abroad?

Grant Shapps: Yes, absolutely. How irresponsible is it to bring a disease back and then spread it around communities and put people's lives at risk, as well as being at risk of getting a criminal record? I absolutely join my hon. Friend in that call.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State outline what discussions are had and what information is shared with the Northern Ireland Executive to align international travel advice as closely as possible while still accepting and respecting devolved authority? I am ever mindful that people from Northern Ireland travel from Belfast directly and use Glasgow, Manchester, Heathrow, Gatwick and even Dublin International airport for connections to further afield. Does he believe that there is a case for mandatory alignment to keep all regions safe?

Grant Shapps: As discussed earlier, there is a devolution settlement that for 20 years has not been subject to these types of questions, which are usually to do with reserved powers. They are what they are. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I am in very close contact with my opposite numbers in Northern Ireland, including as recently as today, and we continue to try to co-ordinate across our Union as much as possible.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): As international travel slowly but surely gets back on its feet over the coming weeks and months, will the Secretary of State look at what further support he can give to help the many, many jobs dependent on the travel industry, such as through airport slots for airlines?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend raises the interesting question of the 80:20 rule—I think that is what he is referring to—which, at the moment, is a European competence, but from 1 January will be a matter entirely for the United Kingdom. I will be considering it very carefully to help the entire sector.

Mr Speaker: Will everybody be brief now? I call Dr Rupa Huq.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): This in-out, hokey cokey of on-off air bridges and quarantine comes without interruption. Passengers have landed at Heathrow and gone straight on to the Piccadilly line through Ealing and Acton, which is now a petri dish—we have an above-average virus rate—so can he please stop playing politics and give Transport for London the bail-out that it deserves at a time of national crisis to save the whole of London and my constituents from that second spike?

Grant Shapps: I congratulate the hon. Lady on shoehorning TfL into all this. I know that we will be having further conversations, but if memory serves me right, I have already bailed it out to the tune of £1.6 billion.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): Travel corridors are a necessary, albeit blunt, instrument to control covid levels in this country, and I welcome my right hon. Friend's further announcements today. However, does he agree that differing rules across different parts of the UK are confusing and awkward both for passengers and tourist industries?

Grant Shapps: I do accept that this adds to some confusion for people, but none the less, we respect the settlement that is in place. It is important, though, that we work as four nations as closely as possible together, and I will continue to look for opportunities and ways to do that, including through a lot of information sharing to enable us, I hope, to come to decisions that confuse people a bit less.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I am surprised that the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) did not welcome the fact that the Transport Secretary is following what was done in Wales in relation to having an islands policy. It is good that devolution is helping each different Administration to learn. Can we, though, have a look—as his hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said—at the issue of announcements at 4 am on a Thursday, rather than at a time when people can have their travel arrangements in place?

Grant Shapps: Yes, the usual pattern is in the afternoon on a Thursday with the measures then coming in at 4 am, as the hon. Gentleman says. I understand the point about the changeover date, as I mentioned before, which has to be measured against the question, “If you know there is a problem, is it right to wait and allow that problem to develop?” But it is a judgment call and I am not going to pretend otherwise. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), I will certainly be reflecting on this further.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Thousands of international travellers used to come into the country via HS1 before the virus hit. Now HS1 is in a perilous position, with both Ebbsfleet and Ashford stations closed until at least 2021. Given the Department's commitment to high-speed rail, would the Secretary of State or one of his team care to meet HS1, Eurostar and me to try to resolve this serious situation?

Grant Shapps: Yes, it is a concern that those stations are closed until 2021 and I would be very happy, with the Rail Minister, to have that meeting. It is extremely concerning and is, again, another sign of how all-encompassing the fight against this virus—it is not over yet—is. I will make sure that the meeting is set up.

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 suspend the House for three minutes.

4.38 pm

Sitting suspended.

Birmingham Attacks and Extinction Rebellion Protests

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call Minister Kit Malthouse to make a statement, I should remind right hon. and hon. Members that a person has been arrested in connection with the Birmingham attacks and that they should take care not to say anything that might prejudice the trial. It may also be helpful to tell the House that, given that this statement covers two issues, I will run the statement for up to 90 minutes.

4.41 pm

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse): By your leave, Madam Deputy Speaker, before making a statement on the Extinction Rebellion protests, I want to say how shocked and deeply saddened both I and the Home Secretary are by the incident in Birmingham in the early hours of Sunday. Our thoughts are with the families and victims of this appalling attack. The police have made a number of arrests overnight and it therefore would not be appropriate for me to comment further on an ongoing investigation. I am in contact with the chief constable, and the Home Office stands ready to support the force in any way it needs. Just a few hours after the incident, a man sadly lost his life following a stabbing in Lewisham, and we have also seen a serious shooting incident in Suffolk this morning.

I want to reiterate before the House that this Government are absolutely committed to tackling violent crime in all its forms. We have increased police funding, provided surge funds for those forces most affected by violent crime and set up violence reduction units to identify those at risk and to intervene early. We will do everything in our power to tackle violent crime and prevent more senseless loss of life.

On Friday night, Extinction Rebellion protesters used trucks and bamboo scaffolds to block roads outside the newsprinters works at Broxbourne, Hertfordshire and Knowsley, near Liverpool. These presses print *The Sun*, *The Times*, *The Sun on Sunday* and *The Sunday Times*, as well as *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Mail on Sunday* and the London *Evening Standard*. The police reacted quickly on Friday night, arrested around 80 people nationally and worked throughout Saturday to clear the sites completely. In Broxbourne, approximately 100 protesters were reported in attendance. Assistance from neighbouring forces was required, with work long into the early hours to ease the disruption. Fifty one protesters were arrested for public nuisance and subsequently charged with obstruction of the highway. They were taken to three custody suites in Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and London. Disruption concluded by midday on Saturday. All main roads remained open, including the nearby A10. However, there was disruption to the distribution of newspapers as well as for local businesses.

In Knowsley, a group of 30 protesters were reported in attendance alongside 10 observers, one legal adviser and one police liaison individual. Thirty protesters were arrested, with disruption concluding by 10.45 the next morning. These protesters were subsequently charged with aggravated trespass and bailed to appear before magistrates at a later date. Twenty four protesters also

attended a print works in Motherwell, Lanarkshire in Scotland. In this instance there was no disruption caused and no arrests were made.

A free press is the cornerstone of a British society. The freedom to publish without fear or favour, to inform the public, to scrutinise our institutions and to stimulate debate on events that affect each and every one of us is indispensable. The actions of Extinction Rebellion were a direct challenge to this freedom and the values of liberty and tolerance that we hold dear. Extinction Rebellion claims to be an environmental campaign group, yet that worthy cause is undermined by its tactics. Its actions show that it is not interested in purely peaceful protest, dialogue and debate. Instead, it seeks to impose its view through this kind of direct action.

The right to peaceful protest is a fundamental tool of civic expression and will never be curtailed by the Government. Equally, it is unacceptable for groups such as XR to hide behind the guise of protest while committing criminal acts that prevent law-abiding citizens from going about their lives. All of us will remember the disruption caused last year as the group blocked roads and major transport routes. Police forces across the country were forced to divert resources away from tackling other crime in order to oversee those occupations. It is a terrible shame to see those counterproductive tactics revived in the midst of a pandemic, when we are only just recovering from the profound disruption of lockdown. Throughout the pandemic, our police officers have been on the streets every day working to keep the public safe and to stop the spread of coronavirus. In placing unnecessary pressure on our emergency services, the actions of the protesters are contemptuous not only of the police but of the public whom they seek to protect.

The irony is that the United Kingdom is already doing more to tackle climate change and decarbonise our economy than almost any other nation on earth. The UK is the first major economy to legislate to end our contribution to climate change by 2050. Since 2000, we have decarbonised our economy faster than any other G20 country. The Prime Minister has set up two Cabinet Committees focused on tackling climate change—one for strategy and another for implementation—discussing how Departments can go further and faster in meeting our legally binding 2050 net zero target. We are also hosting the next UN climate change conference, COP26, which will take place in November in Glasgow. It would be far more productive if, rather than plotting disruption and chaos, those behind Extinction Rebellion put their efforts into working with the Government to tackle climate change and build the green economy. While they persist in their current course, however, our message to those individuals is clear: if you plan to curtail our freedoms through criminal acts, be in no doubt that you will face the full force of the law. As a Government, we will not stand by and allow the livelihoods of hard-working people to be undermined by a minority using the pretence of tackling climate change to impose an extremist world view.

Extinction Rebellion's actions have shown how the tactics of disruptive protests are changing. The Home Office has been engaging with police chiefs to understand the challenges they face and to assess how they can facilitate peaceful protest while not causing significant disruption and infringing on the rights of others with differing views. The Home Secretary and I are committed

to learning the lessons of recent protests and ensuring that the police have the powers required to deal with the disruption caused by groups such as XR. I will keep the tools available to tackle this behaviour under constant review. As always, our thanks go to the police for their tireless efforts to respond to all manner of incidents, and particularly at this time when so many have worked so hard during the pandemic. I hope that the leaders of Extinction Rebellion will issue an apology to them for actions that have been roundly condemned by all mainstream opinion in our country.

By its actions this weekend, XR has done nothing to bolster the cause of fighting climate change. Rather, it has reminded us of the value of a free press and free expression and made us think about what more we may need to do to protect those freedoms. I commend this statement to the House.

4.48 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for advance sight of it. I will first turn to the awful events that took place in the early hours of yesterday in Birmingham. This terrible attack in our second largest city was an absolute tragedy. A young 23-year-old man lost his life, two people—a 19-year-old man and a 32-year-old woman—suffered critical injuries and a further five people were injured. Our thoughts are with the family and friends of the man who was killed and all those injured in this senseless attack as well as those affected by other violent incidents in Lewisham and Suffolk, to which the Minister referred.

Like the Minister, I pay tribute to the first responders and emergency services who were on the scene rapidly to attend to the injured. They acted with dedication and bravery, and we are all grateful to them.

I would also like to pay tribute to the people of Birmingham. The police and crime commissioner for the west midlands, David Jamieson, told me this morning how calmly people were getting on with their business, despite this tragedy. That is a testament to the spirit of the people of Birmingham and the hard work of the local police to keep them safe. I also want to thank officers from surrounding forces in Lincolnshire and Staffordshire, who came to the city to help police locally and provide reassurance.

As the Minister said, this incident is the subject of an ongoing investigation, so we must not jump to any conclusions or prejudice any potential investigation or conviction. However, whenever such an incident occurs, there are of course serious questions that must be asked. What was known about the suspect, and when, prior to arrest? What systems were in place to respond to such incidents, and what systems would prevent such an incident from occurring again? As the picture becomes clearer, it is vital that these questions are answered and that any lessons are learned going forward.

More generally, all Members of the House will be deeply concerned about the wider rise in violent crime that we are seeing. As the former chair of the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime and violence reduction, I am all too aware of the seriousness of this issue. I know that West Midlands police, along with David Jamieson, the PCC, is taking this very seriously, and the violence reduction unit is doing some great preventive work in the west midlands. Does the Minister accept that over the past decade we have seen knife crime rise in every police force area in England and Wales, and

[Sarah Jones]

that easing lockdown restrictions poses particular challenges? Does he further accept that rising violent crime must be urgently addressed?

Turning to the matter of Extinction Rebellion, I trust that the Minister will agree with me, rather than some members of his own party, in recognising that tackling climate change is the challenge of our generation. However, we also know that the free press is the cornerstone of democracy, and we must do all we can to protect it. As a result, actions that stop people being able to read what they choose are wrong. They will do nothing to tackle climate change. Those who break the law should be held to account. As the Leader of the Opposition said over the weekend, the actions of those who deliberately set out to break the law and stifle freedom of the press are completely unacceptable. Stopping people being able to buy the newspapers they choose and hitting small businesses in the process is hugely counterproductive. It does nothing to tackle the vital cause of tackling climate change. In fact, it sets it back.

On the policing response to the incidents, can the Minister confirm whether the authorities had any intelligence that these incidents might occur?

Today in the media, new laws have been mentioned by the Home Secretary. Can the Minister confirm what aspects of our current public order laws he believes are inadequate? Will he also confirm which aspects of the Coronavirus Act 2020 dealing with gatherings he believes leave gaps? Does he agree that we should not forget the many people who are concerned about climate change who wish to peacefully and lawfully protest, and that that right should be protected?

Climate change is one of the biggest challenges that this generation faces, and I am sure that many colleagues across the House have had the same experience as me. Whenever I go into a school, it is the children who want to talk about climate change and who cannot understand why we have not done more to tackle this existential crisis. The Government must do all they can to drive climate change up the agenda, and on this we will hold them to account.

Kit Malthouse: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her remarks and her thanks to the police, which are very welcome, and also for clearing up a little confusion about the Opposition line on the XR protests. Her unequivocal support for the rule of law is very welcome.

On her questions, obviously there will be lessons to learn from the Birmingham attack. Like all these unusual events—and it is an unusual event, thankfully—there will be lots of analyses done post event and post the case that may be brought, if there are charges to be brought. We will then use our general networks and work in the Home Office to try to promote them in similar police forces. It is gratifying, as she pointed out, both with regard to that incident and with the protests in mind, that police forces have honed their ability to co-operate and provide mutual aid to each other very swiftly. Much of that has come out of the covid preparedness work to make sure we are able to deploy large numbers of police officers across the country if and when we need to. Certainly the response of neighbouring forces around Birmingham and Hertfordshire over the weekend was gratifying and very welcome.

In terms of the hon. Lady's specific questions, the intelligence picture is not entirely clear. The fact that the disruption was successful would indicate there was not a police presence there to prevent the intervention. No doubt there will be questions asked about how intelligence around these protests can be improved. As part of that work, we will be looking at the tactics deployed by the protesters, not least the gluing on and locking on. That is a new phenomenon of the past couple of years, which has required the police to develop specialist teams and techniques, paradoxically using quite unpleasant chemicals to get people unglued. We will ensure that the police have got exactly the tools they need, from a legal and practical point of view, to deal with these kinds of problems swiftly.

Finally, I reassure the hon. Lady that we absolutely believe that peaceful protest is a key freedom and a key part of our way of life in this country, and we will do everything we can to protect it, but that also means protecting those who have different views from a protest group and ensuring that they can express their views, whether that is through the pages of *The Daily Telegraph* or, indeed, on the streets. Making sure that we have a sense of order around protest and debate in this country is critical to our freedom in the future.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Would it be possible for us to release some of the pressure on the police and the courts by, when people are arrested for breaking the law, such as blocking the highway in some of these riots, removing them from that place, giving them a fixed penalty notice and telling them that it might appear if a background check is done on them in the future, although it might not be a criminal matter? That seems to me to be something that might help, but I am no expert—the Minister is. What does he say about that?

Kit Malthouse: That is a useful suggestion from my hon. and gallant Friend. He will know that during coronavirus we have been using fixed penalty notices—not in huge numbers, given the scale of the British population, but nevertheless to some effect. The post-match analysis will have to look at what impact they have had on behaviour and compliance and see whether we could use more pre-court or police-style disposals to great effect. However, the one thing we should stress is that at the moment our view is that where a crime is committed, it should be investigated and put before the courts if at all possible. Certainly I hope that will be the case in these circumstances.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (SNP) [V]: I thank the Minister for prior sight of his statement. I join him in deprecating the violence on the streets of Birmingham. Like him, my sympathy goes to the families and to the victims. We are grateful for the action by the police and agencies to address the situation and to reassure communities. Obviously due process will now apply. We also share concerns regarding violence perpetrated elsewhere, which shows why violence requires to be treated not just as a criminal justice issue, but as a public health matter.

Where I disagree with the Minister and differ from him in particular is that I very much regret his conflating that dreadful incident with the actions of Extinction Rebellion. The latter group perpetrated no violence—random or otherwise—nor is it a criminal gang, terrorist

group or a deranged individual. Any attempt to portray those people as that is wrong and a dangerous precedent in a democracy. The actions carried out by Extinction Rebellion, both in Scotland and in England, were a peaceful protest. That should not be forgotten, and that remains legitimate. It is a group of young people, although not always entirely young, who care about the environment. That is a legitimate position to take. This action was not an attempt to close down free speech, and to suggest otherwise is disingenuous. All they were seeking to do was to disrupt the outgoing of print for a period of time. There was no cessation of the print being published. Indeed, it appeared online and at most delivery was delayed to some shops.

To equate that almost with actions such as those in Belarus and Hong Kong is fundamentally wrong. We must be very wary of overreacting. The protest replicated actions taken down through the centuries, from the Chartists, through the Suffragettes, to trade unionists and civil rights protesters, including over the poll tax. We might not all agree with Extinction Rebellion's tactics, but we do have to accept it has a legitimate view and must be allowed to carry out its peaceful protests. Otherwise it is this institution that is threatened, as opposed to the right of free speech mentioned by the Minister.

On the acts of violence, will the Minister ensure that violence is treated as a public health and not simply a criminal justice issue, and that we must address its manifestations, on which progress has been made in Scotland? On the Extinction Rebellion protests, can we ensure that the right to protest that has been enshrined and protected in this institution and this Chamber throughout the centuries will remain? Opposing the views of particular titles is not interfering with free speech. Can I ask that the aim of this Government always be to protect peaceful protest?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman seems to be a little confused. Holding a joint statement on two issues does not necessarily conflate them. It is a single departmental statement because I have had to deal with both issues. We could have had two statements, but it might not have been an efficient use of your time, Madam Deputy Speaker, or indeed the Chamber's. There has been no attempt to conflate the two.

I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman has positioned the SNP outside mainstream opinion. *[Interruption.]* Well, you're all expressing consternation, and speaking, smiling and laughing. I do not know why me expressing concern is worthy of derision. In truth, the vast majority of people in this country, and all mainstream parties in this country, have expressed alarm at the tactics of Extinction Rebellion over the weekend and its stated aim of disrupting newspapers' ability to distribute their views and opinions because they do not agree with them. One of the first things that happens in extremist states and takeovers is an attempt to grip the television station, the radio station or the newspapers. Control of information is key so we need to take care with these things. I hope he will agree with me in time.

On violence and public health, the hon. Gentleman is quite right that we want a 360° approach to combating violence. As somebody who worked at City Hall between 2008 and 2012 fighting the last spike in knife crime, I know only too well the value of that approach. I held many meetings a decade ago with Karyn McCluskey,

who was then running the knife crime efforts in Glasgow, in parallel with those in London, and at the time we were both successful in driving numbers down.

Finally, on the right to protest, as I said in my statement, we in the Conservative party absolutely and fundamentally grasp the fact that our individual liberty is based on a series of freedoms—freedom to associate, freedom of speech, freedom of thought, property rights—that are fundamental to our view of the world and which will remain so into the future.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): I, too, extend my condolences to the family of the person who died in the early hours of Sunday morning, and wish a speedy recovery to the others injured in the senseless knife attack in Birmingham. Will the Minister join me in condemning the suggestion by the West Midlands police and crime commissioner almost excusing the attack as resulting from pent-up frustrations from lockdown, and reinforce the message that violence of any kind is completely unacceptable and that those who break the law will face the full consequences of their actions? May I also invite the Minister to make an assessment of all the additional greenhouse gas emissions that arose from the demonstrations by Extinction Rebellion? I am thinking of the helicopter that hovered from dawn to dusk and of all the additional cars.

Kit Malthouse: I find the remarks of the police and crime commissioner inexplicable. We are in a sorry place if we ever accept that the primary responsibility for a crime does not lie with the criminal. While individuals have complex backgrounds, in the end, the primary responsibility has to lie with the individual who commits the crime; that is the only basis on which we can proceed sensibly in this area.

My hon. Friend is quite right. During the protests now and last year, I have often wondered what the carbon footprint is of the helicopter, which is fundamentally required in a public order situation, or the miles and miles of stationary traffic pumping emissions into what is an already difficult situation from an emissions point of view. Those who are involved in these protests would do well to think about those issues.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, Yvette Cooper.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I join both Front-Bench spokespeople in sending a strong message from this House about the importance of a free press in our democracy. Stopping newspapers being distributed in this way was completely wrong.

The Minister obviously needs to work with police and crime commissioners. I know that he will not want to misrepresent them in any way. We should all across this House send our sympathies to the families of those affected by not only the awful attack in Birmingham but the shocking shooting in Suffolk. The Minister will know that there is serious concern about the rise in violent crime. We have heard reports of some violent crimes being downgraded, to be treated with community resolutions and out-of-court settlements instead, as a result of long court delays during the covid crisis. Can he tell me what the Home Office is doing to monitor that, and could he send the latest figures to the Select Committee?

Kit Malthouse: I am more than happy to try to provide the information that the Chairwoman of the Select Committee requested. I am not aware of that particular phenomenon, but I will certainly make inquiries. She is right that the pandemic has caused issues in the criminal justice system. The courts recovery plan being published today—it may well have been published already—shows good progress in the magistrates court and more work to do in the Crown court. She is right that we want to minimise delays in bringing people to justice in this country, and that is what colleagues in the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office are focused on.

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the first responders who had to deal with the attack in Birmingham and those elsewhere in the country, and I also pay tribute to my local police force in Hertfordshire, which had to deal with the attempt to shut down our free press over the weekend. My hon. Friend is a champion of the police, and as the daughter of a police officer, so am I. Will he confirm that he is committed to ensuring that they have the powers, as well as the resources, to deal with the disruption caused by groups such as Extinction Rebellion?

Kit Malthouse: I welcome my hon. Friend's unequivocal support for the police, and she is quite right that Hertfordshire police did a good job outside the printworks in freeing up that fundamental liberty. We perhaps sometimes take for granted the fact that a newspaper giving us information from across the world will drop reliably on to our doormat. It would be treasured across the world to have such a vigorous and efficient press as we do.

I give my hon. Friend my commitment that we are in constant conversation with police forces and the National Police Chiefs' Council about honing our response to protests in the light of new and emerging tactics. Over the last couple of years, we have seen those tactics from XR, and we will have to think hard about how we can ensure that her liberties and those of her constituents are maintained, while their right to protest is facilitated.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I understand that some of my constituents were victims of the brutal attack in Birmingham on Sunday, so above all I want to join in passing on my condolences to the family of the young person killed in that attack. I cannot possibly imagine the distress, grief and disbelief they are feeling; they must be inconsolable and bereft. I also want to say to the families of the seven other people attacked, some very seriously, that I hope their loved ones will make the fullest recovery, both physically and psychologically.

The responsibility for this attack lies solely with the person who did it, but we all have a responsibility to support those affected by the attack. I welcome the Minister's assurances that the necessary resources will be given to West Midlands police to investigate this particular matter. In addition, will he assure Members of his commitment to victims and their families being given all the support they need in the coming weeks, days and months?

Kit Malthouse: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's remarks. He is right: all killings are senseless, but there is something particularly tragic about people being killed and injured who had gone into a city centre to have fun—to enjoy

the night-time economy post-lockdown, never expecting to encounter this kind of awful tragedy. So I join him in extending our sympathies, and I know that West Midlands police has deployed significant family liaison resources to support families both from the city and who were visiting from outside who got embroiled in this awful tragic act.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Extinction Rebellion's actions on Friday night were an attack on our society, our way of life and our freedoms. Having had to listen to all the commotion and speeches from my office during Extinction Rebellion's protests last week in Parliament Square, it is clear that the group is intent on disrupting society rather than working together with this Government and their strong green agenda to tackle climate change. Will my hon. Friend ensure that activists who pursue these guerrilla tactics will feel the full force of the law for their actions?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend can be reassured that where a crime is committed, whether by a protestor or otherwise, it should and will be investigated and charges brought.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I disagree with XR's strategy of targeting the press, but there is an irony in a Government who are renowned for avoiding the scrutiny of the mainstream media and happy to undermine the impartiality of the BBC and to welcome Fox News to these shores, now posing as the protector of free speech in order to suggest they may change legislation to criminalise peaceful disobedience by Extinction Rebellion. Is the Minister not ashamed to bracket in this statement peaceful protesters with murderers on the rampage, and will he, for the record, unequivocally acknowledge that the XR protesters were peaceful?

Kit Malthouse: I am happy to acknowledge that the XR protesters were peaceful, although crimes were obviously committed in the process of that peaceful demonstration. As I explained earlier, we are covering two subjects in this one statement more for the efficient use of the House's resources than to conflate the two subjects.

On the issue of free speech, the hon. Gentleman gave himself away slightly by deprecating those on this side of the House for welcoming Fox News "to these shores", I think he said; he obviously believes in free speech as long as people agree with him.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): It is less than three months since I stood in this Chamber the last time after similar tragic events in Reading, and I am greatly concerned that these attacks continue and would like the Minister, please, to outline what decisive action the Government are taking to stop these horrific attacks continuing.

On Extinction Rebellion, I am afraid its disruptive, costly and often illegal protest risks severely undermining the important debate on climate change and our environment; blocking roads into hospitals and the like is just not the way to do it.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is right to be concerned about violent crime, and we all are; that is why the Prime Minister has set up the criminal justice taskforce, which will be meeting this week, and which will discuss on a monthly basis what our response to all manner of crimes, but in particular violent crime, should be. As he

knows, we are recruiting 20,000 extra police officers over the next three years. We are about 4,500 into that recruitment campaign. Adding that to previous commitments, we are approximately 9,500 police officers up on 2018, which will help. We are putting money into violence reduction units and indeed into surge funding for police forces that are affected across the country. Later this month, I will be starting a series of meetings with large forces to talk to them about their murder prevention strategies, to make sure that everybody has one in place.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I welcome, in the warmest possible terms, the very robust defence of the freedom of the press that we heard in the Minister's statement. As he says, the freedom of our press to scrutinise our institutions is indispensable. With that in mind, and perhaps with the benefit of hindsight, I wonder whether he would agree that it was somewhat ill-advised of the Government in February to exclude a number of media outlets, including the *Daily Mirror*, *The Independent* and *HuffPost*, from Government briefings. Can he tell us whether we would expect to see him accepting an invitation to appear on "Good Morning Britain" any time soon?

Kit Malthouse: I know my place, and I will be deployed at the behest and instruction of my superiors to perform on screen, in the press or on the radio—wherever is required. I hope that, over quite a long career in politics—local, regional and national—I have never shied away from a challenge and my view is, "If you are not willing to go out to defend a policy, why are you putting it in place in the first place?"

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): The unacceptable actions of Extinction Rebellion show a consistent disregard for the lives and livelihoods that they disrupt. Does my hon. Friend believe we should hold Extinction Rebellion to account, not just for the significant public sector costs that rack up with the action it undertakes, but for the significant lost income that businesses across the country have suffered as a result?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. He is right that these protests are not costless. Aside from the costs to the businesses affected, there is a large overtime bill to be covered. Of all the costs, the most profound and alarming is the opportunity cost; those police officers who are spending time ungluing protesters and dismantling scaffolding are not spending time preventing knife crime, murder, rape or domestic violence. There are other much more vital activities that could be performed in the communities they serve.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I would like to thank both Front Benchers for their kind words about our city, and to express my deep thanks to the people of Birmingham, to its police force and ambulance service, to David Jamieson, who has been misrepresented here today, quite grossly, and to Dave Thompson of West Midlands police force. They have worked tirelessly and will continue to do so, as they always do, to keep people in Birmingham and the wider west midlands safe. The Minister said today that he would do anything and Birmingham would have the resources it needed to ensure that this crime can be detected and victims will be looked after. Will he guarantee that the uplift in police force numbers—of course, in the west midlands,

in Birmingham, we have had a loss of 2,000 officers since 2010 and an uplift of only 1,200—will be fully funded for the next two years? *[Interruption.]* Those are the figures—absolutely. Will he guarantee that that will be funded for the next two years?

Kit Malthouse: Obviously, I acknowledge the profound shock that this crime will have caused the hon. Lady's community. I recognise her remarks and join her in expressing sympathy to all those affected, and I acknowledge the wider shock within Birmingham. This year's uplift in police officers in the west midlands, which I believe is 366, is certainly fully funded. We have yet to decide the allocation of police officers across the country, but our commitment to 20,000 extra police officers over the next three years is unshakeable.

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Extinction Rebellion's attack on Friday night was indeed an attack on our society, fundamental freedoms and way of life. Does the Minister agree with me and with my law-abiding constituents in Derbyshire Dales, who are emailing me in droves about law and order at the moment, that activists who pursue these illegal, guerrilla tactics should feel the full force of the law immediately?

Kit Malthouse: I agree completely with my hon. Friend. She is right that all right-thinking people of this country have been outraged by tactics that are perceived as striking at one of the foundations of our freedoms. Although it might seem like a small thing, a one-off event and a peaceful protest, there is something about it that has unsettled people significantly. They want to see consequences for those who perpetrated it, and I certainly hope that will be the case.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): A member of the family of one of the victims of the horrendous Birmingham knife attacks spoke to me yesterday and again this morning. The victim was with a group of friends, and the family are very grateful to those friends, the police and the paramedics, who almost certainly saved his life. He is seriously ill now in hospital. Sadly, they were unable to do the same for the other of their friends who died.

The Minister spoke of his experience when he was at City Hall. I ask him to reflect on the fact that we still face far too many knife crime attacks, and that far too many people are losing their lives or being seriously injured. What preventive work can and should be done? Not least, what can be done to address the under-provision of mental health services, which we know about from recent knife attacks?

Kit Malthouse: I am obviously grateful for the hon. Gentleman's remarks. He is right that the solutions to knife crime are complex. As I learned between 2008 and 2012, there is no silver bullet that will drive the numbers down. However, our experience of those four years is that they can be driven down through a combination of things, including strong enforcement by the police. As he knows, we have given the police extra powers on stop-and-search—although it is controversial, we know that there are people with knives out there tonight, and our only viable tactic is to stop them, search them and remove the knives—while we create space to do long-term diversionary work with younger people, whether it is moving them away from gangs, crime and drugs, or

[Kit Malthouse]

identifying and dealing with their mental health issues early. There is a variety of things on the menu required to do it, and we will be working hard in the Home Office and across Government to put those measures in place.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Like citizens up and down the country, my Cleethorpes constituents have genuine concerns about climate change. However, on the whole they support the balanced approach that the Government are taking, unlike those in XR. Many among the leadership of XR have political motives and seek to undermine the institutions that hold our society together. I urge the Minister to do all he can to identify these people and bring them to justice so that those who have genuine concerns within the XR movement can proceed in a more orderly fashion.

Kit Malthouse: I hear what my hon. Friend says, and he is quite right that the great silent majority, for whom climate change is very important, want to see it addressed, but in a measured, moderate way. He should be reassured that over the last week or so the police have made more than 600 arrests in relation to these protests. Obviously, those individuals will be going through the investigation and charging process to make sure they face, where appropriate, consequences for any crimes that may have been committed. I hope he will have seen, given the dwindling numbers of protesters over the past week or so, that that approach is having an effect.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Last year, this House agreed with, among others, Extinction Rebellion that we are now living in a climate emergency. Does the Minister accept that this Government have failed the many, many peaceful protesters and campaigners with their inaction and lack of ambition? Does he also accept that if he wants to enact real change, he should look to adopt the expertise and policies of the world's most progressive and ambitious climate change leaders—the Scottish Government?

Kit Malthouse: I thought the hon. Gentleman was going to refer to Costa Rica, which is, of course far ahead of Scotland in terms of its expertise and the use of technology to solve climate change. We bow to no one in our record on climate change. The previous two Prime Ministers and this one are absolutely committed to our target of net zero emissions by 2050. We are making enormous advances: not least the hon. Gentleman will have seen the reduction in the use of coal in our power industry, which is now virtually eliminated—the first country of any major country across the world to do that. As I said during my statement, we have a record of which we can be proud. He is right that there is much more to do, but that does not mean that we have done nothing and, indeed, that we have not made significant progress.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): As we rise to tackle the very real environmental issues we face, does the Minister agree that what we need is reason, vigour and practicality, not alarmism and revolution?

Kit Malthouse: Always the voice of reason and moderation, my hon. Friend is quite right and, as usual,

consistent. He is a technologist and so am I. Science has solved all of humanity's problems over the decades, and I am sure it will solve climate change just the same.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We do not have contact with Khalid Mahmood, so I call Robert Courts.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Clearly, the right to protest must be protected, but so must free speech and access to the free press. Will the Minister confirm that, when protest tips over into criminality and the police have to take action, they will be supported?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend puts his finger on the button, and I completely agree with him.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I understand that Khalid Mahmood has had to withdraw, so I call Steve McCabe.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I also want to offer my thanks to the police and the emergency services who dealt with the incident in Birmingham. The suspect in Birmingham appears to have been arrested in a house in multiple occupation in a residential part of my constituency. By happenstance, I had a useful discussion today with officials at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about the dangers of an over-concentration of HMOs and non-commissioned supportive accommodation in particular areas. I want to express my thanks to the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall), for arranging that. Does the Minister agree that if this person was resident at such accommodation, it further raises safety and security concerns regarding that type of accommodation and suggests that the Home Office as well as MHCLG and the Department for Work and Pensions should be involved in any review?

Kit Malthouse: I obviously cannot comment on the particular circumstances of the investigation, but one of the things that we do know is critical in making sure that people do not become offenders—or, indeed, reoffend if they are released from prison—is that they have good, adequate and high-quality housing. I will have meetings with colleagues from MHCLG to discuss the role that they can play in our fight against crime.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I am a journalist and an environmentalist. I used to be environment editor of *The Observer* and *The Times*. I am currently chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the environment, and I have seen around the world that those countries that have a free press are far better at tackling environmental problems than those countries without a free press. Will my hon. Friend join me in condemning Extinction Rebellion's assault on the free press, and does he agree that such attacks on free speech will ultimately do more harm to the environmental cause than help it?

Kit Malthouse: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Of course, the paradox, or even the tragedy, of the protests is that I understand that the edition of *The Sun* that was prevented from being distributed contained an op-ed from David Attenborough—no less—extolling the virtues of climate change action and urging *Sun* readers to do their bit on global warming. Ten years ago, nobody would have dreamt of that opinion appearing

in that newspaper, and it shows how far the argument has been advanced by peaceful means. This protest runs the risk of setting the debate back rather than moving it forward.

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement today. Does he agree with my South Derbyshire constituents that no one is above the law and that the illegal activities of Extinction Rebellion must mean that they face the full force of the law?

Kit Malthouse: I completely agree with my hon. Friend and her constituents. When a crime is committed, it should be investigated, whether it is under the guise of protest or otherwise.

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): The appalling series of attacks that we saw unfold in my constituency, right at the heart of our great city of Birmingham, were truly shocking. My thoughts and deepest sympathies continue to be with the man who was tragically killed, those who were injured and all their loved ones. Given the rising levels of knife crime in Birmingham, which now has the second highest numbers in the country behind London, what further urgent steps will the Minister take to get to grips with this epidemic and prevent yet more people from being killed and injured on our streets? Will he also stop expecting urban police forces such as West Midlands police to do more with less, and commit to funding them in a way that is commensurate with the risks that areas such as mine face?

Kit Malthouse: I obviously recognise the challenges, in urban areas of this country in particular, and I know that the hon. Lady will be pleased to hear that we have provided many millions of pounds of surge funding to West Midlands police, alongside money for the violence reduction unit and, of course, the money to allow the uplift in the numbers of police officers. At some point this autumn, I will be visiting that force again to talk about its murder prevention strategy. I will then be able to take a better view about how prepared it is to help us in the fight against this kind of crime.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab) [V]: On behalf of the people of Knowsley, may I express our solidarity with the people of Birmingham? In a free society, peaceful protest is important, as is a free press, but does the Minister agree that that does not extend the right to any group to prevent the people of Knowsley from going about their lawful business? Will he also confirm that the police have all the powers they need to prevent the unfortunate events that took place in Knowsley and elsewhere over the weekend from being repeated?

Kit Malthouse: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's support, and he is right to say that, beyond the freedom of speech arguments, the workers in that plant would have been significantly affected and probably unable to leave work that evening. We are constantly reviewing the powers that the police have. Merseyside police managed to deal pretty effectively with that protest, having it cleared by 10.45 the next morning, but it is our duty constantly to ensure that we review police powers in the light of new and emerging tactics, and that is exactly what we will do.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): As the Minister has rightly said, our thanks go to the police for all the difficult work they do. The right to protest is a fundamental one, as is equal treatment before the law. Will he reassure me that, irrespective of the perceived worthiness of the cause, there will be equal treatment when protest occurs, and equal sanction where necessary?

Kit Malthouse: Obviously the decisions to charge, prosecute and hand out whatever sentence may be appropriate are a matter for those who are not under my control, happily—the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts—but I know that they all have in mind the fact that confidence in the criminal justice system comes from exactly what my hon. Friend says, which is that everybody, whether he be aristocrat or commoner, is treated equally.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) on the Front Bench rightly commended the people of Birmingham for going calmly about their business today. Unfortunately, that might be happening because such violent incidents are far too common on our streets now, and quite frankly, this is the shocking legacy of the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) during her time as Home Secretary. Her slash-and-burn approach to the police led to the loss of 2,300 police officers in the west midlands, as well as equally valuable police community support officers and civilian support staff. The inevitable outcome has been surging crime and antisocial behaviour, terrorised neighbourhoods and the criminals ruling the streets after dark. So will the Minister now not just talk the talk about the number of police, PCSOs and support staff, but provide the cash from central Government as well, and not just for one or two years?

Kit Malthouse: I am sorry the right hon. Gentleman sought to ascribe blame elsewhere other than with the perpetrator of this awful crime. The basic premise of his attack is completely wrong. When I was deputy Mayor for policing in London dealing with a not dissimilar spike in knife crime, both in the capital and indeed across the country, it was at a time when police officer numbers were at an all-time high and Gordon Brown and Tony Blair were spending money like water. The two are not connected. The causes of knife crime are complex and difficult. It behoves us all to take a serious non-political view and look at a 360° approach to tackling knife crime together.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): If we take at face value—I am being quite optimistic here—that the Minister does have a commitment to tackling climate change and this is not about making political points about XR, can I ask him, if he is serious about tackling climate change, when the Government will bring forward a vote on the climate and ecological emergency Bill?

Kit Malthouse: That is a matter, obviously, for the Government business managers. It is above my purview to be able to predict. The hon. Gentleman, to avoid any doubt, should know that I have long been an advocate of the hydrogen economy and was the chair of London Hydrogen Partnership for eight years. Indeed, I have been a proponent of a non-fossil fuel economy for the

[*Kit Malthouse*]

past 20 years or so. To me, science is the solution, rather than trying to batter us over the head with alternative views.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Ind): It is true that various brands of Corbynism are a little less popular these days, but does my hon. Friend agree that fining a climate change denier £10,000 for an anti-lockdown protest sets a benchmark which should equally apply to those who break the law in pursuit of more fashionable causes?

Kit Malthouse: As the right hon. Gentleman may know, a number of fixed penalty fines have been handed out over the past few days for all manner of contraventions of the coronavirus regulations. No doubt some may be disputed, but we shall see in the end where the courts decide.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I think those of us who are concerned about the climate emergency should maybe thank the Minister, because with such a grandstanding statement he is actually giving Extinction Rebellion exactly the kind of publicity that they are looking for to draw attention to the climate emergency, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) said, the Scottish Government accept but this Government still do not appear to. Perhaps he might need to consider that if Extinction Rebellion had actual confidence in the steps the Government are taking to tackle climate change, they would not feel the need to take part in these protests?

Kit Malthouse: I think the hon. Gentleman is being a bit disingenuous. We know that because of some of the placards and posters at the demonstration: they seemed to be more about socialism and dismantling capitalism than about climate change. I understand that the SNP may want to do both of those things, but that has absolutely nothing to do with a greener planet.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): We have seen the deployment of police helicopters to monitor the protests in central London, which causes disruption to residents. Clearly, the police need to do their job, but does my hon. Friend agree that we should only be using helicopters if absolutely necessary?

Kit Malthouse: As the former London Assembly member for West Central, which includes the constituency of my hon. Friend, and as a resident of Pimlico for 20-odd years, I totally understand the disruption that a constant buzzing helicopter can cause and what an impact it can have on people trying to go about their life peaceably. I know that the police are very aware of the impact a helicopter can have and only deploy it in circumstances where it is demanded. I hope that over the next few years drone technology will develop such that we are able to substitute that highly polluting and very noise aircraft for an alternative.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Five white billionaire men own the vast majority of the papers in our country. That is not free press; that is monopolistic press. It is laughable to suggest that one day of disruption causes a disruption to the fundamental principle of the free press. Protests are disrupting. If we

are to support the idea of protest, we must not overblow the issue. Of course there are crimes and people will be punished for them, so why has the Minister decided to give a statement on XR and not on the far-right protesters who disrupted Dover this weekend? Does he only care when it is climate change protesters and not when it is racist thugs in our ports?

Kit Malthouse: I did come prepared to answer questions on Dover, and I am quite happy to do so if the hon. Gentleman wishes. Thankfully, that protest went off very quietly and there were not a huge number of protesters. Sadly, two police officers were injured or assaulted by protesters at the time, but it was dealt with very efficiently by Kent police. If the hon. Gentleman thinks there is a market for his views, he is perfectly free to start a newspaper, but I doubt he will sell many copies.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): On behalf of the residents and constituents of Meriden, I would like to associate myself with the comments made in the House, and I pay tribute to the emergency services and the victims of the attack. Over the weekend, many of us refrained from commenting because, quite simply, the facts had not been established. We did not know the motive of the attacks, nor did we know who had committed them. However, the police and crime commissioner of the West Midlands said in a press conference that these types of attacks were “inevitable” given covid-19 and people losing jobs, which was quite frankly shocking and, in my view, tantamount to a surrender. Does the Minister agree that the PCC should rescind those comments and apologise, and does he agree that these attacks are not inevitable and that, as elected officials, we all have a responsibility to do everything we can to stop these attacks, including backing our police officers and keeping our police stations open?

Kit Malthouse: As I said earlier, I simply do not understand the comments of the police and crime commissioner. I had a call with him this morning, as hon. Members would expect, and these matters were not discussed. I have to say, however, that there is nothing inevitable about crime. A key plank of the approach of all Governments to crime has to be prevention. If we think smartly, work smartly and look at the complex causes of crime, we can and will prevent it in the future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister of State for his statement today. Can he confirm what steps his Department is taking to ensure that the right message goes out that if people are not peacefully protesting within the law, then there will be consequences and these will be faced by every member who takes part in these so-called protests? On occasion, these can turn into riots and can involve attacking and disrupting people, members of the police force and businesses, which will not be tolerated. Will the Minister of State clarify again that the right to protest does not mean a right to shut down business and cause loss of income or, indeed, worse—injury?

Kit Malthouse: The right to protest, like the right to free speech or to free assembly, is a gem to be treasured. It is a delicate vase, of which we must all take care, and those who abuse it, crack that vase for the rest of us

and, as a result, do us all a disservice. The hon. Member is quite right that we have to take very seriously those who use the pretext of peaceful protest to prosecute criminal acts. I hope he will have seen, from the large number of arrests that have taken place over the last week or so, that certainly the police are taking that approach.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): May I, too, echo the comments on and tributes to the fantastic West Midlands police for all the work they did following the events this weekend? The point raised by our police and crime commissioner in the West Midlands was of crime being “inevitable”, but it is not inevitable for my communities in Wednesbury, Oldbury and Tipton, who have seen their police stations closed and their community policing undermined by this police and crime commissioner. Will my right hon. Friend give a reassurance to my communities, some of the most vulnerable in the west midlands, that this Government have their back, and will he meet me to discuss the campaign to keep Wednesbury and Tipton police stations open?

Kit Malthouse: I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to talk about the issues in his constituency. He is quite right, as I said earlier, that there is nothing inevitable about crime. If we accept an inevitability, we are basically abrogating our duty towards our fellow citizens to stretch every sinew in keeping them safe, and that is exactly what this Government will do.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): First, can I also echo the sentiments across the House in bringing my condolences to the families of all those affected by the horrific attacks in the past few days? I sincerely hope that the Minister and the Secretary of State will use this opportunity to reflect on the impact of a decade of Tory cuts to our police services across the UK. It is undeniable that forces across the country are already under extra pressure because of coronavirus. Can the Minister therefore please confirm today exactly what steps the Home Office is taking to prevent further tragedies taking place and unnecessary deaths from occurring on our streets?

Kit Malthouse: It will not surprise the hon. Lady to know that the Prime Minister, a former Mayor of London, and I, as his former deputy Mayor for policing and crime, take the issue of violent crime extremely seriously. That is why he set up the criminal justice taskforce, why he personally is leading the fight against crime in this country and why we have seen enormous changes in the crime landscape, not least the recruitment of 20,000 extra police officers, from which her area, like every area in the country, will benefit. It is worth saying and reiterating, as I said earlier, that the solutions to crime are complex and difficult and will require all of us to work together in that fight, and I hope she will join us in our fight against crime both in her constituency and elsewhere in the country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I want to try to get everybody in, so can we be fairly brief in questions and in answers as well?

Gary Sambrook (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): Will the Minister join me in thanking Chief Superintendent Steve Graham and his team for their amazing work and bravery over the weekend in response to the terrible

incident in Birmingham, especially in their fight to combat disinformation online and on social media? That work will not have been aided by the disgraceful comments of the police and crime commissioner, who tried to excuse this murderer before he had even been arrested.

Kit Malthouse: I know that West Midlands police and the chief inspector will be very grateful for my hon. Friend’s support. It is always heartening when Members of Parliament know their local senior police officers by name, because it means that they have met them, talked to them, understand their job and support them. I am very pleased that he does that as well. I hope that he and everybody in his part of the world will join together in fighting the crimes that his community face.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: Rights and responsibilities go hand in hand, and the democratic right to peacefully protest is absolute but sits alongside a responsibility to respect the law. Parliamentary time is at a premium. On the radio yesterday, the Minister’s former colleague and ex-Attorney General, Dominic Grieve, stated that no new law laws were required if the police used the substantial powers they already have. So is this partly a question of police resources, and how do we ensure that the existing laws are used?

Kit Malthouse: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s unequivocal support for protest but also for making sure that we investigate crime. As I understand it—obviously after every incident like this there will be a review and lessons to be learned—some of the delay that arose was around the tactics that XR used in erecting scaffolding and using glue and locks to attach themselves to the road and to other items. The police have the capability to deal with those issues, but it is largely in places like London where we see most of the protests, so we will have to review whether we need this capability elsewhere, and if so we will have to make it happen.

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): As a Brummie by birth, my thoughts go out to all the victims of this weekend’s appalling incident. But knife crime is not just a problem in our cities. In 2017, Ryan Passey was tragically killed at the hands of a knife bearer after an altercation in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that there needs to be tougher action against those carrying knives and more understanding as to why people feel compelled to carry one in the first place?

Kit Malthouse: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Having met far too many victims of knife crime myself, I know she is absolutely right. It behoves us all—we all have a duty—to think carefully about what more we can do to address this terrible phenomenon. I do not understand what possesses somebody to take a knife out at night, not least because we know that if someone carries a knife they are actually more likely to be stabbed, not less, even if they are carrying it for self-defence. What we need to get to is a situation where people know that our public space is well guarded and is a lawful public space, and therefore feel safe enough that they do not have to carry a knife, even for self-defence.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Does the Minister understand the genuine concerns about any plans to reclassify Extinction Rebellion as a

[Patricia Gibson]

criminal group and the implications that this may have for peaceful protest, especially given that last year the Prime Minister's own father addressed an Extinction Rebellion rally and said that he backed their methods?

Kit Malthouse: The classification or otherwise of any group depends on their conduct. Perhaps Extinction Rebellion, in its wider sense, needs to think about the group within its number that is employing these extreme tactics and whether that is appropriate for members of the organisation, but that is a matter for it. As I say, we constantly keep all these things under review, and it is a reflection of the conduct of individuals in society as to how they are classified.

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): West Midlands police did a remarkable job under difficult circumstances this weekend. I would like to say a special thank you to the emergency services involved, and my condolences go to the families of the victims. Can my hon. Friend assure me that, assuming that the suspect is convicted, this man will have the full weight of the law brought against him for these horrendous crimes? The people of Birmingham, like those in neighbouring West Bromwich East, demand that. We want everyone to know that the west midlands is a fantastic place to live and work.

Kit Malthouse: Notwithstanding my hon. Friend's obvious concern for justice to be served for those victims, I obviously cannot comment on the case or, indeed, what the person who I understand is in custody is being held in custody in connection with. However, I know that those people who are involved in the investigation and then prosecution and conviction of whoever is identified as the perpetrator of this crime will certainly have the sentiments that she expressed in the front of their minds.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab) [V]: Direct action is a proud part of our history and democracy. Through it, the Chartists and suffragettes helped secure the right to vote and trade unions won the eight-hour working day and paid holidays, and it played a key part in securing legislation for gay rights and for women's and racial equality. If pursued, would not the Home Secretary's suggestion of defining Extinction Rebellion as a criminal gang be a betrayal of our proud tradition of civil liberties?

Kit Malthouse: Direct action is not the same thing as a crime. If the hon. Gentleman is saying that there are certain crimes that he wishes to ignore, then I am afraid the Opposition are in a very difficult place. I am the Minister for policing and crime, and when, under our current law as approved through this House, somebody commits a crime, I have no choice other than to condemn it.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): The people of Ashfield see no benefit in protesters gluing their ears to the pavement, spraying red dye on our monuments or camping out in trees on Parliament Square. Extinction Rebellion is now public nuisance No. 1 because of the disruption it causes, as well as the massive cost to our emergency services when, frankly, they have better things to do. Does my hon. Friend agree that this group should be

classified as a crime group and feel the full weight of the law if it continues to disrupt members of the public going about their daily business?

Kit Malthouse: I know that my hon. Friend is the genuine voice of his constituents, and he will have received many emails from them on this issue. As I said earlier, the classification of any particular group depends on its conduct in society. Obviously, when a crime is committed, that should be investigated and prosecuted, and punished accordingly.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) [V]: According to today's *Times*, the Prime Minister is considering new powers to prevent newspaper presses from being blockaded, but the Foreign Secretary says that adequate enforcement powers exist already. I wonder whether the Minister can say which he believes is right—or is this a case, as usual, of the Government's left hand not knowing what their right hand is doing?

Kit Malthouse: Even before the events of this weekend, we were keeping the rules and regulations, the law and police powers around protest under constant review. As the hon. Lady will know, the nature of protest has changed quite significantly over the last 15 or 20 years, so she would expect that to happen, and it seems like a perfectly natural thing for us to do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Just to re-emphasise, we need to move through the remaining questioners so that we can get on to the next business.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): The Minister will know that there is no greater advocate for the environment or low carbon than me—I worked in the sector for many years—but does he not agree that the actions of Extinction Rebellion, whether vandalism, blockading or even threatening to have MPs shot in the head, as its founder said, undermine the good cause? Does he agree that we need to root out extremists, be they far left, far right or eco-extremists?

Kit Malthouse: Absolutely right. My hon. Friend speaks the truth. The sad effect of the events this weekend is that they have probably turned more people off the cause than they have encouraged to join it.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The law has to apply to everyone equally, whether they are protesting about the environment or not, but designating Extinction Rebellion as an organised crime group is surely a step too far. What will the consequences be for genuine people who follow the protests of Extinction Rebellion and want to get involved in protesting against climate change—could they then be prosecuted under some new law for being involved in organised crime?

Kit Malthouse: As I have said repeatedly, the classification of any organisation depends on its conduct in society. There is a question for the wider membership of Extinction Rebellion about whether they are happy with the tactics of this small group and think it has been to the benefit or the detriment of their cause that these events took place over the weekend.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): With fewer hard-working commuters to disrupt, Extinction Rebellion is trying to attack the freedom of the press by stopping newspapers being printed and delivered. Will my hon. Friend reassure the House and the country that the police have the resources and the support they need to fully enforce the law and ensure that everyone abides by the same rules?

Kit Malthouse: I can reassure my hon. Friend that police forces within the area and surrounding it were able to deploy significant assets to both incidents in fast time.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In an ideal world, Extinction Rebellion would not feel the need to protest. The Minister said in his statement that the UK Government are doing a lot of good work with regard to climate change. They might be doing some good work, but it is not enough. The reality is that the UK Government are not on track to meet their fourth and fifth legally binding carbon budgets, which are not even aligned to net zero. Does he agree that one simple measure the Government could take, which would make an important statement, is to re-establish a stand-alone Department for Energy and Climate Change?

Kit Malthouse: Once again, the hon. Gentleman asks a question that is outside my purview. Just to reassure nationalist colleagues, this Government have no problem with being urged to go further and faster, to achieve more and to aim higher. What we have a problem with is people who commit a crime in order to do so.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to Thames Valley police for the excellent work they have done over the summer? We have had a summer of discontent, protests and, some would say, lawlessness. Does he agree that the public are looking to the police to restore law and order on our streets? I hope that we will give them full law and order with a crackdown, starting with Extinction Rebellion for its campaign against free speech, democratic values and the rule of law.

Kit Malthouse: I can reassure my hon. Friend that, actually, our streets have been very orderly—often more orderly than usual—during the pandemic lockdown. Indeed, crime has been significantly lower than we would have expected, which is great news, notwithstanding the amplified impact of these protests. I am more than happy to congratulate Thames Valley police, and I will be able to do so tomorrow morning in person, because I am visiting them.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: Our planet is burning, flooding and melting, meaning that people are starving, migrating, fighting and dying. Should the Government not respond to this climate crisis by urgently bringing forward emergency legislation to mitigate climate crime, rather than plotting to criminalise peaceful and—currently—lawful environmental protectors?

Kit Malthouse: We are only criminalising people who commit criminal acts. That is the point, and we shall see where those charges eventually land. As I said, the Government have done an enormous amount on climate

change, and while I do not have a problem with being urged to go further and faster, ignoring the progress we have made does no one any service.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) [V]: Non-violent civil disobedience is a common practice tool used by protest groups throughout history to demand change. Branding them as criminals is not the right way forward. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) reminded us earlier that the Prime Minister's own father spoke at a protest organised by Extinction Rebellion. Does the Home Office really wish to criminalise him and others like him?

Kit Malthouse: As I have pointed out endlessly in the last hour and a half, I completely agree that non-violent civil disobedience is perfectly legitimate—indeed, it is a fundamental right of mine as a citizen of this country—but that is not the same as committing a crime or attempting to curtail the rights of others.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): My thoughts and condolences are with the victims of the attack in Birmingham. Yesterday a 13-year-old boy was threatened with a knife on Colchester Road in Ipswich and today, as my hon. Friend mentioned, there has been a tragic attack in Kesgrave, which is just outside Ipswich. Will he pledge to make sure that Suffolk constabulary has the resources it needs to tackle crime and also that those caught in possession of a bladed weapon fear the consequences? My fear right now is that they do not.

Kit Malthouse: As my hon. Friend knows, Suffolk will receive an uplift of police officers over the next few years, and I know it is making good progress on recruitment so far. Although he is right that those who perpetrate knife crime need to fear the consequences, the critical deterrent factor in crime is the perception of the likelihood of being caught. The recruitment of more police officers and the powers that we give them will help with that in Suffolk, as it will elsewhere.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I would like to offer my condolences to the families of those injured and killed this weekend in Birmingham. Can the Minister confirm that lessons will be learned from this tragic event? Many police forces have lost thousands of staff and police officers in the past 10 years. How can he reassure the people of Birmingham and across the UK that such tragedies can be prevented in future with such job losses?

Kit Malthouse: As I said earlier, during my time at City Hall, when police officer numbers were much higher, we faced the same challenge with knife crime, but managed to drive it down, making significant reductions. We hope that we can do the same thing across the whole country, including in the west midlands, but we need support and help from people such as the hon. Lady and others to do so.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): How many more ambulances need to be stopped by protesters before the police start arresting people who create illegal roadblocks?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is quite right that that is the unfortunate effect of some of those protests. As I said earlier, the Metropolitan police has made over 600 arrests now, with dozens made over the weekend.

[*Kit Malthouse*]

Hopefully that is having an impact on the numbers, but we all want XR to think about the practical consequences of their protests, in terms of not just what we in this House think, but the impact on their fellow citizens.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Policing and police resourcing is one part of the picture of reducing knife crime. Another part, of course, is preventive work. Youth services in England have seen a cut of £1 billion, or 73%, since 2010. Youth work can provide a really good preventive strategy when it comes to knife crime. What discussions is the Minister having with his colleagues to reverse the cuts to youth services?

Kit Malthouse: We are obviously going into a spending round and giving consideration, through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my Department and the Ministry of Justice, to what funding and capability we can point towards diverting young people away from crime. The hon. Lady will know that, happily, I am also in the middle of a process of engaging with the violence reduction units that we have funded across the country, to learn from them and understand what is working, so that we can promulgate that across the rest of the country.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I have spoken many times in this House about the importance of regulating the press and how important I believe climate change is. People like me are so put off by what the XR people are doing. How do we communicate to them that they are really their own worst enemy?

Kit Malthouse: I have no doubt that they will be watching this session with interest. Notwithstanding one or two voices in support, the vast majority of Members have been against. No doubt as the individuals involved go back and sense the feeling from their own communities, families and acquaintances, they will see that this was a step too far.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP) [V]: Far-right anti-migrant activists brought the port of Dover to a halt, and 10 were arrested for racially aggravated public disorder, violent disorder and the assault of an emergency worker. Why is there not a Home Office statement on, condemnation of, and focus on that?

Kit Malthouse: As I have said, I came prepared to answer questions on that protest. It was not deemed to be of a scale necessary to make a statement about, particularly given the impact of the events in Birmingham, but the hon. Gentleman is quite right in his assessment. I do condemn those protesters, in particular those who assaulted police officers.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I add my condolences to the victims of the horrendous events that took place in Birmingham early on Sunday morning, when the police and emergency services were clearly faced with a really challenging situation. From reading accounts in the media of what happened at that time, it seems that the perpetrator was at large an hour and a half after committing the first crime and continuing to commit further crimes. I just wondered whether that was a matter of concern to the Minister.

Kit Malthouse: I wish I could comment on the circumstances of the case and the individual. Of course, I have been briefed by the chief constable. No doubt, in time, as this matter is brought before the courts, all will become apparent. Whatever happens, we will try to learn lessons from what happened on Saturday night.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: Whatever we think about Extinction Rebellion's tactics, be they right or wrong, its actions were peaceful, and such civil disobedience methods have been used throughout history, so any branding of the activists as criminals is certainly not acceptable. Does not the Minister agree that two wrongs do not make a right?

Kit Malthouse: Not all crimes are violent.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I agree with my hon. Friend in his comments earlier that a consequence of a protest turning to criminality has a cost in resources, time and priorities for our brave police officers. Will he therefore look at a legislative route that might enable us to reclaim policing costs from individuals and campaign groups when protest turns to criminality in their name?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point to which I will give due attention as we go into the spending round.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the increased resources going into policing in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire. We here all condemn the unacceptable behaviour we have seen with recent protests. It is totally unacceptable to see people resorting to violence and to also see these larger gatherings when such gatherings are banned. Will my hon. Friend join me in ensuring that we send a strong message to those organising these events that they will be fined, and that action is being taken to ensure that such events will not be allowed to take place in future?

Kit Malthouse: Obviously, a number of fines were handed out over the weekend, and my hon. Friend has given exactly the strong message he is looking for

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): As a former journalist, I was appalled at the chilling attempts to quash the free press by extremists at the weekend. Day in, day out, reporters risk their lives around the world in their determination to seek and expose the truth, which is printed on newspapers at the very print works that XR blockaded. Does my hon. Friend agree that no protest group has the right to override those committed journalists and try to dictate its version of the truth?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is exactly right. If anything, the protest highlighted—certainly to me and to many millions of our fellow citizens—the miracle that is a newspaper. Information is brought to us from across the globe and printed, dropping through the letterbox day after day without let or hindrance. If anything, the protest highlighted the value of that resource.

Imran Ahmad Khan (Wakefield) (Con): It is with regret that, since Extinction Rebellion's inception, we have witnessed it adopt increasingly radical measures, which masquerade upon an environmentalist platform. In truth, it is a considered ruse to gain support for its

Marxist agenda, which attacks British values predicated on freedom and pluralism. Blocking ambulances and seeking to constrain press freedom are but two examples from a plethora of behaviours that demonstrate its devious agenda.

Her Majesty's Government were elected with a mighty mandate from the British people to restore their ancient rights and freedoms, whether threatened from Brussels or from the barricade. The fine people of my constituency of Wakefield expect us to deliver on that. Will the Minister outline what steps the Government will take to neutralise XR's disruptive and dangerous tactics?

Kit Malthouse: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's stentorian support. He is quite right that people want to see a sense of order in this country, and that is exactly what we will put in place and what we are beavering away to make happen across the country—in his constituency and elsewhere.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): In my constituency, I often meet climate activists—people from the Green party. Two of them have stood against me in previous elections and I can honestly say that they are thoroughly decent, engaging and polite, lobbying me for things to be done. That is in stark contrast to what we are seeing at the moment. The idea that we can say that “Well, they were only attacking five billionaire press barons” is simply wrong. Small community shops have been at the heart of our communities during the covid crisis and they took a real hit this weekend. Does my hon. Friend agree that the best way to engage on this subject is to do what the people I am honoured to call my constituents do to try to tackle climate issues, rather than putting hard-working businesspeople out of work?

Kit Malthouse: As usual, my right hon. Friend is exactly right. There is a way of engaging and influencing us as Members of Parliament that works—the one that he rightly points out—and like him, I have never refused to meet a green group in my constituency. If anything, I meet them with pleasure because our views often coincide, but fundamentally, as he knows, because he has been politically active for a long time, the way to effect change is through hard work. It means people leafletting, standing in an election, fighting their corner, getting elected to this place by winning an election and then putting their agenda in place. That is what he and I have done for the last two or three decades and that is the right and proper way in a democracy.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We now have a three-minute suspension.

6.10 pm

Sitting suspended.

Virtual participation in proceedings concluded (Order, 2 September.)

Fire Safety Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

DUTIES OF OWNER OR MANAGER

‘The relevant authority must by regulations amend the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (SI 2005/1541) to require an owner or a manager of any building which contains two or more sets of domestic premises to—

- (a) share information with their local Fire and Rescue Service in respect of each building for which an owner or manager is responsible about the design of its external walls and details of the materials of which those external walls are constructed;
- (b) in respect of any building for which an owner or manager is responsible which contains separate flats, undertake regular inspections of individual flat entrance doors;
- (c) in respect of any building for which an owner or manager is responsible which contains separate flats, undertake regular inspections of lifts and report the results to their local Fire and Rescue Service; and
- (d) share evacuation and fire safety instructions with residents of the building.’—(*Sarah Jones.*)

This new clause would place various requirements on building owners or managers, and would implement the recommendations made in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase One Report.

Brought up, and read the First time.

6.13 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—*Accreditation of fire risk assessors*—

‘The relevant authority must by regulations amend the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (SI 2005/1541) to require fire risk assessors for any building which contains two or more sets of domestic premises to be accredited.’

This new clause would require fire risk assessors to be accredited.

New clause 3—*Inspectors: prioritisation*—

‘In discharging their duties under article 27 of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (SI 2005/1541) (powers of inspectors) in relation to any building which contains two or more sets of domestic premises, an inspector must prioritise the premises which they consider to be at most risk.’

This new clause would require the schedule for inspecting buildings to be based on a prioritisation of risk, not an arbitrary distinction of types of buildings.

New clause 4—*Meaning of responsible person*—

‘In article 3 of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (SI 2005/1541) (“meaning of responsible person”), at the end of paragraph (b)(ii) insert—

“(2) Where a building contains two or more sets of domestic premises, a leaseholder shall not be considered a responsible person unless they are also the owner or part owner of the freehold.”

This new clause aims to clarify the definition of ‘responsible person’ to ensure leaseholders are not considered a responsible person unless they are also the owner or part owner of the freehold.

New clause 5—*Waking watch*—

‘The relevant authority must by regulations amend the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (SI 2005/1541) to specify when a waking watch must be in place for any building which contains two or more sets of domestic premises and which has been found to have fire safety failings.’

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

This new clause would require the UK Government (for England) and the Welsh Government (for Wales) to specify when a waking watch must be in place for buildings with fire safety failures.

Amendment 1, page 1, line 16, at end insert—

‘(1C) Where a building contains two or more sets of domestic premises, the things to which this order applies includes electrical appliances.

(1D) The reference to electrical appliances means any appliances specified by Order made by the relevant authority.

(1E) Schedule 1 of the Fire Safety Act 2020 shall apply to paragraphs (1C) and (1D).’

This amendment would clarify that the Fire Safety Order applies to electrical appliances.

New schedule 1—

‘1 The relevant authority must, no later than 12 months after the date on which this Act is passed, make regulations specifying the electrical appliances covered by paragraph (1D) of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005.

2 The relevant authority must, no later than 12 months after the date on which this Act is passed, make regulations to amend the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (“the Order”) as follows—

- (a) to require the responsible person for premises to which the Order applies to—
 - (i) carry out electrical safety checks of such type as may be prescribed by the Order at such frequency as may be so prescribed (being no less frequently than every 5 years) at each set of domestic premises, regardless of whether the occupier is a tenant of the responsible person;
 - (ii) keep records of the checks for such period as may be prescribed by the Order and make them available upon request to such persons as may be so prescribed;
 - (iii) keep a register of such kinds of electrical appliances as may be prescribed by the Order that are kept in each set of domestic premises, regardless of whether the occupier is a tenant of the responsible person;
 - (iv) check whether those electrical appliances are the subject of a recall notice under paragraph 12 of the Electrical Equipment (Safety) Regulations 2016.
- (b) to require occupiers of such premises to—
 - (i) provide access to premises and allow action to remedy any failure to meet safety standards identified in a safety check carried out in accordance with sub-paragraph (a)(i);
 - (ii) provide the relevant responsible person with information about electrical appliances prescribed in accordance with sub-paragraph (a)(iii) and kept in the premises;
 - (iii) comply with any reasonable requirement made by the responsible person in relation to electrical appliances which the responsible person has reason to believe are the subject of a recall notice under paragraph 12 of the Electrical Equipment (Safety) Regulations 2016.

3 Regulations made under paragraph 2 may—

- (a) confer a power to enter premises on such persons as may be prescribed in the Order for such purposes connected with the requirements imposed under the regulations as may be so prescribed.
- (b) create offences;
- (c) amend the definition of “responsible person” in article 6 of the Order;
- (d) make such consequential, supplementary or incidental provision by way of amendments to the Order as the relevant authority considers appropriate.

4 Regulations made under paragraph 2 must provide that any power to enter domestic premises is not to be exercisable unless—

- (a) at a reasonable time and with the consent of the occupier of the premises; or
- (b) under the authority of a warrant issued by a justice of the peace.’

5 In this schedule the term “relevant authority” has the same meaning as in the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005.’

This new schedule would require the Government to make regulations specifying the electrical appliances to which the Fire Safety Order applies. It would also require the Government to amend the Order to impose additional duties on the responsible person and on occupiers. It is consequential on Amendment 1.

Sarah Jones: Let me begin, as I have at every stage of this Bill, by saying that we on the Opposition Benches support the Bill. The Minister knows that. We are keen to be as supportive as possible, but let me reiterate the point that I have also made at every stage, which is that this Bill is a shamefully inadequate response to the multiple problems for fire safety, which were so tragically brought to the fore when 72 lives were lost in the Grenfell Tower fire. The Bill—all three clauses of it—goes nowhere near far enough to prevent a tragedy like Grenfell from happening again.

The Government said that the introduction of the Fire Safety Bill would take them a step further in delivering the inquiry’s recommendations and recently cited the Bill as one of their key priorities in response to a deeply frustrated letter from Grenfell survivors. Yet the Bill does not even include provisions for any of the measures called for by the first phase of the inquiry.

The Grenfell community were failed by a system that did not listen to them. We must never forget that failure. I pay tribute to Grenfell United, the families and the whole community for continuing to tirelessly fight for justice. They should not have had to fight so hard, and hundreds of thousands of people across the country are now being failed by a system that does not listen to them—those stuck in buildings with flammable cladding, those using their income to fund waking watch and other safety measures, and those who cannot buy or sell their flats because the mortgage market has been ground to a halt by confusion and lack of Government leadership.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend starts absolutely with the crux of the matter. She will be aware that, in my own constituency of Cardiff South and Penarth, we have thousands of residents in apartment blocks who are affected by these issues. The failure of companies such as Redrow, Laing O’Rourke and Taylor Wimpey to hold to their responsibilities for fire safety and other building defects is a huge problem. Does she agree that they need to take responsibility for mistakes that they may have made in construction?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The system as a whole is fundamentally broken, and it is the developers as well as the Government who need to look to their own actions and correct them.

The Government have made many promises to bring justice to the survivors and their families, to change building and fire safety regulations and to do this quickly, but the Government are yet to make their promises a reality. At every stage, we have had to drag

them into action. During the passage of this Bill, we have sought constructively to improve it, so that it goes further as a piece of primary legislation towards improving fire safety.

New clause 1 would do what the Government say must come later. It would place robust requirements on building owners or managers and implement the recommendations—the key recommendations—from phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower inquiry. The Government said that they would implement the Grenfell phase 1 inquiry in full and without delay. This new clause, which we are moving tonight, would fulfil that promise. In what is a very complex world of building and fire safety, the new clause is relatively simple. It seeks to do four things: the owners of buildings that contain two or more sets of domestic premises would share information with their local fire and rescue service about the design and make-up of the external walls; they would complete regular inspections of fire entrance doors; they would complete regular inspections of lifts; and they would share evacuation and fire safety instructions with residents. These measures are straightforward and are supported by key stakeholders. Frankly, it is pretty extraordinary that they are not already enshrined in law.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way at this point. She is making a very powerful case. I will be supporting new clause 1, as it is worthy of support. Will she put some pressure on her Labour colleagues in the Welsh Government in Cardiff to bring forward similar proposals for consideration by the Senedd in Cardiff before the elections in May?

Sarah Jones: The Welsh Government have a proud record on fire safety, and I point the hon. Gentleman in the direction of the many actions that have been taken. In this case today, we are looking at the actions of the Government and their failure to act since the Grenfell Tower fire three years ago.

Time and again in Committee, the Minister supported what we were saying in principle but told us that we must wait for a consultation to finish, a taskforce to report, or the experts to tell us what to do. That is not good enough. We have seen with covid what can be done with political will: hospitals built in days, and whole systems restructured to respond where there is a need. If the political will was there, the Government would support this new clause and we could take one step in the direction of keeping the promises that we all made in those days and weeks after the Grenfell fire. The Government have given no timetable for when they will deliver the inquiry's recommendations through secondary legislation. The Government have continuously pushed back on their promises while thousands of people across the country are stuck still in unsafe flats.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know, and the Minister will recognise, that there are thousands of leaseholders living in flats—I support all steps being taken to improve fire safety—where, as each day passes, more bills are coming in for increased insurance and waking watches. They live in dread of the final bill for the cost of replacing the cladding, which will be completely unaffordable. It is not fair to our constituents to make them live with this nightmare that they did not

cause, and I hope she will continue to urge the Government to play their part, because only the Government can solve this.

Sarah Jones: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: only the Government can fix this problem. The lack of action and the lack of clarity about which buildings are safe, apart from anything else, and about what needs to be done has led to huge disruption for thousands of people, huge cost, mental health issues, weddings put off, jobs and opportunities not being able to be taken and all manner of problems that the Government need to fix.

The Government have constantly pushed back on their promises, while many people are still in unsafe flats. The fire safety measures recommended by phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower inquiry are urgently needed. Why would we wait for secondary legislation at an undetermined point in the future to ensure that building owners and managers share information about the design of external walls with their local fire services? Why would we delay the requirement to have inspections of individual flat doors and lifts? Why would we wait to make building owners or managers share evacuation and fire safety instructions with residents?

In Committee, the Minister responding—the hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse)—said that the Government intend to legislate further, but we need more than vague commitments about secondary legislation. At the very least, we need a clear timetable from Government that sets out when further changes to the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 will be delivered.

The fire safety order requires regular fire risk assessments in buildings, but it includes no legal requirement for those conducting the assessment to have any form of training or accreditation. I could call myself a fire risk assessor, set myself up with a logo and be responsible for one of the most important safety measures we have. No other sector would accept that. No one would accept electricians with no qualifications or gas engineers making it up as they go along. It is absurd. Any one of us could carry out fire risk assessments on schools, hospitals or care homes with no test or accreditation needed. The lack of training and accreditation in such an important area is completely unacceptable.

The Bill's changes to the fire safety order clarify the inclusion of external wall systems such as cladding and insulation, which makes the competence of fire risk assessors even more important, as they will need to understand the more complex elements and materials found in cladding systems. That hugely important issue has been raised by Members from all parts of the House on Second Reading and in Committee.

The Government should be using the Bill to legislate for higher standards and greater public accountability in fire inspections. New clause 2, tabled by the Opposition, would bring into force an accreditation system for fire risk assessors, rather than waiting for more secondary legislation. In Committee, the Minister responding referred to the “industry-led competency steering group” in relation to fire risk assessors. I hope that the Minister today can provide an update on when the Government plan to bring forward changes to address the issue of unqualified fire risk assessors.

[Sarah Jones]

Turning to new clause 3, we have talked to many experts and stakeholders who have significant concerns, which the Minister will be aware of, about how the Bill will be implemented. The Minister responding in Committee referred to the building risk review programme, which looks

“to ensure that local resources are targeted at those buildings most at risk.”—[*Official Report, Fire Safety Public Bill Committee*, 25 June 2020; c. 62.]

We would like to see a similar provision in the Bill. New clause 3 would require the schedule for inspecting buildings to be based on a prioritisation of risk, not an arbitrary distinction of types of buildings. Local fire and rescue services know their areas and the buildings where there is greatest risk. Let them decide what to prioritise first. They know better than Whitehall.

Many Members from all parts of the House have been contacted by desperate leaseholders who have been left to foot the bill for urgent fire safety works, despite not being the building owner. That is a huge challenge, as we have already discussed. The definition of the responsible person in this legislation needs to be made clear.

The Fire Safety Bill is intended to be a foundational Bill. Its purpose is to provide clarity on what is covered under the fire safety order, which will inform other related and secondary legislation. New clause 4 would be an important example of that kind of clarification. Its purpose is to clarify the definition of “responsible person” to ensure that a leaseholder is not considered a responsible person unless they are also the owner or part-owner of the freehold. The draft Building Safety Bill places various requirements on the responsible person, and refers to the fire safety order for the definition. It is vital that the fire safety order makes it clear that there is no ambiguity around the definition of “responsible person”; otherwise, there is a risk of confusion and misalignment between the two pieces of legislation, and a danger that the responsible person might seek to use that ambiguity to avoid their responsibilities under the Bill.

The definition of the responsible person has been raised by many Members from across the House at each stage of the Bill’s progress. Without clear definitions, there will be new questions of interpretation, and we will not achieve what we are setting out to achieve. The Opposition do not understand why that is controversial. Perhaps the Minister could help by explaining why he is comfortable leaving such dangerous ambiguity.

New clause 5 refers to another important issue, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) raised. Struggling leaseholders across the country have been forced to pay extortionate fees for interim fire safety measures—most commonly, waking watch—while progress on remediation work has been too slow. New clause 5 aims to clarify when waking watch should and should not be in place. The Government still have not published the findings of their audit of external wall systems of high-rise buildings, and are therefore unable to say how many buildings are covered in dangerous non-ACM cladding. However, we know from their latest figures on aluminium composite material cladding that more than 80% of private sector residential buildings, and nearly half of social sector residential

buildings, wrapped in Grenfell-style ACM cladding have not had it removed and replaced. The Government deadlines of 2019 for social sector blocks to be made safe, and June 2020 for private sector blocks, were both missed. Progress has been painfully slow, and the coronavirus pandemic has hindered it even more. The impact on residents is terrible. Tens of thousands of people have been locked down in unsafe buildings for months on end.

The National Fire Chiefs Council says that waking watch should be a temporary measure, but some blocks have been paying for it for three years, which has cost residents thousands of pounds and ruined lives. Given that the safety status of many buildings across the country remains uncertain and the timelines for cladding removal keep getting extended, clarity on when and for how long waking watch should be used would bring much-needed consistency on how the measure should be applied.

I will speak very briefly about amendment 1, tabled by the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who has persistently campaigned on fire safety for many years. I pay tribute to him and Jim Fitzpatrick, who is no longer in this House, for their campaigning work and for writing to Ministers time after time, including only weeks before the Grenfell fire, to implore them to act on fire safety. The issue of electrical safety, which amendment 1 raises, is hugely important, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing it to the House. The additional requirements on the fire and rescue service to provide a higher level of inspection and enforcement on the communal parts of buildings with two or more domestic premises, which this Bill introduces, should be accompanied by a rigorous approach to safety checks of electric appliances inside the premises. It is vital to ensure that the risk of faulty electrical appliances in multiply occupied residential buildings is minimised.

Last month, I wrote to the Minister seeking urgent action on the rising number of fires caused by faulty appliances in high-rise blocks. The number of electrical fires caused by faulty appliances has risen in England. Based on analysis of Government figures by Electrical Safety First, *The Times* has reported a rise in the number of electrical fires caused by faulty tumble dryers and fridges. The number of accidental electrical fires in tower blocks has risen in each of the past three years. If these measures cannot be included in the Bill, we will scrutinise any proposals that the Government bring forward to ensure the best possible standards of electrical safety. Will they set out a timetable to deliver that?

In conclusion, there are many issues around improving fire safety that we would have liked to see included in the Bill. However, due to its limited scope, many will have to be addressed through the draft Building Safety Bill and secondary legislation. The amendments we have tabled are straightforward; most of them are on issues that the Government have stated their intention to address but have not shown the political will to move faster on. For those living in unsafe buildings, the risk of fire will not wait for the Government to choose an appropriate date for the Bill’s commencement. After Grenfell, the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), said that her Government will do “whatever it takes” to keep our people safe.

Three years on, we urge the Government to honour the commitment to keep people safe, and to act as quickly as they can to do that.

6.30 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I rise to speak to amendment 1, and I welcome, to a greater extent, the remarks of the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones). I thank her for her generous remarks about myself, of which I am not worthy; I have simply been the mouthpiece for others who have been doing the work behind the scenes.

My right hon. Friend the Minister and I have known one another for a very long time; in fact, when I was an MP for another place, he and his dear wife were there knocking on doors for me, yet now I have tabled an amendment which is not exactly what he wants. I have something to say to him, to which he must not take offence: I am a loyal Conservative through and through, but there comes a point when that loyalty begins to wane a bit. I say to my hon. Friends on the Government Benches that the Government are in choppy waters at the moment. I do not want to tip the boat over, but I am beginning to tire of the responses we have been getting from the Front Bench, and I will come to that in a moment.

I am delighted to see present my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), who was once a fire Minister—I hope he is not here to pick holes in my argument; he had better not—and my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), who has far more expertise in electrical matters than I could ever hope to have, and also of course the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who has campaigned on this issue for many years. That shows that there is broad all-party parliamentary support on this matter, and it is not party political.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir David Amess: I hope my hon. Friend is not going to disagree.

Sir Robert Neill: I assure my right hon. Friend that I very much sympathise with the points he was making, and I am certainly not here to pick holes. As a fellow West Ham supporter, I would never dream of picking holes in my right hon. Friend's arguments, and I hope that the Minister, as another West Ham supporter—like Jim Fitzpatrick—would not either. Perhaps we can get some unanimity as to the objective, even if we need a bit of clarity on the way forward; does my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) agree that that is what we need from this debate?

Sir David Amess: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words, but the three of us have got one or two worries about West Ham at the moment because we lost 5-3 in the friendly; we hope to do a little better when the serious matches start.

Let me say at the outset that, as I said on Second Reading to my right hon. Friend the Minister, I very much support this Bill, and the hon. Member for Croydon Central said that as well. It is, understandably, short and is clear in its purpose of making provision about

the application of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 where a building contains two or more sets of domestic premises, and it also confers power to amend the order in future for the purposes of changing the premises to which it applies. That being noted, I say to my right hon. Friend the Minister that I believe that if the Government were minded to accept my amendments, that would improve the Bill even further. And what is wrong with that—that is something that we should embrace?

However, I do accept that when my right hon. Friend comes to reply, he will draw out of his folder a bit of paper telling him to resist the amendments, and to do so because they are “not in order”, or because “It's the wrong Department” or “It's the wrong time.” It is never the right time, however, and I say to my right hon. Friend that we owe it to the people who died in Grenfell, and their relatives and friends, to act as quickly as possible. And I say to those on the Treasury Bench that there is more than enough time to legislate; my goodness, we packed up on Thursday at 1.35 pm. I could have filled the Chamber's time with endless issues. I say to my right hon. Friend that we should find time in the legislative programme for this.

While taking account of phase 1 findings from the Grenfell Tower public inquiry, the Bill requires owners and managers of multi-occupancy residential buildings in England and Wales to reduce the risk of fire by removing unsafe materials on the external walls of buildings and the individual flat entrance doors. As the hon. Member for Croydon Central has said, the responsible person or duty holder for a multi-occupied residential building must manage risk for the structure, external walls, cladding, balconies and windows, but this legislation should also consider the source of fires in the first place. Surely, for goodness' sake, that is what this legislation should be all about. The purpose of my amendments is to be proactive, and to help prevent fires caused by electrical sources of ignition and ensure that consideration of the safety of electrical appliances is given in this Bill, as they are a key cause of fires in people's homes.

These amendments further build on the Government's new regulation for the private rented sector, The Electrical Safety Standards in the Private Rented Sector (England) Regulations 2020, which will give electrical safety checks every five years to tenants in the private rented sector—I certainly welcome that. I commend the Government on introducing those regulations, which had cross-party support, but I believe this Bill can be amended further to include electrical checks for all people in buildings of multiple occupancy. I know that the Minister will tell us at the end why it cannot.

I wish to thank the wonderful charity Electrical Safety First, which has worked with me, as chairman of the all-party group on fire safety and rescue, on its long-standing campaigning to prevent fires caused by electricity in domestic homes. I agree with ESF's assessment that this Bill should do something more to prevent fires from occurring in the first place, so my amendments seek a solution that will strengthen the protection that people living in high-rise residential buildings require. I accept that the Government are giving some consideration of electrical appliance safety through their Draft Building Safety Bill, but my amendments are designed to ensure that electrical appliances are registered with the responsible person for high-rise domestic dwellings and to introduce

[Sir David Amess]

mandatory checks for all residents, whatever the tenure of their home. It is truly shocking that electricity causes more than 14,000 fires a year, which is almost half of all accidental house fires. In England, 53% of dwelling fires are caused by an electrical source of ignition, but what does this House do about it? It does nothing, and there is time now to do something. Let us, in this unusual Parliament, where we are trying to fight the invisible enemy, do some good—my amendment would do that.

There are about 4,000 tower blocks in the United Kingdom, and the English housing survey estimates that they contain more than 480,000 individual flats in England alone—that is a huge number. Unless every unit in a high-rise building is subject to the same safety regime, everyone in the building can be placed at risk from one single flat—my goodness, how we found that out not so very long ago. Therefore any measure to improve electrical safety in multi-occupied buildings can help to protect more than 1 million people. New analysis of Government data reveals that nearly a quarter of the accidental electrical fires that occurred in high-rise buildings in the past five years in England were the result of faulty appliances, leads and fuel supplies, which can include electrical wiring in a property. My amendments would see a responsible person record the presence of white goods, in order to minimise the risks that faulty goods can pose in densely populated buildings—I know that that is a challenge, and I say to my right hon. Friend that I accept the practicalities about it. Keeping a record of the appliances in use would mean that faulty recalled appliances could be removed or repaired—if only that had happened with the Whirlpool appliances. Mandatory five-yearly electrical safety checks in tower blocks, regardless of tenure, are also included in the amendment. Current regulations mean that privately rented flats are required to have electrical safety checks, but other tenures are not, which has created what I would describe as a tenure lottery of buildings, which often include owner-occupier, privately rented and social housing property.

The tasks to check tenants' electrical safety would be undertaken by competent, registered electricians, and I know my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) will have something to say about that. I am aware of the concerns of the Fire Brigades Union, who have written to me. I fully accept that their members have more than enough to do without bearing the responsibility for this work, and there is absolutely no intention in the amendments that fire officers would actually undertake it. Let me provide that assurance, and I would be very happy to talk to the Fire Brigades Union about the situation.

More worryingly, analysis shows that over the past three years, accidental electrical fires in high-rise buildings have risen consistently year on year, and it is absolutely ridiculous that that is happening. High-profile tower block fires have been previously linked to electrical sources, including Lakanal House, where an electrical fault with a television claimed the lives of six people, and Shepherd's Court of course where, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith has told us in detail on other occasions, a faulty tumble dryer led to extensive damage to an 18-storey building. While other factors accelerated that fire, it must be highlighted that the

primary cause of the Grenfell Tower fire was an electrical source of ignition, as subsequently confirmed by the Grenfell inquiry—that source is in phase one documentation.

It is important to note that fires are not all caused by appliances themselves, but by misuse of them. That is why, despite my amendments, education is obviously very important. Every year, there is a week of educational awareness raising with the public on the proper use of electricity and appliances through the "Fire Kills" campaign. Recent tragic events have demonstrated the fatal risks that electrical accidents and incidents pose to people in their own homes, particularly in high-density housing such as tower blocks. Electrical Safety First has worked to ensure that tenants living in the private rented sector are protected by mandatory five-yearly electrical safety checks in their properties, which was recently brought into law. Such measures are crucial in bringing down the number of electrical accidents and incidents, and I believe that now is the time to include individual dwellings in tower blocks in that regime, regardless of their tenure.

I appreciate that this is a short Bill that will amend the Fire Safety Order 2005, which focuses on non-domestic measures, but it will also amend the order in domestic homes. That means that homes in high-rise blocks will be affected by the proposed legislation, and this offers an excellent and straightforward opportunity to ensure that all who live in such buildings are brought under the same safety regime. Given this, I believe that the newly created role of the responsible person for each high building should include the task of compiling a register of every white good in the building. That ensures that when a recall occurs, anyone with an affected appliance can be quickly alerted and the safety risks resolved. Relying on consumers to register and respond to recalls in these buildings when the potential risk is so high must be considered wholly inadequate and unrealistic.

6.45 pm

This Bill is something of a personal milestone for the all-party parliamentary fire safety and rescue group. I have been involved with the group for 20 years, and it has had a long history of correspondence and meetings with successive Ministers of every political party, but particularly over the last 10 years. I was pleased to hear my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security say on moving the Bill's Second Reading in April this year:

"There is considerable experience across the House, and we will continue to listen to views from all interested colleagues, as well as working with the all-party parliamentary group on fire safety and rescue."—[*Official Report*, 29 April 2020; Vol. 675, c. 345.]

On the basis that he is listening to people like me, I believe that the Government can improve this Bill through a number of measures that seek to improve electrical safety in UK homes. Amending the Bill provides an opportunity to make immediate differences to the safety of people who live in multi-occupied buildings. Electricity does cause fires, and I believe that the Government need to consider seriously the electrical sources of ignition.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), who have set out amendments to the Bill that are reasonable, proportionate

and non-partisan, and I cannot see any reason why the Government should not support them. I do not intend to repeat the arguments they have made cogently; I will just add a few comments of my own.

As the hon. Member for Southend West said, he has chaired or been part of the all-party group on fire safety and rescue for more than 20 years. I cannot claim to have been a member for that length of time, but I have learnt a huge amount in the time that I have been. It is one of the most effective groups within Parliament. The all-party parliamentary group on online and home electrical safety, which my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) chairs, has equally made a huge contribution on this issue, with the support of professional bodies. I urge the Minister to listen to the advice coming from those sources.

I do not know anybody who does not support this Bill. It is a very short Bill, and it aims to do two things. First, it clarifies what is meant by “common parts”, particularly in relation to external cladding and the responsibilities therein. Secondly, it is permissive, in terms of the introduction of secondary legislation to modify and add different classes of building in the future.

Had we been debating this two or three years ago, I think everyone would have said, “This is very sensible. Well done to the Government for getting on with it,” but we are not. We are three years post Grenfell. It seems like a piece of emergency legislation, when we should be on to discussing the nitty-gritty and more comprehensive measures. These amendments achieve that in various ways. I will not go through each one, but I would like to mention new clause 1.

We now have the results of part one of the Grenfell inquiry, and new clause 1 effectively asks the Government to take some of those recommendations on board. They include: that information on materials and construction is available to fire and rescue services; that plans of high-rise residential buildings are available; that inspection and testing of lifts is done properly; that evacuation procedures and information to residents are carried out properly; and that there is proper inspection of fire doors. A lot of us would have probably thought, pre Grenfell, that those things already happened, but they do not, and they did not. It is about time that they did. It is about time that the Government legislated and implemented these measures, rather than put out general, catch-all clauses.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is making a very good point about new clause 1 and the responsibilities. Would he accept that there is a significant responsibility on the original developers, architects and those involved in construction—I mentioned Laing O’Rourke, Taylor Wimpey, Redrow and others—to make sure that they are providing and have available the original construction diagrams of buildings? We have had a huge problem in Cardiff South and Penarth of not being able to get hold of those and then very expensive testing having to be done. Of course, the cost is then passed on to leaseholders, on top of the bills they may face for rectifying these problems in the first place.

Andy Slaughter: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. It is my experience from dealing with blocks in my constituency, and I am sure it is many other Members’

experience, that nobody wants ownership of this, nobody wants to pick up the tab and nobody wants to take responsibility—whether it is those who designed the building, those who built the buildings, those who manage the buildings or those who modified the buildings in ways that were not conceived. Somebody has to do that, and if they will not do that, it is Government’s responsibility to ensure that they do, and I do not think this Bill goes far enough in doing that.

New clauses 2 to 5—I am not going to go through those in detail—are, as I say, sensible and proportionate measures, which are designed to ensure that this legislation the Government are properly bringing forward works more effectively. I wait with bated breath to hear what arguments the Minister can put forward for not adopting those.

Let me come on to the amendment standing in the name of the hon. Member for Southend West, because I think that that is an important amendment. I am glad that it was found to be in scope and is being taken because he is absolutely right to say that, whereas a great deal of the focus has properly gone on construction and modification, particularly in relation to external cladding, insulation and so forth, it is also important that we look at the source of fires. It is rather a truism to say that, if we can control that source, we are going to get a lot fewer fires, whether or not they spread.

There are many issues that are being pursued here. Tomorrow, there is a ten-minute rule Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) on the registration of electrical appliances, so that where there is a need for recall, those matters can be in hand. What we are doing today is not comprehensive, but the two measures that have been proposed in the hon. Gentleman’s amendment and new schedule are entirely sensible. Yes, they are quite onerous because what we are looking for is both a register of white goods and that there are regular checks. Those have been found appropriate for the private rented sector, and I wonder why they are not appropriate for high-rise buildings where we know, as a consequence of fires such as Lakanal, Grenfell and Shepherd’s Court, that people are particularly at risk.

Let me say a brief word about that because it is in my constituency. It is just over four years since the very serious fire at Shepherd’s Court. A tumble dryer, which not just should have been recalled and had not been recalled, but was going to be repaired and was awaiting repair, was being used according to the manufacturer’s instructions—wrong instructions—and therefore did catch fire, destroyed somebody’s home, spread to several other flats and caused the evacuation of an 18-storey block. Had it not occurred in the middle of the afternoon on a summer’s day, the consequences of that would have been dire. As it happened, there were no serious injuries, but the trauma of being involved in a fire of that nature, I do not think can be imagined. If I were the Minister, this would give me sleepless nights every night until these matters are resolved.

What I fear is that the Government are continuing to take what I can politely describe as an incremental approach here. Yes, these are complicated matters and more issues come to light—every time an investigation takes place, we find more problems with more types of building—but that is the world we live in, and it does not excuse the Government from responsibility. We are

[*Andy Slaughter*]

looking at height, but we are also looking at the type of buildings, the type of users of buildings and the type of cladding that is used on buildings. They could be hospitals, hotels, care homes or schools; they could be low-rise as well as high-rise buildings. They all have risks attached to them.

It sometimes feels like getting blood out of a stone to get the Government to widen their ambit and look beyond the very narrow classifications they have already dealt with in terms of ACM cladding, possibly high-pressure laminate cladding and possibly buildings down to 11 metres. The Government are very good at giving advice to others, and we all know the problems that that has caused with the sale and remortgage of properties and the necessity for inspections when the professional staff are not there to deal with these matters. The Government should be better at directing those responsible and, where necessary, providing the means for those responsible to remedy the serious risks that are apparent.

That is the problem with the Bill, which the amendments go some way towards clarifying. Whether we are looking at the source, the construction or the modification, the consequences can be the most serious. They can be matters of life, of the destruction of people's homes, or of people living daily in fear of the risks that apply to their homes. I cannot think of anything less reasonable than that, frankly, so more than three years on from Grenfell, will the Minister look seriously at what is proposed and either adopt the amendments or, at the very least, say that the Government will bring forward their own legislation soon?

It rather feels that we have been overtaken by events because we now have the draft Building Safety Bill. That is a much more detailed piece of work, but I already have some criticisms of it—I will not bore the House with those tonight—and I look forward to more discussions on that as we go forward. I know that the Minister takes these matters seriously, but I do not feel that the Government are addressing them with the rigour or the detail that they need to be. Let us make a start on that today by adopting the amendments that have been put forward.

Sir Robert Neill: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter); he and I have been around debates on this issue for a number of years now. That is true also of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess).

I am delighted to see my right hon. Friend the Minister for Security on the Treasury Bench. He is an old friend and a good man, and I know that he wants to do the right thing. I remember being the Minister responsible for the fire services, as my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West kindly observed. Whether to deal with these issues by primary legislation, by secondary legislation or by way of regulation is always problematic, particularly when it is often necessary to update the actions required in the light of changing scientific and technical knowledge, and emerging knowledge about the right types of processes and procedures that should be followed to ensure safety.

However, given that everybody wants to achieve the same objective here, I hope that my right hon. Friend will listen carefully to the points that are made, because all the amendments have merit behind them. Whether it

is possible to achieve their objectives through the Bill is something that I am prepared to listen to the Minister's arguments about, but, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith just said, if it cannot be done through this Bill, may we please at the very least have a commitment about how it will be achieved?

Having said that by way of preliminary, let me deal with some of the specific points. The whole question of responsible owner is an important one that we need to tackle somehow. My right hon. Friend will have known that I would mention Northpoint in my constituency. He will have known because I banged his door down more than once about it when he was Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. He will know that despite his endeavours then, and despite the endeavours of the current Secretary of State, who made a speech back in January about the need to move on this—despite the establishment of a fund and the enhancement of the amount available in the fund—the process none the less remains so complicated that, as yet, residents in Northpoint have not been able to progress their claim. Of course, the scope of the scheme at the moment does not enable them thus far to pick up the interim costs, including that of waking watches and so on, which I will come to in a moment. All manner of obstacles come along—for example, insurance for any potential disruption to the railway, because the block is right next to a railway line. That was eventually overcome because an uninsurable amount of indemnity insurance was initially being requested. Happily, the Minister's colleague, the noble Lord Greenhalgh, the Minister responsible in the other place, assisted in that, but it indicates that although we have lots of initiatives, a number of the strands are not being joined together, a point to which I will briefly return in a moment.

7 pm

Taking more action to nail down the responsibility, particularly of owners where the freehold has been sold on, is particularly important. As hon. Members have observed, there are some owners and developers who have acted responsibly towards their leaseholders. They are frequently people who still have skin in the game, if I can put it that way, because they either have retained the ownership or are still active, and sometimes well-known, developers in the retail housing field who have a reputation that they properly want to maintain. However, that does not help constituents such as mine, where the freehold has been sold on to what is simply an offshore investment trust. In my constituents' case, the freehold is owned by a vehicle for the Tchenguiz family trust. One can imagine the degree of altruism likely to be found in that quarter without a greater legal means of holding their feet to the fire.

Whether through these measures or otherwise, greater codification of the responsibilities of owners, and in a way that does not enable them to pass off responsibility on to the leaseholders, will be important. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how we can best achieve that, if not through an amendment to this legislation.

New clause 2 concerns fire risk assessors, which was another issue we debated on Second Reading. I appreciate the objective being sought here. All of us would want to ensure that the necessary assessments, including completion of the external wall survey forms—the EWS1 forms, more on which in a moment—are done to the highest

quality and by reputable people. The problem is that, even at the moment, there are a number of obstacles to that being achieved. That is partly because of the current lack of qualified people and also because of a lack of cohesion in the process, which means that a number of other players, who need to be onside for the EWS system to work, are not fully taken on board. I am open to hearing how that should be achieved, but it is not just a question of having the register, by one means or another, and accreditation, important though they are. We also need to remove the obstacles to people undertaking this work.

That is where—as the Minister will not be surprised to know, because I have raised it with him and colleagues—I rely on the compelling evidence supplied by a firm of consultants, Frankham, which is based in my right hon. Friend's constituency, but whose managing director is a constituent of mine, with whom I have discussed this matter on a number of occasions. This is a significant firm that carries out work in both the private and public rented sectors, as well as in the non-domestic sector. Its director of risk wrote a useful article in *Inside Housing* back in June, which I commend to the Minister and hon. Members, about the difficulties that fire risk assessment is running into and the operation of the EWS system.

In a nutshell, it comes to this. Although the scheme involved the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, local authorities, the housing sector and UK Finance, often on behalf of the mortgage lenders, in drawing it up, it did not involve the insurers. The difficulty is that many firms, such as Frankham and many other reputable firms, are being advised by their insurers not to complete, carry out and sign off the EWS forms because if they do, they will be accepting liability for the safety of a cladding system that they did not have a part in the original design and installation of. In other words, they are being asked to take responsibility for what was ultimately somebody else's work. Hopefully, if one finds a defect, one reports it and action is taken, but there is always the possibility that there may be a defect and a problem comes along. In effect, their insurers are advising them in these terms:

"We are aware that the market does not look favourably upon insureds signing documents of this kind. Indeed, having had some preliminary discussions regarding the renewal with underwriters they specifically mentioned documents such as this as being of concern to insurers across the market. There are potential pitfalls in signing them, including that...Frankham would be providing professional advice on the fire safety of a building where it was not necessarily involved in the original design. Additionally, the language on the declaration is clear in attempting to shift responsibility directly onto the party conducting the review."

Was that the intention? Of itself, it is probably right to expect them to do their job properly, but here is the rub:

"Taking the most extreme example, if Frankham concluded and explicitly stated that an external wall was unlikely to support combustion, but the system actually turned out to be combustible resulting in third party loss, on the basis of this declaration Frankham would more than likely be found to have been negligent in the conduct of its professional services, and therefore liable for the ensuing damages."

The advice, therefore, is

"to continue to resist signing forms such as this."

This is made more difficult because, as was observed in an intervention, the people doing this are often unable to get access to the original documentation—the plans and drawings and so on—from those who did the

installation in the first place. The result of that is that the work that is needed to do EWS1 forms is being clogged up. The number of accredited and reliable surveyors who are in a position safely to undertake this work—and commercially able to undertake it without exposing themselves to an impossible risk—is limited. New entrants into the market are therefore limited as well. Ministers really need to get the insurers round the table on this and bang heads together. We all have the same objective, but because not all the parties have been sufficiently brought together and their objectives aligned, we do not have an overarching forum to deal with this and we have not yet resolved the stand-off between the professional fire risk assessors who want to do their job and the insurers who are having to warn them of legal risks unless there is a means whereby we can get an agreed, acceptable form of declaration and wording that all people will understand. I do hope that the Minister will take this away, because it is a really pressing matter if we are going to make EWS1 system, which is in theory a good system, work properly.

That leads me to the remaining issues with the amendments. Much has been said about them, and I will not repeat that in great detail, but I want to mention new clause 5, which deals with the waking watch. This remains a profound issue, and there is inconsistency in the application of the guidance in this regard. For example, in London—in the case of my constituents—the requirement for an on-site permanent waking watch is insisted on by the London Fire Brigade, whereas West Yorkshire and certain other fire brigades are not insisting on the same approach. The rigidity that has been adopted—maybe for good professional reasons—in London has led to my constituents being advised that, even though they are prepared to pay to be trained themselves in fire safety matters so that they can provide their own in-house waking watch on a rota, thereby saving themselves many tens of thousands of pounds, that is apparently not acceptable, although that approach might be acceptable elsewhere. We need some standardisation, particularly as at the moment the compensation schemes are not picking up the costs of the waking watch. Whether it is by way of this new clause or otherwise, I hope that we can have some clarity from the Minister as to how are we going to deal with this issue. There must be standardisation of approach. People need to have certainty, and all the more so because their flats are now unsellable and unmortgageable. They are also concerned that they will become uninsurable. All those reasons make the need for action particularly pressing.

I turn to the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West on electrical matters. I am open again to hearing from the Minister about whether there is a different way to achieve the objective. When I was Fire Minister, we dealt with, for example, the Fire Kills campaign—I was pleased that I managed to keep funding for that going during a time of financial pressure—and we all know that electrical goods a principal or very significant cause of fire. That has been around for a long time. I understand that, with respect to my hon. Friend, there might be some difficulty with the way in which the amendments are formulated, with the obligation, for example, to enforce a register when, in effect, the manager of the building is acting on behalf of a freeholder or a management company and there may be leaseholders whose leases do not automatically permit entry for the purpose of compiling and updating

a register—it may be more tightly drawn in terms of what inspections are for. That may be an issue that needs to be resolved, but let us have a plan of action to deal with that.

I am told that, for example, we have the fire safety consultation as well as the Bill. What is the timeframe for the fire safety consultation to be concluded and acted on? These are matters on which there is a great deal of expertise; it is about giving a sense of urgency.

I will conclude on the point of how things do move on. When I was a Minister in the first half of the coalition Government, one of the things I did without hesitation was to authorise the Department to expend moneys and make available the services of our chief adviser on fire services to assist, as far as was required and necessary, the inquest into Lakanal House and to follow up thereafter the work to attempt to learn lessons from that. Nobody had any qualms about doing that because we wanted to see that the lessons from Lakanal House were learned—they have been alluded to today. Since then, we have found out more about the technology and type of materials used, and further lessons have had to be learned and added on. But I would gently observe that it is almost eight years to the day since the then Prime Minister asked me to go and see him in his room behind the Speaker's Chair, rather than Downing Street and, in most generous, warm and courteous terms, thank me very much for my services as a member of the Government. He then said that, notwithstanding all of those warm matters, he needed, I think the phrase was, to “make space”—I thought I was a fairly small package—and I returned to the Back Benches. Eight years is a long time under these circumstances. We have learned a lot more since, but it does show that, unless we make haste on these matters, time flies.

Of course, these are technical issues and many players have to be brought into the game together and aligned, but I do not want it to be another eight years before we get to a final resolution on these matters. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will be able to do that during his tenure of office. I will be very happy if that is a long time, but not as long as that. I urge him to give us some alternatives to the formulations brought forward in the debate and a sense of a real and pressing timeframe to have these matters resolved.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): Of course, those of us on the Opposition side welcome the Bill and support the clarification to fire safety law that it brings. In the wake of the terrible Grenfell Tower tragedy, which will stay etched in our minds despite the passing of time, it is so important that building owners take responsibility for managing and reducing the risk of fire. A key element of that is to seek to clarify which parts of the burden are covered by those requirements and what the responsibilities are. So why does the Bill feel like such a missed opportunity? It is partly about the amount of time it has taken for us to get this point, as my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) outlined.

Back in October 2019, the Government pledged to implement the Grenfell inquiry's recommendations in full and without delay, yet here we are with the thinnest of bills amounting to three clauses, ducking the main issues and failing to include even the simplest of recommendations such as inspections of fire doors and the testing of lifts. But it is also a bigger missed opportunity,

precisely because the Government have failed to learn the lessons. Of those there are many, but I want to briefly focus on one.

7.15 pm

It is clear that this Bill will require a massively increased level of inspection and enforcement. That is all good, and necessary, but it will inevitably increase the workload of the fire and rescue services, with a subsequent need for training considering the more complex inspections required. Has any serious thought been given to the additional resources that will be needed for fire services to inspect and enforce these new measures and the additional funding that will be needed? In its briefing back in April, the Fire Brigades Union estimated that potentially hundreds of thousands of premises would require additional activity by inspectors, and concluded that fire and rescue services

“will need increased staffing and training to enable them to carry out their new duties of inspection, audit and enforcement.”

We have not seen any guarantees that this is on the cards. In fact, there seems to have been very little discussion with the FBU, whose members, lest we forget, are on the frontline of these changes.

To put this in context, the fire service has seen a decade of the most damaging cuts. A fifth of our firefighters have gone, and here is the real, terrible irony: even more fire safety inspectors—a quarter—have lost their jobs. The £20 million the Government have promised to fund fire safety pales into insignificance compared with the £141.5 million of cuts since 2013 in England. Government cuts mean that we now have fewer firefighters, fewer fire appliances and fewer inspectors—all the elements we need to make sure that another Grenfell does not happen again.

I pay tribute to the firefighters, support staff and all those across the service who have gone above and beyond during the pandemic, but this response lets them down, as well as the public they serve. This Bill was an opportunity to address more fundamental issues. By tabling these amendments and five new clauses, my party has attempted to speak to those communities in Grenfell and beyond who desperately want to see real action on fire safety. They should not have to wait any longer. They deserve that, at least.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Earlier this year, during the Second Reading debate on this Bill, I and many others expressed concern that it was clear that it will not solve the problems that my constituents are facing. Having spoken to residents and leaseholders in my constituency and beyond who are suffering from anxiety and stress, I outlined how leaseholders in blocks with ACM and other types of cladding are experiencing problems in selling or remortgaging their homes. I raised the alarm that up to 60,000 worried residents are still living in buildings wrapped in lethal Grenfell-style cladding over three years after the fire. This is despite the Government setting a deadline of the end of 2019 for all social sector blocks to be made safe and a deadline of June 2020 for all private sector blocks to be made safe, both of which have now been missed. Instead, over 80% of private sector buildings and nearly half of social sector buildings affected have still not had this dangerous cladding removed and replaced. In fact, in June it was reported that the Government are now not expected to remove the same cladding that was on Grenfell

from high-rise homes until a full two years after their own deadline and five years since the tragedy itself. How can this still be the case and how can this be right?

Yet the Bill before Parliament today is only a modest improvement, at best, to the fire safety regime. It does not do enough to break the tortuous pattern of buck-passing leaving residents trapped in between authorities and the building owners. It does not do enough to address the fact that many residents are suffering from anxiety and stress. It does not do enough to resolve the fact that leaseholders in blocks are experiencing problems in selling or remortgaging their homes. Most fundamentally, it is inadequate in protecting people who are being forced to continue to live in an unsafe building.

The Government promised in October to implement the full recommendations of the Grenfell Tower inquiry, yet nearly a year later the Bill does not contain a single measure recommended by the inquiry. For many, Grenfell showed how little black lives matter to the British establishment because of the unavoidable and clear fact that so many of the affected residents were of BAME and working-class backgrounds. Why is it that 72 people are killed in their homes and no one is deemed to be responsible? When will we ever get answers? When will the victims ever get justice?

We need to be sure that a Grenfell Tower fire never ever happens again. The truth is that decisions stretching back years have led to the gutting of the UK's fire safety regime and the failure to regulate high-rise residential buildings properly for fire safety. Policies relating to fire and rescue services have too long been driven by an agenda of cuts, deregulation and privatisation fostered by the direct lobbying of private interests.

The Fire Brigades Union has raised concerns about the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 since it was first imposed, pointing out that many responsible persons who own and manage residential premises have not been assessed for the fire risks in their buildings and have not introduced sufficient measures to keep people safe in their homes. The Fire Safety Bill will require substantial investment to ensure adequate staffing levels and appropriate levels of training. Yet, according to the Fire Brigades Union, the Home Office's impact assessment written for the Bill underestimates the amount and complexity of the work involved, and therefore underestimates the amount of funding necessary to ensure that the legislation is effective. In the meantime, firefighters have been taking on new areas of work to keep our communities safe. More than four fifths of fire and rescue services have delivered packages of food, medicines and other essentials to vulnerable persons, which is the most frequent activity carried out by firefighters.

We need more decisive action from the Government. Too many of my constituents are living in dangerous homes and facing huge financial and legal liabilities for remediation of building safety defects that are not of their making. Our firefighters, our constituents and our communities have the right to expect so much more.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I am pleased that the remaining stages of the Fire Safety Bill are being debated in the House today. Some hon. Members will know that, as an electrical engineer, fire safety is an issue that is of great interest to me. Having spoken on

Second Reading, I was reassured that fellow Members felt as strongly as I do about this issue, and that has been demonstrated yet again in today's debate.

Having managed my own electrical company for many years before being elected to this place, I know how vital it is for residents to know that their accommodation is safe and secure. It is for that reason that I spoke on Second Reading and have closely followed developments on this Bill since then.

That said, hon. Members noted possible issues regarding the responsibilities of leaseholders and freeholders under this legislation, which leads me on to why I shall be speaking in favour of the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) today. The amendment is of significant importance to building safety. We have all heard of portable appliance testing and we have all seen the green labels on our appliances, yet, although the appliance may be of good order, it is vital that the socket into which we plug these items is also of good order. Furthermore, all the wiring that provides our lighting and heating should also be inspected and tested. That is already law in rented properties, but it is only advised for privately owned premises. The fact that the tenure of an individual flat within the same block decides whether or not it is tested for safety is far from ideal, and it fails sufficiently to guarantee the safety of all residents.

As we have seen, fire spreads very quickly, and although buildings are constructed to stop this spread, this is not always successful. The reasons for that are numerous and can be down to deterioration of the fabric, poor management of fire prevention, or even poor building maintenance work when work is carried out on the fabric of the building by unskilled or unsupervised personnel. Fixed-wire testing of all wiring within the building is therefore of paramount importance.

Secondly, it is my belief that an appliance register is a must as we have all seen the effects that a faulty appliance can cause. A register by a responsible management company is not an onerous task and would substantially help towards reducing fires owing to a faulty appliance that has been part of a recall, but not actually recalled. I would hate to think, after all the time spent on the Bill, that it falls short and that another incident such as Grenfell then happens due to a faulty appliance or an electrical system that has failed because of a lack of maintenance. It is therefore crucial that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government looks into this, as reducing the source of fires is far better than preventing their spread. This amendment does exactly that, and if it cannot be addressed today, the Minister may want to further investigate the merits of what is being proposed in the upcoming fire safety consultation and the draft Building Safety Bill.

It is vital that the Government do not allow anomalies in this area if they are to truly demonstrate their commitment to ensuring that everyone has a safe place to live. I believe that the amendment would strengthen the Bill. That said, while it may not go through the House today, it will be a great shame if right hon. and hon. Members do not press for what it is asking for in future.

This Bill is very welcome and it has my support. Three years on from Grenfell, it is high time that the wrongs of the past are put right. I also add that if the Minister would like my help with the Fire Safety Bill, please do ask.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): The Liberal Democrats support and welcome the Fire Safety Bill, but it is a first and only very small step in the right direction. As many hon. Members have said, we are three years on from the tragedy of Grenfell and this Bill is woefully inadequate. We support it and all the amendments that have been tabled. I would like to speak to new clauses 2 and 4 and ask the Minister for various assurances.

On new clause 2, on the accreditation of fire risk assessors, it is crucial that those conducting a fire risk assessment are accredited. Those of us on the Bill Committee heard shocking evidence of unqualified fire risk assessors declaring unsafe properties safe, and the Fire Brigades Union told us of one case that resulted in the death of one of their own. In Committee, the Minister for Crime and Policing shared our alarm at the existence of unqualified fire risk assessors and he posed the question of how many decades this situation had been allowed to persist unnoticed by anybody in the House or by any Government. Surely now is the time to ensure that this practice is brought to an end.

There must be a nationally recognised qualification and certification for those charged with assessing the safety of people's homes. There also needs to be a freely accessible register of those holding such a qualification, held and maintained centrally by a public body, such as a Government-appointed regulator. However, I would go even further: the Hackitt review suggested that with something as vital as fire safety, the fire risk assessments should also be freely available in a publicly available register. That is vital for existing and prospective residents and for inspection and enforcement, so will the Minister provide a firm commitment, on the parliamentary record this evening, that a fire risk assessments register will be provided for in future legislation?

I turn to new clause 4, on the definition of a responsible person. It is right that we are absolutely clear on the Bill's definition of a responsible person and I welcome the clause, because it ensures that a leaseholder without a direct interest in the freehold cannot be considered to be the responsible person. However, outside the scope of the Bill is a massive question about who should pay for the remedial work, and the Government have so far failed to tackle that head-on. Some leaseholders have paid building insurance premiums for years and they may still have valid new-build warranties, but the financial burden of new Government regulations or failures by developers is being shifted to tenants and leaseholders through increasing service charges and demands for one-off contributions.

In my constituency of St Albans, one residents association has been advised that individual leaseholders will face extra charges of around £20,000 per home. This is unacceptable. Some service charges for those residents have already increased sixfold since the Grenfell disaster in 2017 in preparation for the necessary works. I hope the Government agree that while so many individual circumstances are incredibly financially challenging right now, to be hit by a further £20,000 bill is completely unacceptable. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee recommended in March that, given the urgency of these remediation works, it is necessary for the Government to provide the funding upfront. Will the Minister this evening commit to at least taking this up with the Chancellor and asking that the funding be provided for in the autumn statement to make sure all homes are safe?

7.30 pm

Residents, including in my constituency of St Albans, are trapped. They are trapped in a Catch-22 between the excessive cost burden of remediation and being unable to explore any of the financial options to sell up or extend their mortgage. The Government must understand the difficulties that the current situation places on people, such as my pregnant constituent who needs to move home urgently so that she can have a home that is more suitable for her growing family, but cannot do so, or the pensioner in my constituency who is reliant on the sale of their property to support them and their care needs in their retirement.

I will state once again that the Bill needs to be followed with much, much more—and quickly. The two new clauses I mentioned are particularly important to me, but I support all the amendments. They are important first steps and I thank colleagues for tabling them. However, we now need the Government to turbocharge the legislative agenda and to provide the funding upfront for remedial work. Without it, too many people will be held hostage by the inadequate safety standards of their own homes. When we say that an event like Grenfell must never be allowed to happen again, we must mean it. We cannot just have words; we need real action.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): I welcome the Bill, and the measures it seeks to put in place to make buildings safer and prevent tragedies such as the one we witnessed with Grenfell Tower. I note, too, that other measures announced by the Government will further complement the Bill.

I have worked in construction over several years, during which time I was involved in the construction of fuel retail stations. I have also worked on oil rigs. I should also note that I am a landlord and thus declare an interest. Ensuring that homes and other buildings are safe is of the utmost importance. My experience has given me some insight into fire safety and how sometimes I see a disconnect between policymakers and those who deliver a service on the ground. The practicalities of day-to-day delivery can sometimes show a well-meaning policy to be out of touch with what actually happens on site. Let me give an example of what I mean.

I have known site managers ask for fire doors to be installed before a building had been made waterproof—dozens of doors. As to be expected with our British climate, it rained, and those fire doors and frames swelled. When they would not open and close properly, carpenters were asked, under time pressure, to plane doors down so that they would pass inspection. Of course, eventually these doors dried out and shrank. That meant they were again the wrong size, but this time with gaps so large that they were no longer fit to be fire doors. However, by that point, the doors had been signed off by inspectors, despite the fact that modifications had now made them no longer fit for purpose.

My plea is to ensure that when the Bill is finally delivered, people who are ultimately accountable for fire safety are not only competent by the certifications they may have, but that they are present on site and understand construction, not just fire safety alone. Furthermore, I make a plea for an ever-evolving and updating follow-up process that identifies any and all changes that new tenants can often make, often innocently for aesthetic purposes, which alter the fire rating of the

system, such as the changing of door furniture and other material modifications. We need a dynamic model of fire safety that ensures it is delivered over time during construction and for the entire lifetime of a building. This Bill is a very positive step in the right direction, but it is a step because fire safety and any safety is always evolving.

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate.

Over three years after the Grenfell Tower fire, any improvements to fire safety legislation are of course welcome; however, the Bill in its current form is only a modest improvement on the current fire safety regime. I do not have the experiences of so many hon. Members speaking in this debate today, but as the daughter of an ex-firefighter I certainly understand the importance of these issues, and I share the concerns highlighted by the Fire Brigades Union that the views and concerns of the people who live and work in high-risk buildings should be at the heart of the new system of fire safety across the UK.

That means that the voices of tenants must be heard in this process. Residents have raised concerns about the removal of flammable cladding and the role of waking watches. It is disturbing that three years on from Grenfell, there are still issues around the removal of flammable ACM cladding from both social and private-sector tower blocks. Coronavirus has caused many contractors to stop work on cladding sites, while others have not even begun due to complex legal disputes. These delays mean that residents of buildings continue to face extortionate fees for interim safety measures, most commonly waking watch. The National Fire Chiefs Council's advice on waking watch has become outdated. Its guidance suggests that waking watch should be a temporary measure, yet some residents have been forced to pay for waking watches for a number of years. This is not a sustainable solution. New clause 5 would require both this Government and the Welsh Government to specify when a waking watch must be in place for buildings with fire safety failures.

The voice of firefighters also needs to be heard with regard to the Bill. The FBU believes that this legislation requires investment in professional firefighters and an expansion in the number of fire inspectors. Therefore, I have great concern that the Bill gives little consideration to the additional costs to the fire and rescue services in implementing these additional inspections. That comes on top of Government cuts to central funding to fire and rescue services by 28% in real terms between 2010 and 2016, followed by a further cut of 15% by 2020. These cuts have led to 11,000 fewer fire service personnel—that is 20% of the service. On Boris Johnson's watch as Mayor of London, in eight years the London Fire Brigade was required to make—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady must refer to the Prime Minister as “the Prime Minister” here in the Chamber, please.

Kate Osborne: On the Prime Minister's watch as Mayor of London, in eight years the London Fire Brigade was required to make gross savings of over £100 million, leading to the cutting of 27 fire appliances, 552 firefighters, 324 support staff, two fire rescue units

and three training appliances, the closure of 10 fire stations and a reduction in fire rescue unit crewing levels. Ministers must commit to funding fire and rescue services sufficiently to ensure that fire authorities are able to inspect and enforce these new measures.

In conclusion, last October the Government promised to implement the recommendations of the Grenfell Tower review in full and without delay. Nearly a year later, this Bill does not contain a single measure recommended by the inquiry. Therefore, I will be supporting new clause 1 as it places robust requirements on building owners or managers to implement the recommendations from phase one of the Grenfell Tower inquiry. I will also be supporting new clauses 2 to 5. I urge the Government to make true on their promises: back the amendments and put everyone's safety first.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I would like to add my voice to those of many colleagues across the Chamber who have expressed the frustration of many of our residents that, following the terrible incident at Grenfell, we have not yet brought to a conclusion many of the issues that the incident highlighted. We have followed the progress of the inquiry, with many views expressed by stakeholders—those personally affected because they had relatives in the building, and different parts of the industry and professional bodies. At the heart of much of the frustration is the question of liability. Who, ultimately, will meet the costs faced by our residents—whether they are landlords or occupiers of the property, freeholders or leaseholders—for the cost of remediation, which we know is substantial?

That issue plays out in many different parts of our lives. In my former role, I was responsible for the construction of a significant number of new schools. Inspections of those new buildings subsequently identified that some of the fire safety work, signed off and done in recent times, did not meet the standards that we would expect. We need to ensure that the question of liability is brought to a conclusion as quickly as possible. Those on the Front Bench know that there are many different ways in which that might be achieved, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister will have something to say about that.

I turn to two specific points on which it would be helpful to hear a little more from my right hon. Friend. The first is the role of the responsible person. Across Government, where we are concerned about the degree of accountability for a life-and-limb, critical activity or service, it has been common practice to identify an individual post holder who is accountable for ensuring that work is done to the relevant standard. In children's social care, we have the director of children's services. In public health, we have the director of public health. In businesses, we have chief accountable officers.

We also know from long experience, with all sorts of things having gone wrong across different parts of those services, that having someone identified as accountable will only bring about the improvement that the House wishes to see if we can be confident that that person has the necessary qualities to do the work required and the ability to carry out the duties we are imposing on them. A number of Members have expressed views about whether there will be sufficient people with the knowledge of fire safety to undertake this role. It is crucial to ensure that whoever is responsible in individual buildings,

[David Simmonds]

on estates, on local authority estates or on school estates, we can rely on them to carry out that duty effectively. It will be critical to ensure that training, qualifications and all the rest of it sit behind that.

Secondly, ensuring that that person has the ability to do what sometimes may be intrusive and expensive work that may not always attract the consent of the householder will be a major issue. Earlier on in my political career, I spent a bit of time as chairman of a housing management and maintenance sub-committee at a local authority responsible, as a landlord, for over 12,000 properties. I am conscious that the local authority sometimes had to take several dozen tenants to court every year to get access to properties to do—at no cost to the tenant—essential safety checks and safety-critical work. We should not assume in this House that, by saying that we are going to designate a responsible person, we can be confident that they will be able to do what they need to do. I look forward to my right hon Friend fleshing out the further measures that we might need to take to ensure that responsible people are able to undertake the work to the relevant standard, to provide the assurance that we all want on behalf of our residents.

7.45 pm

Finally, on electrical safety, many experts—my hon. Friends the Members for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) and for Southend West (Sir David Amess)—spoke very passionately, with knowledge and based on research, about the issues that that highlights. Certainly in my own conversations with those with an interest in fire, one of the points they have highlighted is that, in their view, white goods in particular are becoming safer and safer as time goes by. But there are new fire risks emerging, particularly with small appliances, chargers and things like that, which are causing significant risks and are the cause of a large number of thus far, thankfully, quite small fires that, if they got out of control, would create additional risk. Those things would not necessarily be subject to or caught within the safety regime that has been debated. Given that those are new and emerging risks, I have concerns about relying upon assumptions at this stage that may not capture the full extent of the risks that our residents are facing. I know the Minister has been giving some thought to this, and I look forward to him explaining how we might address those wider risks in legislation that will come before the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the next hon. Member, might I remind everyone in the Chamber, but especially new Members who have possibly not quite got into their stride on the matter as we have not had normal times—I took the matter up with the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne)—that it is obligatory to refer to hon. Members not by name, but by their constituency? I call Matt Rodda—I can call Members by their names.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate tonight.

Thank you for reminding me of that very important point as well. I would like to speak in support of new clauses 1 and 2 and the other new clauses tabled by the Opposition on the duties of building owners and accreditation of fire risk assessors. However, before I address those important points, I would first like to reflect on the scale of the challenge facing our country following the Grenfell disaster and, indeed, the issues in my own constituency of Reading East. I would like to briefly pay tribute to the Grenfell families, and I am sure we can all agree that our thoughts are with them continually after what happened in the disaster. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) earlier, I wish to show my support for our firefighters, both for their bravery and their professionalism.

Three years after Grenfell, the issue of dangerous cladding is still a daily reality for thousands of residents, including many in my constituency, and for many more, there are a whole series of other issues, such as fire safety concerns about their own properties or concerns on behalf of friends or relatives living in accommodation that is subject to those risks. One resident put it to me so poignantly when she contacted me, when she said:

“Imagine coming home every night to a flat which you fear is unsafe to live in, and yet you are unable to sell the flat or to move out of it.”

That is the reality that thousands of people in our country continue to face. That story is repeated time and again in towns the size of Reading or much smaller, and in great cities around the country. Indeed, it extends way beyond the issue of ACM cladding, although that in itself is a huge issue for the country.

To give an example, in Reading and Woodley there are several blocks containing Grenfell-style cladding, and others with other forms of composite materials on them, as well as wooden cladding, all of which have been found to be highly dangerous and flammable. Indeed, since Grenfell there have been fires in Bolton and in Barking with the materials that I have mentioned, similar to those found in my constituency.

In addition to tall buildings and the issues that we have talked about tonight, there are also fire safety concerns about lower-rise buildings. In my constituency, there are huge numbers—possibly into the thousands—of lower-rise flats below the 9-metre limit, many of which have what I believe may be serious fire safety issues. That affects tens of thousands of people around the country.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an important point when he talks about the impact that this is having on many families. He may have instances in his constituency, as I do in mine, where couples have divorced but are unable to separate properly because they cannot sell their flat. The mental strain, illness and stress that that imposes on many residents is absolutely phenomenal.

Matt Rodda: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution, because it points out just how dire this problem is, on so many fronts. The point I was about to make relates not just to the taller buildings or even the 9-metre ones, but to houses in multiple occupation. There has been a huge growth in the number of houses that have been divided up into bedsits or small flats in my constituency, as there probably has in his north

London seat. I have concerns about those, as do other Members, although they are not addressed by this Bill, and I urge the Government to consider that matter as well.

This Bill is long overdue. I hope it will help, but I fear that it does not go far enough, and I urge Ministers to look again at the issue in much more detail and tighten their grip on it. A much more substantial response is needed, both in legislation and in the level of resources available to fire services, as has been mentioned, and to local authorities. Strengthening this response, both in legislation and resources, will be particularly helpful in respect of buildings that have multiple owners, such as blocks with leaseholders, tenants and freeholders, where the fire services, local authorities or contractors face a deeply confusing jigsaw puzzle of ownership. In many cases, it is hard to track people down. In some cases, the owners may be corporations based overseas or there may be other forms of ownership that are difficult to piece together. A more robust approach combining legislation and the funds to support local authorities and fire services would help residents in lower-rise accommodation. Berkshire's fire service has urged me and MPs from across our county to speak up about the issues found in many towns mainly in lower-rise accommodation, not in the high-rise blocks discussed in the Bill, because of the huge number of those sorts of flats in towns such as Reading, Bracknell and Slough.

I am conscious of time, so I shall turn to new clauses 1 and 2. New clause 1 is particularly important, because, as many people involved in this issue recognise, we face real problems in improving safety in some private blocks. The new clause would speed up what can be a very lengthy process by requiring a manager or a lead figure to share information with the fire service about both fire safety and evacuation plans, which are important matters.

New clause 2 also raises a significant but simple point: fire inspectors should be accredited. I hope the new clause would address a long-standing loophole that I understand was first introduced unwittingly in legislation in the 1980s. It takes years for a fire safety inspector to complete their training, so it seems obvious that they would need accreditation. As has been mentioned by Members from across the House this evening, a common feature of any regulatory system is having people who have a known role of this type accredited.

I hope that tonight's debate has allowed a further discussion of these issues and allowed us address these points in some detail. I urge the Minister to look at the matters in hand, and I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak tonight.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you for calling me to speak on this matter, Madam Deputy Speaker. There is a little more frightening than a raging fire, as it is then that we truly understand the little we are able to do in our human state. We are so thankful for those in the fire service, who use their expertise and training, yet, ultimately, lay their lives on the line every time they answer the call. Others have said it, but I want to put on record my thanks to them for all they do and have done.

The Grenfell tragedy had repercussions for all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so although it happened on the mainland, and although

this legislation is for England and Wales, I wanted to make a brief contribution to ask that the lessons learned are shared with Northern Ireland. When the Grenfell tragedy took place, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the bodies with responsibility for this area right away checked all their high-rise flats to see whether the danger that there was on the mainland was or was not apparent in Northern Ireland. Some steps were taken right away. I know it is a devolved matter, but I wish to mention something at the end that the Minister might take on board, and it relates to what we have learned in Northern Ireland.

This Bill is a devolved matter for Northern Ireland, so my comments will be brief. It is clear that the improvements in this Bill to create greater fire safety must be considered UK-wide. My colleagues in the Northern Ireland Assembly have taken seriously the lessons that we have learned from the absolute tragedy at Grenfell. I take this opportunity once again to remind all the families involved that our thoughts remain with them as they try to rebuild their lives. I do not think there is anybody anywhere in the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland or further afield who was not touched by what happened, as we watched the tragedy unfold.

I echo other hon. Members' comments about the danger of electric goods, and in particular about the need to have them checked so that they meet the standards that we have in the United Kingdom, which are some of the highest in the world. The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who represents that great city of Southend, has been an excellent, outstanding spokesperson on this matter, along with our former colleague and friend, Jim Fitzpatrick. I remember him fondly; he, I and the hon. Member for Southend West shared many debates in that other great place, Westminster Hall, on electrical safety and other things. We had some very good and enjoyable times. One thing that was outlined was the opportunity for people to buy online goods that may not meet the standards. I am sure the Minister will say how the Government are addressing those issues for online purchases, which I believe need to be checked.

I welcome the remediation programme, supported by £1.6 billion of Government funding, to remove unsafe cladding from high-rise residential buildings, and the commitment of £20 million of funding to enable fire and rescue services to review or inspect all high-rise multi-occupied residential buildings by the end of 2021, but it is clear that more needs to be done. Right hon. and hon. Members from both sides of the House have said that, and hopefully the Minister will be able to say what other steps the Government are looking at to try to make improvements.

I do not want to be alarmist, but the Northern Ireland Assembly's inquiries into safety standards raised not just the issue of cladding—the Northern Ireland Housing Executive carried out those risk assessments, because cladding is its responsibility—but concerns about reports that 63% of Northern Ireland Housing Executive wall cavity insulation may be defective. There was some concern that the cavity wall insulation could in some way lead to worse fires and could be a conduit, allowing fires to go through buildings. I do not expect an answer from the Minister today if he has not got one, but I know that he always follows up, and we thank him for

[*Jim Shannon*]

that, so perhaps that could be looked at. We are awaiting more information, but that raises a pertinent issue. I believe that it must be absolutely clear in any legislation that it is the building owner's responsibility to make safe not simply the outside of the walls but the inner cavities. I would appreciate it if the Minister could clarify how that is legislated for in this Bill.

Has the Minister had any discussions with other regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland about a UK-wide approach to this issue? I often say in this House that lessons learned in England and Wales can and must be shared with the devolved Administrations—the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Scottish Parliament. This debate is not about that, but none the less it is important that we share things. We can learn from each other in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. If things are learned in Northern Ireland, they should be shared with the rest of the United Kingdom. If they are learned in England and Wales, they should be shared with us in Northern Ireland, and with Scotland. An improvement can be made UK-wide so that all the people of this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can benefit.

The Minister for Security (James Brokenshire): It is a privilege to respond to this debate. It is the first time I have had the chance to speak physically in this Chamber since March, so it is a great pleasure to be here tonight to respond to what has been a passionate, well-informed and very serious debate on issues that touch on concerns that we share across this Chamber. Like others, I very much underline our recognition of the context of the Bill: the Grenfell Tower fire and the need to ensure that people feel safe and are safe in their homes. I pay tribute to the community of Grenfell—Grenfell United and more broadly—on their determination to seek justice and change, and I recognise the responsibilities we hold to them in following through on that.

8 pm

I also pay tribute to our fire service and the work they continue to do through the current pandemic crisis. They have done above and beyond what is expected of them to support our communities in different ways, which we should recognise equally along with their fire safety work that touches on the issues we are discussing tonight.

There is clearly a need to change culture. I have spoken about that in the past in the context of building safety, and it is something I firmly believe in relation to fire safety, too. Yes, this Bill is a narrow Bill that is about clarification, but it sets the foundations for us to amend the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 with certainty. I seek that legal certainty to ensure that the changes we propose are robust and effective.

I highlight that the fire safety order consultation is ongoing and concludes on 12 October. I look forward to seeing the results and to seeing us move quickly in response, as well as moving forward with the building safety Bill, which colleagues from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government are leading on. Indeed, I understand that the Select Committee will be commencing pre-legislative scrutiny of that Bill this

week. I absolutely understand the need for that sense of momentum, and I want to convey that from the Dispatch Box this evening.

Prior to responding to the amendments and new clauses, I wish to clarify a couple of very detailed points. First, the Government's policy intention on the express inclusion of structure in the Bill has been raised before by Members and industry representatives. The Bill intends to reinforce existing operational practice, which is set out in the Government's guidance, "Fire safety risk assessment: sleeping accommodation", issued in 2006. The guidance sets out that fire risk assessors should consider structural fire protection as part of the fire risk assessment process. However, that is designed to be a visual inspection of the construction and layout of the building on the basis that it will have been built to resist early structural collapse in the event of a fire. As such, intrusive surveys of buildings are only required if the fire risk assessor has serious concerns about the structural fire protection of the building. Otherwise, non-intrusive surveys should normally be carried out. That advice is also reflected in the industry-recognised guidance, "Fire risk assessment: Guidance and a recommended methodology", and will be reinforced in the revised version that is being prepared for publication.

My second point concerns how we propose to take forward the commencement of the Fire Safety Bill. We have established a task and finish group, co-chaired by the Fire Sector Federation and the National Fire Chiefs Council, that brings together a range of stakeholders with an interest in fire safety to provide a recommendation on how the Bill should be commenced. The group will advise on the optimal way to meet the Bill's objectives of improving the identification and assessment of fire risks in multi-occupied blocks and addressing them as soon as possible to ensure residents' safety while effectively managing any operational impact. The group is expected to report no later than the end of September.

Turning to the new clauses and amendments, I will start with the lead amendment, new clause 1. I say to the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) that I recognise her intent and desire behind new clause 1 to create that sense of certainty and of getting on with things at the earliest possible opportunity. I just observe that it obviously contemplates that the measures would be brought forward by subsequent changes to the fire safety order. That is precisely the approach that the Government are already taking, as reflected in the consultation that concludes on 12 October. Therefore, her proposal—and I appreciate that she seeks to hasten—actually does not hasten any more than what the Government are already intending and proposing in respect of the regulations that this Bill provides the framework and foundations for, and that is the sequencing we intended.

The hon. Lady will know that we are consulting on the detail. Indeed, under the regulations themselves, we are obliged to do that. I understand the timing issue, and I assure her that when the Bill is on the statute book—that has to come first—we will move with all pace and expedition to see that the regulations are put in place as fast as possible, because that is the sequencing.

On the new clause on the specifics—I agree that, as already stated, the Government's principal intention is to follow through on the phase 1 recommendations, and we are not resiling from that one jot—I say to the hon.

Lady that expressing it in that way might allow further legal challenge and create uncertainty. Therefore, I ask her to reflect carefully because we share her intent absolutely to proceed at pace.

I hope the hon. Lady will reflect further and, indeed, reflect on the words of Sir Martin Moore-Bick, who noted that it was important that his recommendations “command the support of those who have experience of the matters to which they relate.”

That is precisely what we are seeking to do through the consultation, which extends, yes to the hon. and right hon. Members we have in this House, but also to residents, responsible persons, the fire sector and enforcing authorities to ensure that we get this right. That is what all Members across this House want to do, and that is what we want to do. I ask the hon. Lady to reflect on whether there is a need to divide the House when our approach is absolutely aligned and we want to get on with the matter.

As many in this House are already aware, my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) has long been a champion of fire safety. I commend him, and indeed the all-party parliamentary group of which he has been such an active member over many years, for his work and for the essence behind the amendment that he has put forward on electrical products.

The electrical products intended for use by consumers are already regulated under the Electrical Equipment (Safety) Regulations 2016, which require manufacturers to ensure safeguards are in place to protect the health and safety of persons, domestic animals and property. The regulations place strict obligations on manufacturers and importers to ensure that products are safe. I recognise that there are—thankfully, rare—occasions when safety issues become apparent only after a product has been safely placed on the market. That is why the 2016 regulations also require, where it is appropriate, that manufacturers monitor products already placed on the market. Local trading standards authorities have a duty to enforce the regulations in their area, and in 2018 a new national regulator for product safety was created, the Office for Product Safety and Standards.

I also want to remind the House that the new Electrical Safety Standards in the Private Rented Sector (England) Regulations 2020 came into effect on 1 June. They apply to new tenancies from 1 July and to existing tenancies from 1 April 2021. These regulations require that electrical installations must be inspected and tested by a qualified and competent person at least every five years. Electrical safety standards must be met, and electrical installation condition reports must be provided to tenants and local housing authorities on request. In addition, the Government’s “How to let” guide already recommends that landlords regularly carry out portable appliance testing on any electrical appliance they provide and then supply the tenant with a record of any electrical inspections carried out, as good practice.

Andy Slaughter: In Grenfell Tower, there will have been secure tenants, leaseholders and private tenants. Why should regulations apply to some of those groups and not others just on the basis of tenure?

James Brokenshire: I was coming on to precisely that point. In her review, Dame Judith Hackitt recognised that residents themselves have a role to play and

recommended clearer rights and obligations for residents to maintain the fire safety of individual dwellings, working in partnership with the duty holder. There are provisions on this within the draft Building Safety Bill, published in July, setting out a clear duty.

A number of different measures are in place, but I take the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West made very seriously. The Government are committed to ensuring that the electrical products that people buy are safe. I recognise the concerns, and we will look across Government at whether there are any gaps in the current regime and proposals to strengthen accountability in this area. I give that assurance to my hon. Friend to work with him. I would like to pay tribute, as he did, to Electrical Safety First for its important work in this arena. I hope to work with my hon. Friend and colleagues across the House to identify gaps, and if there are still gaps, we, like so many Members, want to see those filled effectively. With that assurance, I hope my hon. Friend will be willing to withdraw his amendment.

I turn to the new clauses, which were tabled in Committee, as the hon. Member for Croydon Central highlighted. On new clause 2, I agree that there is a clear need for reform in relation to fire risk assessors, to improve capacity and competency standards. That includes the role for the industry-led competency steering group under the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government’s building safety programme and its sub working group on fire risk assessors. That group is looking at ways to increase competence and capacity in the sector. The competency steering group will publish a final report shortly, including proposals in relation to creating a register of fire risk assessors, third party accreditation and a competence framework for fire risk assessors. The Government will give detailed consideration to the report’s recommendations.

The Government are also working with the National Fire Chiefs Council, the fire risk assessor sector and the wider fire sector to take forward plans for addressing both the short-term and long-term capability and capacity issues within the sector. The fire safety consultation will also bring forward proposals on issues relating to competence. Members are understandably keen for this work to be brought forward, but it is vital that we get this right and that the Government listen to the advice in order to frame this effectively and appropriately. Once the fire safety consultation responses have been considered—as I said, it closes on 12 October—the Government will be able to determine the most appropriate route to implement changes.

New clause 3 seeks to impose a new duty on inspectors to prioritise their inspections of multi-occupied residential buildings by risk. I would like to underline some of the comments made by my hon. Friend the Minister for Crime and Policing in Committee. As he said, the Government’s position is that adequate and established arrangements are in place to ensure that enforcement authorities target their resources appropriately and are accountable for their decisions without the need to make it a statutory requirement. The fire and rescue national framework for England requires fire and rescue authorities to have a locally determined risk-based inspection programme in place for enforcing compliance with the fire safety order. The framework sets out the

[James Brokenshire]

expectation that fire and rescue authorities will target their resources on those individuals or households who are at greater risk from fire in the home and on those non-domestic premises where the life safety risk is greatest. The national framework for Wales includes similar provisions.

In parallel, the regulators' code states that all regulators should base their regulatory activities on risk, take an evidence-based approach to determine the priority risks in their area of responsibility and allocate resources where they would be most effective in addressing those priority risks. The building risk review programme, which will see all high-rise residential buildings reviewed or inspected by fire and rescue authorities by the end of 2021, is a key part of this.

The programme will enable building fire risk to be reviewed and data to be collected to ensure that local resources are targeted at the buildings most at risk. The Government have provided £10 million of funding to support that work, not only to facilitate the review of all buildings, but to strengthen the National Fire Chiefs Council's central strategic function to drive improvements in fire protection. That is in addition to a further £10 million grant to bolster fire protection capacity and capability within local fire and rescue services. The allocation of funding is based on the proportion of higher-risk buildings, further demonstrating the need to target resources at risk. I remind the House that we have also established the task and finish group that will be responsible for providing a recommendation on how the Bill should be commenced before the end of this month—obviously I have commented on that work and how the group is expected to report.

8.15 pm

New clause 4 seeks to remove leaseholders from the definition of responsible person unless they are also the owner or part-owner of the freehold for the premises in question. In multi-occupied residential buildings, the leaseholder of a flat is unlikely to be a responsible person for the non-domestic premises. The exceptions to that would be where they own or share ownership of the freehold, which is acknowledged in the new clause. A leaseholder can be a duty holder under article 5 of the fire safety order, and it is important that the order provides that ability, which will be determined by the circumstances of a particular case.

The Bill does not change that arrangement. It does, of course, clarify that the order applies to the flat entrance doors, which obviously affects leaseholders more directly than other parts of the building where they may reside. Depending on the terms of a lease or a tenancy agreement, responsibility to ensure that the door complies with the requirements of the order could therefore fall to the responsible person, or the building owner, or the tenant/leaseholder, as a duty holder. As we conveyed previously, legislating to remove the leaseholder as responsible person would undermine the principles of the order and could have the unintended consequence of creating a vacuum of responsibilities under the order, which could in turn compromise fire safety. On that basis, and given our other proposals in relation to the fire safety order, I would ask that further consideration be given in terms of moving new clause 4.

On new clause 5 and waking watches, I am very conscious of a number of points made by hon. and right hon. Members across the House and the intent behind the proposal. I gently suggest to the hon. Member for Croydon Central that there are technical issues with this amendment—which my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) underlined and which do not seem to have been reflected—that mean that the approach taken could lead to greater uncertainty and more waking watches where they are not intended.

However, I understand the points made by hon. Members across the House, and I underline that we are taking forward the following on waking watches, in conjunction with the National Fire Chiefs Council. The NFCC is updating its guidance relating to waking watches, which I think responds to a number of points raised by hon. and right hon. Members. We anticipate that this will be published very shortly. Once the guidance is available, we will ask the fire protection board to advise fire and rescue services on how best to ensure that it is implemented on the ground by responsible persons. That will include looking into other measures, such as installing building-wide fire alarm systems, to reduce the dependency on waking watches wherever possible.

My colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government are also looking to publish data on the costs of waking watches. This means that there will be transparency on the range of costs and will enable comparisons to be made. Our aim must ultimately be to reduce the use of waking watches and the costs that they bring, for all the reasons highlighted by hon. and right hon. Members in this debate. We are working with the NFCC and fire and rescue services to undertake a building risk review programme on all high-rise residential buildings of 18 metres and above, as I have already referenced.

Let me respond on the issue of EWS1 forms and some homeowners facing difficulties working with lenders. We do recognise the issue, and colleagues at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government are working with lenders to support a proportionate approach and explore how other evidence might assist the valuation process. The Government do not support a blanket approach to the use of EWS1 forms on buildings and are encouraging mortgage lenders to accept other equivalent evidence from building owners for valuation purposes.

The Minister for fire and building safety held a roundtable with mortgage lenders, where lenders agreed that a nuanced, proportionate approach to risk was required. They are reflecting that in their policies and guidance to valuers. The Minister will hold a further roundtable with lenders shortly.

I say to the House that we have further opportunities with the Building Safety Bill, and I would encourage participation on the consultation on the fire safety order, but with the assurances and clarification that I have given, I hope that hon. Members will be minded not to press their new clauses and amendments.

Sarah Jones: Ahead of setting up the Grenfell Tower fire public inquiry, the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), said that she wanted

“to provide justice for the victims and their families who suffered so terribly”

and that

“we cannot wait for ages to learn the immediate lessons”.—[*Official Report*, 22 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 168.]

However, despite being long delayed, the Grenfell Tower fire phase 1 inquiry's recommendations are now nearly one year old, and they have not yet been implemented.

The Minister will have heard the frustration from across the House: it is not just on the Opposition Benches but coming loud and clear from the Government Benches, and the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) put it best. It is always never the right time for these things to be implemented with this Government—there is a consultation, a taskforce and the dreaded roundtable followed by another roundtable. It is simply not good enough.

New clause 1 attempts to press the Government to deliver on the first set of recommendations from the Grenfell Tower phase 1 inquiry. The Minister is a good man, but his response is not good enough. We must lead. That sense of momentum he talked about has to have meaning. We have to act to do what we can, three years on from the Grenfell Tower fire. The official Opposition therefore want to press new clause 1 to a Division.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 188, Noes 318.

Division No. 86]

[8.22 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Abrahams, Debbie	Dodds, Anneliese
Ali, Rushanara	Doughty, Stephen
Ali, Tahir	Dowd, Peter
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Eagle, Ms Angela
Amesbury, Mike	Eagle, Maria
Anderson, Fleur	Eastwood, Colum
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Edwards, Jonathan
Ashworth, Jonathan	Efford, Clive
Barker, Paula	Elliott, Julie
Beckett, rh Margaret	Elmore, Chris
Begum, Apsana	Eshalomi, Florence
Benn, rh Hilary	Esterson, Bill
Betts, Mr Clive	Farron, Tim
Blake, Olivia	Farry, Stephen
Brabin, Tracy	Fletcher, Colleen
Brennan, Kevin	Fovargue, Yvonne
Brown, Ms Lyn	Foxcroft, Vicky
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Foy, Mary Kelly
Buck, Ms Karen	Furniss, Gill
Burgon, Richard	Gardiner, Barry
Butler, Dawn	Gill, Preet Kaur
Byrne, Ian	Glindon, Mary
Cadbury, Ruth	Green, Kate
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Greenwood, Lilian
Carden, Dan	Greenwood, Margaret
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Griffith, Nia
Chamberlain, Wendy	Gwynne, Andrew
Champion, Sarah	Haigh, Louise
Clark, Feryal	Hamilton, Fabian
Cooper, Daisy	Hardy, Emma
Cooper, Rosie	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Cooper, rh Yvette	Harris, Carolyn
Coyle, Neil	Hayes, Helen
Creasy, Stella	Healey, rh John
Cruddas, Jon	Hendrick, Sir Mark
Cryer, John	Hill, Mike
Cummins, Judith	Hobhouse, Wera
Cunningham, Alex	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Daby, Janet	Hollern, Kate
Davey, rh Sir Edward	Hopkins, Rachel
David, Wayne	Howarth, rh Sir George
Davies-Jones, Alex	Huq, Dr Rupa
De Cordova, Marsha	Hussain, Imran
Debbonaire, Thangam	Jarvis, Dan

Johnson, Dame Diana	Rees, Christina
Johnson, Kim	Reeves, Ellie
Jones, Darren	Reeves, Rachel
Jones, rh Mr Kevan	Reynolds, Jonathan
Jones, Sarah	Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Kane, Mike	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Keeley, Barbara	Rodda, Matt
Kendall, Liz	Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Khan, Afzal	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Kinnock, Stephen	Shah, Naz
Lake, Ben	Shannon, Jim
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Sharma, Mr Virendra
Lloyd, Tony	Sheerman, Mr Barry
Long Bailey, Rebecca	Siddiq, Tulip
Lynch, Holly	Slaughter, Andy
Madders, Justin	Smith, Cat
Malhotra, Seema	Smith, Jeff
Maskell, Rachael	Smith, Nick
Matheson, Christian	Sobel, Alex
McCabe, Steve	Spellar, rh John
McCarthy, Kerry	Starmar, rh Keir
McDonagh, Siobhain	Stevens, Jo
McDonald, Andy	Stone, Jamie
McDonnell, rh John	Streeting, Wes
McFadden, rh Mr Pat	Sultana, Zarah
McGovern, Alison	Tami, rh Mark
McMahon, Jim	Tarry, Sam
Mearns, Ian	Thomas, Gareth
Mishra, Navendu	Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Morgan, Stephen	Timms, rh Stephen
Morris, Grahame	Trickett, Jon
Murray, Ian	Turner, Karl
Murray, James	Twigg, Derek
Norris, Alex	Twist, Liz
Olney, Sarah	Vaz, rh Valerie
Onwurah, Chi	Webbe, Claudia
Oppong-Asare, Abena	West, Catherine
Osamor, Kate	Western, Matt
Osborne, Kate	Whitehead, Dr Alan
Owatemi, Taiwo	Whitley, Mick
Owen, Sarah	Whittome, Nadia
Peacock, Stephanie	Williams, Hywel
Pennycook, Matthew	Wilson, Munira
Perkins, Mr Toby	Winter, Beth
Phillips, Jess	Yasin, Mohammad
Pollard, Luke	Zeichner, Daniel
Powell, Lucy	
Qureshi, Yasmin	
Rayner, Angela	
Reed, Steve	

Tellers for the Ayes:

Jessica Morden and
Bambos Charalambous

NOES

Adams, Nigel	Baldwin, Harriett
Afolami, Bim	Baron, Mr John
Afriyie, Adam	Baynes, Simon
Ahmad Khan, Imran	Bell, Aaron
Aiken, Nickie	Benton, Scott
Aldous, Peter	Beresford, Sir Paul
Amess, Sir David	Berry, rh Jake
Anderson, Lee	Bhatti, Saqib
Anderson, Stuart	Blackman, Bob
Andrew, Stuart	Blunt, Crispin
Argar, Edward	Bone, Mr Peter
Atkins, Victoria	Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bacon, Gareth	Bowie, Andrew
Bacon, Mr Richard	Bradley, Ben
Badenoch, Kemi	Bradley, rh Karen
Bailey, Shaun	Brady, Sir Graham
Baillie, Siobhan	Brereton, Jack
Baker, Duncan	Bridgen, Andrew
Baker, Mr Steve	Brine, Steve

Bristow, Paul	Fysh, Mr Marcus	Lewer, Andrew	Rowley, Lee
Britcliffe, Sara	Gale, rh Sir Roger	Lewis, rh Brandon	Russell, Dean
Brokenshire, rh James	Garnier, Mark	Lewis, rh Dr Julian	Rutley, David
Browne, Anthony	Ghani, Ms Nusrat	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian	Sambrook, Gary
Bruce, Fiona	Gibson, Peter	Loder, Chris	Saxby, Selaine
Buchan, Felicity	Gideon, Jo	Logan, Mark	Scully, Paul
Burns, rh Conor	Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl	Longhi, Marco	Seely, Bob
Butler, Rob	Glen, John	Lopez, Julia	Selous, Andrew
Cairns, rh Alun	Goodwill, rh Mr Robert	Lopresti, Jack	Shapps, rh Grant
Carter, Andy	Gove, rh Michael	Lord, Mr Jonathan	Sharma, rh Alok
Cartlidge, James	Graham, Richard	Loughton, Tim	Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Cash, Sir William	Grant, Mrs Helen	Mackinlay, Craig	Simmonds, David
Cates, Miriam	Grayling, rh Chris	Maclean, Rachel	Skidmore, rh Chris
Caulfield, Maria	Green, Chris	Mak, Alan	Smith, Chloe
Chalk, Alex	Green, rh Damian	Malthouse, Kit	Smith, Greg
Chishti, Rehman	Griffith, Andrew	Mangnall, Anthony	Smith, Henry
Churchill, Jo	Griffiths, Kate	Mann, Scott	Smith, rh Julian
Clark, rh Greg	Grundy, James	Marson, Julie	Smith, Royston
Clarke, Mr Simon	Gullis, Jonathan	May, rh Mrs Theresa	Solloway, Amanda
Clarke, Theo	Halfon, rh Robert	Mayhew, Jerome	Spencer, rh Mark
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Hall, Luke	Maynard, Paul	Stafford, Alexander
Clarkson, Chris	Hammond, Stephen	McCartney, Jason	Stephenson, Andrew
Cleverly, rh James	Hancock, rh Matt	McCartney, Karl	Stevenson, Jane
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse	Harper, rh Mr Mark	McVey, rh Esther	Stevenson, John
Colburn, Elliot	Harris, Rebecca	Mercer, Johnny	Stewart, Iain
Collins, Damian	Harrison, Trudy	Merriman, Huw	Streeter, Sir Gary
Costa, Alberto	Hart, Sally-Ann	Metcalfe, Stephen	Stride, rh Mel
Courts, Robert	Hart, rh Simon	Millar, Robin	Stuart, Graham
Coutinho, Claire	Heald, rh Sir Oliver	Miller, rh Mrs Maria	Sturdy, Julian
Crosbie, Virginia	Heapey, James	Milling, rh Amanda	Sunderland, James
Daly, James	Heaton-Harris, Chris	Mills, Nigel	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Davies, David T. C.	Henderson, Gordon	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew	Syms, Sir Robert
Davies, Dr James	Henry, Darren	Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Thomas, Derek
Davies, Gareth	Higginbotham, Antony	Moore, Damien	Throup, Maggie
Davies, Mims	Hinds, rh Damian	Moore, Robbie	Timpson, Edward
Davies, Philip	Hoare, Simon	Mordaunt, rh Penny	Tolhurst, Kelly
Davis, rh Mr David	Holden, Mr Richard	Morris, Anne Marie	Tomlinson, Justin
Davison, Dehenna	Hollinrake, Kevin	Morris, David	Tomlinson, Michael
Dinenage, Caroline	Hollobone, Mr Philip	Morrissey, Joy	Tracey, Craig
Dines, Miss Sarah	Holloway, Adam	Morton, Wendy	Trott, Laura
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Holmes, Paul	Mumby-Croft, Holly	Truss, rh Elizabeth
Docherty, Leo	Howell, John	Mundell, rh David	Tugendhat, Tom
Donelan, Michelle	Howell, Paul	Murray, Mrs Sheryll	Vara, Mr Shailesh
Dorries, Ms Nadine	Hudson, Dr Neil	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew	Vickers, Martin
Double, Steve	Hunt, Jane	Neill, Sir Robert	Vickers, Matt
Dowden, rh Oliver	Hunt, rh Jeremy	Nici, Lia	Villiers, rh Theresa
Doyle-Price, Jackie	Hunt, Tom	Nokes, rh Caroline	Wakeford, Christian
Drummond, Mrs Flick	Jack, rh Mr Alister	Norman, rh Jesse	Walker, Sir Charles
Duddridge, James	Jayawardena, Mr Ranil	O'Brien, Neil	Walker, Mr Robin
Duguid, David	Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Offord, Dr Matthew	Wallis, Dr Jamie
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Jenkinson, Mark	Opperman, Guy	Warburton, David
Dunne, rh Philip	Jenkyns, Andrea	Parish, Neil	Warman, Matt
Eastwood, Mark	Jenrick, rh Robert	Pawsey, Mark	Watling, Giles
Edwards, Ruth	Johnson, Dr Caroline	Penning, rh Sir Mike	Webb, Suzanne
Ellis, rh Michael	Johnson, Gareth	Penrose, John	Whately, Helen
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie	Johnston, David	Percy, Andrew	Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Eustice, rh George	Jones, Andrew	Philp, Chris	Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Evans, Dr Luke	Jones, rh Mr David	Poulter, Dr Dan	Wiggin, Bill
Evennett, rh Sir David	Jones, Fay	Pow, Rebecca	Wild, James
Everitt, Ben	Jones, Mr Marcus	Prentis, Victoria	Williams, Craig
Fabricant, Michael	Jupp, Simon	Pursglove, Tom	Williamson, rh Gavin
Fell, Simon	Keegan, Gillian	Quince, Will	Wood, Mike
Fletcher, Katherine	Knight, rh Sir Greg	Randall, Tom	Wragg, Mr William
Fletcher, Mark	Knight, Julian	Richards, Nicola	Wright, rh Jeremy
Fletcher, Nick	Kruger, Danny	Richardson, Angela	Young, Jacob
Ford, Vicky	Kwarteng, rh Kwasi	Roberts, Rob	Zahawi, Nadhim
Foster, Kevin	Lamont, John	Robertson, Mr Laurence	
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Largan, Robert	Robinson, Mary	Tellers for the Noes:
Frazer, Lucy	Latham, Mrs Pauline	Rosindell, Andrew	Eddie Hughes and
Freeman, George	Leadsom, rh Andrea	Ross, Douglas	James Morris
Freer, Mike	Leigh, rh Sir Edward		
Fuller, Richard	Levy, Ian		

Question accordingly negated.

The list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy, is published at the end of today's debates.

Third Reading

Queen's consent signified.

8.37 pm

James Brokenshire: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Grenfell Tower fire was a national tragedy that shook confidence in the building safety system to the core. As a Government, we remain fully committed to fixing that system, to reforming fire and building safety and to ensuring that the events of 14 June 2017 are never repeated. People have a right to be safe and feel safe in their homes.

On the day of publication of the Grenfell Tower inquiry's phase 1 report, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister accepted in principle all 12 recommendations that were addressed to the Government directly, 11 of which will require implementation in law. The Fire Safety Bill, which will amend the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005—the fire safety order—is an important first step towards enacting these recommendations.

In that context, I thank the Minister for Crime and Policing, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who led the Bill in Committee on 25 June, all the Members who served on that Committee and applied scrutiny to the Bill, and indeed all right hon. and hon. Members who participated in the debate earlier today.

As Members are aware, this is a short and technical Bill to clarify that the scope of the fire safety order applies to the structure, external walls and flat entrance doors of multi-occupied residential buildings. This provides a firm foundation to implement the Grenfell Tower phase 1 legislative recommendations that focus primarily on inspection of high-rise residential buildings by building owners and managers and information sharing with fire and rescue services.

I want to take a moment to underline that this is part of a bigger picture. The Government have published the draft Building Safety Bill, which will shortly be subject to pre-legislative scrutiny by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. The Building Safety Bill takes forward the recommendations from Dame Judith Hackitt's independent review of building regulations and fire safety, and will put in place new and enhanced regulatory regimes for building safety and construction products, and ensure that residents have a stronger voice in the system. Alongside the Building Safety Bill, the Government published a fire safety consultation, which includes proposals to strengthen the fire safety order, improve compliance with the order, implement the Grenfell Tower phase one recommendations, and progress arrangements for consultation between building control bodies and fire and rescue authorities in relation to building work.

Our programme of work is not limited to legislation and includes having established a remediation programme, supported by £1.6 billion of Government funding, to remove unsafe cladding from high-rise residential buildings. For those who register for the fund, they are now able to

submit their funding applications. We are also undertaking, in conjunction with the fire service, a building risk review programme for all high-rise residential buildings in England by December 2021, supported by £10 million of new funding.

The Building Safety Bill is a very detailed piece of legislation that aims to create significant changes to improve building and fire safety. Moreover, our fire safety consultation contains proposals to strengthen a number of areas of the fire safety order. Together, the Fire Safety Bill, the draft Building Safety Bill and the fire safety consultation will create fundamental improvements to building safety standards and ensure that residents are safe and feel safe in their homes.

During the passage of the Fire Safety Bill, we have had good and robust debates in this House which have benefited the Bill in airing and showing the issues that are at stake. Hon. and right hon. Members have underlined why this matters to their constituents, why this matters for safety and why this matters for people feeling confident in their homes. That is a message and an objective that the Government absolutely will follow through on. It is why we believe the Bill is important in setting good and solid foundations upon which we can now proceed. I therefore commend the Bill to the House.

8.42 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): On Third Reading, I reiterate that the Opposition support the Fire Safety Bill, but we are desperately disappointed that the Government have not gone much further and much faster on improving fire safety.

I regret that the Government did not choose to support Labour's new clause 1, which would have implemented the key recommendations of Sir Martin Moore-Bick's Grenfell Tower inquiry phase one report, published in October. It is difficult to understand why the Government, who promised to implement the recommendations in full and without delay, have not chosen to make the concessions to include provision for them in the Bill. It is difficult to understand why responsible owners should not have to share evacuation plans with residents or undertake regular inspections of flat doors or lifts. It is difficult to understand why the Government are content with a situation where a fire risk assessor needs no qualifications whatever. It is difficult to understand why we cannot define the responsible owner in such a way to avoid leaseholders, who are already paying so much, footing the bill for things that are not their fault.

Endless promises of action, statements, consultations, taskforces and roundtables without any real change have tied the entire building safety world in knots, with hundreds of thousands of people paying the consequences, living in unsafe homes or unable to sell their flat because there is such confusion over which buildings are safe and what pieces of paper are needed to prove they are safe and who is liable. At every stage, the Opposition have sought to be constructive and to help the Government to improve the Bill. There is a lot more work to be done and we hope that as much of it as possible will be achieved now through secondary legislation.

Having debated our amendments on Report, I want to raise an important point about the implications of the Bill for our fire and rescue services. We welcome the high level of inspection and enforcement that the Bill

[Sarah Jones]

requires, but we need clarity about the funding and resources provided to carry out such work. Over the past decade, we have seen devastating cuts to firefighter numbers, amounting to 20% of the service. Fire inspectors have seen some of the largest cuts, yet the Bill requires much more of them, and many more of them. I would like the Minister to set out what additional funding will be provided to the fire and rescue services to undertake this work.

I pay tribute to our fire and rescue services, as the Minister did, who go above and beyond to keep us safe and have worked tirelessly to protect us throughout the covid pandemic. I am grateful to the Ministers, the officials and the House staff who have worked with us on the Bill, and I give particular thanks to Yohanna Sallberg and Kenneth Fox, who have brilliantly supported me through the passage of the Bill. I also pay tribute to the hon. Members who have made such important contributions today and at previous stages of the Bill. There is much expertise in this House—either built over years of work in this place or personal experience in jobs that people have done before coming to this place—that the Government should listen to with more urgency.

In July 2017, I made my maiden speech during the first full debate in this Chamber on the Grenfell tragedy. I never would have thought that three years later, I would be facing a Government that are still yet to pass a single Act of Parliament to deliver on the clear promises made in the wake of that tragedy. The most important aim of the Bill is to clarify fire safety rules to prevent loss of life or damage to buildings from fire. It is to ensure that our constituents can live safely in their homes. I want to say to all those stuck living in unsafe blocks, but in particular to the Grenfell survivors and the victims' families, that Opposition Members will not rest until every measure necessary is in place to prevent a fire like Grenfell from ever happening again.

8.46 pm

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Grenfell Tower is in my constituency of Kensington, so I start by paying tribute to the Grenfell community—to the bereaved

and to the survivors, who have borne their loss with such dignity. This Bill is a small step in implementing the recommendations of the first phase of the Grenfell inquiry, and I commend it to the House, but I urge Government to move with a sense of urgency. I would also say that the Bill is just one small component. Clearly, the Building Safety Bill and the consultation on the fire safety order are also critically important. We owe it to the Grenfell community to never, ever allow a tragedy of this kind to happen again, so let us ensure that we implement state-of-the-art building and fire safety regulations with urgency.

8.48 pm

Sir David Amess: I rise to support the Third Reading of the Bill and wish it a swift passage in the other House. The Bill has been welcomed by public and industry bodies, noting the expected increase in the enforcement action by fire service authorities as a result of its clarifications, as well as an expectation that it will impose greater burdens on the responsible person in multi-occupancy residential buildings.

On 20 July, the Government also published the draft Building Safety Bill, which takes forward their fundamental reform of the building safety system, introducing new regulatory regimes for building safety and construction products. Unquestionably, the Bill would strengthen the whole regulatory system for building safety as well as ensuring that there is greater accountability and responsibility for fire and structural safety issues throughout the life cycle of buildings within the scope of the more stringent regime.

Having said all that, I very much hope that the Government will not ignore all the points that have been made by the Opposition and the arguments that I have tried to make this evening. We cannot, and must not, waste any more time by pushing the issue of electrical safety around between different Departments. We owe it to those who lost their lives in Grenfell and other fires to find the parliamentary time and the right vehicle to enshrine electrical safety in legislation.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

House of Commons Members' Fund

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That—

(1) Anne Main be removed as a Trustee of the House of Commons Members' Fund and Stuart Andrew and Sir Alan Campbell be appointed as Trustees in pursuance of section 2 of the House of Commons Members' Fund Act 2016; and

(2) the sum to be deducted from the salaries of Members of the House of Commons in pursuance of section 4(1) and (2) of that Act shall continue to be £2 per month.—(*Stuart Andrew.*)

8.50 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): May I start by paying tribute to Anne Main, the former Member for St Albans, who was part of the Members' Fund? I thank the hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Sir Alan Campbell) for agreeing to serve. I am sure that they will both do a very good job.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I will be very brief. I cannot disagree with anything that was just said; I thoroughly endorse that position.

The Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household (Stuart Andrew): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) for her kind comments, and I would like to add my thanks and those of the Government to former Member Anne Main.

Question put and agreed to.

Electoral Commission

[*Relevant Documents: Third Report of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, Re-appointment of a Nominated Electoral Commissioner, HC 627.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will re-appoint Alasdair Morgan as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 October 2020 for the period ending on 30 September 2022.—(*Stuart Andrew.*)

8.51 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission for its third report. I wish Alasdair Morgan all good wishes for his work and thank him for serving on the Committee.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): Again, I will be very brief. I thoroughly endorse the reappointment of Alasdair to the Electoral Commission. He has done an excellent job so far and his wealth of experience from this place and the Scottish Parliament certainly is of great benefit to the Commission.

The Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household (Stuart Andrew): I certainly endorse all the comments made and I thank Mr Morgan for his continued service.

Question put and agreed to.

Local Government Boundary Commission for England

[*Relevant Documents: Second Report of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, Re-appointment of the Chair of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, HC 626.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will re-appoint Professor Colin Mellors OBE as Chair of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England with effect from 1 January 2021 for the period ending on 31 December 2025.—(*Stuart Andrew.*)

8.52 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission for its second report. Professor Colin Mellors was appointed chair of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England on 1 January. His current term of office began then and comes to an end on 31 December. I think it would be helpful for the House to hear exactly what the Speaker's Committee said about Professor Mellors:

"Together, the responses gave us a positive impression of the way Professor Mellors had carried out the role. They suggested that he had taken an open and inclusive approach to chairing the Commission, that he had effectively maintained the Commission's independence, impartiality and credibility, and that he had brought to the role a strong understanding of the local government sector and the wider policy context."

The Committee

"also heard that Professor Mellors had ensured the Commission's finances were carefully scrutinised to enable it to deliver value for money."

We support the Government's motion endorsing Professor Colin Mellors.

8.53 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I, too, wish to support and endorse the appointment of Professor Colin Mellors. I also wish to spare him vast amounts of unnecessary work.

I wonder whether the Government might consider that, in the midst of the biggest crisis this country has faced since the second world war, it is the wisest thing to

ask Professor Mellors, or indeed other parts of the state, to spend the next few years engaging with a top-down restructuring of local government, therefore focusing local authorities' efforts not on tackling the virus or on providing schooling or care or looking after our local communities, but on looking inwardly—navel contemplating; reorganising the deckchairs on the Titanic—when instead they should be focusing on serving their communities.

I wonder whether the Minister agrees that top-down reorganisation and restructuring is always dangerous because we always find that people take their eye off the main ball and the main focus. In the midst of the biggest crisis since 1945, is it wise—and indeed in touch with public opinion and what is going on in this country—to publish a White Paper that Professor Mellors will now have to get to grips with, as he sets new boundaries in much bigger councils, and sets new electoral limits, and tell him, and indeed, the whole of the local government community, "Spend the next two years navel contemplating, talking to yourselves and rewriting the headed paper, instead of providing support for public health and fighting back against the virus and the economic consequences"?

8.54 pm

The Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household (**Stuart Andrew**): I join the Opposition spokesman in the comments she made about Professor Colin Mellors. I will certainly make sure that the Secretary of State has heard the views of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), but I am sure that the glowing references we have heard about Professor Mellors mean that he will be more than capable of dealing with anything that is sent his way.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Ordered,

That Virginia Crosbie be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Theo Clarke be nominated.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Housing Developments: West Sussex

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

8.55 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): It is good to see colleagues from West Sussex here this evening. The Minister for Defence Procurement, my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), wanted to be here, but is away on Government business overseas. He is taking a close interest in these matters, and is also keen to see that the Government find the right balance.

West Sussex is a proud county that has contributed greatly to the history of this country. Romans, Saxons and Normans all settled in Sussex first before going on to make a lasting impression on many other parts of the United Kingdom. Much more recently, our ports and airfields were central to the defence of our realm in two world wars. The Minister's Department may be interested to know that the six Sussex rapes are among the very oldest recorded form of local administrative units in the country, still reflected today in the six martlets on the Sussex flag.

More pertinently to today's debate, Sussex sits between two immovable features—the coast of the English channel and Greater London. In many places, it is the only ribbon of truly green land preventing unbroken concrete from connecting the two. I requested that the House discuss this important issue back in July, as my constituents in Arundel and South Downs were already feeling the strain of a planning system that had the unique quality of pleasing absolutely no one. I suspect that I make common cause with the Minister when I say that the planning system we have today is too slow, too adversarial and too expensive, and yet still manages to create huge amounts of blight and burden on communities without delivering the volume, quality or even type of homes that we need. Planning permissions are already in place for more than 1 million homes, enough to satisfy the nation's needs for years to come, but those homes are not getting built. Labour's tax raid on pensions channelled savings instead into buy-to-let property, and we have a legal commitment to net zero, but we are building homes in the middle of nowhere that are wholly reliant on a car to go anywhere.

Housing is a market where intervention has been heaped on intervention, so that, like a teenager's carpet, we can no longer see the original pattern. That matters terribly, because right now so many of my constituents from Adversane to West Grinstead, Barnham to Wineham, and in villages of every letter of the alphabet in between, are having their lives blighted by the prospect of inappropriate and unsustainable development. It is on their behalf that I speak today.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important Adjournment debate. The ancient parish of Ifield just outside Crawley borough is facing the threat of some 10,000 houses in unsustainable circumstances on the floodplain. Would he agree that it is very important that while we should provide additional housing for future generations in West Sussex, we must have the environment paramount in our considerations?

Andrew Griffith: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend on that. I shall come to the point about the provision in the planning system for different landscapes, including floodplains, which, as we know, West Sussex has in abundance.

The aspiration of owning one's own home is one that every homeowner, parent and grandparent can support. I was proud last December to stand on a manifesto that pledged to tackle a problem that has been ducked by so many previous Governments, but let us also be clear that that manifesto also said that we would

“guarantee that we will protect and restore our natural environment”. It also said we would “increase bio-diversity” and devolve “power to people and places across the UK.”.

I am an optimist, and I believe that, with care, it should be possible to do all those things.

The Government's recent planning White Paper has many features that I welcome, such as local design statements, more emphasis on brownfield land and faster neighbourhood plans, but I would argue that, perhaps not for the first time this summer, well-meaning ministerial intent has been sabotaged by a “mutant algorithm” cooked up in the wet market of Whitehall. There are seemingly three fundamental flaws in the standard methodology. First, it appears to be entirely blind to geography, which is not a great look for a planning system. If, as in West Sussex, much land is physically incapable of being developed or is protected in law, the algorithm appears to completely ignore this. For example, nearly 50% of Mid Sussex District Council's land is in the High Weald area of outstanding natural beauty, another 10% is in the South Downs national park and the district is one of the most wooded in the whole south-east. My constituents in Hassocks, Hurstpierpoint and Sayers Common are rightly concerned that if this protected land were excluded without an adjustment to the numbers, the algorithm would force unrealistic amounts of development in what should, in any case, be a precious green corridor linking the ecology of the South Downs and the High Weald.

Also, the algorithm must only work in dry weather, as much of my constituency lies on the floodplains of the Rivers Arun, Adur and Rother, something that even a cursory look at the lacework of blue lines on an Ordnance Survey map would reveal. Anyone relying on the Environment Agency's narrow definition of flood risk will spend much of their winter bewildered by the waters lapping around their waist, as residents of Pulborough, Fittleworth and Henfield know all too well. Promoters of a 7,000-home development known as Mayfield Market Town clearly fall into that category, as locals know that a large proportion of the proposed site sits under water for a good proportion of the winter. I guess we could build the homes on stilts, like those over-water tropical villas, but that does not quite explain how the residents will get in their cars to drive the many miles that development in such an unsustainable location would require. All that is before we take into account the down-catchment impact of run-off from concreting an area that currently acts as a huge sponge, filling our chalk aquifers and preventing flooding of our coastal towns downstream. My constituents in Hassocks and Barnham have both had the disturbing experience of raw sewage emerging from the drains after planners failed to understand how the water table on a floodplain works.

[Andrew Griffith]

Secondly, the standard method algorithm is backward looking and self-perpetuating; unlike the famous investment disclaimer, past performance here is treated as entirely a predictor of future success. Districts with high rates of house building in the past are assumed to continue that into perpetuity, so this fatally undermines any opportunity to level up away from the over-heated south-east of England.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Many of my constituents in Bracknell and the Wokingham Borough Council area are very sensitive about unsustainable house building. Having seen the targets that have been put together in the Lichfields table, they are rightly concerned about what lies ahead. Given that both councils that I represent have proudly and boldly delivered against the local plan in recent years, does my hon. Friend think that for the Government to be worthy of their pre-eminence, they need to apply some form of judgment on top of the science?

Andrew Griffith: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about the role of judgment in any planning system—particularly one with a Government who are committed to supporting local democracy.

The report from the levelling up taskforce, which was published only today—I congratulate the author on attracting such attention to such an important issue—shows a huge southward shift in the UK population. Before the second world war, roughly a fifth of the population lived in the south of England outside London, while twice as many lived in the north and Scotland, taken together. Now equal numbers live in both. Between 1981 and 2018, the population of London increased by nearly a third, while that of the north-east grew by less than 1%. By piling on even more growth in the south-east, the algorithm is locking the north and midlands into permanent disadvantage, just as Ofqual's formula dictated that someone from a school that had not done well in the past could never do well in the future. For much of the north and midlands, the algorithm suggests a lower number than the current one, while in the south it significantly increases. Despite the Government's stated intent, the new formula is levelling down, not levelling up.

Thirdly, the formula uses a simplistic affordability ratio as a false proxy for local need. For an area impacted by central London wages, such as Horsham, the algorithm produces a result that would take the housing stock from 55,000 in 2011 to almost 90,000 over 20 years. That is growth of 62%. However fertile the local population may be, it seems an unlikely outcome at a time when the reproduction rate of the settlement population is barely at replacement levels. Trying to influence affordability through supply has been likened to a person standing on an enormous iceberg and trying to melt it by pouring kettles of hot water over their feet.

The algorithm needs more work. The reason that matters is that high, top-down housing targets induce developers to submit large and unsustainable schemes. Even when they do not get built, they end up blighting residents for years on end. That is the case for Horsham District Council, which, in calling for sites, has encouraged developers to put forward greenfield sites in Adversane and West Grinstead. Both are in the middle of countryside

and only accessible by road, and the nearest town of Horsham is a 10-mile drive away. They would create millions of car journeys a year, and there is no capacity in local schools and GP surgeries or local employment opportunities. Ironically, in that particular case, the alternative is the Government themselves, through Homes England, which claims on its website to be able to build 10,000 homes much closer to existing hospitals, schools and shopping facilities in the north of the borough. If that is the case, I say get on with it.

The perfect example of this blight is Mayfield Market Town, which has impacted 27,000 residents across 17 parishes for seven years, dating back to 2013. Residents, through Locals Against Mayfield Building Sprawl and the inter-parish group, have held 73 meetings, and have had to raise and spend £140,000 to fund barristers and commission experts' reports on a scheme that, to the best of my knowledge, not a single elected person or layer of government in West Sussex has ever supported.

Let me reassure the Minister that in West Sussex we are not nimbys. Over the past three years, Sussex has delivered 6,000 homes per year and has hit 97% of its allocation. I think good development is organic. The historical growth of our small towns and villages can be traced like rings on a tree. Good development supports the village school, the village shop and the village pub. Without exception, adopted local neighbourhood plans have made healthy provision for growth, and have just got on with it. The tiny parish of Albourne committed to 14% growth in a parish of just 260 homes. It approved this at a referendum in September 2016, and by the middle of this year 21 new homes had already been delivered. Every day that we persist in trying to build the wrong homes in the wrong places is another day when we are not building the right homes in the right places.

There is a better way. First, we should adjust the housing numbers formula not just for national parks and areas of natural beauty but for a broader category of floodplains, high-quality agricultural land and vital green corridors for wildlife. As currently constructed, the logical inference is that the more protected land we have in an area, the greater the density of development on the remainder. It is like a closed-loop error in computer code that would see the South Downs national park end up like Central Park, Manhattan, with protected areas hemmed in on every side by high-rise development.

If we are serious about the guarantee to protect and restore our natural environment, we have to build in protection for green corridors for wildlife to move through the landscape and for natural processes to operate effectively. These cannot be cosmetic or artificial—they need to have the original ancient biome intact. One such green corridor is the ribbon of land between Barnham and Eastergate connecting the coastal plain to the national park. Another is between Henfield, Sayers Common, Cowfold and West Grinstead that connects the South Downs with the High Weald. It contains the Knepp estate, where Isabella and Charlie have made such an iconic contribution to rewilding. It hosts one of the largest concentrations of nightingales in the UK, the biggest breeding population of rare purple emperor butterflies, all five indigenous species of owl and, crucially, about 16 breeding turtle doves—the most likely next bird species to face extinction on British soil. This summer, the first white stork chicks born in the UK for

hundreds of years hatched there. This ecological gem is at risk from plans to build a 3,500-home new town on nearby greenfield land in West Grinstead, bringing 10,000 new residents, light pollution, and millions of additional car journeys.

I accept that they may currently be somewhat out of favour, but, as the excellent Sussex Wildlife Trust has highlighted to me, there are also extremely rare bat colonies relying on the native woodlands, ancient hedgerows and streams of West Sussex. In fact, West Sussex is home to the UK's rarest mammal, the greater mouse-eared bat, which is an extinction event happening in real time and on our watch. As its name suggests, it has large, mouse-like ears and a body so large that it has been likened to a rabbit hanging from a wall. In flight, its wings can stretch to nearly half a metre wide. Only a handful of mammal species live longer relative to their body size than humans, and the greater mouse-eared bat is one of the longest-lived of all: it can clock up more than 35 years. Scientists recently discovered that this is probably due to the fact that its telomeres—the string-like material at the end of its chromosomes—do not shorten with age, an insight that could very possibly help humans live longer. Tragically, as the result of its habitat being destroyed, the population of this great creature is believed to be down to a single solitary male.

Secondly, we should exhaust every single opportunity to prioritise building on brownfield land. How can we teach our children to recycle plastic bags from a supermarket and yet let an algorithm, mutant or otherwise, dictate that we bulldoze by numbers through ancient fields, hedgerows, water meadows and woodland while land capable of reuse stands idle? Every local planning authority now has a brownfield register, which in 2019 showed that there was enough suitable brownfield land to build more than 1 million homes. I welcome the Government's commitment to a "brownfield first" policy, although we should give this teeth by supporting the call from CPRE to require local authorities to write these numbers into their plans as delivered before considering any greenfield sites.

Even in West Sussex, we do not have to look far. In my constituency of Arundel and South Downs, the Shoreham cement works sits on a 44-acre site on the Steyning Road near Upper Beeding. It should be the perfect showcase of an environmentally friendly, multi-use redevelopment of a brownfield site. It could easily provide more than 2,000 quality apartment homes for a mixed community of downsizers and first timers, which is precisely where the gap in the market exists. But it is an eyesore that has been derelict for over 20 years. Despite—or perhaps even because of—many layers of government coming up with their own visions for the site, nothing has happened, and the site is not even being considered within the local plan, while untouched green fields are.

The Government are spending £400 million to support house building on brownfield land, but why is that money only available for mayoral authorities? If it is good policy—and it absolutely is—then let us make those brownfield moneys available for all. In respect of this particular site, I would be grateful if the Minister and his officials would agree to meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) to see what might be done to move forward.

Thirdly, we should be looking to do more in the centres of our great urban cities, particularly London. Our great capital city is a magnet for talent internally and externally. It is the closest we have got to a city that never sleeps—young, optimistic and diverse; the very epitome of a thriving urban centre. But it is becalmed, challenged by crime, closed roads, closed bridges, congestion and now covid. It is no wonder that the August survey by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors saw 93% of businesses expecting to reduce their space requirement over the next two years, or that PricewaterhouseCoopers, Linklaters, Schroders, Facebook and many others are all planning for their London-based staff to work from home.

As well as being overdue fresh leadership, London is now badly in need of a new renaissance. Let us take its now hollow core and transform it into the world's greatest live-work city. London is a city whose centre was razed by the great fire of London and then again by the blitz but in each case was built back better than before. Let us see commercial to residential conversions on a grand scale, building up not out, vertical farming, ubiquitous wireless connectivity, hydrogen river boats shuttling up and down the Thames—and all building on the abundance of existing infrastructure and services that development elsewhere can never tap into, such as world-class teaching hospitals, universities and cultural institutions. I put it to the Minister that this is no time to give up on our urban areas, and London is just one. Exactly the same opportunity exists for Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow, Liverpool, Cardiff and all our great historic urban centres.

Fourthly, we should acknowledge the special quality of dark skies and use the next draft of the national planning policy framework to preserve and restore the ability of future generations to connect with our universe by being able to see the milky way on a dark night. The most recent British Astronomical Association survey revealed that 61% of people live in areas with severe light pollution, meaning that they can count fewer than 10 stars in the night sky. This is a real opportunity and costs us nothing to achieve.

Fifthly, we must retain confidence in the fairness of the planning system by ensuring that there is one common and equitable set of rules for all. That means not discriminating in land supply between permanent and nomadic residents, which I know causes a great deal of concern to my local councils.

Finally, I make a personal plea to the Minister to give more support to community land trusts, which are one of the best solutions to providing genuinely affordable homes for truly local people. Projects are being pursued at the moment in Arundel, Angmering, Barnham and Eastergate, Pulborough, Slindon and Steyning, each of which I look forward to supporting all the way to their completion.

I ought to conclude and allow my right hon. Friend the Minister to respond. We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to get this right, and it is vital that we do. This is not about today, but about tomorrow—the future that we want for our children and grandchildren. As I said at the beginning, I am optimistic about the future. I am encouraged that this is a consultation, and I know that the Secretary of State and the Minister have already said that they are open to making changes. Nature has bequeathed us a unique inheritance on to

[*Andrew Griffith*]

which our forefathers built thriving towns and great enterprising cities while preserving a tapestry of villages, fields and woodlands. We must not preserve it in aspic, but neither must we replace the species-rich ancient countryside and dark skies of West Sussex at risk from overdevelopment.

9.20 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (*Andrew Griffith*), a constituency neighbour, on securing this debate, which is of such importance. Indeed, no fewer than six of the eight West Sussex Members are present in the Chamber.

I was disappointed earlier in the Session when I missed my hon. Friend's maiden speech, but I feel we have almost been treated to a rerun of it this evening, such has been the panoply of the tour around the wonderful constituency of Arundel and South Downs, which forms the heart of West Sussex, and I have actually learned quite a lot, despite representing the neighbouring constituency for 23 years, not least how close we are to the greater mouse-eared bat and how endangered they are, and I shall go and find some.

Andrew Griffith: It is.

Tim Loughton: It is; yes, indeed.

I absolutely share my hon. Friend's complete horror at what he refers to, appropriately, as the mutant algorithm that may be responsible in the future for the level and type of developments across our country, which will have particular impact on parts of West Sussex, and I want to talk about my constituency, the coastal part of West Sussex, and why we are particularly fearful of what might happen if some of the measures that have been promulgated in the White Paper go ahead.

Adur, which forms two-thirds of my constituency, is one of the smaller district council areas in the country and is boarded to the north by the south downs national park, subject to high protection, and the coast to the south; it is an urban coastal strip. About 52% of the land space of Adur District Council falls within the national park, so is not under the planning authority of Adur planning authority and is subject to greater protections than the ordinary district area. Instantly, that district has lost more than half of its land space, on which it has no control over development.

Within the district we have England's largest village, Lancing. It is technically a village although it has over 21,000 residents, and it is the largest part of Adur. We also have the oldest commercial airport in the country, Shoreham airport, which has been there since 1911—although a few people still complain about the noise of the planes, even though the houses were built long after the airport was put there. Shoreham harbour is the closest cross-channel port to London, and we have the original Hollywood, film studios, as were, on Shoreham beach. All those spaces are threatened, and would certainly be threatened if we changed our planning policies.

I am a veteran of the local plans. Adur came up with various versions of its local plan almost 10 years ago. I attended countless meetings, held meetings, and made

sure everybody was consulted, and it was a very thorough consultation. Because of the unique circumstances of Adur—we cannot develop in the national park, because Shoreham harbour is a separate brownfield zone and we cannot build out on the sea as we lack the infrastructure to link up the houses—we have a particular problem. If we do not have the roads, people cannot get in and out of the houses easily, regardless of how smart the new developments might be. The local council, with my support and that of local people, argued a strong case, and in the end the planning inspector accepted a target that was about two thirds of the original target that we had been told we would have to take in Adur, recognising the special circumstances and appreciating how the case had been argued. The local plans of Mid Sussex to the north and Arun to the west were rejected and they had to come up with greater numbers, but our special circumstances were recognised.

I am fearful that all that hard work that made the case and gave us stretching, challenging housing figures that we would have to produce up to 2031, on which a good start has been made, will be put at risk if all of a sudden we have a completely different planning strategy. I will certainly ask the Minister to comment on what will be the future of the already agreed local plans, in place up to 2031, if these new changes come in. Will all of that work have been in vain, with those areas that we protected now being fair game for developers?

Shoreham airport is one of the few green spaces that we have left. Many developers have eyed it up over many years, and various people have bought Shoreham airport on the basis that they might be able to develop it. If so, we would lose an important part of the local scene and an historic building.

Shoreham harbour was the largest brownfield site in the south-east of England. The heavy goods and imports warehouse and everything have gradually disappeared over the years and are now being replaced by a large developments of—mostly—flats. The latest development is of some 500 flats on the waterside. It is a great place to have a flat in a new development—until anyone tries to get to it, because the road has not changed. The A259, an already congested road with already worryingly high air pollution levels cannot be expanded, and yet, within the next few years, that development of 500 flats will be just one of many thousands of new dwellings on the north side of Shoreham harbour. On the south side of Shoreham harbour, the number of residences has more than doubled in my time as the Member of Parliament and yet there is just one road onto the spit of land that is Shoreham beach.

We have already been developing brownfield sites, and there are very few left. A planning application is in to convert a series of business premises on Lancing business park—the second largest business park in the whole of West Sussex and one that is extraordinarily successful, employing about 3,200 people across 230 businesses, with world-class companies and with 99% occupancy, the last I heard—into 80 residences. We are desperately short of business space—particularly good-quality business space—within the Adur district, and now, because of permitted development rights, there is a strong chance that the application could go through, so we would lose space that we desperately need for businesses. It is not just a question of turning business

space—brownfield space—into residences; we need that business space as well, and none of that will work without the infrastructure to link it all up.

I have often termed the A27 as the biggest car park in the south of England. My hon. Friend the Father of the House and I, and our predecessors before us, have campaigned for an enhancement—a bypass—to the road over many years, and we still have nothing. What we do have, because the local council had no choice under the likelihood of an appeal, is approval for a development of 600 houses. Worse still, to go with that, and in order to finance it, will be a brand-new IKEA store that is predicted to attract 2 million customer journeys a year on what is already the busiest road and one that is highly congested. That is the impact of development on local communities that are already struggling to find space for the activities they have.

All our schools are now full up. The last secondary school in my constituency that had been undersubscribed, Sir Robert Woodard Academy, has done fantastically well—it is no doubt well along the road to being an outstanding academy—and is, this year, for the first time in many years, oversubscribed. It is a great success, as is Shoreham Academy, which is oversubscribed too. All our secondary schools are oversubscribed. We desperately need new primary schools as well, but where do we put them? The space for them will be gobbled up by housing developments or businesses who desperately need to replace their space. It is all very well having a new, fast-track, slimline development planning scheme, but we have to be cognisant of the geography in which we place it, and there are certain parts of the country, of which I think my constituency is one—we are not just being nimbys—whose special circumstances mean that we cannot just plonk down a load of boxes in order to house people.

We absolutely need more housing for more people, but we also need appropriate housing. Many of these new developments, such as the lovely new flats going up along the waterside in Shoreham harbour, will be bought by people from out of the district, in many cases as second homes for people with boats. Local people and their children will be priced out of their own areas, where they grew up, because of property prices, not least because of the drift of people moving out of Brighton, as property prices there almost mirror London prices, and gradually moving along the coast to Shoreham, Worthing and beyond. We are therefore pricing out and taking away the space for local people who have grown up in the area with their families.

There is also an important issue affecting coastal constituencies. West Sussex is a relatively affluent part of the world that is very rural in many parts—not in my constituency—and has pockets of deprivation. We also know from a big study last year that educational achievement is at least two points below the average for other parts of the country. We therefore face real challenges in coastal constituencies, yet we have been neglected in the whole of the south-east, particularly on the coast, over many years when it comes to infrastructure spending. We are expected to provide the houses—and the taxes—but we do not get the infrastructure to go with that to make them viable for the people who already live there and those who understandably want to move into the area.

Of course we need more development, and we desperately need more housing—there are too many people on housing waiting lists—but we cannot use an algorithm that is completely blind to the sorts of local geographical and social circumstances that I have mentioned to come up with figures that might add up in Whitehall, but absolutely do not add up in places such as Adur. Just in the last week, the local council made an announcement, which I absolutely support, about an area of 70 acres called New Salts farm, which borders the airport and which had been speculatively bought—first by Wimpey homes and then by a housing association, on the basis that it could develop it into a lot of houses—but it was specifically taken out of the local plan because it was not seen as suitable for development. It is on a floodplain, it is close to the sea and it is a congested area. I am glad to say that the local council has bought that stretch of land and will use it as an environmental area for the use and enjoyment of the local population—a green lung of the kind that we desperately need in our area.

That is a fantastic scheme, and I applaud Adur Council for taking that initiative. However, I hope that the sorts of changes now being looked at will not mean that a developer can come in and say, “No, we’re going to develop that land,” and force Adur to give up its ambitions for that and other similar areas—for the very few open spaces that we still have left. It is really important that any algorithm respects, appreciates and recognises the local environment and the needs of local people, because their work-life balance is much more important than an algorithm. As we know, once we lose those spaces, we do not get them back.

I hope the Minister will look carefully at this. Many colleagues on this side of the House who represent constituencies that have large protected areas in them and are bounded by the coast, or by national park areas, areas of outstanding natural beauty or whatever, will be looking closely at how any changes in the planning system will impact on us, because we have done our bit. We have taken a lot of development, and a lot of people are feeling rather put upon. They are feeling that the local environment has got a bit too cosy, and they will take it, but they will not take a great deal more. Let us not ruin it simply because we have not thought this through. Let us remember that, at the end of the day, we are beholden to our constituents and our local communities, and they expect us, and certainly our party, to protect and enhance them, not to cover them in concrete.

9.34 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): May I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) that I am glad he secured this debate? I fear the penalty may be that he will be taken into Government: either made a Whip to keep him quiet or a Minister to answer devastating points such as he has made today. I congratulate him, as I congratulate the four of the eight West Sussex MPs who have become Ministers, one of whom has become a Minister again: my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb) and my hon. Friends the Members for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies) and for Horsham (Jeremy Quin). Those of us who are not Ministers—my hon. Friends the Members for East Worthing and Shoreham

[Sir Peter Bottomley]

(Tim Loughton), for Crawley (Henry Smith) and for Arundel and South Downs and I—have to provide the balance, and we can encourage Government to pay attention.

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister, who very kindly looked after me for some years when he was my Whip: could he please send the Secretary of State to West Sussex and bring the Prime Minister with him, first of all to learn that in Sussex we will not be druv—that means treat us with respect and treat our area with respect—and, secondly, to explain where the land is going to come from for development between the South Downs national park and the coast?

If we take the borough of Worthing, which makes up two thirds of my constituency, the council is proposing to have 200 homes built on Union Place, where the old police station was, opposite the old Conservative office, and over 300 homes, if things go right, at Teville Gate by the station. In the long-term plan, there were proposals for over 700 homes in West Durrington, below the national park, and those have basically been built. There are many other smaller schemes coming forward, including the Aquarena site, where a building application for 21 storeys was rightly refused, and 18 storeys was accepted—still, I think, too high.

I would say to the Minister that if he looks at St Andrews Gardens off Church Road in Tarring, an area where there is no residential building of more than three storeys, there was a proposal by some landlords—freeholders—to stick on an extra floor. The council rightly turned it down, the inspector came along and turned it down in even more firm language, and what happened when people read the Government's proposals for planning? There is a pre-application now in at the council that is putting people up in arms. People do not vote in my constituency to have a Government proposal misinterpreted and then have everything in that particular ward wrecked, where there are all sorts of other problems. But the main problem, I think, is that it is out of scale for the local area. My constituents, Jon and Michelle Mayes, have written to me to say on the original St Andrews Gardens that, although the people there are nice, the homes are out of place in that particular area. Why should that be coming forward again?

On Thursday, I shall go to celebrate the change of name of Chatsmore Catholic High School to the St Oscar Romero Catholic School. If the Minister and the Secretary of State put Chatsmore in a Google Earth search, they will find that that school, by the railway line, is between the north and south Goring gap—the green fields between Goring in Worthing, Goring-by-Sea and Ferring in the Arun District Council. Persimmon has put in an application for over 450 homes that will totally change its character. Were green belt to spread further than London and Oxford, there would be a green belt around Worthing that would certainly include the north and south Goring gaps, one of which includes Chatsmore Farm to the north, just below the A259.

I would say to the Minister that if he has a chance of looking up Chatsmore on Google Earth, he will see the problem. Where there is an open field now, that is where Persimmon plans or hopes to get approval. It is not in the Worthing Borough Council plan and it is not in any sensible plan. As a shareholder in Persimmon, I can say

to the board, “If I get a chance, I’ll come to the AGM”—perhaps I can get many other people to buy one share; I have got more than one share in my private pension—“and say, ‘Could they please pay attention to the shareholders, but even more to the nature of our countryside running down to the coast from the national park?’”

I hope that when we look at the planning proposals, we can accept where it is possible acceptably to have homes, even though there may be local objection, but we should not have homes where it is wrong. The difference between being right and being wrong is even more important than between being right and being left. Having said that, I say to my local Labour party in Worthing West, which for a long time was chaired by Ed Miller, who was secretary of the Ferring Conservation Group, “I will back you all the way. You may have tried the best you can at various elections to get me out, but between elections let us work together to protect the Goring gap.” I say the same thing to the Liberal councillors and others involved in Tarring to protect St Andrews Gardens and the rest of Tarring as well.

This is a cross-party issue. If the Government get it right, they will get more homes—acceptable homes. If they get it wrong, I do not think they will be respected by the people of all parties who want to have a proper planning system that delivers new homes at affordable prices to a range of people who otherwise would find themselves suffering from housing stress. Do not do it at the expense of a ward such as Tarring. Do not do it at the expense of those who want to protect the Goring gap, where the Goring and Ilex Conservation Group unite with the Ferring Conservation Group, and I back them all the way.

9.40 pm

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) on what I think we all agree was a finely crafted and balanced speech. I congratulate him on securing the debate and also on securing the interests of other hon. and right hon. Members. I note in particular the as ever eloquent speeches by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and also by my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who made very kind remarks—at least about me.

I also note the interest my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs has secured from other colleagues. I see around us my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), for Crawley (Henry Smith) and for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), as well as a few interlopers from a little further afield in Berkshire, Hampshire and Leicestershire: my hon. Friends the Members for Bracknell (James Sunderland), for Winchester (Steve Brine) and for Harborough (Neil O’Brien). I am very pleased they have made the time to attend this debate.

I am particularly interested in the interest of my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs in housing and planning matters, and I am pleased to speak on some of the issues that he and others have raised this evening. He drew particular attention to the calculation for local housing need, as did others, and I

think it is worth me spending a minute before I go into the detail of my speech just to remind the House of the history of the local housing need calculation, which began some six or seven years ago. From memory, it had to be revised in about 2017 to look more closely at households. Due to the challenges there have been, we committed earlier this year to revisit it with a consultation yet again. That is why the consultation is taking place now. We should disaggregate that from the consultation that has taken place on our wider planning reforms in the planning White Paper, but I entirely understand why my hon. Friend and others have wished to raise the local housing need calculation.

The local housing need calculation is driven, as properly it should be, primarily on the question of affordability. There are places in our country where affordability is low and prices are high—sometimes income is low, too—and in those places it is difficult for people, particularly local people, as mentioned by some of my hon. Friends, to find accommodation locally. We must not lose sight of the other levers that affect the local housing need calculation: the importance of levelling up and improving stock in those parts of our country that most need it; and, the importance of focusing on more brownfield development and the better use of our town centres. We are mindful of those considerations, and we will consider them carefully and closely as a result of the consultation and the submissions made to it.

My hon. Friend also drew attention to the planning White Paper and our proposed planning reforms. I want to take this opportunity to reassure him and other Members not least about our very real aspiration to leave the environment better than we found it as a result of the White Paper. It is clear that things have to change, because under the last Labour Government, house building fell to its lowest peacetime rate since the 1920s. That is why this Government have delivered more than 1.5 million additional homes since 2010 as part of our commitment to reverse that trend. We built more than 241,000 in England last year alone, and we can be rightly proud of these achievements, yet despite this progress, we are still not building enough homes. That is why we made a manifesto commitment to build more.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Would the Minister then consider that maybe the reason we have done so well in West Sussex and other parts of England since we have been in office is that we have local plans in place delivering new houses, and that maybe our focus should be on areas such as Eastleigh, part of which I represent, that do not have a local plan, and on the 1 million or so planning permissions that have been granted but not built? Maybe if we focused on those two, we would continue to make the progress that he has rightly celebrated at the Dispatch Box.

Christopher Pincher: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making those points. I will not make specific reference to any particular local plan, but it is worth noting that the consolidated local plans, as they are constituted, provide for only 180,000 new homes, which is well below our commitment to build 300,000 new homes a year by the middle of this decade, and below the number that were produced last year. It is for that very reason that we are introducing, as defined in our White Paper,

the sorts of reforms that we believe will allow for more building in the right places, in the right style and to the right standard that people want.

Our vision for the future of planning and house building is bold and ambitious and it is set out in our White Paper, “Planning for the Future”. Its purposes are essential. It proposes important changes to the focus and processes of planning to secure better outcomes in terms of land for homes, beauty and environmental quality. Simplifying the role of local plans will be a big part of this. It will be easier to identify areas suitable for housing development and for renewal, and areas that should be protected. These changes will transform a system that has long been criticised as being too slow to provide housing for families, key workers and young people, and too weak in getting developers to pay their fair share towards supporting infrastructure such as schools, roads and clinics. Our reforms will provide for more building on brownfield land, which my hon. Friend and others have mentioned, while valuing green spaces will be important and will continue to be protected. The consultation on the White Paper runs until 29 October 2020, and I hope that all our constituents will take the opportunity to engage in that process.

Our national housing challenge also requires powerful local responses, because local authorities have a key role to play. It is reasonable to expect them to meet their share of the nation’s future housing needs. That is why we ask authorities to plan to meet the full housing need of their communities, to identify enough land to meet that need and to take an active role in delivering homes in their areas. Although the presumption in favour of sustainable development may apply where an authority cannot identify sufficient land for housing or where delivery falls below a certain level, we are clear—crystal clear—that decisions will still need to be made in the light of all the policies in our national planning policy framework. That includes policies that seek to protect an area from unwanted developments, such as the strong protections for the South Downs National Park.

Local and neighbourhood plans will also play a key role as they have a number of important functions, including setting out what development an area needs, ensuring that it is supported with the right infrastructure and, crucially, ensuring that local decisions remain at the heart of the planning system. Our proposal for protecting areas in local plans in “Planning for the future” would justify more stringent development controls to ensure sustainability in areas subject to significant flood risk or other environmental factors, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs alluded. Taken together, local and neighbourhood plans help ensure that developments that are planned and sustainable, not sporadic and speculative, are developed. I am pleased that 90% of councils have adopted a local plan—one or two still have not, as has been mentioned by some of our colleagues. That is compared with just 17% in 2010. I am delighted that there have now been more than 900 successful neighbourhood planning referendums across England. I am certainly encouraged by the work being undertaken by the communities in West Sussex to update their local plans and drive forward the number of adopted neighbourhood plans in the area.

As we move to transform our planning system, we are looking carefully at those areas that have long been a source of local objections. This evening, I will touch on

[Christopher Pincher]

just three: the need to protect the environment; a lack of critical infrastructure; and the need for high quality design. The first, environmental protection, is a subject close to all our hearts. A number of Members have mentioned it. I want to reassure my hon. Friend and other hon. and right hon. Friends that our reforms will not be at the expense of our natural environment. Through our NPPF, we have made it clear that planning policies and decisions should minimise the effects on biodiversity of developments and provide net gains. That means opportunities to incorporate biodiversity improvements in and around developments should be sought, especially where that can be secured and offer secure, measurable net gains for biodiversity, but we also want to go further, which is why, in our forthcoming Environment Bill, we will make biodiversity improvements mandatory for a range of development, including house building.

This will ensure that future planning applications include an assessment of the existing biodiversity quality of land and details of the improvements that are proposed to be made. The NPPF also makes it clear that planning policies should encourage the take-up and prioritisation of suitable brownfield land, especially for new homes. All authorities now publish a local register of brownfield land suitable for housing, bringing thousands of hectares of developable land to the attention of house builders. Our brownfield remediation fund announced at the Budget, which provided £400 million for brownfield development—initially, those proposals were focused on mayoral combined authorities—has demonstrated a very fat pipeline of brownfield sites. I look forward to more being brought forward and other opportunities that we can work together to develop, because I want to underline today that planning permission for major development in areas like the South Downs national park should be refused, other than in exceptional circumstances and where development is shown to be in the public interest.

Another source of local objections is the lack of critical infrastructure, and that the infrastructure comes too little or too late. That was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, among others. That is why we committed in our manifesto to amend planning rules, so that infrastructure comes before people move into their homes. As a part of that, we are investing £10 billion through the single housing infrastructure fund to provide the infrastructure to

support new homes, so that infrastructure comes forward quickly and appropriately. Moreover, we have made £5.5 billion available through the housing infrastructure fund to provide the infrastructure to unlock up to 650,000 homes in areas of greatest need. We are consulting on a new uniform flat-rate infrastructure levy, consolidating existing developer contribution mechanisms—the community infrastructure levy or section 106—to deliver the local infrastructure needed to support people and places. It is a truly radical reform, simplifying processes while making sure developers pay their way.

Finally, we know how important high quality design is to communities. Often it is the most tangible thing people see when they see developments going up around them. We know that people will be less likely to oppose new development if the quality of the local area is improved at the same time. Reflecting the recent report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, our reform proposals make beautiful places a central objective for planning. We intend to create a fast-track system for beautiful buildings, with local design guidance to help developers build and preserve beautiful communities. At its heart will be effective community engagement, because community input at this stage of preparing plans and design codes will give local people real influence over the location and the design of new developments, rather than having to react to unexpected planning applications. I want planning to be proactive, to be strategic, to be up-front, not tactical, not reactive, not rearguard as it all too often is at present and has been for too long.

In closing, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs for convening us on this important topic and allowing so many Members of the House to make eloquent speeches or contributions. I have listened keenly to those distinguished contributions tonight. I believe we all recognise the crucial need for homes for young people in West Sussex and across the country: homes in sustainable and well-designed communities, homes with the infrastructure that is ready to go, and homes that ensure our beautiful countryside and heritage all around the country—in Staffordshire, of course, but in West Sussex in particular—is protected, preserved and enriched in the decades to come. I am confident that together we can achieve it.

Question put and agreed to.

9.59 pm

House adjourned.

Members Eligible for a Proxy Vote

The following is the list of Members currently certified as eligible for a proxy vote, and of the Members nominated as their proxy:

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy	Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington)	Bell Ribeiro-Addy	Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford)	Caroline Nokes
Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green)	Chris Elmore	Janet Daby (Lewisham East)	Chris Elmore
Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting)	Chris Elmore	Geraint Davies (Swansea West)	Chris Evans
Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower)	Chris Elmore	Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk)	Patrick Grady
Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk)	Stuart Andrew	Marsha De Cordova (Battersea)	Rachel Hopkins
Siobhan Baillie (Stroud)	Stuart Andrew	Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West)	Chris Elmore
Hannah Bardell (Livingston)	Patrick Grady	Caroline Dineage (Gosport)	Caroline Nokes
Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay)	Stuart Andrew	Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock)	Patrick Grady
Margaret Beckett (Derby South)	Clive Efford	Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire)	Stuart Andrew
Scott Benton (Blackpool South)	Stuart Andrew	Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock)	Gagan Mohindra
Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley)	Stuart Andrew	Philip Dunne (Ludlow)	Jeremy Hunt
Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen)	Stuart Andrew	Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover)	Maria Caulfield
Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South)	Patrick Grady	Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall)	Chris Elmore
Bob Blackman (Harrow East)	Stuart Andrew	Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford)	Stuart Andrew
Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North)	Patrick Grady	Michael Fabricant (Lichfield)	Stuart Andrew
Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough)	Stuart Andrew	Stephen Farry (North Down)	Alistair Carmichael
Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire)	Stuart Andrew	Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw)	Patrick Grady
Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham)	Chris Elmore	Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford)	Chris Elmore
Richard Burgon (Leeds East)	Zarah Sultana	Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford)	Stuart Andrew
Conor Burns (Bournemouth West)	Stuart Andrew	George Freeman (Mid Norfolk)	Theo Clarke
Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth)	Chris Elmore	Marcus Fysh (Yeovil)	Stuart Andrew
Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow)	Patrick Grady	Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet)	Caroline Nokes
Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton)	Chris Elmore	Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston)	Chris Elmore
Sir William Cash (Stone)	Leo Docherty	Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham)	Stuart Andrew
Sarah Champion (Rotherham)	Chris Elmore	Mary Glendon (North Tyneside)	Chris Elmore
Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife)	Patrick Grady	Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald)	Stuart Andrew
Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham)	Stuart Andrew	Peter Grant (Glenrothes)	Patrick Grady
Feryal Clark (Enfield North)	Chris Elmore	Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts)	Patrick Grady
Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe)	Stuart Andrew	Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North)	Mark Fletcher
Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire)	Chris Elmore	Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish)	Chris Elmore
Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde)	Patrick Grady	Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East)	Chris Elmore
Mr Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon)	Alex Burghart	Claire Hanna (Belfast South)	Liz Saville Roberts
Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark)	Chris Elmore	Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham)	Chris Elmore
Stella Creasy (Walthamstow)	Chris Elmore	Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire)	Stuart Andrew
		Sir Mark Hendrick (Preston)	Chris Elmore
		Mike Hill (Hartlepool)	Chris Elmore
		Simon Hoare (North Dorset)	Fay Jones
		Wera Hobhouse (Bath)	Alistair Carmichael
		Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West)	Chris Elmore
		Adam Holloway (Gravesham)	Maria Caulfield

Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy	Member eligible for proxy vote	Nominated proxy
Sir George Howarth (Knowsley)	Chris Elmore	Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West)	Patrick Grady
Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border)	Stuart Andrew	David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale)	Stuart Andrew
Imran Hussain (Bradford East)	Judith Cummins	James Murray (Ealing North)	Chris Elmore
Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central)	Chris Elmore	Ian Murray (Edinburgh South)	Chris Elmore
Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire)	Stuart Andrew	John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire)	Patrick Grady
Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham)	Stuart Andrew	Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon)	Rebecca Harris
Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North)	Chris Elmore	Guy Opperman (Hexham)	Stuart Andrew
Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South)	Chris Elmore	Kate Osamor (Edmonton)	Nadia Whittome
Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton)	Chris Elmore	Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich)	Peter Aldous
Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire)	Stuart Andrew	Lucy Powell (Manchester Central)	Chris Elmore
Julian Knight (Solihull)	Stuart Andrew	Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East)	Chris Elmore
Ian Lavery (Wansbeck)	Mary Kelly Foy	Christina Rees (Neath)	Chris Elmore
Chris Law (Dundee West)	Patrick Grady	Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge)	Chris Elmore
Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire)	Stuart Andrew	Bob Seely (Isle of Wight)	David Rutley
Clive Lewis (Norwich South)	Rosie Duffield	Naz Shah (Bradford West)	Chris Elmore
Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset)	Stuart Andrew	Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall)	Chris Elmore
Tony Lloyd (Rochdale)	Chris Elmore	Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield)	Chris Elmore
Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster)	Lee Rowley	Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East)	Patrick Grady
Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking)	Stuart Andrew	Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn)	Chris Elmore
Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian)	Patrick Grady	Jo Stevens (Cardiff Glasgow Central)	Chris Elmore
Rachael Maskell (York Central)	Chris Elmore	Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon)	Stuart Andrew
Karl McCartney (Lincoln)	Stuart Andrew	Mel Stride (Central Devon)	Stuart Andrew
Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East)	Patrick Grady	Julian Sturdy (York Outer)	Stuart Andrew
John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington)	Cat Smith	Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central)	Patrick Grady
Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East)	Patrick Grady	Gareth Thomas (Harrow West)	Chris Elmore
John Mc Nally (Falkirk)	Patrick Grady	Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury)	Charlotte Nichols
Ian Mearns (Gateshead)	Chris Elmore	Jon Trickett (Hemsworth)	Olivia Blake
Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock)	Stuart Andrew	Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East)	Chris Elmore
		Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire)	Patrick Grady
		Hywel Williams (Arfon)	Ben Lake

Written Statement

Monday 7 September 2020

PRIME MINISTER

Machinery of Government

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I am making this statement to bring to the House's attention the following machinery of government change.

PEACE PLUS Programme

I can confirm that Her Majesty's Government's responsibility for the PEACE PLUS Programme will transfer from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to the Northern Ireland Office. This change will be effective immediately.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 7 September 2020

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
EDUCATION	345	EDUCATION—continued	
Adult Education: Unemployed People	351	School Safety: Covid-19.....	353
Attainment Gap: Disadvantaged/Affluent Areas ...	356	School Support: Increased Covid-19 Infection	
Early Years Providers: Covid-19.....	352	Areas	355
Free Speech: Universities	345	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities:	
Further Education College Finances.....	349	Covid-19	358
Home Education: Grades/Covid-19	348	Testing, Marking and Examination Systems	350
Missed Education: Covid-19	357	Topical Questions	359
School Exercise: Covid-19.....	347	University Student Numbers.....	345
School Finances: Covid-19.....	352		

WRITTEN STATEMENT

Monday 7 September 2020

	<i>Col. No.</i>
PRIME MINISTER	13WS
Machinery of Government	13WS

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Monday 14 September 2020**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Monday 7 September 2020

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 345] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Education

International Travel [Col. 365]
Statement—(Grant Shapps)

Birmingham Attacks and Extinction Rebellion Protests [Col. 384]
Statement—(Kit Malthouse)

Fire Safety Bill [Col. 410]
Not amended, further considered; read the Third time and passed

House of Commons Members' Fund [Col. 453]
Motion—(Stuart Andrew)—agreed to

Electoral Commission [Col. 454]
Motion—(Stuart Andrew)—agreed to

Local Government Boundary Commission for England [Col. 455]
Motion—(Stuart Andrew)—agreed to

Housing Developments: West Sussex [Col. 457]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Written Statement [Col. 13WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
