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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 17 September 2020

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Infrastructure Projects: Delivery

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to expedite the delivery of transport infrastructure projects. [906189]

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to expedite the delivery of transport infrastructure projects. [906215]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): My Department is looking to deliver infrastructure projects better, greener and faster through initiatives including the Acceleration Unit and Project Speed.

Nicola Richards: Given the impact that coronavirus has had on communities such as mine in West Bromwich East, will my right hon. Friend throw his support behind West Midlands Mayor Andy Street's unprecedented investment plans in our transport infrastructure, like the midland metro, helping to bring it to places such as Great Barr in my constituency, so that all communities can feel the benefits of levelling up?

Grant Shapps: Yes, indeed. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her campaigning on this issue and, of course, to the West Midlands Mayor's relentless campaigning. I have been to see the proposed extensions. They are very impressive, and the Government will absolutely back any processes that will help to level up communities.

Mark Jenkinson: The Heathfield bridge on the A596 at Aspatria in my constituency crosses the Cumbrian coast railway line. It will shortly see the second anniversary of a car strike, which still sees the main arterial road reduced to one lane. Will my right hon. Friend work with me and stakeholders to ensure that action to repair the bridge becomes a priority and that this is not allowed to happen again?

Grant Shapps: I have been to my hon. Friend's constituency and I completely appreciate how important the bridge is and the connectivity it provides, so I will absolutely commit to working with him to try to ensure that that connectivity is improved.

Transport Supply Chains: Covid-19

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): What recent steps the Government have taken to support the UK transport sector and its supply chains during the covid-19 outbreak. [906190]

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (SNP): What recent steps he has taken to support the UK transport sector and its supply chains during the covid-19 outbreak. [906220]

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What recent steps the Government have taken to support the UK transport sector and its supply chains during the covid-19 outbreak. [906211]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): The Government have undertaken activity across the freight sector to ensure that supply chains are maintained, from vehicle inspections to drivers' hours and the temporary establishment of freight public service obligation contracts.

Margaret Ferrier: Covid-19 has placed major strains on supply chains across the UK, and many businesses that rely on red diesel are concerned that planned tax changes will have a detrimental impact while they struggle to recover from the pandemic. Will the Minister make representations to his Treasury colleagues to delay these changes until enough support is put in place to develop green alternatives to diesel-powered refrigeration?

Robert Courts: The hon. Member rightly notes that those tax matters are for the Treasury. I will be sure, in the early days and weeks of my time in this brief, to listen to all representations from the sector and consider any appropriate action.

Kenny MacAskill [V]: Several of my constituents in the aviation sector have had their terms and conditions of employment unilaterally changed, and for the worse. While support for the sector is vital, surely when executive bonuses and dividend payments seem unaffected, the protection of workers' rights is equally essential. Will the Minister commit to supporting the Employment (Dismissal and Re-employment) Bill proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), as well as the calls of the trade unions?

Robert Courts: The hon. Member makes an excellent point. The workers to whom he refers are highly skilled, highly trained and of enormous value to the UK and the aviation sector. I urge all employers to treat those who work for them with respect and sensitivity, and I urge them to work in a spirit of partnership with unions and employees.

Mr Speaker: Remaining in Scotland, we go to Douglas Chapman—he is not there. Let us go to the shadow Minister.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would like to say that my thoughts, and I am sure the thoughts of the whole House, are with the injured and all those affected by the recent bus accident in Winchester.

Local coach companies are much loved small businesses with the owner's name and the town of origin proudly painted on the side of the coach. These are local small businesses that have served their communities through thick and thin. However, day trips and coach travel for football supporters have disappeared because of the coronavirus, and four in 10 of these much-loved local companies could go out of business this autumn, with the loss of 27,000 jobs. Will the Minister reassure the House that the Government will take urgent action to support these family-owned small businesses, and will he meet me and the coach operators as a matter of urgency?

Robert Courts: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that very important point. I know that that is an area in which he has a particular interest. I would be very glad to meet him and representatives of the sector to look at what may be done.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I echo the comments of the shadow Minister on the bus accident in Winchester.

Yesterday, the British Airways chief executive told the Transport Committee that he would protect BA at all costs. Those costs will be borne by 10,000-plus jobless employees and the remainder whose terms and conditions have been permanently slashed and are as yet unknown. Many of those jobs and thousands of others across the sector could have been saved had the Secretary of State kept his word to stand by the industry's side. When will we see business rates relief for England and when will we finally see the promised sector-specific support?

Robert Courts: The hon. Member refers to some of the decisions taken by BA. These are, of course, commercial matters, but, as we have been clear, they are none the less ones that we regret. There are a number of aspects here, but the thrust of his question is, of course, with regard to support for the aviation sector. The Government have made available £330 billion of support through loans and guarantees across the breadth of the entire economy.

Aviation Sector Jobs

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on helping to protect the jobs of workers in the aviation sector. [906191]

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on employment protection for people working in the aviation industry. [906243]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): The Government are working at pace to ensure the recovery of the aviation sector, and Departments are working closely together to progress options in support of individuals affected.

Richard Burgon [V]: Giving evidence to the Transport Committee yesterday, BA boss Alex Cruz seemed to suggest that the company's notorious fire and rehire threats were now off the table. However, I am informed by Unite the Union that, although its campaigning has meant that many of its members are now free from this kind of blackmail, there are at least 800 mixed fleet staff who still face this threat unless they sign new contracts. What steps are the Minister and his Government taking to banish this shameful practice once and for all?

Robert Courts: As I have said, the Government are quite clear that they regret some of the decisions that have been taken, although these are of course commercial decisions. What I welcome is the agreement in principle between BA and Unite on behalf of cabin crew, which encourages the spirit of partnership between employees, the airlines and the union, which I am sure the hon. Member will join me in encouraging across the sector.

Munira Wilson: As has already been noted, while it is welcome that British Airways has potentially dropped some of its bully-boy tactics of threatening to fire and rehire its workforce on much worse conditions, it comes too late for many employees who had taken the difficult decision to take voluntary redundancy, such as the single father in my constituency who could not afford to feed his family on 40% of pay. What steps is the Minister's Department taking to support such individuals, because his Department's response to the Transport Committee report said that it was the Government's ambition to support these individuals where possible?

Robert Courts: It absolutely is the Government's intention and desire to support these highly trained and highly valued members of our workforce. At the end of the day, we need to concentrate very much on the recovery and restart. The Government have already moved quickly to rebuild consumer confidence, collaborating with industry and the unions and across the sector. It is through that that we will ensure the vitality of the sector and those who work for it.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Today marks the 10th anniversary of Pope Benedict's visit to Parliament when he addressed both Houses in Westminster Hall and reminded us that, in the pursuit of public policy, we should always keep the common good at the heart of it and that there is an intrinsic link between human dignity and the value of work. In that spirit and in welcoming the Minister to his post today, will he join me in thanking the tens of thousands of ground handlers in every airport across our nation who have kept our skies open, working for companies such as Swissport, dnata, Menzies and World Freight Services? Will he dust down that aviation-specific package that his predecessor had and bring it back to the table?

Robert Courts: I thank the hon. Member for making that absolutely superb point. He is quite right to thank those who work in the aviation sector, particularly the ground handlers, because of the way they have continued to work throughout the sector, which has ensured that vital freight and supplies have continued to come in, and people have been able to get around when they have needed to do so. The Government will be looking—as I will be in the course of settling into the role—at any possible steps that we can take to help the sector, which is absolutely vital for our country.

Rail Network: Accessibility

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve accessibility for disabled people using the rail network. [906192]

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps is he taking to improve accessibility for disabled people using the rail network. [906195]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): The Government have recently made £350 million available to make accessibility improvements at a further 209 stations through the Access for All programme. We also require the industry to comply with current accessibility standards whenever it installs, replaces or renews station infrastructure.

Rachel Hopkins: Since July, the lifts at Luton Airport Parkway station have been in the process of being fixed, so people in my constituency who are disabled, have mobility issues or have a family with children and a buggies are not able to access the railway. I am pleased that Luton station has been granted Access for All funding. I spoke to the Minister six months ago about the decrepit state of Luton station and the need not just to add shiny lifts to something that is not fit for the 21st century. Will the Minister give me an update on the much-needed renovation of the station, the accessibility needs that have to be addressed and where we are now?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I know, from when I met the hon. Lady virtually during lockdown, how she aspires to a wider redevelopment of Luton station. At that meeting, I promised to get Network Rail to continue its work with Luton Borough Council to finalise a solution to deliver an accessible step-free route at the station by 2024. Since then, Network Rail has presented a number of options to the council which are currently being considered.

Catherine West: Will the Minister accept a wider definition of accessibility and comment on the plans to stop the free travel for under-18s, which gets students all around London? Is there a plan for the Government to assist Transport for London, given its financial situation, to bring back free travel from half-term for under-18s, so they can get to schools and to other pursuits?

Chris Heaton-Harris: That is slightly beyond my brief and slightly stretching the accessibility definition to which I operate, so if I may I would like to write to the hon. Lady.

Road Condition

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the condition of roads. [906194]

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the condition of roads. [906199]

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the condition of roads. [906217]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): The Government have undertaken the biggest ever pothole-filling programme, with £500 million funding each year between 2021 and 2024-25

specifically to tackle potholes on our roads. Further funding for local road maintenance will be agreed as part of the spending review.

Karl McCartney [V]: Drivers will be pleased to have heard that answer from the Minister. She may also be aware that Lincolnshire County Council has an oven-ready project to construct the North Hykeham relief road, part of the original eastern bypass that I have campaigned for, for many years. That section will give Lincoln its full ring road, boost connectivity in the region and lead to further economic growth. Will my hon. Friend and her ministerial colleagues seriously consider providing the funding for that project and for dualling the whole of the eastern bypass—locally, we all know that that should happen—and perhaps meet me and council leaders in Lincolnshire to enable the completion of this important project which I have promoted incessantly?

Rachel Maclean: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his diligent campaigning over a number of years. He knows of the Government's extremely strong support for that project and the vital role it plays in his constituency. My ministerial colleagues are currently considering the business case very carefully and they will be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to consider the next steps.

Selaine Saxby: From my conversations with Devon County Council, it is clear that one of the barriers to improving roads and filling potholes in my constituency is uncertainty about future funding. Has my hon. Friend looked into whether multi-year funding settlements might be a solution?

Rachel Maclean: Absolutely. The Government are keenly aware that local authorities require certainty in funding to plan their highways asset management programme effectively. Any decision on multi-year funding settlements will be decided as part of the ongoing spending review.

Holly Mumby-Croft: The A15, leading to the A46, is a major strategic corridor for north Lincolnshire. Improved north-south connectivity via the A15 plays a vital function as a strategic economic corridor and is critical for facilitating the movement of goods in connection with heavy engineering and the food sector. It also provides an important economic role, linking the midlands and the south to the Humber ports, the refineries and one of the largest enterprise zones in the country on the south Humber bank. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that such routes are improved as part of the levelling up process?

Rachel Maclean: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is completely right that improving our road network is an essential part of our levelling-up network. That is why the Prime Minister has brought forward £100 million of funding for 29 shovel-ready projects. She will be pleased to know that £4.5 million of funding was awarded to North Lincolnshire unitary authority for such work on the A15.

Rail Services: North of England

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve rail services in the north of England. [906196]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): I recently announced a £600 million package for the rail network across the north, including £589 million to upgrade and electrify the trans-Pennine route, which is part of a multibillion-pound programme for High Speed North.

Robert Largan: On Sunday, the new 195 trains finally started running on the Hope Valley line, which runs between Manchester and Sheffield and serves New Mills, Chinley, Edale, Hope and Bamford in my constituency. While that is welcome news and something I have long campaigned for, services are still not frequent enough or reliable enough. To solve that, we need to increase capacity. May I urge the Secretary of State to invest more in this often-overlooked part of the northern powerhouse and finally upgrade the Hope Valley line?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right to campaign for that. I am a great fan of the Hope Valley line. I cannot make an announcement about it today, but as he is aware, Ministers are investigating the possibilities to enhance capacity, and I do not think he will have to wait too long.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): As more people return to work using our great northern railway and the southern railway, what steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that the railway network and public transport is safe for increased passenger numbers?

Grant Shapps: As my hon. Friend knows, we took over the running of Northern earlier in the year because we were so dissatisfied by the progress, and it was then hit by covid, but I can report to the House some numbers that might be helpful. Some 62% of workers across the country are now going back to work. That is the highest level since the crisis began. In particular, the figure for last week—the week commencing 7 September—was 42% back on our national rail services. Northern is doing a great deal of work to make its services ready for people coming back.

Sustainable Transport: Covid-19

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to encourage the use of sustainable transport (a) during and (b) following the covid-19 outbreak. [906197]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): The Government have provided the largest ever investment in this area, with a package of £2 billion for cycling and walking and £500 million for electric vehicle infrastructure and e-scooter trials, demonstrating our commitment to a green recovery.

Kevin Brennan: Like many Members, I have recently dusted off my bike, oiled the chain, taken it off the wall and ridden it for the first time in many years, exploring the wonderful cycle trails in my constituency along the River Ely and the River Taff and out to the UK museum of the year, St Fagans, earlier this month. It is great to see a cycling renaissance, but what more can be done to ensure that this country genuinely is world-beating on cycling—I am sorry to throw one of the Minister's clichés back at her—because at the moment we are not?

Rachel Maclean: I am delighted to see the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for the Government's ambitions. As I set out, we will be investing £2 billion, which is the largest ever infrastructure investment. We have already delivered £250 million for emergency schemes, and we are helping people to fix their bike with £25 million-worth of vouchers.

Cycling and Walking: Local Authority Support

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): What support his Department is providing to local authorities to maintain and increase levels of cycling and walking. [906210]

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): What support his Department is providing to local authorities to maintain and increase levels of cycling and walking. [906223]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): The Government are investing £2 billion in active travel over the next five years. That is the biggest ever boost for cycling and walking and, as we heard in the previous question, it is welcomed widely across the House.

Mr Speaker: It is a pleasure to see Tracey asking this question. We miss you; we really do.

Tracey Crouch [V]: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I miss you all too.

Thanks to the Government's active travel grants, Medway Council has managed to upgrade many of its cycling and walking routes, which is superb news for those at the Chatham end of my constituency. However, at the other end, part of the Aylesford towpath collapsed into the River Medway earlier this year and is now closed to the 6,000-plus users per month. Despite Kent County Council's incredible efforts to find funds to repair the towpath, it still faces a significant shortfall. Could the Minister offer any guidance towards emergency central Government funding pots that would enable the reopening of that incredibly popular path for cyclists and walkers?

Chris Heaton-Harris: First, may I echo your words, Mr Speaker, and say how good it is to see my hon. Friend? She is one of the few MPs I follow on Instagram, from which I know what a keen cyclist she is—and, indeed, what she looks like in Lycra.

The Government allocated the first tranche of active travel funds to councils earlier in the summer; a bigger second tranche will follow shortly. I am quite sure that my hon. Friend will be able to persuade her county council to make the appropriate investment in Aylesford towpath, and I would be very happy to work with her to try to help that happen.

Jason McCartney: During the summer, I enjoyed a socially distanced walk with the regional Canal and River Trust team along the canal towpath between Marsden and Slaithwaite in my constituency. I support its bid for £45 million of funding from the Department as part of the commitment of £2 billion for cycling and walking to get people out on the canal towpath. Does the Minister agree that supporting such regional bids is a big part of encouraging more cycling and walking in our regions, and that it is a vital part of our levelling up the country and improving the health of our constituents?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I happily agree with my hon. Friend; he is absolutely right. The canal towpath network across the country, a huge chunk of which runs through my constituency, is a wonderful place for walking and cycling. He is right to identify that we have committed a £2 billion package to active travel. We have started to get money out the door, and I very much hope that we will see schemes such as the one he mentions benefit from it so that we can all enjoy the countryside—and, indeed, other cycle routes through our cities and towns—more in the future.

Rail Infrastructure

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve rail infrastructure. [906200]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): The Government continue to invest record amounts in our rail infrastructure, with £47.9 billion to be spent over the next five years.

Elliot Colburn: Getting more trains into Carshalton and Wallington stations is reliant on completing the Croydon bottleneck project to unblock congestion on the Brighton main line at Selhurst. Network Rail will finish its consultation on the project on Sunday. What assurances can the Minister give me that the Government will back the project and get more trains into Carshalton and Wallington stations?

Andrew Stephenson: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for continuing to champion transport improvements in his constituency. My Department is currently considering an outline business case to progress the Croydon bottleneck scheme through our investment pipeline.

Public Transport Authorities: Buses

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): What plans he has to enable public transport authorities to operate their own bus services. [906201]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): The Government's view is that the commissioning and provision of bus services should be kept separate, particularly as new partnership and franchising powers in the Bus Services Act 2017 are likely to lead to more local authority control and better influence of local bus services.

Sir George Howarth [V]: I thank the Minister for his response, but I do not think it amounted to an answer to my question, so let me try again. If publicly owned bus services are right for London, why are they not right for the Liverpool city region?

Chris Heaton-Harris: To be fair, the right hon. Gentleman's question was, "What plans he has to enable public transport authorities to operate their own bus services," and I gave the appropriate answer. However, as he will know, I am quite keen, as a localist, to try to do some of this, but the Government are committed to implementing the UK's first ever long-term bus strategy, which will be accompanied by long-term funding. That strategy will focus on passenger needs and set out how the Government will work with local authorities and the private sector.

Integrated Public Transport Systems

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): What recent representations he has received on the creation of additional integrated public transport systems throughout England. [906202]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): The Department receives requests through many different routes to fund schemes that consider integrated transport, intra-city transport and all the other types of integration.

Mike Hill: As covid-19 breathes down the neck of my constituency and much of the north-east goes into local lockdown, and with local access to transport now needed more than ever, can the Secretary of State tell the House why many residents have seen their bus routes cut routinely over the last 10 years?

Grant Shapps: Good news for the hon. Member: this Government have committed to putting a record amount into bus investment. As he will know, 4,000 shiny new zero-carbon buses are part of that plan, as is a massive investment—a bus, cycling and walking package of £5 billion—in ensuring that bus routes can be expanded. We are certainly on the side of him and his constituents when it comes to expanding those bus services, notwithstanding the significant challenges of covid.

National Bus Strategy

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): When he plans to publish the national bus strategy. [R] [906203]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): The Government remain committed to a national bus strategy and aim to publish it by the end of the year.

Dan Jarvis [V]: Covid is creating huge challenges for our bus network, and if we are serious about improving services after the pandemic, we need a commitment to long-term investment from all tiers of government. In South Yorkshire, we have produced an improvement plan for our buses, but we need support. So I ask the Secretary of State: when will we see more investment from Government for the sustainable, affordable and accessible bus service that we all want?

Grant Shapps: I think that the hon. Gentleman is referring to his bus review report, which I have read. It is very impressive. We share the ambition to do much of what he has just said. The South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive has received a £1.127 million grant, as he will know, and the Sheffield City Region Combined Authority has been allocated £703,614. We are putting our money where our mouth is. We will publish our national bus strategy, and I think he will find that it complements the bus review report that he is behind.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Bus manufacturing is a key industry and companies such as Alexander Dennis, despite being world leading, face huge challenges. The Scottish Government recently announced millions of pounds of funding for ultra low emission vehicles, which is vital not just to the bus industry but to communities and businesses across the country. Will the Secretary of State please accept that our bus industry is teetering on the brink and needs a green bus fund rolled out now, not after Alexander Dennis and other companies like it are gone?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the need not only to build buses but to turn them into green ones. That is why the extraordinary investment we are making—sufficient to build 4,000 buses—will come forward as part of the national bus strategy. It is important to recognise that there is huge turmoil, not just in the bus sector, because of the ridership figures. I mentioned the ridership figures for trains a moment ago, and it is right to inform the House that ridership on non-London buses has now gone back up to 58%. It is increasing, but that is all in the context of how we take the bus sector forward, and we will say much more about it very soon.

Seafarers: Furlough Scheme

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the number of UK seafarers who will be directly affected by the end of the Government's furlough schemes. [906204]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): There is no appropriate statistical breakdown. The Government's focus is to support the sector's recovery and to stimulate jobs and growth.

Karl Turner [V]: The job retention scheme has clearly helped businesses right across our economy, including in the maritime industries of port constituencies such as mine in east Hull, but when it is clear that the shipping and ferry sectors may take years to recover, the Chancellor is casting jobs in east Hull adrift by ending the furlough scheme, with no replacement and no plan. What action is the Minister taking to ensure that British seafarers, who have kept this country afloat throughout the pandemic, do not bear the brunt of that short-sighted decision? Will he please assure me that the UK will retain the maritime skills base that is vital for our future?

Robert Courts: The hon. Gentleman makes a number of excellent points. I am encouraged to see that some firms such as P&O have offered their own job retention schemes with a view to reducing any redundancies that have been announced. More broadly, I will work with all aspects of the sector to hear their views and to see how the Department may be able to help. Maritime 2050, which I will look at with fresh eyes, gives a good opportunity to see what policy objectives may be possible in the future, but I assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that it remains a long-term policy of the Government to grow the number of UK seafarers and to support the sector.

Pollution: Covid-19

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to prevent an increase in air pollution from transport and a potential related increase in levels of covid-19 mortality. [906206]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): We are making active travel and public transport the natural first choice for journeys. We are providing £2.5 billion of support to accelerate the transition to zero-emission vehicles.

Mr Speaker: We are now going to Swansea, via the New York backdrop, to Geraint Davies.

Geraint Davies [V]: And a Welsh flag, Mr Speaker!

The Minister will know that congestion levels in outer London have now grown to 150% of what they were before the lockdown and that pollution causes both covid infection and death, so why is she not encouraging the Prime Minister to continue to get people to work from home and to encourage investment from the Chancellor in public transport, when instead we are told to travel to work by car and not to work from home?

Rachel Maclean: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not attempting to travel to Wales via New York because that would definitely encourage congestion. I can assure him that we are investing strongly in public transport. We will continue to support the bus sector. We have provided £218.4 million of funding on a rolling basis from 4 August. We have provided over £700 million-worth of funding for public transport throughout the pandemic.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am pleased that the Government have listened to Labour and are considering bringing forward the date for the phase-out of the sale of new diesel, petrol and hybrid vehicles, but how is the Minister actually going to get us there? All we have had from the Government lately is gimmicks like green number plates and the suggestion that they will paint electric vehicle parking spaces green. The charging infrastructure is woefully inadequate. Other than painting everything green, what is her actual strategy?

Rachel Maclean: This was a Conservative Government pledge in our latest manifesto. We are accelerating the transition to zero-emission vehicles with £2.5 billion of support. We already have one of the most extensive charging networks in Europe, and we are ramping it up all the time.

Bus Services: Covid-19

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support bus services during the covid-19 outbreak. [906208]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Rachel Maclean): The Government are committing £27.3 million per week to support England's bus services.

Paul Howell: Integration between all elements of public transport is critical. Will my hon. Friend bring the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), who has responsibility for HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail, to Sedgefield to better understand the local frustrations and needs? We need to see rail investment delivered in places like Ferryhill station, where my hon. Friends could meet the team at the inspirational Cornforth Partnership to understand the need for more and better buses, particularly to better connect places like Cornforth to employment centres. They could also visit magnificent companies like Hitachi in Cleveland Bridge to understand how Government procurement processes need to better reflect their commitment to local economies as we build back better.

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government recognise the importance of multi-modal integration and connecting communities such as his to employment opportunities. That is why we have made

£198 million available for the transforming cities fund, which will deliver improvements to bus services, cycling and walking in County Durham. My hon. Friend the Minister will be delighted to speak to him further.

Emergency Funding Agreement: London

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with (a) the Mayor of London and (b) Transport for London on the expiration of the emergency funding agreement on 17 October 2020. [906209]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): The Department regularly engages with Transport for London and the Mayor, including in relation to understanding the impact of covid-19.

Feryal Clark [V]: Private train operating companies were told on 23 March, just as lockdown began, that the Government would take on all their revenue and cost risks and support them through the pandemic. By contrast, Transport for London was not granted this emergency funding deal until 14 May. Will the Minister explain why that is and reassure Londoners that the additional emergency support that TfL needs will be confirmed as a matter of urgency, rather than being left until the eleventh hour like last time?

Andrew Stephenson: The Government agreed a £1.6 billion funding package in May. But let us be clear that Transport for London's finances were in trouble well before covid-19, with a projected deficit of £220 million last year and £422 million the year before. Many of the financial problems can be directly traced to poor decision making by the current Mayor of London.

Support for Bus Manufacturers

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support UK bus manufacturers in (a) Scarborough and Whitby constituency and (b) England. [906216]

Andrew Stephenson: We are committed to providing at least 4,000 British-built zero-emission buses through our £5 billion funding package for buses and cycling.

Mr Goodwill: If 2020 has been a tough year for bus and coach operators, it has been even worse for manufacturers such as Alexander Dennis Plaxton in Scarborough. We have heard on a number of occasions today of the £5 billion announced in February for 4,000 zero-emission British-built buses, but does the Minister agree with me that we need to get this money out of the door very quickly indeed if we are to avert a crisis on the production lines?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I completely agree with what he says, and I commend him for what he has been doing to support manufacturers in his constituency. The Government have announced over £700 million in support for the bus and light rail sector already to date, and we are also providing £50 million for Britain's first all-electric bus town and the £20 million rural mobility fund, which will support additional jobs. However, I agree with him, and I hope that we will make an announcement soon.

Connecting Towns to the Rail Network

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to connect more towns to the railway network. [906221]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): The Government have pledged £500 million to start reopening lines and stations to reconnect smaller communities that no longer have a station.

Mark Logan: Is it not about time that Londoners had a direct train line into Bolton?

Andrew Stephenson: Improving services to the north-west of England, including Bolton, while balancing the capacity and performance impacts on passengers, remains under constant review.

Coach and Bus Sector: Covid-19

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of the covid-19 outbreak on the viability of the coach and bus sector. [906245]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): I am the Minister for active travel, and these steps I am getting now are quite productive for my step count.

The Department works closely with the bus and coach sectors to assess the ongoing impact of covid-19 on their industries.

Jonathan Edwards: Many of the coach companies based in my constituency are family-run businesses, and they inform me that they are facing a year-and-a-half-long winter in economic terms as a result of the covid pandemic. They are, of course, vital cogs in the tourism sector, yet they cannot access covid-related hospitality, leisure and tourism funding. What discussions is the Minister having with colleagues in the Treasury and the devolved Governments to address this anomaly?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. My Department has been in regular contact with the representatives of the coach industry, and we have been working very closely together. Officials from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport also engage with the Coach Tourism Association via the Tourism Industry Emergency Response Group. My Department has helped to put together the package for home to school transport—a £40 million package that is benefiting the sector. We have regular conversations with the Treasury, and it is clear that the £330 billion of Government support through loans and guarantees can reach parts of this sector, too.

Topical Questions

[906160] **Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): My Department continues to tackle the very many different challenges that covid presents to all the forms of transport discussed here this morning.

It might be worth mentioning that I visited London Bridge station earlier in the week, where a programme that involves all the Network Rail stations is being rolled out. It is using antiviral cleaning materials, which means that surfaces become protected from coronavirus for up to 30 days. It actually repeats this on a 21-day basis, and it carries out the cleaning during the night, enabling people to return to the railways with the confidence of their being covid-free.

In addition, yesterday, the first meeting of the Hammersmith bridge taskforce took place. This major artery through London has been closed for too long; it is now closed to pedestrians and cyclists as well. The Department for Transport is looking to get this resolved, and I have brought in my own engineers to do so.

Tom Hunt: Arguably the biggest transport issue that impacts on my constituents in Ipswich is the Orwell bridge. At the moment, the current speed limit is 60 mph, and when it closes because of high winds, the whole town grinds to a halt. The economic impact of this should not be underestimated. Highways England has a plan involving a 40 mph speed limit, which will I hope mean that the bridge can stay open even when it is very windy. However, I am slightly concerned about the timescale. Will my right hon. Friend communicate to Highways England his expectation that these new measures will be put in place before the new winter season—the windy season—when these closures will continue if we do not implement the new measures?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right that the Orwell bridge is another key artery for Ipswich. I know that it is subject to ongoing work by Highways England that requires wind tunnel validation. I have been promised that that work will be completed by the end of September. From the Dispatch Box, I send a clear message to Highways England that I expect to see it on my desk.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Our transport industries have been devastated by coronavirus, but its frontline workers have kept the country going in difficult times. We owe them a debt of gratitude.

At the outset of topical questions, with 72 hours to go before the current rail franchise emergency measures agreements are due to expire, I expected the Transport Secretary to update the House. I am afraid my sheet is blank because no such statement, comment or indication followed. That is absolutely staggering. Are we to expect that, rather than something being reported to the House, it will come out over the next couple of days or the weekend, denying the House the opportunity to look into it? Will the Transport Secretary commit to making a statement to the House on Monday?

Let us be absolutely clear that in the last six months, with the current management agreements in place, while many parts of our transport sector have been denied the support they need, £100 million has been paid out to shareholders, many of which, by the way, are foreign Governments. That cannot continue in its current form.

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman will know that the first emergency measures were worth some £3.5 billion to ensure that our rail sector was able to continue. I have

already described how passengers are now returning to them and the work that is going on to make sure that they are safe to return.

As the hon. Gentleman points out, it is the case that the EMAs, as they are called, come to an end quite shortly. I do not think the House would realistically expect me to stand here and carry out those negotiations in public, but I reassure him that I will certainly return to make a statement in the House as soon as there is something to say.

Jim McMahon: There are just 72 hours left to go—it is literally last-minute. It is a timetable that would make Northern shy. I do not know what is going on with the Transport Secretary.

We know that passenger numbers have fallen to 7% of what they would be in normal times, yet rail fares are set for another increase in January. The average commuter will pay £3,000 for their season ticket, which is over £900 more than they would have paid in 2010. To encourage commuters back safely, will the Government commit to freezing fares and introducing part-time season tickets, as Labour has proposed?

Grant Shapps: I hate to play politics at the Dispatch Box, but it is worth reminding the hon. Gentleman that, under Labour, there were inflation-busting fare rises that added 4.9% during its time in office. Again, I want to make sure that we are speaking on the basis of facts. I will return to the House on the emergency measures.

It is not true to say, as I think the hon. Gentleman did, that the number of passengers is down to a single-digit percentage. As I said before, the number of passengers returning was at 42% last week. It is incumbent on all of us to demonstrate that the railways are safe; to take the railways from time to time, which I am sure Members on both sides of the House do; and to reassure people of the safety and efficacy of using the railways and all other public transport systems.

[906163] **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): Ruabon station in my constituency of Clwyd South is the only station on the Chester to Shrewsbury route that is not compliant with Access for All. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the urgent need for step-free access at Ruabon station, particularly given the projected increase in footfall due to new housing and commercial developments locally?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Government are committed to ensuring that our rail network is more accessible. We are in the process of making 16 stations in Wales more accessible as part of our £350-million Access for All programme. My hon. Friend the Rail Minister would be happy to meet him to discuss Ruabon station.

[906161] **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab) [V]: One thing that makes the British countryside unique, special and loved by everybody around the world is that, since the 1940s, it has been illegal to put up great big advertising hoardings outside towns and cities. That means that our motorways should be free of advertising, and people should just be able to appreciate the countryside. Unfortunately, on my journey back from London last night, I saw 23 such hoardings that have been plonked in fields by farmers and others. What is

the Government going to do to return the British countryside to the way it should be without constant advertising along the motorway?

Andrew Stephenson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I can confirm that no one puts illegal hoardings on land controlled by the Department for Transport or Highways England. Much of this illegal signage is put up on land located next to motorways, so this becomes a planning matter. I will therefore raise his concerns, if he is happy for me to do so, with Housing, Communities and Local Government Ministers.

[906164] **Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con) [V]: My constituents are fed up with speeding vehicles and horrendous noise pollution, especially on the so-called Rutland TT race circuit. Will my right hon. Friend please consider running noise camera trials in some of Rutland and Melton's stunning 160 villages, especially Great Dalby and Langham?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend will be interested to hear that we have carried out some trials using noise equipment and automatic number plate recognition software, to see whether it is possible to match the two up and use them as we might use a speed camera, but for noise. Work is ongoing to compile the results of that study into a report, so I hope to be able to report back to the House on that. I agree with her that this is a problem. For example, sometimes exhausts have been modified, both in motorcycles and cars, and for no other purpose but to make a huge amount of noise. We are certainly interested in finding solutions to that, and I will report back to the House.

[906166] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Before the summer recess, the Secretary of State told the Select Committee on Transport about his plans to introduce hydrogen bus towns and hydrogen hubs. That is an excellent opportunity for my city of Bath, where having electric buses is a real challenge because of our steep hills. Will he update us on those plans, and especially on how cities such as Bath can profit from that, and quickly please?

Grant Shapps: We are very keen to improve air quality, and that goes hand in hand with reducing carbon dioxide—the two often go together. Our massive investment in car electrification, which has not yet been mentioned, means that we now have more charging locations than petrol stations, and one of the best charging networks, in this country, although it could still be better. We are also ensuring that public transport and bus services switch over, and I have mentioned previously from the Dispatch Box the 4,000 zero-carbon buses that will be coming in. We will work closely with local authorities such as Bath to create clean air zones and improve air quality for everyone.

[906165] **Stuart Anderson** (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): Will the Secretary of State work with me to see that Tetterhall gets the train station it needs, to support the surrounding area and to increase connectivity and infrastructure in Wolverhampton?

Andrew Stephenson: The aim of the Restoring Your Railway programme is to reconnect people and communities. I know that my Department has provided

feedback on the proposal to reopen Tetterhall station, and I encourage my hon. Friend to contact the programme's team to discuss the next steps.

[906168] **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Just before the general election, the Prime Minister committed to electrification of the entire midland main line, but since then we have seen no such commitment from the Department. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to reassert that commitment, or was that just another broken promise to the east midlands?

Andrew Stephenson: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we are currently delivering the midland main line upgrade, which includes electrification from London to Kettering, with additional electrification to Market Harborough being developed. Further electrification of the midland main line is currently at an early stage, but it is being examined by Network Rail. The Department will continue to work closely with Network Rail on the development of a proposal for this, including approaches to advancing the delivery of electrification across the route.

[906169] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): There are over 360,000 licensed taxi and private hire drivers in England, and the sector has been very hard hit. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact on the sector, and will he tell us how he plans to measure the impact of his rather disappointingly weak statutory guidance issued back in July?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the impact, and the same is true of many other forms of transport. I pay tribute to the work of taxi drivers and private hire vehicle drivers, who have been incredible during this crisis and have often provided the only form of transport available for people in certain areas.

The statutory taxi and private hire vehicle standards have considerable teeth, because for the first time ever we will have national databases, and we will put enormous work into ensuring that all local authorities and hackney carriage authorities sign up to those and use them. I will say more in the not too distant future about our support for taxis and private hire vehicles through the pandemic.

[906167] **Jane Hunt** (Loughborough) (Con): Many taxi drivers in my constituency have raised concerns about having to pay East Midlands Railway the full £600 fee for a permit to ply for hire at Loughborough station, despite the unprecedented collapse in business they have been forced to face over the past few months. I would be grateful to know whether the Minister has had any discussions with rail operators about permit fees and, if not, whether it is something he would consider.

Andrew Stephenson: Officials from my Department have been in discussions with East Midlands Railway and provided guidance last week that should, I hope, enable train operators to resolve this issue.

[906170] **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I declare my interest as an electric vehicle driver. The charging network across Thirsk and Malton is pretty woeful. Many of the connection types are different, the chargers are slow and even the new BP Chargemaster

ones for contactless payment cards often do not work. What more can we do to prevent the charging network from becoming a deterrent to the take-up of electric vehicles?

Grant Shapps: I, too, declare an interest as an electric car driver. Although I said, accurately, that there are now more charging locations than petrol stations, it is still the case that in particular areas—Thirsk and Malton is perhaps one such example—the charging is not good enough. One issue that I have come across, as I am sure has my hon. Friend, is machines that require sign-up to a membership system or particular requirements in advance, preventing me from charging up. He will be pleased to hear that we intend to enforce, particularly on rapid chargers, a system whereby it has to be possible for people to walk up and pay contactlessly for the energy that goes into their car, without signing up to a particular scheme in advance. We have taken powers to enforce that system and I hope it will make his drive easier, as well as mine and everybody else's who switches to an electric car.

[906172] **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) [V]: Back in July, the Government committed to decriminalising moving traffic offences, which will provide parity across England. Given that Greater Manchester has called for this change for a number of years, will the Secretary of State give an update on the timeline for delivering on the commitment?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. These powers have existed in London forever. They prevent, for example, box junctions from being blocked up, along with a number of other things. As he rightly says, we intend to extend the powers throughout the country and I will report back to the House on that shortly.

[906174] **Barbara Keeley** (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) [V]: I want to return to support for the aviation sector during the pandemic. Thousands of jobs have been lost at easyJet and Airbus, and easyJet has moved many pilots to part-time contracts and closed three of its bases. Staff who are losing their jobs in aviation or managing on part-time pay need the sector-specific support package that has been promised. That will be essential in avoiding more job losses, so when will we see that support for the sector?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady is absolutely right about the impact on aviation, which has been enormous, but so has the support, and that is often not recognised. If I may detail it, there has been £1.8 billion of support through the Bank of England's covid corporate financing facility, which easyJet and others have used; £283 million has come from the coronavirus job retention scheme; and 56,400 staff have been furloughed, with the salaries that have been paid worth well north of £1 billion. When those figures are added up, there has been an enormous amount of support for the sector. We are working with it every day and the best thing we can do is to open up the routes, which is dependent on the progress of the virus and the progress of technology to help us beat the virus.

[906178] **Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP) [V]: As chair of the all-party group on disability, I have been contacted about

accessible transport by many constituents across the UK. Next Wednesday, it will be two years since the Department's consultation on audio-visual announcements on buses, but it has yet even to publish the consultation responses. We must do everything possible to be a fully inclusive society, so when will passengers finally get the benefits of audio-visual announcements on buses? Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and the all-party group? What progress will the Government make towards their 2030 inclusive transport strategy ambition?

Grant Shapps: That is an incredibly important subject. The good news, which the hon. Lady may have missed, is that during my time as Secretary of State I have put several million pounds into precisely this issue of audio-visual on buses. I will certainly write to her with the details, and I will also arrange for her to meet the buses Minister.

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): This Conservative Government are putting unprecedented levels of investment into the Highways England strategic road network. The A64 Hopgrove roundabout upgrade is one project that is vital not only to my constituents but to people from West Yorkshire and beyond who suffer in the queues. Will the Secretary of State give me an indication that this project is still in the programme and of when we are likely to see spades in the ground?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is right about the £27.4 billion we are investing in the road investment strategy 2 programme to upgrade and build roads fit for the 21st century. There was very effective lobbying on the roundabout, and I will certainly come back to him in writing to provide more of an update.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I know that you, Mr Speaker, the Secretary of State and the whole House will share my grief about the fatal Stonehaven tragedy and the environmental damage wrought by the Llangennech derailment. It seems that the Government have finally listened to the Labour party and look to be ending their failed franchise model. Given the many billions of taxpayer funds that this will cost, it is simply unacceptable that we have to read about these agreements piecemeal in newspapers. As my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State said, perhaps the Secretary of State can enlighten us as to when he will make a full statement to this House outlining the future of rail. Will he also confirm what percentage of contracts, especially for HS2, will be going to UK suppliers?

Grant Shapps: There is a lot to cover there, but I will try to make it brief. The hon. Gentleman is right about Stonehaven. I went to the scene of the tragedy—I was taken over in a helicopter—and it was like a Hornby train set had been thrown up in the air. Our thoughts and prayers go not only to the three who died, but to those who were injured, the emergency workers and the brave people who rescued others—our thoughts are with them all. The House will have noted that I issued the Network Rail interim report on Stonehaven a week or two back, which comes to some very important interim conclusions. I will update the House further with the full report shortly.

As for the ending of the emergency measures agreements, I hope the House will understand that it is not possible to conduct negotiations with nine different operating companies in public—I cannot do that from the Dispatch Box. As he knows, the EMAs come to an end shortly, so I will of course be coming back to the House. I would disbelieve everything that you read in the newspapers; I do not think I have read a single thing that relates to what is actually happening. I will return to the House in due course to update it on precisely what is happening,

but I do not think that the hon. Gentleman can doubt our commitment to rail—the £3.5 billion we have put in so far, and indeed our support for HS2, which he mentions.

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 a few minutes.

10.33 am

Sitting suspended.

Speaker's Statement

10.39 am

Mr Speaker: I would like to make a short statement about the failure of the pass readers in the Division Lobbies last night. As colleagues will know, all four pass readers in the Division Lobbies stopped working and we had to switch to roll-call voting. I have now received a report on what went wrong, and I can inform colleagues that the failure was due to human error. The contractors involved have offered their apologies, and I am assured that urgent steps are being taken to prevent such a mistake from occurring again. I thank all colleagues for coping so well with the switch, and I especially thank the Doorkeepers for their help. I know that there are alternatives to using this system of Divisions that we are currently using, and I will continue to discuss the use of alternatives with the Leader of the House and other Members concerned.

I also wish to make a short statement about the transfer of oral questions and the timeliness of written answers. This is, of course, the responsibility of the answering Department concerned. However, I note that some hon. Members tabling questions for the Ministry of Defence for Monday on matters relating to the welfare of veterans have had their questions transferred, while others have not. What makes it worse is that this does look like political interference or at least political bias; I take this very seriously. This makes it hard for hon. Members, and the Table Office in assisting them. In the current case, the hon. Members whose questions have been transferred will be called to ask supplementaries to the questions not transferred, so they will not be disadvantaged. However, I hope Departments will give careful consideration to the principles of consistency and fairness in reaching decisions on transfers. I also wish to restate my plea for Departments to ensure that all hon. Members receive timely and substantive answers to their written questions; I do not expect lip service to be paid to Members who were elected to serve their constituencies.

I am sure that both the Procedure Committee and the Leader of the House will keep an eye on these two matters, and I know that the Leader and the shadow Leader take this very seriously as well, so I do hope Ministers are listening.

Business of the House

10.42 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for next week will include:

MONDAY 21 SEPTEMBER—Continuation of consideration in Committee of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill (day 3).

TUESDAY 22 SEPTEMBER—Conclusion of consideration in Committee of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill (day 4).

WEDNESDAY 23 SEPTEMBER—Second Reading of the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill, followed by motion relating to proxy voting.

THURSDAY 24 SEPTEMBER—General debate on the situation in Yemen, followed by general debate on the settlement and annexation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, followed by general debate on the Rohingya humanitarian crisis and the effects of the covid-19 pandemic. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 25 SEPTEMBER—Private Member's Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 28 September will include:

MONDAY 28 SEPTEMBER—Remaining stages of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill (day 1).

TUESDAY 29 SEPTEMBER—Conclusion of the remaining stages of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill (day 2).

WEDNESDAY 30 SEPTEMBER—Second Reading of the Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) (No.2) Bill, followed by motion under the Coronavirus Act 2020 relating to the renewal of temporary provisions, followed by all stages of the Sentencing Bill [*Lords*], followed by debate on motions relating to planning.

THURSDAY 1 OCTOBER—Proceedings on a Bill relating to social security benefits uprating.

FRIDAY 2 OCTOBER—The House will not be sitting.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business and you, Mr Speaker, for the statement you made on those two issues. I have to say that what happened yesterday was unacceptable, and I hope we can all sit down and talk about one or two of the incidents. I, too, want to place on record my thanks to the Clerk of the House, the House staff who managed to switch to a different system and the Doorkeepers who reminded us that we were on television.

If that was not enough, I do not know when the Government are going to make a statement about the chaos and the warning about the queues of lorries that will take place in Kent. Some 7,000 lorries will take two days to get through. More sites are being planned, such as the Waterbrook Park site behind the MOJO site, and local people know nothing about what is going on. A coronavirus test centre was abruptly closed to make way for a customs check. Staff were told out of the blue that it would be closing. When are we going to have a statement on what is going to happen in Kent after 31 December? Mr Speaker, to paraphrase Joni Mitchell, they paved the garden of England and put up a lorry park.

It is interesting that the following week, on Monday 28 and Tuesday 29 September, there are further days for the conclusion of the Internal Market Bill; I thought it would all be over this week so that the Prime Minister could go to party conference and wave a piece of paper in the air saying, “Oh, we have Brexit done.” It was the Government who signed the agreement, with the protocol, on 9 January and have now done what looks like a handbrake turn. To paraphrase what happened on the Health and Social Care Act 2012, it was a U-turn so big people could see it from space—perhaps from the moon, even.

Mr Speaker, the Leader of the House tweeted:

“Starmer’s Socialists still suck up to Brussels.”

As I said, it has nothing to do with Brexit. What we are doing is sucking up to the rule of law. The Law Society president has said that that is non-negotiable. He said that clauses 41-45:

“Represent a direct challenge to the rule of law,”

and he is urging hon. Members to vote against it.

The Leader of the House will know that we are celebrating 10 years since Pope Emeritus Benedict’s visit. In his speech, the Pope said that the separation of powers in this country is “an inspiration” and so is our, “respect for the rule of law”.

Those are the words in his speech; I urge the Leader of the House to read them. This country has an internationally renowned reputation for legal services and as a place for the administration of justice, and that is all going to change. We have a law officer who has just recently resigned.

Can we have a debate on saving British businesses? The Leader of the House will know that the founder of ARM has written to the Prime Minister to stop the sale to Nvidia.

He said it was

“an issue of national economic sovereignty...Surrendering UK’s most powerful trade weapon to the US is making Britain a...vassal state.”

Has the Leader of the House heard that phrase before? He has failed to act in the public interest. It is a powerful letter and the Government should take a golden share in ARM. Could we have a statement on the negotiations and ensure that a business such as that will put the interests of the British people first, rather than being used as a powerful trade weapon for the United States?

I know there is a health statement later, but where was the chair of the test and trace programme? She has made no statement since 19 August. Public Health England has been abolished. We have had mixed messages. Do the Government really think that people without symptoms are going to have a test? The number of tests returned within 24 hours has fallen from 68% to 8%. It seems to be all “talk, talk” and not “test, test”.

More importantly, I want to use the Leader of the House’s good offices, if he could speak to Ministers in the Department of Work and Pensions. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) had a ten-minute rule Bill in July on how people who are terminally ill are treated in the benefits system. She asked a question and she was told by the Minister at the time that the outcome of the review would be done shortly. The Minister said on Monday he will have it

done “as quickly as possible.” Could we have a statement as soon as possible, hopefully next week, on what is happening with scrapping the six-month rule?

I am sure that the Leader of the House has already seen the 250 to 300 statutory instruments that are coming down the line. Could he ensure that there will be proper scrutiny of those issues?

It was the fourth birthday that Sherry Izadi, the wife of Anousheh, has had without him. Anousheh also needs diplomatic protection. Nazanin had that terrible prospect of not knowing whether she was on trial. I know the Foreign Secretary has been to America, and I hope that in some way we are nearer to a solution, as the Defence Secretary has suggested. Of course, let us not forget Luke Symons in Yemen; I hope there will be a statement next week in the Back-Bench debate.

I hope the Leader of the House will join me in thanking the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew)—I forgot to mention him earlier—for standing in so wonderfully for him last week and also Marcial Boo, the chief executive of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, who left last Friday. I thank him for his six years. He has made many changes and says that he has left IPSA in a better place. He never failed to deal with queries on behalf of my colleagues. He saw three elections, winding up offices and setting up new offices. We thank him for his service and wish him well in the future.

Finally, happy new year, shanah tovah, to the Jewish community. I know that it has been difficult to have the celebrations, but maybe Rosh Hashanah next year will be back to normal.

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I also wish the Jewish community a happy new year? Of course, celebrations are difficult this year under the regulation.

May I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) and Deputy Chief Whip? I was worried that last week he was far too good and that this week hon. Members would all be clamouring for him. Indeed, I fear that they are, but are too polite and kindly to admit it to my face, although I have no doubt that the call will go out on Twitter that Members want the Deputy Chief Whip.

I also add my thanks to Marcial Boo, who carried out a very difficult task with dignity and patience. He was always available to Members to hear representations and was always keen to put things right. I think he did very good public service in possibly one of the most testing jobs, in which there are 650 critics and very few defenders. I think he did it really admirably.

The right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) is right once again to raise the question of British nationals detained overseas, including Anousheh Ashoori and Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. It is good news that the second trial has so far been deferred, and I hope that it will not take place. The detainees in Yemen can of course be raised in the debate coming up next week. The Government take this issue very seriously, but as the right hon. Lady knows, there are limitations to what the Government can do with a foreign nation that is determined to behave in the way that Iran behaves.

The right hon. Lady asked me about the scrutiny of statutory instruments. She will notice in the business that I announced that we are making time available for

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

debate of statutory instruments where the Opposition prayed against them. It is the will of the Government, the habit of the Government and, indeed, the requirement of Parliament that where debates are requested, wherever it is possible and feasible in terms of the management of business, we will do our best to facilitate them and ensure proper scrutiny. That is of course up to Members as well. Some statutory instrument Committees do not take very long to perform their scrutiny, and we should all look to our own consciences as to how much we wish to debate statutory instruments when they come before Committees.

The right hon. Lady raises the point about the Department for Work and Pensions, and the terminally ill and the promise of an answer. I will follow that up for her; it is a reasonable request to have made. I will ask the Secretary of State to ensure a written response as to when we can expect an answer, even if we do not have the answer itself.

I am afraid that is where the sweetness and light has to end, because some of the other things that the right hon. Lady said were really rather more contentious and have to be disputed. The UKIM Bill is a really important piece of legislation. It builds on section 38 of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020, which made it clear that the law in this country is made by Parliament. That has been our historic constitutional position. The Prime Minister himself has pointed out that the EU in these negotiations is not acting with good faith. If we are negotiating with somebody who is not behaving in good faith, we have to protect our interests, and we have a fundamental duty to protect the Good Friday agreement. It is absolutely clear in the Good Friday agreement that there will be no change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland without agreement from the people of Northern Ireland. Putting tariffs on, banning food going from GB to Northern Ireland, would be such a fundamental change. It is our duty to stop that happening, because it is our duty to protect the Good Friday agreement and to support the United Kingdom. A fine piece of legislation has been crafted, and is being piloted through the House of Commons, that will do precisely that. It is the right law, it is good law and it will protect the position of the people of Britain.

The Government have consistently ensured that provisions are being made in Kent for whatever may be the result on 1 January next year. That is absolutely the right thing to do, and the Government are continuing to do that.

As regards testing, one has to be reasonable. I was not here last week because I was awaiting a test result, and that was quite right; people who have family members who have developed symptoms must self-isolate. The right hon. Lady's right hon. Friend, the Leader of the Opposition, also did the right thing in self-isolating until the test result came back. We all have an obligation to try to stop a dangerous disease spreading, but we have gone from a disease that nobody knew about a few months ago to one where nearly a quarter of a million people a day can be tested, and the Prime Minister expects that to rise to half a million by the end of the October. Instead of this endless carping, with people saying it is difficult to get them, we should be celebrating

this phenomenal success of the British nation in getting up to a quarter of a million tests for a disease that nobody knew about until earlier in the year. That is a success of our society, our health experts and our Administration. Yes, there is demand for more; yes, demand exceeds supply, but the supply is increasing and what has been done is really rather remarkable and something we should be proud of.

Finally, on the Division yesterday, well that is the great thing about being here physically: we had a fall-back plan, so we could all get through the Lobbies. Just think if we had all been remote: the business would have fallen and we would not have got the business through the House. [Interruption.] There is some cackling from the Opposition Benches. They seem to think that when technology fails you need even more technology, whereas as actually good, trusty turning up and saying "Aye" or "Nay" worked extraordinarily well.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: I have one small issue with my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew): he did not go back before the 16th century. I do wish my right hon. Friend to say a little bit about King Alfred. As he knows, earthquakes in Somerset are extremely rare, but there was a big one last December, just before Somerset County Council launched its bid to become a unitary. It made houses shake across the region. Was it the ghost of King Alfred rotating in his grave over the petty-mindedness and stupidity of the county council? Will my right hon. Friend give us a debate? The plan proposed by the district councils to reunite our wonderful county of Somerset and allow our famous king to rest in peace is worthy of Government time.

Mr Rees-Mogg: May 878, the Battle of Edington: it is from that battle and the defeat of Guthrum that the British nation, the United Kingdom, was founded. Without that, we would probably all be speaking Danish. It is thanks to King Alfred, who of course laid his plans on the Somerset levels. We should always remember that our great nation comes from Somerset, and Somerset should always be at the centre of our nation's thinking. It is one great united country. Ted Heath's chopping it up in 1974 caused me dyspepsia as a five-year-old and continues to cause me dyspepsia now. Somerset is a great county, and the more united it is the better.

Mr Speaker: Just to say, we do like virtual from Somerset.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is good to be here, Mr Speaker, after so many months of absence to discuss matters with the Leader of the House in person.

I begin with your very welcome statement, Mr Speaker, about what happened last night. The Leader of the House ought to be a little less nonchalant in his approach. What we presented to the public and the world last night was quite an unedifying spectacle, to be honest. The conga line going through this House involving Members, many of whom clearly had some difficulty with social distancing, was not a good example to set. When we had the remote voting system, it did not fail; it worked perfectly well on every occasion it was put to the test. It is a system that was fit for purpose, and as he well knows, the Procedure Committee has recommended that whilst the pandemic persists we should go back to that form of voting, which is not only secure but safe

and allows people to vote without coming into proximity of one another. I hope that when we discuss these matters next Wednesday at the debate he has announced on proxy voting, we will be able to consider alternatives as well, and I hope we will be able to take some action on this prior to the present arrangements running out at the beginning of November.

Secondly, I invite the Leader of the House to comment on the resignation yesterday of Lord Keen, the Advocate General for Scotland, who reached a point where he found it impossible to continue to serve in the Government because of their intention to proceed with breaking international law. Does he think he will be successful in finding a qualified Law Officer in Scotland who will be prepared to countenance breaking the law in the future?

Finally, I want to ask the Leader of the House about the coronavirus job retention scheme and the self-employment income support scheme, both of which we will discuss in Backbench Business debates this afternoon. Members across the House who will be participating in those very well-subscribed debates look to the Government to bring forward proposals for what will happen after 31 October, when many businesses will have to remain closed by Government order. If that is the case, it seems to me that the public purse has to assist them in getting to the other side of this pandemic. It is not enough to simply close down the scheme and say, “That’s it.”

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is a pleasure that we are back face to face. When the hon. Gentleman appeared remotely, he looked like one of the rather more bad-tempered Old Testament prophets, but face to face, we see his natural joviality shining through. He is very welcome back, and I am sorry that I was not here last week.

Yesterday, the votes worked—that is the key. Had the technology failed remotely, we would simply not have been able to get the business through. It is proving that this House is back to work as the rest of the country is coming back to work. We are leading by example, and we should be proud of that.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about my noble Friend Lord Keen, who is a distinguished lawyer. He has indeed left the Government, and I am sure that there are many brilliant Scottish lawyers who can be found and asked to fulfil the role of Advocate General. The pool of wisdom in Scottish legal circles is very deep, and I have absolute confidence that we will find someone of comparable genius to the noble Lord to take the role that has been vacated.

The issue here is a very important one: do we defend the national interest of the United Kingdom when the EU is acting in bad faith, as the Prime Minister has said? The answer is yes, we must defend our national interest and our United Kingdom. The hon. Gentleman does not want the United Kingdom to exist. That is a perfectly respectable position for him to take, and it is put forward by his party in Scotland, but it is not the position of the Government or, indeed, of the majority of people in the United Kingdom, who have an affection, an attraction, a devotion and a patriotism towards their country and want it to succeed. Its success will be determined by laws passed in this House.

As regards the job support scheme, it is worth reminding the House what has been done by taxpayers. There has been £160 billion of support from taxpayers across the United Kingdom, with £35 billion on the furlough

scheme, £8.5 billion for 3 million self-employed people, £15 billion on coronavirus business interruption loans for small and medium-sized enterprises and large businesses, and £35 billion on over 1 million bounce back loans. That is an enormous amount of taxpayers’ money, but taxpayers’ money is not unlimited, so the schemes cannot go on forever, but I am sure that the debates later today will be informative.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): May I also wish shana tova to the Jewish community in my constituency and across the globe?

Apprenticeships are a fantastic way for young people to not only get into work but get a valuable qualification in the process. Being a keen supporter of apprenticeships, I have recently taken on two to work in my Radcliffe office, so that we are not only helping constituents but helping young people to earn and learn. Given the Prime Minister’s announcement that young people should be guaranteed an apprenticeship—which is much needed, given the increase in youth unemployment during the pandemic—will the Government lead by example and commit to offering as many young people as possible apprenticeship programmes across all areas of government?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right and asks an important question. I am glad to say that my own office has a good track record in this. We have an apprentice at the moment, and another member of the team was an apprentice before being promoted to a full-time appointment. I hope the Government will indeed follow my hon. Friend’s suggestion. In his plan for jobs, the Chancellor announced measures to ensure that young people have access to an offer of work-based training, work experience and training programmes, but apprenticeships are an excellent way of getting people on the jobs ladder, and the Government fully support them.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: I am glad to see the Leader of the House safely back in his place, and I hope he recovers from his dyspepsia quite soon. I thank him for announcing the business for next week, including the Backbench business for Thursday 24 September, although it is a bit regrettable that we will not get Thursday 1 October, as we have just under 30 remaining applications, including some that are time-sensitive for late September and early October.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will shortly make a statement introducing significant restrictions on the people of Northumberland, Durham and Tyne and Wear, including my constituency of Gateshead, to combat the considerable growth in the number of positive cases identified in those areas, despite local testing capacity having been reduced, as I have previously mentioned. Will the Leader of the House urge the Health Secretary to make regular statements to the House on the situation, as it is fast-moving and serious? Restrictions on time preclude many Members who would want to from putting questions to him when we get the opportunity.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is pleased that there is Backbench business both this Thursday and next Thursday. I give a reminder that it is still the intention to restore Westminster Hall from 5 October, so that will provide more time for Backbench business. The Health Secretary answered an urgent question earlier

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this week and is making a statement later. Who is on the call lists is really a matter for you, Mr Speaker, rather than for me, but I think the Health Secretary has been admirable in his willingness to come to the House to explain what is going on and to ensure that people are kept up-to-date.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I trust that my right hon. Friend will be very much looking forward to the county championship final next Wednesday between Somerset and Essex. I think I did predict in this place a few months ago that the championship would be a struggle between those two great counties, but I did not think it would come down to a showdown at Lords in the way it is. I look forward to discussing that with him next week.

I would like to touch on the issue of pet theft. We have seen a significant growth in pet theft over lockdown. Our pets have never been more important to us. For many, they have been our companions throughout lockdown. Pet theft continues to grow and there is a strong sense among many campaigners that the penalties are not there to deter pet theft from growing in the way it has done. There is a petition of well over 100,000 people who would like the issue to be debated in Westminster Hall. We have had a virtual meeting so far, because we could not have that debate, but would my right hon. Friend commit to bringing back Westminster Hall debates as soon as possible, so that pet theft and many other critically important issues can be thoroughly debated by us Members?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is an issue that concerns people. I can tell the House that recently I bought a cocker spaniel for one of my children, which is a very popular addition to the Rees-Mogg household. I confess it was for my little girl, Mary, who has been asking for a dog for many years, and I finally gave in. The thought of it being stolen is one that I know would be of great concern.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): What's the dog's name?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The dog's name is Daisy. It was named by my daughter, as Members would expect. I had all sorts of extravagant names for the dog, as Members might also expect, but my daughter held sway in the matter. The issue is of concern to people. Pets are being stolen—I am aware of that—and there will be an opportunity after 5 October to have debates on this type of matter in Westminster Hall.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): This year private schools saw their proportion of top A-level grades double. Does the Leader of the House accept that it is a disgrace that 60% of young people at Barnsley College saw their A-levels downgraded, compared with 40% nationally? Can we have a Government statement about how they will avoid this scandal happening ever again?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady calls for it never to happen again, and we hope that people will be back to doing exams and that therefore grading will not be done by assessment in future. That is certainly the plan. I obviously do not know the specific circumstances of

Barnsley College, but I will take the matter up with the Secretary of State for Education and try to get her a fuller answer.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): The BBC is a fantastic employer. One of its employees recently received a £1 million-a-year pay rise, paid for by the great British public. However, the residents in Ashfield were not consulted over the pay rise. Does the Leader of the House agree that there should be a debate in this House so that the people of our great country can have a choice over whether or not their hard-earned cash should be used to subsidise BBC presenters' £1 million salaries?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As a public service broadcaster funded by the licence fee—i.e. taxpayers—the BBC has a responsibility to lead the way in promoting equality in the workplace, ensuring overall pay restraint and value for money. That is why the Government requested that the names of all BBC staff and talent paid more than £150,000 be published. But there was one thing that horrified, appalled and shocked me about the list that came out: the name of Jonathan Agnew did not appear higher up the list. I could not believe that there were people being paid more than £1 million and that one of them was not our leading cricket commentator, Aggers himself. This is a great injustice, and I hope that somebody will request a Backbench Business debate to try to put this right. Fairness for Aggers!

Mr Speaker: Where do I go from there?

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): From cricket to football—yesterday, the chair of the national league wrote to the Culture Secretary asking for permission to start the new season on 3 October. National league clubs such as Bath City Football Club are such important community facilities for people of all ages. They are not our shiny premier league clubs, which get income from TV deals; they depend on their supporters to physically attend. If these national league clubs cannot reopen in October due to a Government decision on covid guidance, all these clubs will go under. Will the Leader of the House make representations to the Cabinet, particularly to the Culture Secretary, to make sure that these clubs can reopen in October, while also being covid-safe? I understand that they made very special plans over the summer to make all provisions to make it safe for people to attend. Perhaps face coverings could be suggested in those circumstances. But it is vital that these clubs can actually reopen and that supporters can see the games in person from October.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady makes a very fair point. Local clubs are important—they are important community facilities—and they do not have the huge amounts of money of the premier league clubs. In my own constituency, both Paulton and Keynsham have very good football teams and it is going to be difficult without a clear path as to how they can reopen. The Secretary of State will be answering questions next Thursday and I am sure he will be able to give more information on this.

Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend and, indeed, the shadow Leader of the House are both as committed as anybody here to ensure that we change the culture of Parliament

for the better. I would like him to please update the House on where we are on the 18-month review of the complaints scheme. In particular, when I met with him on this subject, we discussed the fact that it takes too long for a complaint to go from the initial phone call to the helpline through to whether it is upheld or refused. We all know that justice delayed is justice denied. So can he say what he is doing to ensure that this House is putting our own house in order and being the role model to the rest of the country that we all want to be?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First, I thank my right hon. Friend for all the work that she did to improve and change the culture, because she really drove this forward with considerable energy to the benefit of Parliament. I think that we are all agreed that we need a new culture and that there is no place for bullying, harassment or sexual harassment in Parliament. We should be a place of excellence where people feel safe and secure in their employment and where people are treated properly. As regards the 18-month review, there is a paper in front of both the Lords and Commons Commissions to be considered to try to get this review done and done speedily. There have inevitably been some delays because of the coronavirus, but I entirely agree with her on the issue of speediness when people make a complaint. It is unfair both on the complainant and on the person accused if inquiries drag out indefinitely. She is right to raise that and I hope that it will be part of the inquiry—the 18-month review—though obviously that is not for me to decide because it will be independent.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: The statutory requirement for the House to debate fuel poverty annually has not been met since 2018. Will the Leader of the House kindly inform us when Ministers plan to rectify this situation with a debate in Government time?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As the hon. Gentleman will know, there are enormous pressures on Government time, but there are many ways of raising things in debate and bringing them forward. Parliament allocates its time in accordance with its Standing Orders and the requirements of the law, and any statutory requirements that there are to have debates will be upheld.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Following on from what my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) said, may we have a debate in Government time on the salaries paid to BBC presenters—£1.75 million and £1.3 million, to mention just two, and for what? Yet the BBC has the audacity now to charge 75-year-olds the licence fee. These salaries are outrageous and shameful, and it is about time the Government put an end to them.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Slightly warming to my earlier theme, I am not entirely sure why a retired footballer is paid more than Vic Marks, a distinguished Somerset cricketer who regularly appears as an expert summariser on “Test Match Special”. I would have thought that he was deserving of much more money than a retired association footballer.

I do think that the BBC has been unfair on pensioners in requiring them to pay the licence fee. The hope was that it would not do that. It is basically stealing the Ovaltine from pensioners’ night-time drink by charging them the licence fee, and it is losing licence fee payers: it

has lost a quarter of a million licence fee payers in the last year, as people vote with their feet. I think the BBC needs to pay attention to what my hon. Friend says. When it charges some of the least well-off in our society and gives the money to some of the most well-off in our society, there are people who will rightly question that—especially when it is not giving it to cricketers.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): In my constituency in the last week, we have been desperately trying to avoid a local lockdown—to be honest, with little help from the Government. Last week, I took it upon myself to work with a local charity, Sindh Doctors Association UK, to deliver some IT equipment to my lovely old primary school, which was gratefully received for distribution to disadvantaged students.

Just last year, the Office for National Statistics said that around 700,000 young people, including those at secondary school but not those at primary school, do not have proper access to the internet, or a tablet or computer. May we therefore have a debate in Government time on the provision of IT equipment, including tablets, routers and all the other equipment that young people will need if our country is heading into further localised lockdowns or even, as rumoured today, a potential national lockdown? Our pupils have already suffered enough in the last year, and we want the Government to take every opportunity to ensure that they do not fail again to deliver such technology, which they said they would deliver but then did not, to so many young people.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point about ensuring that there is support for young people who do not have access to the necessary technology. There is a £350 million national tutoring programme, which is a package of targeted funding for the most disadvantaged pupils to try to ensure that they can catch up on anything that they have missed, in addition to a £100 million fund to boost remote education, which is obviously helping with the technology. The hon. Gentleman makes a very fair point; I think it is worth asking for an Adjournment debate on this issue, but the Government are taking steps in a direction that I hope he will approve of.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): A few weeks ago, residents in Wednesbury and Tipton suffered incredibly bad flooding, which saw many houses washed out and possessions lost. This is not the first time that that has happened in those communities, and many people now cannot get flood insurance. I managed, luckily, to speak to Severn Trent Water, which raised with me the fact that most of the time it is not consulted on potential flooding issues with new developments. I have been somewhat concerned by the lead flood authority’s attitude to engagement with Severn Trent on trying to resolve these issues for the long term. May we have a debate in Government time on flood protection, particularly in the Black Country, an area that is often overlooked when these issues are discussed?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government absolutely recognise the devastating impact that flooding can have on communities across the country; it is very tough on those affected. The Government are acting to drive down flood risk and announced a £5.2 billion expenditure

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programme of taxpayers' money to build 2,000 new flood defences over the next six years. However, the point that my hon. Friend makes about the lack of co-ordination is important, and I am happy to take that up with Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on his behalf to get him a fuller answer as to why these engagements are not taking place.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Last year's "State of Nature" report found that 41% of UK species are in decline, with one in 10 threatened with extinction, and just this week a new report from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds noted that we have seen a "lost decade for nature", with the Government failing to reach 17 out of 20 biodiversity targets they signed up to 10 years ago. May we therefore have an urgent debate on how the Government plan to turn that around, including by introducing legally binding targets to restore nature by scrapping the reckless £27 billion road building plan, which is already subject to judicial review, and by restoring the funding to organisations such as the Environment Agency and Natural England, whose budgets have been slashed by 30% in the past 10 years alone?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is very important that we have roads and that people can get about the country. The road building plan will help the economy. It will be a boost to the economy and a boost to jobs. The last thing we should be doing in the current crisis is making it harder for people to get jobs and for the economy to grow. However, the Government have a very good record on dealing with environmental matters. They have committed to the net zero target by 2050. Perhaps most importantly, we will take back control of our agricultural policy from 1 January and will be able to ensure that expenditure in that area goes towards protecting diversity and the environment, rather than being squandered on EU-sponsored schemes we are not in favour of and burdening our farmers with bureaucracy. Things are getting very much better thanks to the Conservatives and Brexit.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Residents in the village of Long Crendon in my constituency currently face the prospect of losing their GP surgery and being asked to go to a village poorly served by public transport that is at least an £11 taxi ride away. May I therefore ask my right hon. Friend for a debate in Government time to explore the provision of rural GP services, so that, as the Government deliver on our commitment for 50 million extra GP appointments, rural communities keep local, village-based GP services?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Living as I do in a small village, I am well aware of the importance of rural GP services and the need for them to be accessible by people living in rural areas who do not necessarily have any public transport and need to be within reasonable distance of a surgery. However, there are countervailing arguments about having larger centres which may be able to provide a higher level of service and more appointments. There is a balance within that. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the issue, which is very suitable for a Backbench Business debate, because it may well be of interest across the House.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Almost a year ago, I challenged the Prime Minister that his Brexit withdrawal agreement would not only put a customs and regulatory border down the Irish sea, but weaken our Union. Because he is not a details man, and without reading it line by line, he proceeded, amid much fanfare, to sign the agreement, extol its virtues as the best deal and an oven-ready deal, and impose it into law on a three-line Whip. Does the Leader of the House agree, now the Prime Minister has woken up and wants to break international law, that while the Prime Minister may need a United Kingdom Internal Market Bill to supposedly protect him from the European Union, what we actually need is a Bill that protects our country and its people from the seemingly limitless ineptitude and incompetence of this Prime Minister and his Government?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman may perhaps overstate his case just a little. It seems to me that the withdrawal agreement is a very good agreement, but it depended on the good faith of the other side. Had that been forthcoming, there was no question of tariffs on goods that were going to Northern Ireland and were going to stay there. That was provided for. There was no question of food not going to Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, the obduracy, the stubbornness, the pig-headedness of the European Union has put us in a position where we have to protect our interests. In terms of legislation around this Government, the greatest voice we had was that of the British people and they decided just last December who they wanted to run their affairs. They decided they wanted a Conservative Government who would deliver a departure from the European Union in the British national interest. That is what is being done and that is why so many people across the country in historically socialist seats decided to put their faith in the Conservatives.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) [V]: I was very cheered up at the beginning of business questions when I saw my hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), the Deputy Leader of the House, sitting next to my right hon. Friend. Last week, my hon. Friend undertook to go round to No. 10 and tell the Prime Minister off for making announcements to the media before making them to the House. Will the Leader of the House take that a little further? The rule of six, which limits the British people to gatherings of no more than six, is a major change to the way this country works. Should not Parliament discuss those major changes first and vote on them? Could we have a statement next week, outlining that in future, before a major change in regulations relating to covid is made, an amendable motion is debated and approved in the House before the regulations come in? Perhaps it would be useful if the Deputy Leader of the House made that statement.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I apologise to my hon. Friend, but there was some problem with the technology. He was kindly helping my argument that technology is not the answer to every possible problem and that sometimes good old-fashioned turning up in person is helpful. However, I got the broad impression that my hon. Friend is not very pleased. I wish to correct the record. My hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew) did not undertake to go round to see the Prime Minister and tell him what my hon. Friend the Member for

Wellingborough (Mr Bone) wanted him to say. I think that probably, had he answered the question at greater length—he was under pressure of time—he would have said that was going to go round to Downing Street to tell the Prime Minister what a wonderful job he is doing and how lucky we are to have such inspired leadership, with which I hope my hon. Friend would concur. However, I can assure him that there will be a debate. A debate is scheduled on the continuation of the Coronavirus Act 2020 provisions on Wednesday 30 September. That will be the opportunity for those points to be raised.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Parents held vigils around the UK yesterday, including my constituent Rachel Rankmore, whose son, Bailey Williams, has very severe epilepsy. They were holding those vigils because they are still paying thousands of pounds in private prescriptions to get hold of medical cannabis. In Northern Ireland, the Administration are helping financially. May we have a debate on why that is not happening in the rest of the UK?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There is always great sadness about children who are suffering from these very difficult conditions and questions about the drugs that are made available and who pays for them. Obviously, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has a responsibility to investigate that, but I will happily pass on the hon. Gentleman's comments to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): My right hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that the incompetently run Lib Dem council in Sutton is again not listening to Carshalton and Wallington residents, this time about road schemes, which are causing travel chaos across the borough. May we have a debate in this place about those road schemes and the way councils should consult residents properly?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right. The Lib Dems hate the motorist, of course, and want to make life as difficult as possible for motorists whenever they can. The emergency active travel fund, which was announced on 9 May, comprised £225 million of funding in two tranches for local authorities. The local authorities have the responsibility for how that money is spent, but the Government will ensure that if they do not demonstrate that it is providing improvements, the funding will be withheld.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): It is estimated that around 320,000 private renters have fallen into rent arrears during the pandemic. Many have lost work, fallen through gaps in support or struggled on reduced earnings on furlough. On Sunday, the evictions ban ends, putting hundreds of thousands at risk of eviction and tens of thousands at risk of homelessness. For private renters in Coventry South and across the country, will the Leader of the House give Government time to urgently discuss measures to stop the crisis, such as extending the evictions ban for at least a year, scrapping no-fault evictions, as promised in the Tory manifesto, and cancelling rent arrears?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Nearly £1 billion of support has been provided for renters, increasing the generosity of housing benefit and universal credit so that the local housing allowance covers at least 30% of market rents

in local areas. Measures to ensure that no tenant has been forced out do indeed come to an end on 20 September, but landlords have not been able to evict for the past six months and there is a balance to be struck between landlords and tenants, and the Government have spent a great deal of taxpayers' money trying to support tenants.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): Earlier this summer, I spent time campaigning to get my constituents in Oadby and Wigston out of our local lockdown, and nobody wants to go back into those kinds of measures, but unfortunately the number of coronavirus cases, particularly in Oadby, has gone dramatically up. I have told the Health Secretary that any new measures must be extremely well targeted and proportionate, so that they do not affect people's businesses and livelihoods. May we also have a debate on how we best handle local restrictive measures?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is important that restrictions are precise and aimed at the areas most at risk. Local outbreaks require local action and may be a feature of our lives for some time to come, but the Government's aim is to enable as many people as possible to live their lives as close to normal as possible. I hope that he will have an opportunity, depending on the call list, to quiz the Secretary of State for Health in a moment.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: On 16 July, the Youth Violence Commission, which I chair, launched its final report and recommendations. I sent a copy to all Members and peers the following week. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Prime Minister has read the report, and will he grant us a debate on youth violence so that we can discuss these urgent recommendations and hear the Prime Minister's response?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Obviously, youth violence is a very important issue, and I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing it to the attention of the House and on the work that she has done. This is very suitable for a Backbench Business debate, and I imagine that there would be considerable support across the House for that. It would be bold of me to tell the Prime Minister what he ought to read, but I will certainly ensure that the copy she sent him has arrived.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con) [V]: For more than half a century and throughout all parts of the United Kingdom, historic counties have been divided, merged, replaced and abolished, as my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will know only too well with his beloved Somerset. May we please have a statement from the Cabinet Office on respecting our traditional counties, perhaps via the lord lieutenancies?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Lieutenancies Act 1997 sets out that the ceremonial counties will be the historic counties, and it was a rather splendid Act because it reunited Somerset and other historic counties that had been bowdlerised by Ted Heath's Administration. The historic counties are an important element of British history. They support the identity and cultures of many of our local communities, giving people a sense of belonging, pride and community spirit, and I hope that the counties will be recognised. As I am addressing an hon. Friend from Sussex, I think it is worth reminding him that the

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

conversion of Sussex to Christianity was delayed because the woodland was so thick that it was hard for the converters to get through, but I am glad that he stands up for his county.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I do not know how familiar the Leader of the House is with the concept of no recourse to public funds, but it has resulted in one of my constituents being left close to destitution while caring for her grandchildren after their mother died of cancer, because she cannot get her status sorted with the Home Office. Will the right hon. Gentleman arrange for a Minister to look into this specific case, and may we have a debate on the wider issue so that a Minister can come to the Dispatch Box to explain how this Government can continue to justify their inhumane, hostile and violent immigration policy?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise a constituency issue of this kind on the Floor of the House, and I will certainly take it up with the Home Office and ensure that he gets an answer.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I welcome the sentencing White Paper that the Justice Secretary introduced yesterday, as it restates the Government's commitment to increase the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving to life imprisonment. However, it is now nearly three years since the Government first announced this change, and the families waiting for justice have waited long enough, so will the Leader of the House tell us exactly when this legislation will be introduced, to give the bereaved families the justice they deserve?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank the hon. Lady for the campaigning she has done on this important issue and for her success in developing policy in this area. Her influence and questioning have helped the Government to come to our policy decisions, which, as she knows, the Lord Chancellor announced yesterday. As regards the precise timing of the Bill, I cannot give an absolute answer on the day it will take place, but the White Paper sets out a serious Government priority. It will be introduced as soon as parliamentary time allows and the Bill has been written, and that is in the not too distant future. I hope that that answer is at least encouraging.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Given that the Prime Minister yesterday refused to rule out changes to the International Development Act 2002, may we have a debate in this Chamber about the implications for international development assistance for the poorest people in the world? Who in the House will actually be scrutinising what is happening?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The House decides how to set up its own scrutiny, and Select Committees are a matter for the House. The scrutiny will continue as it currently is, I believe, until the end of the year and then the House will have to come to a decision.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Tomorrow, I will announce my Angel awards recognising the people, organisations, businesses and public bodies that have done so much to support our communities across Blaydon in the coronavirus pandemic. Will the Leader of the House join me in

thanking all those people who have done so much, and will the Government bring forward a scheme to recognise people across the country who have gone above and beyond to support their communities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank the hon. Lady for her marvellous initiative. It is important that we thank people and recognise the incredible outpouring of community spirit that there has been during a very difficult time. She is doing absolutely the right thing. It seems to me that if the Government can piggyback on the work that she has been doing, that would not be a foolish thing to do, so I will certainly bring it to the attention of other Ministers.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Every year in England, more than 100,000 people in problem debt attempt to take their own lives. It is complex, and there are a range of factors that lead to somebody in debt becoming suicidal, but research shows that a key factor is receiving intimidating letters from lenders. That is a real concern with millions more people facing debt as a result of the crisis. Will the Leader of the House encourage the Chancellor to make a statement outlining how we make provisions for a small change to the rules contained in the Consumer Credit Act 1974 on the content of debt letters to simplify the language and signpost people to advice? I understand that could be done quite simply by statutory instrument, and it could save lives.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point that should concern the whole House. A great deal of support is available from organisations across the country for people who are in debt that they cannot afford to repay, and the ability of debt counsellors to help debt to be rescheduled and to help to lift the burden from people is there. I agree that it would be helpful if that were more widely known. All of us, as constituency MPs, sometimes point our constituents in that direction. I understand his point about changing the wording. Letters sent out by debt collectors ought not to be threatening. That is quite clear. I understand his point, and I will pass it on to the Chancellor.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): I was delighted to see the Government launch a taskforce to reopen Hammersmith bridge in London, the closure of which has been a congestion nightmare for hard-working Londoners, but as part of the levelling-up agenda at the heart of the Government, we need to bridge the gap between London and some of our left-behind communities. On that note, will my right hon. Friend assure me that the Government will display the same strength up north in reopening the Whorlton bridge in my constituency, the closure of which for more than a year has cut off communities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I understand that the Whorlton bridge was built in 1831, a year before the Great Reform Act—[*Interruption.*] No, I wasn't here at the time. It is a fine example of 19th-century engineering—[*Interruption.*] The right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) says that I am a fine example of 19th-century engineering. I am not quite sure that is entirely true, but I will take it as a compliment. The bridge is the responsibility of Durham County Council, which ought to listen to my hon. Friend. Bridges connect communities and ought to be repaired.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Scotland is a dynamic, forward-looking nation and is ambitious to retake its position on the world stage by adherence to the international rules-based order. When it makes an agreement with a future ally, it will stick to it, by contrast to the way that the Government are behaving this week with the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill and their ambitions to break international law. Does the Leader of the House agree that the Scottish Government would be perfectly within their rights if, in seeking a section 30 order in preparation for our upcoming referendum, one is not forthcoming, they just decide to carry on regardless?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There is an incongruity in the hon. Gentleman's comments. He says, quite rightly, that Scotland is a forward-looking, fine, upstanding nation, but then he wants to kow-tow to the European Union, and take Scotland's fish and give them all away to the fisherfolk of the European Union. He cannot have it both ways. Either he maintains his pride in Scotland, shared with the United Kingdom, or else he wants to go and be a vassal of the European Union.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): In my constituency, we have a local landmark on a road called Woodmere Avenue, but it is all for the wrong reasons. As cars navigate through it, they get scratched. Local residents feel like they are between a rock and a hard place, or between a post and a scratched car, in the sense that local bureaucracy going back and forth over many years has meant that they have not been able to get this changed. May we have a debate to look at how we can unwrap local issues around bureaucracy so that we do not keep going through a groundhog day of residents requesting change, having to do petitions to try to get change, and then it not happening? Can we please get pavement politics back into government?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We really need to discourage councils from their war against the motorist. We should be backing the motorist. Driving is a great sign of one's independence, liberty and exercise of historic freedoms. But local authorities are, quite rightly, independent, so the answer is to campaign to get in a Conservative council.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): On 22 June, the Court of Appeal ruled that the Government's periodic assessment regulations for universal credit were illegal. The next day, the Minister for welfare delivery said that the Government would now begin the process of carefully considering possible solutions. Three months, several written questions and an early-day motion later, there has been no update. Tens of thousands of people are affected by this. One of my constituents has continually had her passported benefits wrongly taken away because of this problem—devastating at any time but especially during covid. Will the Leader of the House therefore speak to the Minister for welfare delivery and encourage him to come before this House to provide a meaningful update on the Government's plans?

Mr Rees-Mogg: When court cases do not go the Government's way, it is obviously right that things are considered very carefully. It is worth saying, though, that there has been £9 billion of support for universal credit following the coronavirus crisis. An enormous number of people have received extra support during

that period, and the Government have been making the money available to ensure that that happens. But it is only right that when there are court judgments, they are examined carefully.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): In common with many Members, I am having trouble getting timely responses to written questions from many Departments. I have about 30 outstanding at the moment, some of which are more than three months old. One in particular, though, will be of interest to all Members, as it relates to preparations for Remembrance Sunday. All Royal British Legion branches up and down the country are beginning to think about what we can do to have a covid-secure Remembrance Sunday, so can we please have a statement from the relevant Minister as a matter of priority?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point about timely ministerial responses. I will confess that I put in an envelope letters outstanding to one Ministry from April, May, June and July in the hope that I might get a reply to them. If I do not get a reply, I will, in due course, tell the House which Ministry it is, but at the moment I will keep that quiet. Remembrance Sunday is one of the great important national days. I have absolutely heard what the hon. Gentleman has said, and I will take it up with the relevant Secretary of State.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree that our negotiating position has been strengthened as a result of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill passing its Second Reading. That said, the European Union continues to act in bad faith, and the Government must be prepared for an orderly departure with or without a deal. So can the Leader of the House confirm that the Government have made all the necessary preparations in the event that an agreement is not reached next month?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right in what he says about the UKIM Bill strengthening our hand. We left with a deal in January, and planning for the end of the transition period is well under way, co-ordinated by the XO—Exit Operations—Cabinet Committee, to make sure that we are ready to seize the great opportunities of being outside the single market and the customs union. With the Bill going through Parliament, I can assure my hon. Friend that the Government will have full legal ability to maintain the sovereignty of our nation and the integrity of our internal market. We have launched a comprehensive communications campaign to make sure that people and businesses know what they need to do to prepare for the end of the transition period. That remains a central priority of the Government and Departments.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) [V]: May I first correct the Leader of the House's assertion, which he repeated again this morning, that those of us who are working from home are somehow not at work? That will certainly be news to my wonderful constituency team, who dealt with a fourfold increase in casework this year without having to set foot in our office.

The Leader of the House says that he wants Parliament to be a safe place for people to work. He must know that some Members of Parliament are making it a more dangerous place by deliberately flouting safe distancing

[Peter Grant]

requirements in the Chamber, the voting queues and elsewhere. What steps is he taking to ensure that all MPs set a good example by complying with health and safety requirements in the House, and by being polite to members of staff whose job it is to help keep everybody safe?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman's very last point is of fundamental importance. Mr Speaker, both you and I have made it clear to all staff of the House, particularly the Doorkeepers and security people, that they are allowed to remind Members, and all other people on the estate, of the need to maintain social distancing. It would be quite wrong for any Member to be high-handed when asked to remember the requirements of social distancing. I do not think one should be too critical because inevitably, human nature being what it is, things will not always be perfect, but the work that has been done to make this a covid-secure workplace is terrific. There are markings on the floor, things are spaced out and the seats in the Chamber have been limited to ensure that we are covid-safe. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman might like to come down and see how well it is working.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Does the Leader of the House share my concerns about the safety of women, following accounts of serious medical complications after some women have taken abortion pills at home, as is temporarily allowed during the pandemic? Should we not therefore look to revert as soon as possible to confidential in-person consultations being available for all women before such serious procedures are undertaken?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this deeply troubling issue. It is important that safeguards that used to be in place are put back in place as soon as possible. Of course, anything to do with abortion is not a matter where the Government have a policy; it is a matter for one's private conscience, but she knows that her conscience and my conscience align on this matter.

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 a few minutes.

11.47 am

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Update

11.53 am

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on coronavirus and about our plans to put us in the strongest possible position for this winter. Like many other countries around the world, we are continuing to see a concerning rise in cases, with 3,991 new cases recorded yesterday, and this week the number of patients in mechanical ventilator beds has risen above 100 for the first time since July. The battle against coronavirus is not over, and while we strain every sinew to spring free of its clutches, with winter on the horizon we must prepare, bolster our defences and come together once again against this common foe.

One of our vital lines of defence has been taking targeted action at a local level. We have seen local action work well in some parts of the country, and now we must take further action. We have seen concerning rates of infection in parts of the north-east. Sunderland, for example, now has an incidence rate of 103 positive cases per 100,000 of population, and in South Tyneside, Gateshead and Newcastle the figures are all above 70 per 100,000. As a result, local authorities wrote to me earlier this week asking for tighter restrictions, and we have taken swift action to put them into place. From tomorrow, in Northumberland, North Tyneside, South Tyneside, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Gateshead, Sunderland and County Durham, residents should not socialise with other people outside their own households or support bubble; hospitality for food and drink will be restricted to table service only; and late-night restrictions of operating hours will be introduced, so leisure and entertainment venues must close between 10 pm and 5 am.

I know, as the whole House does, that these decisions have a real impact on families, on businesses and on local communities. I can tell everyone affected that we do not take these decisions lightly. We agree with the local councils that we must follow the data and act, and the data says that we must act now so that we can control this deadly virus and keep people safe. I know that the people of the north-east will come together to defeat this virus, as defeat it we must.

We are working to bolster our health and care system too. Winter is always a stretching time for health and for care, but this winter presents particular challenges. People will be spending more time indoors than they did in summer, where we know the virus is more likely to spread, and we know that we will need to deal with coronavirus along with the usual pressures that the season will bring. So today I want to set out our plans to support the NHS and social care this winter.

Turning first to the NHS, I can tell the House that we have allocated a further £2.7 billion to the NHS to support it during the winter months. This funding, in addition to the extra funding for personal protective equipment and testing, will help the NHS with the vital task of operating safely in a world in which covid is still at large and the critical task of working through the backlog of elective work that was inevitably caused by the first peak.

Our emergency departments are on the frontline of the fight for life in the NHS. Today, I am delighted to announce a series of measures to support our urgent

and emergency care system this winter and beyond. I want to thank and pay tribute to Katherine Henderson, the president of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, with whom I have worked closely to develop these proposals. I want to thank her, and, through her, all those who work in emergency care for their service in the face of adversity. I saw this again this morning at the St Thomas' Hospital accident and emergency department, and I know that all of us support the work of those who work in our emergency facilities, right across the country. I very much hope that yours, Mr Speaker, will be opening soon in Chorley.

We will make our emergency departments bigger. Many are simply too small—that was true even before the pandemic, but it is even more acute now. So we are investing to expand capacity in urgent and emergency care, so that hospitals have the space to continue treating patients safely in the coming months. In August, we confirmed £300 million for emergency upgrades across 117 trusts, and I can today announce a further £150 million to expand 25 more emergency departments, including some of the most constrained in the country, such as those in Worcester and at the Royal Shrewsbury. This extra funding will put us in the strongest possible position for this winter, and boost the crucial work to accelerate non-covid care.

It is not just about the space, but about the service, so we are working to get patients the right care in the right place, by expanding the role of NHS 111. During the peak of this pandemic, we saw millions of people using NHS 111, on the phone or online, to get the best possible advice on coronavirus, helping them to stay safe and, where possible, to stay out of hospital, where they could have unknowingly spread the virus. It is crucial that, ahead of winter, we use this window of opportunity to seek out what worked and build on it, so we provide a better service for patients and protect the NHS. Of course, no one will ever be turned away from our emergency departments in the most serious of cases; however, we have worked with the royal colleges, the NHS and others to develop a better, quicker and more clinically appropriate service for patients by using NHS 111 first.

This is how it works. We will invest £24 million to increase call-handling capacity and to make sure there are more clinicians on hand to provide expert advice and guidance, and we will build on our trials to make NHS 111 a gateway to the emergency care system, providing a first port of call for patients. In future, rather than having to queue in an emergency ward, we are testing that people should call NHS 111 first to book an appointment with whoever can give them the most appropriate care, whether it is a GP, a specialist consultant, a pharmacist, a nurse or community services. Of course if they need to go to the emergency department, NHS 111 will be able to book them into an appropriate time slot. We want to see this approach lead to shorter waiting times and better availability of appointments for patients. We will consult on how its performance is best measured, and, with successful pilots, we will roll out NHS 111 First to all trusts from December.

Finally, I want briefly to update the House on our work to protect care homes. One of the worst things that we know about this virus is that it reserves its greatest impact for those who are physically weakest, especially the elderly, so we must do everything in our power to protect residents in social care. In May, we

introduced the adult social care infection control fund, which has helped adult social care providers reduce the rate of transmission. This was used to fund important measures such as improving infection prevention and paying staff to self-isolate. I can now inform the House that we will extend this fund for six months and provide over £540 million of extra funding for providers. That brings our total funding for infection control measures in social care to over £1 billion. We will also shortly be bringing forward our adult social care winter plan, because we will do whatever is humanly possible to protect our care homes from this virus so that they are a place of sanctuary this winter.

We will soon be facing winter in this fight and, whether on our NHS emergency care wards or in our care homes, we will strain every sinew to give them what they need, so they are well equipped for this pandemic and, indeed, for the years ahead. I commend this statement to the House.

12.2 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his remarks.

The capital investment for 25 A&Es will be welcome. On the piloting of the 111 triage ahead of A&E, given inequalities in accessing healthcare for the poorest and disadvantaged, how will the Secretary of State ensure that it does not worsen health inequalities? If it leads to greater demands on primary care, will GPs be given extra resources as a consequence?

The NHS is facing a likely second spike, winter pressures and a monumental backlog in non-covid care. The Chancellor promised to give the NHS “whatever it needs”. Does that promise still stand, and will the NHS get the funding it now needs to tackle the growing backlog in non-covid care?

On social care, can the Secretary of State guarantee that care homes will not face the same personal protective equipment shortages they faced at the start of the pandemic? Does he also accept that restrictions on family visits cause huge harm to residents? Does he rule out re-imposing nationwide restrictions on family visits?

The Secretary of State said little about testing this afternoon. Back in May he stood at the Dispatch Box and told the House that

“everyone aged five and over with symptoms is now eligible for a test. That applies right across the UK, in all four nations, from now. Anyone with a new continuous cough, a high temperature or a loss of, or change in, their sense of taste or smell can book a test”—[*Official Report*, 18 May 2020; Vol. 676, c. 380.]

“We have”, in his words, “now got testing for all”.

Yet, four months later, for the British people, it has become not so much “test and trace” as “trace a test”. Just when many fear we are on the cusp of a second deadly spike, the Prime Minister admits we do not have enough capacity. Rather than fixing the testing, the Secretary of State is restricting it. In the exchanges on Tuesday, 33 Members from across the House raised issues around testing in their constituencies. He responded with the local figures—it was a very good debating trick, and well done to the specialist adviser for producing the briefing—but that will have been no comfort to constituents advised to travel hundreds of miles for a test when ill. It will have been no comfort to parents with a poorly child and themselves sick with worry and

[Jonathan Ashworth]

unable to get a test. It will have been no comfort to those turned away from walk-in centres and now presenting at A&E asking for a test. It will have been no comfort to the 25,000 teaching staff not in schools teaching our children because they cannot get a test. People want to know when the Secretary of State will fix testing and deliver on his promise to make testing available to everyone.

The Minister in the media this morning said there would be priorities for testing, so can the Secretary of State outline what his rationing plans are? Care England says that weekly testing of all care home staff is still not happening. Will care home staff get testing under his imminent rationing plan? What about people living in areas of restrictions, including the north-east? Will the north-east get all the mobile testing sites it requests? What is happening in university towns, with thousands of students set to come to universities across the country in the next two weeks? Will there be extra testing in those areas? In July, he pledged 150,000 asymptomatic tests per day by September. Has that commitment now been abandoned?

We should not be in this mess. We warned the Secretary of State that without fixing testing and isolation, infections would rise. Rather than capacity being increased over the summer, pillar 1 and 2 lab capacity remained broadly flat. He is now setting up more commercial Lighthouse labs. Why not invest in the 44 NHS labs instead? There are still problems in these commercial labs, aren't there? There are huge numbers of voided tests across the commercial labs. Randox had 35,000 voided tests across August. Today's stats show test turnaround times for testing in these labs getting longer. Serco is still failing to trace 80% of contacts. At what point will the Secretary of State step in and strip poor-performing outsourcing firms of their lucrative public sector contracts?

When testing breaks down, case finding breaks down, isolation breaks down, and we lose control of this virus. The British people made great sacrifices—they missed family celebrations, they could not say their final goodbyes to loved ones at funerals—and honoured their side of the bargain. In return, the Government were supposed to deliver effective testing and tracing. The Government failed. Now we have vast swathes of the country under restrictions. Where do we go next? The Prime Minister yesterday said a second lockdown would be disastrous. Obviously, we all want to avoid a second lockdown, but the British public deserve some clarity. Is the Secretary of State completely ruling out a second short national lockdown in all circumstances? Infections are rising at pace, but it is not clear what the actual strategy of the Government now is. It is all very well talking about camel humps and moonshots, but we need a plan to fully suppress the virus. It is urgent that he fixes testing and tracing and gives people isolation support to avoid further restrictions. Otherwise we face a very bleak winter indeed.

Matt Hancock: To respond to the constructive questions that the hon. Gentleman raised, I welcome his comments on the use of 111 First. The purpose of 111 First is to improve access, including in terms of inequalities in the NHS, by ensuring that people get the right treatment in the right place and easier access if they do need to go to an emergency department, because the emergency

department will know that they are coming. It is commonplace now in almost every part of our life to let people know that we are coming. If we are going to do something as important as visit an emergency department, it will help both the patient seeking treatment and the NHS to let them know that they are coming first. That is the principle behind 111 First. It sits alongside 999, which anybody should call in a serious incident.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the need for extra funding for the NHS, both for winter and for testing. I have just announced £2.7 billion of extra funding for the NHS, and he might have done better to welcome it. He talked about tackling the backlog of cases that inevitably built up in the first peak. The good news is that we are making progress on tackling that backlog and reducing it. Of course, there is an awful lot of work to do, and part of this extra funding will go towards that, alongside the funding to expand our emergency departments, the funding for PPE and the funding for testing that I mentioned in my statement.

The hon. Gentleman asked about PPE for care homes. We have a huge plan to ensure that care homes can get PPE, and the details will be set out shortly in the social care winter plan. He asked about family visits. The challenge of visits to those living in care homes is incredibly difficult, because nobody wants to spread coronavirus, but we also need to ensure that those who live in care homes get the support that they need and deserve.

The hon. Gentleman asked about testing. Of course there is a challenge in testing. The central point is that, contrary to what he said, capacity is at record levels and has increased week on week. The challenge is that demand has gone up faster—[HON. MEMBERS: “No, it's not.”] Those on the Opposition Benches can say, “No, it's not,” but they cannot defy the facts. The most important thing for everybody across the country to hear from their elected representatives, if they are interested in helping the country get through this pandemic, is: if you have symptoms, get a test, and if you do not have symptoms, please do not come forward to get a test unless you are specifically asked to. That is what colleagues on both sides of the House need to be repeating to their constituents.

The hon. Gentleman rightly raised prioritisation—I like him, and he raised exactly the right point, which is that we choose to prioritise care home staff and care home residents. Over 100,000 tests a day of the 260,000 capacity are sent to care homes. We could solve other problems by not doing that, but we prioritise those who live in care homes because that is the right thing to do. He asked about areas where there are restrictions. We prioritise putting tests into areas of restrictions, such as Leicester, where there were over 1,000 tests yesterday. This is the core point: when something is provided for free and demand is therefore high, we have to prioritise where we put our national resources. His tone on prioritisation was almost at the point of welcoming it, and welcome it he should. He also asked about universities, and it is important to prioritise testing, where that is clinically appropriate, for universities too.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about today's contact tracing figures. Again, he played this divisive card that does not suit him at all, talking about the difference between the NHS and the private contractors. What I care about is a good service for the people we

serve. The figures announced today are that 83.9% of contacts where communication details were given have been reached and told to self-isolate. That is the contact tracing working—even as the number of cases goes up—to help to control this virus. As we approach winter, I look forward to the two sides of this House coming together in the national interest, not playing these divisive cards that will simply play against the interests of those we serve, who elect us here in order to take our country through difficult times.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): Today is World Patient Safety Day, which I had the privilege of launching virtually with Dr Tedros of the World Health Organisation this morning. The changes that the Health Secretary is announcing to A&Es are about patient safety. As Dr Katherine Henderson told the Health Committee, if we go back to crowded A&E waiting rooms, patients will die, so I welcome these changes. May I ask my right hon. Friend specifically about sepsis? Our A&Es have made huge progress in testing people who need to be tested quickly for sepsis when they arrive at A&E. If that is now to be done on the phone—if that is the first point of contact—it is absolutely vital that 111 call handlers are properly trained and their algorithms adjusted to ensure that we ask the right questions on sepsis. Will he undertake to do that?

Matt Hancock: I wholeheartedly support the points that my right hon. Friend has made. I pay tribute to him for his work in establishing World Patient Safety Day and thank him for his ongoing work in the international arena, both representing our country and driving forward this agenda globally. I entirely agree with his comments about 111 First. It is absolutely critical that both the online and phone systems act to ensure that sepsis is recognised, wherever that is feasible, to ensure that people get the best and safest route to care. I will ensure that that point is registered. We have put in the extra funding, which I have just announced, for 111 to ensure more clinical support for people accessing the service through NHS 111 First. Indeed, I pay tribute to him for introducing 111 in the first place. There is an awful lot of work to do here, but it will undoubtedly help patients to get a better service and help the NHS to deal with the multitude of cases that come its way.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]: While personal behaviour and local measures are critical, so is a functioning test, trace and isolate system. Last week the Prime Minister claimed that there was capacity for 350,000 covid tests a day, but I am sure the Secretary of State is well aware that a third of that capacity is antibody testing, which becomes positive only after the infection and is therefore of little use in diagnosing cases or managing outbreaks. Why have the Government not published the daily diagnostic testing capacity since last Thursday? The Secretary of State has promised that there will be 500,000 diagnostic tests a day by the end of next month. Can he confirm that that definitely refers to diagnostic antigen testing, and is he confident that it will be delivered on time?

The current problem appears to be a shortage of laboratory capacity, with the Government now cutting test appointments in many parts of the UK. Does the Secretary of State accept that that causes a danger of new outbreaks not being detected at an early enough

stage? With the rationing of test slots, there are multiple reports of people being advised to enter an Aberdeen postcode to obtain authorisation for a test, even though the test will be carried out in the south of England. Does he accept that that will undermine Scotland's contact tracing system and that incorrect data could give the false impression of a local outbreak in Scotland that does not exist? How does he plan to stop that practice?

Finally, the Secretary of State has previously talked about his moonshot testing project, based on millions of people testing themselves for covid every morning. Can he clarify whether he is planning for such tests to be provided on the NHS, or would individuals be paying for them? If they are on the NHS, given the enormous price tag and the fact that the technology does not even exist yet, should he not focus funding and efforts on getting the current diagnostic testing system working in the here and now?

Matt Hancock: Taking those points in reverse order, of course investing in the next generation of technologies is important here and now, because if we do not push forward those technologies that allow us to expand testing, we will always be stuck with the current one. The idea that there is a dichotomy between the two is completely wrong.

On the hon. Lady's point about an Aberdeen postcode, we already have in place a system to ensure that if someone puts in one postcode but then turns up at the wrong drive-through centre, that will be indicated to the people there, so that problem has been resolved—indeed, it had been resolved before it was first raised in the House.

I hope that, like the Scottish Government, the hon. Lady will reiterate the point that people should come forward for a test when they have symptoms or have been told to do so by a public health professional, and they should not come forward if they do not have symptoms. Working together across the UK is undoubtedly the only way to solve this crisis, to the benefit of all our constituents.

That brings me to the point about testing in Scotland. More tests are being done in Scotland—through drive-through centres, local testing sites and mobile testing centres—than across the rest of the UK per head of population. We over-index the number of tests through those routes that we put into Scotland. Indeed, in the Scottish NHS there is spare capacity that needs to be used. I am working closely with the Scottish Government to ensure that that spare capacity is used, given the enormous demand for tests right across this country. I think that tone of working together is what we need to hear.

Robert Lorgan (High Peak) (Con): Earlier this month, Tameside and Glossop clinical commissioning group was reporting the highest rate of covid death of anywhere in the country. I want to put on the record my thanks to Ministers, Public Health England and NHS staff for working so hard to try to tackle this worrying situation, but it is very concerning that my constituents are still sometimes being asked to travel over 150 miles to get a test. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that the Government are doing everything they can to ramp up testing and laboratory capacity as a matter of urgency?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. There are of course challenges, which we are working incredibly hard to address, both in Derbyshire and nearby in Greater

[Matt Hancock]

Manchester. Across Derbyshire as a whole, in the past week almost 4,000 tests have been done, so the testing capacity is there. The challenge is that there is also this increase in demand. We have to ensure that the people getting the tests that are available are the people who need them most. That is the principle behind prioritisation, and it is a principle that everyone here should support.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): A constituent wrote to me yesterday:

“My child started at primary school last week. Inevitably, she’s picked up a cold. That cold includes a slight temperature. She’s not allowed back to school until she’s had a negative Covid test result. Nor are my wife and I allowed to go to work. No tests are available.”

That scenario is being repeated in thousands of households across the country, with children who have already been out of school for six months facing further weeks at home because they cannot get a test. The heroic efforts of teachers to enable the full reopening of schools are being undermined by the chaos of the testing system. When will school children, teachers and support staff have reliable and rapid access to testing and results so that covid cases can be swiftly identified and isolated, and disruption to education minimised?

Matt Hancock: Those are the challenges that we are working so hard to address. The message to the hon. Lady’s constituent and others is that there are thousands of tests available in her part of London, and it is incredibly important that those with symptoms come forward and those without symptoms—[*Interruption.*] I know that her constituent had symptoms. The critical thing is that all of us have the same message: those with symptoms do come forward, but those without do not. That huge spike in demand is the challenge. It is as simple as that.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Testing capacity is a finite resource, and it is right to consider prioritising care homes, hospitals and key workers. Will my right hon. Friend ask his Department also to consider the issue of testing very young children, who frequently experience raised temperatures, coughs and colds? Some parents are taking very young children for multiple tests, but those in that age group are unlikely to be out in the community spreading the virus. People want to do the right thing and nobody wants to overwhelm the system, so will he continue to do all he can to ensure that the testing system is operating efficiently?

Matt Hancock: Yes. I thank my hon. Friend for that question, which captures the challenges we face. It is absolutely true that children under the age of 16 are very unlikely to get ill with coronavirus; indeed, the proportion of under-16s testing positive is extremely low and is flat, whereas it is rising in many other age groups. She raises a clear point: the prioritisation we have is about getting the tests that we have—record capacity—to the people who need them most. That is why it is an important principle.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Over the next few days, tens of thousands of students will be arriving in Nottingham. Our universities have spent months planning for a safe return, but there is a real

danger that their hard work will be undermined, as Nottingham schools’ incredible efforts have been undermined, by the inability to get tests and results promptly. The University of Nottingham has repeatedly requested access to a small stock of pre-distributed pillar 2 swab test kits, which would enable faster and safer testing for symptomatic students and take the pressure off local community testing facilities. Will the Secretary of State work with and listen to universities such as the University of Nottingham to help to improve the efficiency of the national testing programme, and will he authorise the allocation of those kits to the university and others who request them?

Matt Hancock: I will absolutely look into that. That is exactly the approach we have taken with schools, and many universities’ labs are an important part of getting test results back. I am very happy to work with all of the 106 universities that are doing so much to ensure that the return of university is covid-secure, and I will look into the precise point the hon. Lady raises.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I have also had a number of Carshalton and Wallington residents get in touch with me about testing, some of whom are being sent down to the south coast to places such as Portsmouth and Southampton. May I ask my right hon. Friend what more the Government are doing not only to ensure that drive-through centres such as those in Chessington, which is nearby, are able to continue to process those tests, but to bring in more testing capacity into boroughs such as Sutton?

Matt Hancock: We are looking to get more testing capacity right across the board, as my hon. Friend well knows. The Chessington drive-through centre, which was one of the first that we put in place, has done an amazing job over the entirety of this pandemic. The good news is that, as I mentioned to the House on Tuesday, the average distance, as the crow flies, that people have to go to get a test has fallen from more than 6 miles to less than 6 miles. The message is that there are thousands of tests available and the average distance is low. The critical thing is that the people who come forward to get a test are the people who are eligible for a test, not people who do not have symptoms.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: There are multiple private companies involved in running the track and test system: Serco, McKinsey & Company, Deloitte and Randox, to name but a few. Can the Secretary of State tell us whether there is a financial penalty written into their contracts for when citizens cannot get tests, and what that penalty is? Or is it only our constituents who will pay the price for this mess?

Matt Hancock: It is the task of the companies that the hon. Lady mentions and many more, and of the British Armed Forces, the NHS, the Department, Public Health England and many local councils, including her own, to get as much capacity as possible. That is what their job is, and they are doing that at record levels.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The feedback I am receiving from local schools is that the problems that staff and pupils are experiencing in getting tests could make it very difficult for some schools to remain open. To prevent this, can my right hon. Friend first liaise

with the Secretary of State for Education to ensure that clear guidance is provided to schools about when to request a test? Secondly, can he do all he can to ensure that local testing programmes, such as that provided by the Norfolk and Waveney clinical commissioning group, continue to operate, as they do provide much-needed additional capacity?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I agree with both points made by my hon. Friend.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Secretary of State has announced some £2.7 billion extra for the NHS. Can I seek confirmation: under the Barnett consequential, how much of that will come to Northern Ireland? The news of the progress on a vaccine is a very positive step. Will he again confirm that no vaccine will be available on the NHS that has not been rigorously and completely tested? With that assurance, will he outline whether he considers children and education as a priority for the vaccine?

Matt Hancock: On the NHS funding, the Barnett consequential will operate in the normal way for the hon. Gentleman's constituents in Northern Ireland and right across the country. When it comes to the question of the vaccine, of course, we will allow a vaccine to be put in place across the board only when it is safe. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency is one of the most respected and high-quality regulators in the entire world. It is that body that will make the decision on whether it is safe to license. Of course, the question of who should be vaccinated and in what order is again a clinical decision, on which we will take advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): [V] I thank the Secretary of State on behalf of myself and my colleagues in Aylesbury and Buckingham for the extra A&E funding for Stoke Mandeville. It will make a great difference to patients and our valued NHS personnel in the Buckinghamshire health trust. But, in my constituency, in common with other Members, I am having a problem with the education system. A headteacher has written to me saying that we now have teachers and teachers' children with covid symptoms, which means that they are off in isolation, and they are being told that there are no tests available for 21 days. She writes, "This is very tricky, as we have to pay a lot for supply teachers to cover classes. Would it not be sensible to prioritise testing for teachers if it is a priority to keep schools open, as once too many teachers are off waiting for tests, schools will have to close, and then people won't be able to return to work?" What can I tell my headteacher, and how can we get those tests into schools more rapidly to mitigate the problems that are coming down the line?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend raises several important points. First, Stoke Mandeville Hospital is a famous and excellent hospital and I am delighted that we are able to expand its emergency facilities in this way. She has done more than anyone to represent the needs of Stoke Mandeville Hospital and all those who serve in that great hospital, so I welcome her comments on that. On testing, absolutely, we have sent tests to all schools to make sure that they have tests available. But of

course I also recognise the challenges in getting hold of tests. I do not accept at all that there is a delay of 21 days and nobody should accept that. That is not Government policy. I have just looked up the figures: across Buckinghamshire, just over 1,000 people a day are getting tests, so there are tests available. This is part of the challenge of having the record capacity but demand having gone up. I am working as hard as I can to ensure that all those who need a test—all those who have the symptoms—get a test. I understand that it is a very human instinct to think that if a close contact has symptoms the best thing to do is to get a test, but if people do not have symptoms please do not come forward and use a test that is needed for somebody who has symptoms, so that either they can get a negative result and get back to their normal lives such as teaching at a school, or, if they test positive, we can give them the treatment and support that they need.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I do want to be able to get everybody in, so I urge colleagues to make the questions fairly brief and, correspondingly, the answers.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): While there are some welcome announcements in this statement, I am utterly astounded that there is only one reference to coronavirus testing when we see cases rising across the country, a system in meltdown, people unable to access tests, and turnaround times down. If the Secretary of State does not believe us, perhaps he should read his own constituency inbox. Will he finally admit that the system is broken and we risk losing control of the virus? Will he issue a public apology?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady, earlier in the week in a statement that was all about testing, raised an issue that turned out to be wrong. I think it is really important and incumbent on all of us as public servants to explain things fairly, straight and properly to our constituents, and that is what she should start to do.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for that statement. I was actually due to head to the north-east myself this weekend to celebrate my parents' golden wedding anniversary, which obviously I cannot do now, but I take this opportunity to wish them a happy anniversary anyway.

On the subject of testing, I have been contacted by constituents who are struggling to get tested. I know that is something the Secretary of State really does grasp and appreciate, but I wonder what further reassurances he can give them that those who genuinely do need testing will be able to access that as soon as possible.

Matt Hancock: I am sure that my hon. Friend's family will be disappointed he will not be there, but at least a mention in *Hansard* is something to make up for it. He rightly raises the challenges in getting tests. I assure him that we are working as hard as we possibly can to fix the problem, that tests are available, even though it is a challenge to get hold of them, and that those who do have symptoms should come forward and get a test.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab) [V]: Two weeks ago, residents in Darnall in my constituency were pleased that a new walk-in test centre was going to be opened. They are now being told not merely that they cannot walk in to that test centre, but that they cannot walk or drive to any other local centre. Across the city, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust has done a brilliant job in using its own laboratories to process tests for staff and patients since the beginning of the covid crisis. Will the Secretary of State now answer the question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) from the Front Bench and indicate when he will fully use the capacity of public sector laboratories to fill in for the failures of the private sector to perform the contracts it has been given?

Matt Hancock: First up, we absolutely support the pillar 2 testing, as it is called, which in Sheffield has delivered more than 10,000 tests in the past week. The hon. Gentleman, who is normally such a reasonable man, should welcome that and thank all those who work on that project. I absolutely support his proposal to further expand the NHS testing in Sheffield, and I look forward to working with the NHS in Sheffield to do just that.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is absolutely right that we now put in provisions to prepare for winter, so will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the announcement of £6 million for expanding St Peter's Hospital's accident and emergency and urgent care centre, which will make a huge difference to patients and to staff working in our hospital?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. This is one of the 25 projects that we are announcing today that are all about preparing for winter. There is nobody who stands up for Runnymede in this House more than my hon. Friend, and he has made a great case for his local hospital. I am very glad to be able to support it today.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): A constituent of mine's husband, who works in the NHS, came home on Friday with covid symptoms. She has been trying to get him a test ever since, getting up at 5 am in the morning to try to do so. She is being told that tests are available locally and then being told, "Actually, no, there aren't", and she cannot get one. She has since developed symptoms herself. Neither of them has been tested. Neither of them is therefore in the tracing system, so there is no follow-up to prevent other people getting the virus as well. This is not just chaotic; it is dangerous.

The Government knew there would be a huge increase in demand for testing when the schools went back and when they were encouraging people to go back to work, yet since mid-July testing capacity has only gone up by 10%, while the number of cases has gone up by 400%. Why did the Secretary of State set his target for the end of October and not the beginning of September, so we could get enough tests in place?

Matt Hancock: We are increasing that capacity and, as I said, it is at record levels. When it comes to the right hon. Lady's constituents, first, those who work in the NHS are eligible to get tests through the NHS

pillar 1 system, but for all those who have symptoms of coronavirus or think they may have symptoms of coronavirus, it is very important that they self-isolate—

Yvette Cooper: She is doing that.

Matt Hancock: The right hon. Lady says she is doing that. I am very glad that she is, and I thank her for doing that. I am very happy to work with the right hon. Lady to ensure that her constituent who works in the NHS can get a test through the NHS, because that is the role of the NHS for provision for those who work within it.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I welcome the confirmation today that Leighton Hospital will receive £9 million extra to help it prepare for winter. That funding will make a huge difference. I think everyone in this House and in the whole country hopes that we manage to find a vaccine, so I would be grateful for an update on vaccine development. Can my right hon. Friend also confirm my understanding that Test and Trace has found that the virus is spreading in our own homes, when we mix with friends and family, and that, as much as it is difficult for us, that is why the lockdown is focusing on those types of interactions?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, as an emergency doctor himself, he knows more than almost anyone in this House about the needs of emergency care, not least because he spent lockdown working on the frontline of our NHS. I know that everybody is grateful to him for that. I know that the £9 million expansion to Leighton Hospital, which he and I visited in November or December, is much needed, and I hope that it brings good benefits, but it is also critical that people listen to my hon. Friend's wise words.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): On 21 July, during this summer's nadir of new covid cases, I pressed the Government's chief medical officer on the need to expand testing capacity. In that meeting of the Health and Social Care Committee, he stated that he would not consider that until there was evidence of a new surge in cases. Now we are in the grip of a second wave, with mounting chaos in testing capacity. Who should resign? The Secretary of State? The chief medical officer? Or do Ministers in this Government resign only when they refuse to break international law?

Matt Hancock: There is record testing capacity, which we work across the whole UK to deliver.

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): May I ask my right hon. Friend to set out the specific criteria that must be met for the rule of six to be lifted?

Matt Hancock: The judgment on how we lift the rule of six will be based on a whole series of measures: not least, of course, the case rate across the country, but also the impact of those cases in terms of hospitalisations. Sadly, we are seeing hospitalisations starting to rise, and therefore we have brought in measures to try to slow the spread of the virus. We also look at test positivity and the surveys of how many cases there are around the country, not just at the total number, because of course if you put more testing in, you get more positives. We look at all those indicators and, of course, take the clinical advice, and then make a judgment.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): The last time I raised test and trace failures, the Secretary of State accused me of not being serious. Well, I am deadly serious. The Mildmay testing centre opposite my office in Ilford South has stopped accepting walk-in tests, despite the constituency being on the cusp of a local lockdown, with Redbridge now having the highest infection rate in London. The Secretary of States has repeatedly claimed to be following the science and data while ignoring the advice of leading scientists who have called for an expansion of our public health infrastructure. We now face further lockdowns across the country as a direct consequence of the lack of capacity in his test and trace system. It is hardly world beating. With the chief medical officer saying that there are 38,000 infections per day, can the Secretary of State give us an assurance that we will not need a second lockdown to mitigate his failing test and trace system?

Matt Hancock: I work very closely with the London leadership, cross-party, to tackle the problems and to ensure that there is testing available according to the clinical priority. In the hon. Gentleman's area in the last week, there have been over 3,000 tests. I am sure that he welcomes those, but we absolutely work so that there are more, not least in the public health and NHS systems, as well as through the pillar 2 Lighthouse lab approach.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): I have four asks for the Secretary of State. No. 1 is to fix the national portal. A constituent of mine failed to get a test in Bolton, but then she tried using a Wigan postcode and succeeded in getting a test for Bolton. No. 2 is to remove the backlog on testing results. People are having to wait too long before getting results. The third is to ramp up contact tracing. The senior leadership at my local authority inform me that they do not have the resource to deliver what is needed. Finally, what specific actions is his Department taking right now to help bring down the numbers in Bolton?

Matt Hancock: The situation in Bolton is very serious, and all four of the requests from my hon. Friend are rightly made. He is pressing the case, as he should, and perhaps I should meet him to see what progress we can make on all these cases.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Despite the likes of me warning last month about test lab capacity problems, the Government could not get a grip of their supposedly world-beating system and have now instructed our testing centre in Slough to become appointment-only. The only slight snag is that, instead of being able to use the Slough site, local people are being asked to travel for hundreds of miles, including getting a ferry to the Isle of Wight. This debacle is dangerous because Slough has already had too many fatalities and has only recently come off the Government's covid watchlist. Given that we all know that test, track and trace is the best weapon to tackle coronavirus, how does the Secretary of State for Health expect local communities to continue their hard work in overcoming this virus if his Government are failing to provide vital resources?

Matt Hancock: On the contrary, the fact is that we are working hard with the local authority in Slough,

where just in the last week over 1,900 tests have been done. I think it would be better to work together—don't you?

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): On a visit to Trinity Academy in the town of Thorne in my constituency, the principal told me that increasing the number of testing kits given to each school from 10 to 30 will better ensure that children remain in the classroom, where they belong. Can my right hon. Friend therefore confirm to the House whether his Department is planning on increasing the number of testing kits distributed to educational settings?

Matt Hancock: Yes, we are looking at exactly that, and I am very happy to talk to my hon. Friend about it.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): The Health Secretary has announced restrictions in the north-east. He will know that, in my community, we have been under those restrictions for quite some time now. This has impacted on beauty businesses, soft play centres, wedding companies and, particularly, coach companies. With my constituents doing the right thing and trying to beat this virus, but with furlough ending and winter looking like we might have continued lockdowns, does he agree with me that we now need a financial package to support the businesses that are suffering so that they do wither on the vine, and so that my constituents can do the right thing in having to choose between leaving work in order to keep people safe and putting food on the table?

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, because in Kirklees it has been difficult in the last few weeks. Unfortunately, we are seeing continued cases in Kirklees. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced further support for businesses. She rightly argues for that in Batley and Spen, and I will see what I can do to further that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I want to re-emphasise that we need brief questions, because we have two very well subscribed debates this afternoon on coronavirus support and it is important that we get to those fairly promptly.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con) [V]: Over the past few days, I and Kent colleagues have received a significant increase in the number of inquiries from constituents regarding testing arrangements in the county, which are leaving many frustrated by the online booking system and, ultimately, unable to arrange a test nearby. What steps is the Department taking to scale up testing and lab capacity in Kent, and could consideration be given to a more accessible and localised system to ensure that those in genuine need of a test are able to arrange one as close to their home as possible?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. My hon. Friend makes the point well. We are putting more localised testing in and making sure that it is as accessible as possible. Of course, the challenge is to ensure that those tests get to the right people, prioritised appropriately, and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend to deliver that across Kent.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): At least six care homes in my borough of Enfield have seen the return of covid-19 cases. At the same time, they

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

are experiencing delays in receiving pillar 1 and pillar 2 test kits, and results are taking more than a week to arrive, potentially leading to a rise in the spread of the virus. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that testing is not taking as long? What does he intend to do to fix this mess?

Matt Hancock: Making sure that test kits get returned rapidly is incredibly important, including in social care. I am glad to say that the backlog has come down over the past week. At its core, our response to the problems in social care, because so many people who live in care homes are older and therefore vulnerable, is to protect the amount of test kits. The weekly testing of staff and the monthly testing of residents has been delivered and is being protected, even despite all the other pressures on testing capacity.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for all the work he is doing in clearly challenging circumstances. My constituency, which is part of Solihull Borough, is under enhanced restrictions at the moment, restricting household-to-household mixing. That is absolutely the right thing to do. However, will my right hon. Friend give consideration to allowing informal childcare arrangements? Many parents who cannot afford to pay for childcare would welcome the opportunity to go to work within the guidelines and also have childcare in place.

Matt Hancock: That is an important question. It is a very difficult balance, because often informal childcare is grandparents looking after children and older people are, of course, the most vulnerable to the disease. That is the balance that we need to strike. I always keep an open mind and I am very happy to talk to my hon. Friend about getting the balance exactly right in his area.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The Government's plans for mass testing have been criticised for placing their faith in technologies that are yet to be fully validated scientifically. The Prime Minister himself acknowledged that we are some way off the widespread use of pregnancy-style covid-19 tests. Given the well documented issues with capacity in the UK testing system at the moment, does the Health Secretary accept that we need to focus on ensuring that the existing system works before trying to shoot for the moon?

Matt Hancock: We need to do both. I would just ask the hon. Lady to look at the work the SNP Scottish Government are doing. They are themselves employing and deploying some of the new technologies.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): In Bolton, the national lockdown has been followed by the local lockdown and economic lockdown. Positive covid cases are rocketing up, and that is having a devastating impact on people's physical and mental health, as well as people's livelihoods and businesses. Many people are heading out of the borough to get beauty treatments, and to go to pubs and restaurants. At the same time, the testing system is failing to deliver, so people are increasingly going to accident and emergency departments in Bolton and Wigan in the hope of getting a covid test. What actions is my right hon. Friend taking to deal with that?

Matt Hancock: We have put huge amounts of testing into Bolton, with almost 7,000 tests over the past week. People should not go to A&E to access tests. I saw that that was being reported yesterday. My team have been working with the hospital, which is doing a very good job in difficult circumstances. It is seeing the number of hospital admissions with coronavirus starting to rise. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. The situation in Bolton is very difficult, with over 200 cases per 100,000 of population. That is the highest in the country by a long, long way and we have a lot of work to do to get the situation under control in Bolton. All the people of Bolton should listen to the public health advice, which is unanimous among Members of Parliament, the council, which is doing an excellent job, and the national clinical advisers. The advice is this: "Do not socialise with those outside your household." That way, we will be able to get this most localised of epidemics under control.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): It is no good blaming the public. People want to know that they can get a test when they need to. Some 25% of new cases are in north-west England, but only 15% of testing capacity. My constituents who are showing symptoms cannot get a test. Children and staff in our schools need to be able to get a test, so schools can stay open safely. The care homes in my borough are worried that, as demand goes up, they will not be able to get a test. When will the extra capacity be available in my constituency? The British people know what is going to happen and who is responsible. Fix it!

Matt Hancock: We have been putting in the extra testing capacity in Sefton. More than 5,000 tests have been conducted in Sefton in the last week. People should hear loud and clear that if they are in Sefton, as anywhere else, and they have the symptoms, they should come forward. The hon. Gentleman's question, by rightly raising the importance of people with symptoms and people in care homes being able to get a test, underlines how important it is to prioritise and that people who do not have symptoms should not come forward. I hope that he would repeat that message.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): Having visited Chorley and South Ribble Hospital last Friday, I was delighted to see some of the Government's £300 million grant in action, with teams on the ground building significant works to help to make the A&E unit more covid-secure and increase its capacity. Will my right hon. Friend join me in looking forward to its full reopening as soon as possible?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. As I mentioned in my statement, I want to see the A&E in Chorley reopen as soon as is safely possible. My hon. Friend is right that we have put in a huge amount of support, and we all want to see it reopening. I look forward to the day—I hope soon—when we can announce that that has happened.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): As my constituency sees the introduction of the new local restrictions in the north-east, will the Government give extra thought to easing the restrictions on informal childcare? It is an important part of the north-east economy and an absolute necessity for those on the lowest incomes, particularly women. I understand it is something that the local authorities have also requested. Will the Secretary of State think about that again for the north-east?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I will happily work with the hon. Lady on that question. It is a challenge, because of the problem of intergenerational transmission of the virus—I am sure she understands that side of it—so it is an important balance that we need to strike.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I am absolutely delighted with the £9.7 million upgrade of Southend A&E, which is entirely appropriate as we move towards city status. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if Southend is to avoid a lockdown, we cannot have a repetition of the scenes at Short Street testing station yesterday where, apparently, someone in management said that people could turn up without an appointment?

Matt Hancock: I will happily look into the testing in Southend, but it is nice to have some good news for the people there today.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Luton was an area of concern earlier in the summer, but it came out of it because people were able to get tested whether they had symptoms or not. Now, however, with the prioritisation of only those with symptoms because of the abject failure of the Government to get the testing process right, residents in my constituency are worried that we will see the simple blunt tool of a national lockdown. Can the Secretary of State give some clarification?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that Luton is an example of local action that worked to bring the case rate right down. The outbreak was specific to certain parts of Luton. The council worked with the national bodies brilliantly.

Over the last week in Luton, about 3,000 tests have been done, so those tests are available. I look forward to working with the hon. Lady to make sure that people who have symptoms are able to get the test.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the extra money for the Luton and Dunstable Hospital that he announced today. Does he agree that it would help people with symptoms who need a test if those told to self-isolate without symptoms did not think that a test was a “get out of jail free” card? How can we help people to self-isolate properly, given that only one in five has been doing so?

Matt Hancock: This is the central point: if people do not have symptoms, but they have been close to somebody who has tested positive or has symptoms of coronavirus, unfortunately they have to self-isolate because of the biology of the virus, which can incubate for up to 14 days. Even a negative test does not release them from that obligation, because they may well get a false negative. That is at the core of how we control this virus. The more colleagues around the House explain that principle, the more we will relieve pressure on the testing system and break the chains of transmission of the virus. It is an incredibly important point for us to communicate to all those we serve.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Increasingly, we have a Health Secretary who is out of control of a virus that is out of control. Next weekend, 40,000 students will come to York. We were promised a testing centre next month. November is now the earliest

that we will have a walk-in centre where people can have a test. What discussions has he had with his colleague the Secretary of State for Defence about strategic planning, because it seems that his Department is incapable of planning for this virus?

Matt Hancock: We of course have to ensure that the provision of testing centres is where the virus is most virulent. Actually, we do have military planners involved in that process, and it is very important to get it right.

I should also say that we have just had two speakers from Luton, and I forgot to mention the money to improve Luton Hospital, which is one of the best in the country. I am delighted that it has made the case successfully for the expansion of its A&E, which will serve all the people of Luton.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Some 1.4% of those 275,000 people who travelled and queued were positive. Will not even a modest number of false positives mislead us? Is the Office for National Statistics survey any less prone to false positives?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend raises an important point about the mathematics and the science of testing. I am sure he would enjoy reading the annexes to the ONS report that comes out each Friday, which address directly the question how the ONS adjusts for potential false positives, due to the high but not perfect specificity of the polymerase chain reaction test. I am very happy for one of my academics to take him through the rigorous Bayesian mathematics, which I am sure will help to elucidate the debate on this matter still further.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Because of the testing shambles, I understand that covid tests now have to be rationed to high-risk areas, but that comes at a time of increasing case numbers in Brighton and Hove, where a yellow alert has just been issued amid record cases last week. How will new outbreaks in currently deprioritised areas be identified and contained if we are not testing properly in the community? How will contact tracing function? I am really worried about the impact of the rationing of tests on our chances of knowing about and containing new outbreaks in other regions.

While I have the floor, I ask the right hon. Gentleman to condemn the comments of the Leader of the House about an hour ago, when he told the public to stop their “endless carping” about the lack of access to tests. It is not endless carping; it is genuine concern about people’s health.

Matt Hancock: Given the hon. Lady’s understandable concerns for her constituents, she should welcome the record testing capacity that we have and the more than 3,000 tests that have been done in Brighton in the last week.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Given the speculation about new local restrictions in West Yorkshire, will the Secretary of State reassure me that he will continue to be driven by the data? Will he also deploy extra testing facilities and capacity, because entire families in my constituency are unable to go to work or school, as they sit at home repeatedly refreshing the testing portal to try to book a covid test for family members with symptoms?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend, who rightly raised this issue with me on Tuesday, knows that I will always be driven by the data in the local action that we take. Where we do take local action, I do so with a heavy heart. I was very pleased that we were able to take his constituency out of the local action in West Yorkshire. However, we have seen case rates go up, and we will be guided by that data. I look forward to talking to him and working with him on that basis.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Despite the disappointing news that the Health Secretary has delivered, the people of the north-east are committed to doing everything they can to get this virus under control—but the Government need to meet them halfway. In Scotland and Wales, children under 11 are exempt from the restrictions. That enables families who do not have an army of nannies and formal childcare to get to work. I appreciate the concerns that he has outlined today, but none of them explains why the people of Scotland and Wales are trusted to make these decisions, yet people in England are disproportionately put in the difficult position of not being able to rely on family and friends.

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, who, in what she has been saying this morning and overnight about the restrictions that we have unfortunately had to put in place in her local area, has been speaking for her constituents, and with very clear public health messages that it is so important that people heed. I will absolutely look at the point that she raised and make sure, working with her local councils, that we get the details right of exactly the measures that are put in place in her area and, indeed, across the country.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): As a north-east Tory MP, I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for engaging so effectively with our local authorities in the north-east as we try to tackle this really worrying rise in cases. However, I am concerned that residents across my constituency are facing these difficult, restrictive measures yet not seeing many rises in covid cases in our local communities. How will he review the situation in the north-east? Will he work with me to assess the figures at the most local level to ensure that residents from Spennymoor to Shildon to Barnard Castle can all get back to normal life as soon as possible?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. We take action at as local a level as possible, but unfortunately we do have to take action in this case. I was in the north-east on Monday. I would echo her comments that people will do what is necessary to control this virus and to look out for their communities. I pay tribute to the work that she has done in representing people from Bishop Auckland and her whole constituency in what are difficult times.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Many of my constituents cannot get tests, including people who work for the NHS. Others have been sent as far afield as Aberdeen for tests. At the same time, there has been

spare testing capacity in the region. Last week, NHS Test and Trace moved all its mobile testing units out of County Durham. The measures that the Secretary of State has outlined today will be enacted by the people of the north-east—I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell)—but unless we have an effective local test and trace system, this will not work. Is it not time to just admit that the national system has failed and that the effort now has to go into directors of public health being given the finance locally to put in place effective test and trace systems that local people can have confidence in?

Matt Hancock: The test and trace system works in a combination of the national and the local. If we took away the national, we would not have the record testing capacity, but if we took away the local, we would not have the local knowledge and the boots on the ground to solve problems and to find people who need to self-isolate. It is the combination of the two that works. I urge the right hon. Gentleman to work with his local council and with the national teams to do everything we can to get the virus under control in his area.

Munira Wilson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During the Secretary of State's response to me earlier in the statement, he said that I was wrong to raise the issue earlier this week of my constituents using Scottish postcodes to access tests and that I was not being fair or straight with my constituents. I would like to offer the Secretary of State the evidence that I have. I have emails from Sunday, from Monday and, indeed, from this morning of constituents using Aberdeen and Dundee postcodes to access tests at the Twickenham site. Will the Secretary of State withdraw his comment, or is he suggesting that my constituents are lying to me?

Matt Hancock: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am very happy to look at any evidence that is presented, but I did look into this issue when it was raised on Tuesday. If someone does as the hon. Lady suggests and then goes to a testing site that is not the one they booked into, an alarm comes up on the screen to say that the person is booked into the wrong testing centre, so there is a process in place to tackle the problem that she has mentioned. I am very happy to look at any evidence to solve any problems in the system, but I have looked into this one, and I am assured that that is the case.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order, and I thank the Secretary of State for responding to it. I suggest that if the hon. Lady still wishes to send the emails to the Secretary of State, perhaps she should do so. It feels as though we can perhaps get to the bottom of this if we do it that way. There will now be a three-minute suspension.

1.10 pm

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Pandemic: Government Response

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the Select Committee statement. Mr William Wragg will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Mr William Wragg to respond to these in turn. Members can expect to be called only once, and interventions should be questions and they should be brief. Front Benchers may take part in questioning. I should say that we have two heavily subscribed debates afterwards, so I urge Members to ask brief questions.

I call the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Mr William Wragg.

1.14 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker.

On behalf of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, I am grateful for the opportunity to present our report on a public inquiry into the response to the covid-19 pandemic. I begin by expressing my gratitude to those who contributed to the report. In particular, I am indebted to our witnesses, who gave their time to the Committee in contributing evidence, including Emma Norris, Dr Alastair Stark, Jason Beer QC, Lord Butler of Brockwell, Sir Robert Francis, QC, Dame Una O'Brien and Baroness Prashar of Runnymede, as well as those who submitted written evidence to the inquiry. I also thank my fellow Committee members and indeed extend my thanks to the excellent Committee staff who worked at pace to help produce the report.

As we are all painfully aware, covid-19 has had and continues to have a profound impact on our lives, from those who work in our health and social care sectors to those who have sadly been bereaved. It is therefore important that a thorough inquiry is conducted.

Public inquiries have been a routine part of the UK's political landscape, and they are now customary following major public incidents and crises. For that reason, it is welcome that at yesterday's Liaison Committee meeting, the Prime Minister again committed to establishing a public inquiry into the Government's response to the pandemic. However, at present there is little guidance about exactly how or when such an inquiry will be established.

From the time of their announcement, inquiries can take several weeks or even months before they begin gathering evidence. Chairs and panels need to be appointed, inquiry staff recruited, budgets established, IT procured and terms of reference decided, all of which is currently done without any official guidance. Even if the inquiry is launched immediately, it is unlikely to begin its evidence gathering much before the end of the year. For that reason, we recommend that the Government take immediate steps towards launching the inquiry. The Committee is confident that combating the spread of covid-19 and launching an inquiry into the Government's responses thus far are not mutually exclusive ends.

The Committee also believes that there is a need for clarity about the primary purpose of any inquiry. To date, inquiries have served to establish facts, apportion blame, pass judgments, perhaps all under the umbrella of holding decision makers to account. Determining the purpose is important, not only because it dictates much of the substance of the inquiry but because it should also decide the way in which the inquiry is organised. As things stand, there is no fixed configuration and whether there is a quasi-legal construction—often chaired by a judge making extensive use of statutory powers—or chairs with no legal authority but considerable policy expertise remains uncertain.

Although mistakes will inevitably have been made in handling the pandemic response, the report recommends that the inquiry should be forward-looking, with the primary purpose of appreciating where and why mistakes were made and ensuring that similar events can be handled better in future. To do that, an understanding of the decisions taken and the reasons for them will be needed, but we are clear that the inquiry should not solely be a hunt for somebody to blame. While that may mean that some important issues are excluded from the inquiry, Parliament is able to set out its plans to cover which information is omitted. That will allow the public inquiry to focus on the issues with which it has been tasked and those who are impacted by the wider issues to understand how and when they can contribute to the lessons learned.

The report stresses the importance of the inquiry's chair. At present, the remit and holder of the chair is decided by a Minister on an ad hoc basis without reference to established procedure, yet it is the Committee's belief that the significance of the chair who conducts the inquiry is such that the usual ad hoc process is not appropriate and that greater transparency is needed. The appointing Minister should be able to demonstrate that proper consultation and deliberation has been conducted before the appointment is made. We also suggest that the appointment should be subject to a pre-commencement hearing with the relevant Select Committee, given the high level of parliamentary interest in the inquiry.

Yet of course the chair cannot succeed alone, and every chair should be supported by an equally capable panel. That is particularly important in an inquiry into the Government's response to a multifaceted pandemic, for which the panel can supplement the chair's skills and expertise with their own. However, there is a balance to be struck between increasing the range of expertise represented on the panel and the need to have a panel small enough to function effectively. Again, greater transparency is needed on how the panel is appointed.

Concern has also been raised about the authority to bring an inquiry. Under the Inquiries Act 2005, the Government of the United Kingdom can establish a joint inquiry, but we are concerned that a single inquiry would not see devolved matters receiving sufficient attention. That matter is exacerbated by the fact that we cannot make recommendations to the devolved Administrations, and rightly so. To that end, we encourage the devolved Administrations to establish their own inquiries into how they have handled the covid-19 response.

This report further explores the accountability of the Government in responding to an inquiry's recommendations. At present, the Government are under no obligation to

[Mr William Wragg]

explain why they do or do not accept suggested courses of action. Although they sometimes accept recommendations, that is by no means always the case. Therefore, the Committee expects the Government, in responding to the inquiry, to adopt a “comply or explain” approach, which should demonstrate beyond doubt why they do or do not accept particular recommendations and what action will be taken instead.

On a final, related note, the lack of structure and official guidance leaves no formal process to follow up and oversee the implementation of an inquiry’s recommendations. Select Committees have been known to follow up inquiries, but often they do not. Of course the very purpose of Select Committees is to scrutinise actions taken by the Government, and the action taken with regard to inquiry recommendations should be no different. An additional level of scrutiny can be achieved via the Liaison Committee, which we suggest should consider adding the scrutiny of the Government’s response to public inquiries to the list of core tasks for departmental Select Committees. On that note of parliamentary scrutiny, I welcome questions from colleagues.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I would like to start the next debate at approximately 1.35 pm, so I stress that these are questions to Mr William Wragg, not mini-speeches, so that he has the chance to respond.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for updating the House on these issues. I welcome much of the report, but I cannot agree that a judge-led inquiry would not be the best way to achieve the desired transparency. Although I agree it is vital that each of the devolved nations has its own inquiry, should we not also be encouraging a broad UK approach in those areas that are reserved, so that we get a national picture, not a disjointed one?

Mr Wragg: We have not quite made the recommendation that it should not be a judge-led inquiry; it could well be, but perhaps with a panel of different experts to contribute something different. I entirely agree with the hon. Lady on the need for a co-ordinating role, which has to be based on co-operation with the devolved Administrations.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is entirely appropriate that there is a separate Scottish inquiry into the areas of responsibility of the Scottish Government? As my colleagues have already highlighted in the Scottish Parliament, there are significant areas of concern, not least in relation to the number of deaths in Scotland in care homes, which followed specific decisions of the Scottish Government. Does he also agree that it should be possible to have such an inquiry into those responsibilities and at the same time have an inquiry into the responsibilities of the UK Government, who of course have significant reserved responsibilities in Scotland?

Mr Wragg: Without pre-empting such an inquiry, the short answer is yes, and I thank my right hon. Friend for his contribution to the report.

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): As my hon. Friend identified in his statement, we discovered during the evidence sessions that there is no standing secretariat for public inquiries. For example, Sir Robert Francis told us that

“we were all starting with a blank piece of paper when it came to setting up resources, so there was no idea where we would have offices or where we were going to get equipment from.”

He also said it took him four months to appoint solicitors. So does my hon. Friend agree that if we set up an inquiry sooner rather than later, it will enable the inquiry to do that important background preparatory work so that it is ready to focus on the main task at hand as soon as possible?

Mr Wragg: I thank my hon. Friend for that and for his contribution to the Committee’s work. Time is indeed of the essence, as there will be an inevitable lag period before such an inquiry can begin taking evidence, and we should use that time wisely, as he suggests.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP) [V]: One of the main issues facing the effectiveness of any inquiry will be the difference in approach across the four nations and whether evidence presented has been evidence-based or politically driven. Does the hon. Member therefore agree that the devolved Governments should be afforded access to evidence-based decision making by the UK Government that has had a direct impact on the devolved Governments’ ability to respond to the pandemic?

Mr Wragg: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, but it would be for the inquiry to require that evidence if it was based on a statutory footing.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): We have learned a lot about covid in the past nine months, and it is worth reflecting that this disease did not exist a year ago. One of the things that plagues inquiries—I have certainly seen this a lot in medicine, in terms of investigations—is the trap of hindsight bias. Of course, when we look back, there are things that we would do differently because we have learned so much in the past nine months. How can we ensure that the inquiry avoids using what we sometimes call the retrospectoscope?

Mr Wragg: I thank my hon. Friend. Being a qualified medic, he will share my disdain for any outbreak of “hindsightitis” in all this. I would emphasise that the summary of our report states that the primary purpose of the inquiry should be

“to learn lessons and to make recommendations about how similar events can be better handled in future.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for his presentation. I wholeheartedly agree with him and others that there should be an inquiry, but does he agree that the inquiry should not be to point fingers, but rather to enable lessons to be learned if, God forbid, we come to circumstances like this again? Furthermore, does he agree that any inquiries and investigations carried out by the devolved Assemblies of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should be sought by this inquiry team and must be incorporated in any report?

Mr Wragg: Yes, I agree with the thrust of the hon. Member's question. He may already be aware of—and, following this statement, may wish to follow up—the evidence kindly presented to us to by Gordon Lyons, Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive Office, who made an important contribution to our proceedings.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend and all those who contributed to the report. Does he agree that it would be appropriate for any inquiry to consider the supply of critical equipment, including personal protective equipment and ventilators, and how the Government can ensure that we have adequate manufacturing capacity in the UK, so that we are not reliant on outside suppliers to have enough vital equipment?

Mr Wragg: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Again, without pre-empting what such an inquiry may wish to investigate and find, it is useful to have the Paymaster General on the Treasury Bench, because I know that her department in the Cabinet Office is particularly keen on the areas that my hon. Friend mentioned.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP) [V]: As a member of the Select Committee, I would like to thank all the Committee staff for their ongoing help, support, knowledge and professionalism during these complex times. Does the Chair agree that, if we are to fully understand how we can do things better, the proposed devolved inquiries must have access to the Cabinet members, experts and civil servants who were part of the UK Government's response to the covid crisis?

Mr Wragg: I thank my fellow Committee member for his question. The short answer is yes, but it is important to remember that it will be the inquiry, placed on a statutory footing, that will be able to summon such evidence.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Chair and all the other members of the PACAC for this timely report, its fifth report; they have been very assiduous.

Her Majesty's Opposition have responded to this pandemic in a spirit of co-operation that has always put the national interest first, and we are also willing to

work together to ensure the right lessons are learned. The fundamental task of any Government is to protect their citizens' health and wellbeing, so it is crucial to get this inquiry right. A full, independent public inquiry into the Government's response to the covid-19 pandemic is essential to ensure that we are better equipped to confront future health emergencies. We also need to ask questions about why Exercise Cygnus was not followed during the pandemic.

An emphasis should be placed on the early response to the pandemic, including the factors that might have contributed to a delay in ordering a full lockdown and whether the initial herd immunity strategy was pursued. Members will have been shocked by the disproportionate number of BAME deaths, which were not just confined to people in poverty but included people of all classes, including consultants. Understanding these disparate outcomes should form a central part of the inquiry.

The Prime Minister has said that the inquiry should not take place while the pandemic continues. I suggest there be a two-stage inquiry: an initial review followed by a wide-ranging public inquiry. We know that the Government Legal Service can set up inquiries quite quickly and that there are different inquiries taking place. I support the 16 recommendations in the report. It is extremely important that we hold the Government to account, so I agree with the Committee that the Liaison Committee should consider adding the scrutiny of the Government's responses to public inquiries to the list of core tasks of the Departmental Select Committees. It would be a welcome development. I also think that the four nations should hold their own lessons-learned inquiries, because they all dealt with the pandemic differently.

To conclude, I again thank the Committee for its assiduous work. Her Majesty's Opposition welcome the report.

Mr Wragg: I thank the right hon. Lady for her constructive reply and careful consideration of the report and for welcoming all our recommendations. I am sure that the Government—with my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General on the Front Bench—will in due course welcome all those recommendations as well.

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

Backbench Business

Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

[Relevant Documents: Second Report of the Treasury Committee, “Economic impact of coronavirus: Gaps in support”, HC 454; and the Government Responses, HC 662 and HC 749; and Eighth Report of the Treasury Committee, “Economic impact of coronavirus: the challenges of recovery”, HC 271.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am sure right hon. and hon. Members will know that the two Backbench Business debates are very well subscribed, so there is likely to be a four-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches for both. As we are running behind quite a lot, that limit might have to go down further. With two debates, there will be two Front-Bench winding-up speeches, so the amount of time for Back-Bench contributions will be fairly short.

1.32 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I beg to move

That this House welcomes the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and calls on the Government to examine, improve and extend that scheme’s operation and application to ensure that people who started work after the furlough scheme started are included and that this support continues until the UK’s economy is more robust, so that the goal of retaining as many jobs as possible is secured.

I first applied for this debate in May, but the matters at hand are as relevant now as they were at that time, and perhaps even more so as we continue to struggle with the challenges of covid-19 and its serious and far-reaching consequences. I wish to say at the outset that I will not press for a vote on the motion, because it would simply eat into the talking time in the next important debate.

The job retention scheme was established by the UK Government. At the time, it was a very welcome response to the disruption caused by the virus, helping to keep workers and families afloat during difficult times. It would be wrong, indeed churlish, to say anything else. I know that this point will be explored in the next debate, but every single MP in the House will have had emails from constituents who have been deprived of any support through no fault of their own—the newly employed, the newly self-employed, freelancers and so on. The injustice of being excluded from support has profound consequences for those affected. For six months, some have had no wages coming in, and for far too many there is no end in sight to their troubles.

For these people, this issue should have been quickly addressed by the Chancellor, when the up to 3 million excluded came to light. It should have been addressed and still can be addressed, but it has not been, so their debts are building, their futures are uncertain and they are simply being ignored. Hearing, as we have many times in this Chamber, of the Chancellor’s bounty for other workers does not pay their bills; it only increases their sense of being overlooked and ignored. The words “We are all in this together” ring hollow and mocking in their ears, and we shall hear more about that in the next debate. Now we face the situation of the job retention scheme being wound down at the end of October, with hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of people losing their jobs.

In previous debates, Government Members met the common-sense arguments in favour of extending furlough with cries of “This scheme can’t last forever”, and I presume that that is because they simply cannot answer why it needs to be wound down in October. Extending the furlough scheme by a mere eight months could save 61,000 jobs in Scotland alone. In much of Europe support schemes are being extended, not curtailed, with Germany investing 4% of its annual income in recovery compared with the UK’s feeble 1.3%.

We must save jobs that are sustainable in the longer term until our economy is more robust. Many self-employed people—people overlooked entirely by the job retention scheme—must also be included, otherwise we will face a wave of job losses and millions will face enormous ongoing financial hardship, with some sectors of our economy taking years to recover and some jobs lost forever.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My hon. Friend talks about some sectors struggling and transport, in particular aviation, would be one of those sectors. Does she agree that if the Government do not extend a version of the furlough scheme for all sectors they should at least be looking at doing so for specific sectors that are really struggling?

Patricia Gibson: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. We need sectoral support, and some areas are desperately looking for help, but we also need to extend this scheme in general.

To wind down the scheme and withdraw all support at the end of October, just as payment holidays are ending, will do huge damage to workers and their families, as many will face losing their homes and any hope of financial recovery. Tens of thousands of viable jobs could be saved with an extension of support. We know, as we have heard from my hon. Friend, that the aviation and aerospace industries and the tourism and hospitality sectors are struggling badly, as are our night-time industries. They have been hit very hard, and the Institute for Public Policy Research has estimated that 3 million jobs could be lost, most of which would remain viable in the longer term if support were to continue.

The Fraser of Allander Institute reports that 55% of Scottish businesses using the job retention scheme expect to reduce employee numbers when it ends.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Like the hon. Lady, I have had letters and emails from people in similar situations, and I am sure everyone here has a great deal of sympathy. She mentioned the importance of maintaining jobs that are going to be viable after this is all over, but one of the things most people are saying to me is, “We don’t know what the new normal is going to be like,” so how is she going to choose between jobs that are going to be viable and those which will just be fundamentally changed because their industries are changed as a result of consumers behaving differently once the pandemic is over?

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, but the whole point is that we do not know. We need to get our economy on an even keel; we need to make sure it is healthier so that then the damage can be assessed—but what a crime it is to throw away viable jobs because we think that some jobs will not be viable.

There are potentially millions of jobs that are saveable here, and I think investing in our jobs is a price worth paying in order to save the vast majority, because that is what the experts are telling us.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Patricia Gibson: I will make some progress.

Many businesses are awaiting further lockdown easing before some or all of their staff return to pre-covid working hours. Numerous other viable businesses are simply not in a position to keep staff in their jobs without this crucial support. Indeed, in our own island communities, such as the Isle of Arran in my constituency and the Isle of Cumbrae, there has been even greater disruption with the necessity of capacity restrictions on ferries. With the main tourism season drawing to a close, further support for viable jobs is essential.

Government Members continue to throw their hands in the air and ask, “For how long should support continue?”, to which we on the SNP Benches reply, “For as long as necessary to save tens of thousands of viable jobs, perhaps millions in the longer term.” We say: we want the Chancellor to keep his word when he said he would do “whatever it takes” to save jobs. Let us put to bed this economic illiteracy about what that would cost. The direct cost to the Government of extending furlough would be offset by income tax and national insurance contributions paid on the wages of those remaining on furlough and by savings on unemployment benefits that would not need to be paid. The net cost of extending the furlough scheme across the UK would be around £10 billion, according to the National Institute of Economic and Social Research. We also need to factor in how that would help economic growth and leave public debt slightly lower as a share of GDP than if the scheme were closed down next month, and that is before we factor in the likely significant social cost of not extending the scheme. Without an extension, unemployment is likely to be as high as 10%.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I accept many of the points that the hon. Lady is making, but does she also accept that some of the jobs she is talking about will not be viable when the furlough scheme ends and that extending it would delay the opportunities to retrain or accept jobs in other sectors?

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Lady for her point, but again we hear the argument that, because some of these jobs cannot be saved, no jobs should be saved. We say: let us invest in our people and assess the economic damage afterwards. At the moment, when the picture is not clear and the facts are still emerging, and when the extent of the damage is still unknown and the economy is still in a critical condition, we cannot afford to wind the scheme down in October.

Jim Shannon: With businesses slowly bringing staff off furlough, does the hon. Lady agree that extending the scheme will allow that slow rollback to continue, rather than having owners make the decision to let go of staff who could be brought back in a month’s time? We are talking about 700,000 people. Another month, or another few, could make all the difference.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. He is absolutely correct. For the sake of a little extra support until our economy is in better condition, while we are still in the midst of the pandemic—it has not gone away—we need to save as many jobs as possible and support businesses in their quest to hold on to staff, rather than losing jobs that might never return.

In addition, the CBI has warned of a cliff edge and urged replacement support for jobs if furlough support ends next month. The UK manufacturing sector has warned of a “jobs bloodbath”. So much of this could be avoided. The goal of the job retention scheme, as the Chancellor told us, was to save jobs and build a bridge through the pandemic, but if furlough support is withdrawn next month, his bridge will self-evidently have not reached the other side. The investment to support and save jobs was laudable, but the task is not finished and the UK Government should not—must not—walk away from an economic disaster that is avoidable. They must not allow events simply to take their course.

Today, we on the SNP Benches urge the Government to go further and do more to save potentially millions of jobs. I echo the calls made last night in the Scottish Parliament and urge an extension to the job retention scheme. Despite the leader of the Labour party in Scotland having said that it makes no sense for the UK Government to pull away support now in one fell swoop, bewilderingly—almost inexplicably—Labour MSPs last night voted with the Tories in the Scottish Parliament against a motion urging the continuation of that support. That is an act of betrayal and a dereliction of duty towards those in Scotland who are currently, and desperately, worried about their jobs and their families.

Voters in Scotland will not easily forgive or readily forget this act of political posturing from a so-called party of workers—a party that was happy to bail out the banks but voted against support for viable jobs in Scotland for the longer term. It is utterly bewildering, and if any Labour Member wants to intervene and explain why the Labour party in Scotland has done that, I will be more than happy to hear it, but I see that nobody is willing to do so.

There are no mixed messages or equivocation from the SNP Benches. We urge the UK Government to do the right thing: to look at the kind of forward planning and support done in countries such as Germany, and to protect our economy and jobs through these difficult times. If these calls go unheeded, we in Scotland will simply be further persuaded that we need those powers for ourselves to make our own decisions.

There is a tsunami of job losses heading our way. It is not inevitable. We can stem the tide. We urge the Government to use every tool at their disposal to do so, to extend support for jobs and to ensure that those who have been unjustly excluded are given the support they need during these difficult times.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We are behind where we thought we would be, so therefore we are introducing a four-minute limit from the very beginning.

1.45 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): At the start of my remarks, I place on record my appreciation of and gratitude to the Government for the coronavirus

[Stephen Hammond]

job retention scheme. In Wimbledon, it has meant that 12,500 people have a chance of their livelihoods and their futures.

Inevitably, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) has already said, as this country returns to work and the economy starts to revive, we are likely to see a very different economy from that which we saw pre-covid. We are wrong to try to pretend anything other than that. While some say, “Let’s extend furlough, but in a targeted way,” the questions to whom, how much and for how long remain unanswered.

In July, surely the Chancellor was right to say,

“I will never accept unemployment as an unavoidable outcome.”—*[Official Report, 8 July 2020; Vol. 678, c. 974.]*

As we look to the future, instead of a blanket extension of the furlough, is the Chancellor not right to ask for new, innovative, creative and effective ways to support the economy and people’s livelihoods? It is not a question of whether we are supporting jobs, but of how we do it.

On the protection of jobs, I have spoken about the arts sector many times. I say to my right hon. Friend on the Front Bench, the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), that I welcome the recent package for the arts sector, but he will know that most of that is going to the institutions rather than the workers. May I suggest that, particularly for those in the theatre sector, he looks at a wage subsidy scheme that allows them to continue so that when theatres reopen, they will be there? Much the same applies to the events industry, which is a huge industry with a lot of jobs in Wimbledon.

The Government have made much of targeting infrastructure, and they are right to do so, but they must look at the economic activities and train people for those activities in the future. Economic development zones are not a new idea but, armed with investment and training incentives, they would be zones of opportunity, investment and employment. Those zones could be aligned to, for instance, a new technologies adoption fund: 3D printing will be the tool-making of the future, and for people to have those jobs, we need to skill them for the future.

For young people, the prospect of securing a foothold in the labour market as they transition from education to employment should be a realistic ambition. This Government’s plan for jobs—£100 million for 18 and 19-year-old school leavers—is clearly a step in the right direction. It is also right that the Government are looking at how they can support the people who have taken those courses into jobs. I welcome the support for apprenticeships and for new trainees being taken on, but may I suggest to my right hon. Friend one way of embedding that? We all know that work experience gives rise to permanent jobs, and I encourage him to look at ways of supporting people coming off those courses into work experience and into permanent jobs.

History also teaches us that downturns and recessions often temporarily remove that step into work for young people, but the over-40s, who find their jobs being eradicated, also need help. While I commend the work being done by the Government in doubling the number of job coaches and in some of the retraining schemes, I ask my right hon. Friend, when the Government are

looking at support for jobs, to embrace those schemes and make them and the flexible support fund available to the over-40s as well.

Finally, the Government acted with extraordinary speed and effectiveness to create the coronavirus job retention scheme. That scheme was the right scheme at the right time, and 50% of those people have now returned to work. That does not make it the right scheme for all time.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): HMRC estimates that the level of fraudulent or incorrect claims under the CJRS to be 5% to 10%—between £1.75 billion and £3.5 billion—so even at the lower end, that money would be useful in extending the benefits of the scheme. When I asked about this, only five individuals had asked for the data that is held about them and about who has actually secured the funds that have come to them under the scheme. Does the hon. Member agree that further transparency would allow more of this money to be, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) has said, available to people to extend the scheme?

Stephen Hammond: I am not aware of those numbers, but I thank the hon. Lady for making them available to me. I am sure that the Minister on the Front Bench will have heard her words. I want to make sure that the scheme has not been operated fraudulently, because we need all the money to go to people and to some of the great retraining schemes that the Government are introducing now. As I have said, the investment in future prosperity and the commitment to look at new and innovative ways of protecting and creating jobs is the key, and it is the right approach for the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Just to give a bit more information, particularly to those who are going to take part in the next debate, the wind-ups will begin at 2.45 and this debate will conclude at 3.15 when we move on to the next debate. We are giving equal time, therefore, to both of them.

1.50 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I am glad to be able to take part in this important debate. Yesterday, at Prime Minister’s questions, the Prime Minister proclaimed:

“We need to get people off furlough and into work”.—*[Official Report, 16 September 2020; Vol. 680, c. 311.]*

But he said that the scheme is not “the right way” to do that. Yet, he also stated that the Government will continue to apply the maximum creativity in putting their arms around the workforce in the UK. This contradiction is forcing millions into crippling uncertainty. The Government’s short-sighted decision to withdraw support for jobs and businesses across the UK will be nothing short of disastrous for people, for businesses and for jobs. We all know that. We have warned them time and again that this approach will result in job losses and hardship for ordinary people who are just trying to get through the coronavirus crisis.

According to IPPR research, 2 million viable jobs are at risk. Other countries have extended their schemes, why cannot we? In fact, we should. I am not arguing that the furlough scheme should be carried on just as it is. I am not arguing for a one-size-fits-all approach to job retention and I am certainly not asking the Government

to throw money at every industry. What we need is a flexible, targeted support scheme beyond the autumn to save millions of people in vulnerable sectors from the jobs crisis. To avoid this inevitable jobs catastrophe, we need some key actions and changes to the furlough scheme. We need to expand part-time working and reward employers who give people hours rather than cut jobs. We need to provide training and support for those who cannot come back full time. We need to target sectors most in need, including retail, which is a major employer in my constituency of Blaydon and already suffering. We need to target hospitality and other people hit by local lockdowns. We need to provide certainty for workers and businesses, but, instead, what have we got? We have the job retention bonus, which is a scheme that will see taxpayers' money going into businesses that were going to bring back workers anyway. My constituents do not need a bonus, they need a lifeline.

Things will only get worse if the Government continue with their plans to strip people of that lifeline shortly. Earlier this week, the north-east chamber of commerce said that it knows that the winding down of the job retention scheme is likely to lead to significant redundancies in the months ahead. The continued rise in the claimant count in my constituency in the north-east is an early indicator of that. Many of those people who are jobless and claiming at the moment are in the 18-to-24 age group. The crisis has had an unequal impact on young people in the north-east.

We know as well that some people have got on the job retention scheme as it is coming to an end, but there are other people who have been excluded, who have fallen through the cracks. So many businesses in my constituency tell me that they are not able to claim grants and they are not able to furlough themselves. These are not rich business people. They are not fat cats. They are people who are just working hard to make ends meet and to provide businesses and employment in the constituency. I hope that the Government will think again and consider extending the furlough scheme, but in a new form, which better reflects the needs of the people. That will give people in my constituency—both employees and entrepreneurs—a chance to survive.

1.54 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing the debate. I am glad that the motion welcomes the job retention scheme. It is clear from the contributions we have heard so far, from across the House, that the scheme has been an absolute lifeline for people's jobs. It has certainly been a lifeline in Sevenoaks, where it has saved 12,000 jobs and been vital for so many institutions, from the brilliant Stag theatre to the equally brilliant Bricklayers Arms in Chipstead. But the question now is what we do next.

I will focus my remarks on women and women's jobs, which have been disproportionately affected by the crisis. I will argue that we do that by encouraging opportunities for women to be economically active where possible, rather than not. It is worth dwelling at the outset on the impact of coronavirus on women. Before the crisis, we had a record 75% participation rate, but the pandemic has hit women's jobs hard. Women are more likely to work in sectors that have been completely shut down, such as hospitality. The virus has increased the burden of unpaid care,

disproportionately affecting women, according to McKinsey and other studies. Mothers have reduced their paid working hours as a result, and by more than fathers. Overall, women's jobs are almost twice as likely to be vulnerable than men's jobs, and there is a fear that the gender wage gap will rise because women's jobs are more likely to be interrupted in the workplace than men's jobs.

It is in that context that the furlough scheme has been absolutely crucial. Women are 14% more likely to be furloughed, and from July they have been able to come back flexibly, which is crucial. The flexibility shown by employers in relation to home working has also helped many. How do we make sure that women can continue at that high participation rate? How do we ensure that the impact they felt over the crisis does not continue to high rates of unemployment?

To continue furlough indefinitely would, in my view, risk rising female unemployment. It would keep women in jobs that simply, and very sadly, just do not exist. I argue that we should instead focus on encouraging employers to rehire; creating new jobs; supporting childcare and making sure that schools stay open; and encouraging employers to continue being flexible, and indeed to increase flexibility.

On rehiring, I disagree with the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). I think that the job retention bonus scheme will be crucial to allowing women to get back into work. As I have said, women are more likely to be furloughed, so the scheme is more likely to benefit them. It is something I welcome and encourage.

With regard to creating new jobs, Andy Haldane—I am sure that he will be quoted at length today—has said clearly that

“keeping... jobs on life support is in some ways prolonging the inevitable in a way that probably doesn't help either the individual”.

I agree. What we need are new, flexible opportunities in the workplace, such as the green jobs encouraged by the green homes grant, and we should offer retraining opportunities. I hope that we will see that in the upcoming Budget, because that would really make a difference for women, enabling them to move into new jobs in the new workplace that we are inevitably coming into.

We also need to support childcare and keep schools open. It is critical that nurseries, childminders and schools stay open. Whatever happens over the next few months, it is absolutely essential that we make sure we do not see a drop-off in female employment rates, particularly as we see the end of furlough. I would also like to see continuing flexibility. The pandemic has caused a shift in working that has been fought for years. It helps working parents. We should encourage it and see it continue.

To conclude, I welcome furlough, but continuing it for too long would risk women's jobs in the long term. We need to focus on getting women economically active, back in work and supported by childcare.

1.58 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Lab): The coronavirus pandemic has caused widespread suffering for too many individuals and communities across the UK. We have the worst of both worlds: in addition to recording the highest number of excess covid-19 deaths in Europe, we are facing our worst ever recession, which is almost twice as severe as comparable European nations.

[Claudia Webbe]

The furlough scheme has been an indispensable lifeline to millions of workers during the pandemic, yet the Government intend to sever this crucial support, which will have devastating consequences for people in Leicester and across the country. More than 4 million workers are still on furlough just weeks before we reach the Chancellor's October cliff edge. The latest data from the Office for National Statistics suggests that that is more than one in 10 workers, but in some sectors the figure is as high as 41%. The Government should be targeting support where it is needed most, such as in the arts, entertainment and recreation sector, and in accommodation and food services activities, not withdrawing it across the board.

The Government cannot simply turn their back on workers. With coronavirus cases spiking across the country and our testing system in crisis, they cannot blindly hope that this crisis will magically resolve itself. I am gravely concerned that the abrupt ending of the job retention scheme will put more lives at risk, especially among the working poor. It is impossible for impoverished people to comply with guidance on self-isolation and social distancing. Cutting the job retention scheme will disproportionately impact women, and without proper protection from racism in the workplace, it will disproportionately impact African, Asian and minority ethnic communities. It is therefore not just morally imperative but, in public health terms, in the best interests of everyone in our country that people's basic needs are met.

My home city of Leicester has been hit particularly hard by the coronavirus. It has been an incredibly difficult and tumultuous time for our residents, who continue to face coronavirus restrictions that other parts of the country do not. The economic impact on our city has been immense. I have been helping many Leicester East residents to access support. In April, I wrote to the Chancellor, urging him to widen the job retention scheme and in a sense, this is what we are debating here today and it is particularly hard that we have to do so.

It may be hard for this Government of the super-rich to understand, but many residents in Leicester do not have savings to fall back on if the furlough scheme ends abruptly. Even before the coronavirus hit, my constituency was suffering from an unacceptable stagnation in living standards. As of April 2019, the average weekly income for full-time employees in Leicester East was £420. That is £130 less per week than in the east midlands as a whole, and £160 less than the UK average. I am particularly worried by the number of people claiming unemployment benefits in Leicester East, which has more than doubled since the UK lockdown began. In March 2020, 2,145 Leicester residents claimed unemployment benefits; by August, that had shot up by 143% to 5,210 people.

Now is the time for the Government to prove that they work for the majority of people in the UK who live paycheque to paycheque. That means, as we enter a probable second spike, that the wellbeing and security of our communities must be prioritised above all else.

2.3 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for securing this important debate.

Protecting the livelihoods of 9.6 million people—9.6 million people who were at risk of being laid off—has been at the heart of the Government's coronavirus job retention scheme. That support is worth £37.5 billion. Since March, employers have been able to claim up to 80% of an individual's monthly wage, up to a maximum of £2,500 per month. The scheme has been available for any employee paid via pay-as-you-earn across the entire UK. That is 29 million people.

By the time the scheme ends in October, it will have been in place for eight months. It was designed to help us through the most challenging period. I say to the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) that the Chancellor has continually adjusted the scheme, so that we do not have a hard cliff edge. She may have missed it, but from July the Chancellor allowed adjustments for flexibility of working. That was absolutely right, to help people back into business and to help companies restart their operations. In August, employers were allowed to start contributing towards some of the costs of those salaries—around just 5%—to make the scheme affordable. We need to be clear: our scheme is more generous than any other European country in terms of its coverage. It extends to all employers, not just small businesses. On payments, the Government are paying 80% of an employee's wage, with only modest requirements for company contributions. It is more generous than other countries and we have now seen many other countries all around the globe starting to wind down their schemes. The furlough scheme was right at the time, but things have changed. We should not continue a scheme that incentivises people to be economically inactive.

So we have a globe-leading response designed to protect and retain jobs. That is recognised on the high streets in villages, towns and cities across the UK. In my Warrington South constituency, the furlough scheme has protected 15,400 incomes, helping families through the most difficult period of the lockdown. But I hear from those families that they want to return to work. They want support to get back into jobs. We know the furlough scheme has saved jobs: more than half of all employees who were furloughed have now gone back to work. That comes from Office for National Statistics data released just this week. More than 90% of those who came off furlough before the start of June continue to work for and be paid by the same employer who furloughed them. That is evidence that the scheme is delivering on its aims of saving jobs and retaining the connection between employees and their workplace.

I took time during the recess to meet the team at Warrington jobcentre, who have done an incredible job of responding to claimants in a speedy manner so that people who needed payments got them quickly. It is fair to say that without the introduction of the universal credit system, that simply would not have been possible.

The UK came into this crisis in a strong position. Warrington's economy remains one of the strongest in the north-west, thanks to careful Conservative management of the economy over the past 10 years. We came into the crisis with public finances in a good position, which enabled us to react strongly.

It is important to differentiate between the short term and the medium term. In the short run, we need to drive a recovery, as the Government are doing, including via the tax system and through more borrowing where

necessary. But in the medium term, we need to restore sustainability to our public finances. That is what the British people expect from their Government. I know the Chancellor will be looking at creative, innovative and effective ways to support our economy as we move forward.

2.7 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing the debate, and on her robust and eloquent speech. Like her, I want to again give a warm welcome to the job retention scheme, which has indeed operated like a lifeboat for many of my constituents and for people across the United Kingdom. I think that welcome is pretty much unanimous, but what I think Members are saying today, certainly on the Opposition Benches, is that, first, we believe there was and is room for some more people on that lifeboat, and that too many have been unfairly excluded from it. Secondly, having provided that life raft, it would be utterly nonsensical, a monumental mistake, to suddenly sink it or kick everybody off it at the end of October while we are still in very deep and dangerous waters, and a long way from safety.

The Government say that the scheme cannot last for ever—I do not think anybody in this House says that it should—but that is not a reason or justification for stopping it on 31 October. That is an arbitrary date. It bears no relation to where we are in the pandemic, or where we are in terms of opening up again and recovery taking hold. It means that an avalanche of viable jobs are just going to be destroyed. So it is disastrous for workers, bad for employers and bad news for the economic recovery. As my hon. Friend made clear, it is also bad for the Government's balance sheet. We know that a quarter of the job retention scheme costs are recouped by the Exchequer straight away through social security savings and from tax paid by furloughed staff. As she pointed out, the analysis shows that, by extending the scheme by eight months, debt as a percentage of GDP would fall rather than increase, because of the impact it would have on growth in our economy.

Andy Carter: The hon. Gentleman talks about an arbitrary date of 31 October for ending the scheme. Does he have in mind a date when he would like it to end, or should it continue for ever?

Stuart C. McDonald: I said specifically that the scheme would not continue for ever and it cannot continue for ever, but that should be based on an analysis of the economy, where we are at and the number of jobs available. Conservative Members keep telling us that people should be looking to move into employment, but any analysis by any major think-tank says that those job opportunities are just not there at the moment, so we have to wait for a time when the economy is on a more even keel, which will not, on any indication, be by 31 October.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): As the hon. Gentleman possibly knows, the Liberal Democrats agree that the scheme should be kept going. We have specifically looked at June next year as a minimum, which would cost £10 billion. That is not much more than withdrawing the scheme would cost, as the Chancellor

is proposing at the moment, and is a drop in the ocean compared with the eventual cost if we do not support the economy.

Stuart C. McDonald: I agree wholeheartedly. I do not want to put a date on it today, but the costed proposal from the Scottish Government, which has been looked at by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, is for an eight-month extension. That would save tens of thousands of jobs in Scotland, and even more across the United Kingdom, and pay for itself, because debt as a percentage of GDP would fall rather than rise. It makes perfect sense from every single point of view. It has to be about analysis rather than just picking a date in the calendar, which is essentially what the Government have done.

All in all, the scheme is a great investment, and a better one, as hon. Members have said, than the deadweight job retention bonus scheme. As we have heard, many countries are extending their similar schemes, and we should not be the outlier in that regard. There is an urgency about the situation, because employers are deciding right now what they are going to do with furloughed employees at the end of October, so we cannot wait. We need a commitment from the Government today.

The scheme does not require to be completely unchanged. We have heard about some of the flexibilities and the changes that were made as we went along, and more changes could be made as we go ahead. It could be targeted by sector, as some have suggested. There must be a focus on areas where there are local lockdowns or other restrictions. We could look at the other models that have been implemented by countries such as France and Germany, which involve short time and wage subsidies.

I join hon. Members in highlighting the desperate plight of those who have been left off the lifeboat altogether for totally unjust reasons. That includes a huge number of people who simply changed jobs at the wrong time; those who work only a small number of hours for a particular employer, which puts them below the minimum salary threshold; those paid in the form of dividends; and those working as PAYE freelancers, especially in industries such as TV and the arts, who have been hung out to dry.

Many came close to qualifying under the job retention scheme or the self-employment income support scheme, and it is heartbreaking that they were left qualifying for neither. The reality is that many have been left with nothing, or next to nothing, because they are not entitled to other support. Essentially, the Government response appears to be that it would be too hard to fix for everybody, but that is as nothing compared with the hardship that has been inflicted on my constituents.

In the context of the Government being happy to invest £10 billion in a job retention bonus scheme that is likely to have little impact, investing in support for those excluded people could be transformational for them. That may well be more labour-intensive for HMRC, rather than relying on real-time information submissions, but it can be done. As the Minister knows full well, there is a tax office in Cumbernauld that is set to close, possibly in the next few months. If he wants to keep that tax office open, I am sure that the employees there would be happy to do the work required to extend the scheme. At the end of the day, my constituents and the

[Stuart C. McDonald]

excluded across the UK are not asking for anything more than fairness. I hope that the Treasury will think again and offer those people a hand on to that lifeboat.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I know that some Members have applied to speak in both Back-Bench debates and I do not think it would be fair if they lost out on both debates, but the only way that we can adjust for that is by lowering the time limit to three minutes. I apologise; I do not like three-minute debates. I made the point last week that we have two debates of a similar nature and it would have been rather better, and more Members would have been able to speak, if we had had just one debate on this issue. I call Anthony Browne for three minutes.

2.13 pm

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this debate and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on coming up with a policy so good that it gets a warm welcome from across the political spectrum. It is a delight to hear Labour and SNP Members praising Conservative party economic policy—a real triumph—but all good things come to an end. [Interruption.] I look forward to them praising the rest of the economic policies.

The proof is in the pudding. The latest Eurostat figures show that employment in the UK has dropped far less than in other European countries.

The second quarter this year versus the first quarter has seen a drop of 0.7%—that is half the drop in employment in Germany, one quarter the drop in France and one ninth the drop Ireland. We can demonstrably prove that we have been far more successful at preserving jobs in the UK.

Looking at the unemployment figures that we had just this week, there was a rise in unemployment, but it went from 3.9% to 4.1%. Most economic commentators believed that the rise in unemployment would be far greater. I very much welcome the fact that we have more strength in the labour market now than most people expected. Obviously, every job lost is bad news, and my heart goes out to anybody who has lost their job.

We have been hearing about the cliff edge, and there is a big question about how high that cliff edge is with 9.6 million people having been on furlough. Anecdotally, however, everyone I know who has been on furlough has now gone back to work. The latest figures from the ONS, which are from 15 August—over a month ago—show that only 11% of the workforce are on furlough. That is roughly 3 million people. If we look at the trajectory, we are probably now down to about 5%, with 1 million to 1.5 million still on furlough. I look forward to seeing the latest figures. We have another six weeks or so to go until the end of October, so it is not a cliff edge, but a tapering out. I very much welcome that, and again, that is tribute to the Chancellor's policies and the flexibility, with employers being given nudges to get people back to work.

One of the most critical points is to understand the difference between protecting jobs, which is what the job retention scheme was about, and helping people find

work at the end. There will be structural changes to the economy. The airline industry, for example, which the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) mentioned, will not be the same size—not next year, not the year after and not in three years' time. What are we going to do for the people in the airline industry? Are we going to put them on the job retention scheme for ever? At some point, we have to move on, look forward and actually help people find jobs, and that is why I very much welcome the schemes that the Chancellor is focusing on now. Rather than paying people to stay at home and not work, we are providing incentives for employers, such as the kickstart scheme or the bonuses for apprenticeship, to help people who are out of work get back into work. That is the way forward.

2.16 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Labour party will do everything within its power to convince the Government that they need to find an urgent solution to the pending jobs crisis of withdrawing the job retention scheme next month. Trade unions and businesses agree. For us, jobs are not about statistics; jobs are about people, families and communities, and they just do not know what the future will bring. Time is running out. Redundancy notices are being written now. We are facing the worst economic crisis we have ever seen. My constituency is forecast to be the second worst hit place in the country, and that is why I am standing here today.

I look at our twin cities of Münster in Germany, where people have an additional 14 months' security, or our twin city of Dijon in France, where people have until January and then a possible extension until July 2022. Workers in my city do not have that security and safety. They are scared because they could be on the dole before Christmas.

The Treasury should invest in these jobs because they are good jobs. The problem we saw with this Government after 2010—we are seeing it now—is that if we do not invest in good-quality jobs, we end up with low pay and low-wage jobs. That means low productivity and less money going back to the Treasury. That is why we are calling right now for more flexibility to be built into the job retention scheme and for help for the sectors that are struggling, such as tourism, hospitality and leisure, which are so dominant in my local economy.

Yesterday, I raised with the Prime Minister the fact that 17,700 people in my constituency are currently on furlough. Their future looks bleak unless the Government act. The 8 million people who visit York each year just are not there, and people in my constituency are saying that they are facing their third winter in a row as they move into the next season without the support they desperately need. Some 22% of jobs are forecast to go in York—one in five jobs. That is terrifying. That is why we need the Government to step up now. Time is not on our side.

Looking at companies in my city, employers are worried, too. Great Rail Journeys, established in 1947, has already had to lay off staff and has 80 members of staff currently furloughed. It helped people at the start of this crisis to cancel or postpone their bookings, and now they are not seeing more money coming in. We absolutely need to support these parts of the economy.

Finally, I say this to the Minister: I stand here for the sake of the livelihoods of my constituents. They need their jobs preserving, and I look to him to do that.

2.19 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): As we are all only too aware, neither the health crisis nor the economic crisis is over, and we are going into the winter. In both respects, the furlough scheme has a role to play to protect workers until our economic recovery is truly under way. I would like to thank the public servants who have administered the job retention schemes. In many cases, we have had much contact with them, and they have done an excellent job. Of course, as we have already heard, Germany and France have recognised this and taken the considered decision to extend their equivalent furlough schemes.

Let us consider the unequal fiscal settlement between Westminster and the devolved nations. While the main levers of our response, such as health, are devolved in Wales, Westminster doggedly refuses to cede further economic powers to the Welsh Government to underpin these health interventions. Even as the UK Government borrow their way out of the immediate crisis, Westminster continues to enforce an artificial cap on the Welsh Government's borrowing ability. It is one rule for Westminster and another for the devolved nations.

Of course, this has an effect. Welsh Government-mandated local lockdowns without furlough support could mean families being forced to choose between putting food on the table and statutory sick pay of less than £100 a week. This is an unfair and an unworkable choice, and it highlights the real consequences of Westminster ending furlough too early for Wales. During the good times, refusing to allow Wales the financial means to help ourselves might be interpreted as dog in the manger behaviour, but in these hard times, it is wilfully obstructionist.

Our response is interconnected, but the UK Government intervene in unforeseen and possibly unforeseeable ways. For example, outdoor centres such as the Urdd in Glan-llyn near Bala in my constituency—but across north Wales and, I am sure, across England as well—are struggling as the Department for Education in England continues to forbid such school-based activities, yet the UK Government, rightly in my opinion, insist that schools should reopen and office workers go back to their offices. The workers at these outdoor centres are caught as the collateral between different policies, and where do they stand? They look to lose their livelihoods.

We believe that furlough must continue, specifically for severely affected sectors such as tourism, leisure, hospitality and the arts, which have lost a key proportion of their earnings season and are now heading into a bleak winter. Some of them tell me they have lost two thirds of their earnings season. The important message, if I could leave this with the House, is that these are not zombie businesses. Their business model was viable and they were flourishing before covid, and they only need to be conveyed safely through the winter season to have a viable and flourishing future. Anything else would be an abdication of responsibility by this Government and would risk undoing the collective sacrifice of the past several months across all four nations of the United Kingdom.

2.22 pm

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): Our economy has contracted by one fifth in the last quarter, and it is clear that we have entered a great and deep recession. The Office for Budget Responsibility predicts that unemployment will peak in quarter 4 at between 9.7% and 13.2%. At 13.2%, that is absolutely unprecedented, at least according to the figures available from the Office for National Statistics, and even at 9.7% it is unlike anything we have seen for nearly 40 years. One in 10 people could be out of work. The Chancellor has said over and again that the economic challenges we are facing are unprecedented, and he is right to say that: the situation is unprecedented. The projected unemployment figures show that in black and white.

Of course, we have welcomed the job retention scheme and it has been a life support, as has been said, but why are we stopping the treatment when the economy is still sick? That is why I do not understand the reason for the blanket withdrawal of this scheme, especially after the Government's mixed messaging and inability to implement a proper track and trace system, which is causing a second peak and local lockdowns up and down the country. The public health crisis is driving this recession, so the economic crisis will not go away until we get a grip of that. The Government need to look at what sectors are most affected and extend the scheme in those areas to keep people in their jobs.

As well as protecting jobs, we must also protect people's rights at work. It is disgraceful how some employers are using this crisis to drive down pay and conditions. For example, the staff at British Gas are rightly standing up against the absolutely outrageous fire and rehire tactics of Centrica, their employer, and British Airways staff are going through the same challenges. That is not about getting people back to work; it is about putting millions of people's jobs and security at risk.

Crises such as the one we are living through should not be seen as opportunities to restructure businesses for shareholders. Instead, we must come together to ensure that, in the Chancellor's own words, no one is left behind. Well, 3 million people have been left behind, so we need to plug the gaps in the job retention scheme for the people who have begun to work after the cut-off point before the lockdown. We also need to extend the scheme where it is appropriate to do so and to defend the rights of people in work by banning the disgraceful fire and rehire tactics that are being used to force down wages and conditions.

2.25 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Like many Members on both sides of the House who have spoken, I come to praise the furlough scheme and to beg the Government not to bury it. There is no doubt that it has saved many families from poverty over the past six months. A recent estimate shows that something like 9.6 million people have been on the furlough scheme, and there are probably 6 million still on it. The point made by many people here today is: why stop it now? That is a position that I absolutely support.

We are facing a really uncertain future, and this country will depend upon an effective test, trace and isolate process being in place if we are to live with this virus in the medium term. That, more than anything else, is what is needed to keep our economy up and

[Sarah Olney]

running. Much has been said in the Chamber over the past week about testing and tracing, but I also want to highlight the point about isolating. If we want people to isolate effectively to keep infection rates down, we must provide them with the financial support to do so.

This is about more than the furlough scheme; it is also about the Government's approach to the whole economy and how they will ride the economic dislocation that we will all face in the months to come. We are calling on the Government not just to extend the furlough scheme until next year but to make it available to anyone who needs it, because the weakness of targeting certain sectors is that people will be left out. As the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) mentioned, over the past six months that has affected about 3 million people who earn their income in many different ways.

A lot of support seems to be targeted at people who pay mortgages and earn salaries, but we all know that there are many more ways to earn a living and that many people have been missed out. We need a strategy for the whole economy to help us with the approaching economic dislocation. We need investment in green jobs. We need those people who are going to lose their jobs in the near future to retrain urgently to work on retrofitting houses with better heating, on renewable power and on electric vehicle infrastructure. I echo what the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) said about ensuring that the needs of women and minority groups are considered as we think about this just transition to a greener future.

I want to highlight the Public Accounts Committee's findings on the furlough scheme in its inquiry last week. It found that between 5% and 10% of the scheme had been lost to fraud, so I urge the Government to look at that and to ensure that we have financial sustainability for the scheme for as long as it is needed. We need better controls to ensure that the money is being spent where it is needed. Echoing what my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) said in the earlier debate, I also urge the Government to cancel the job retention bonus scheme. Those businesses that have already got people back into work do not need the extra money. That money needs to go to those who are still facing an uncertain future.

2.28 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): We know it has been a tough time for business, just as it has been a tough time for everyone, and the support so far has been invaluable, but what was the alternative? Should we have allowed companies that had been trading successfully for many years and been responsible for thousands of well-paid, permanent, highly skilled jobs to go under because of a short-term disruption that has impacted on everyone? Some of the biggest employers in my constituency, such as Vauxhall and Airbus, fit that description. They should play a huge role in the future prosperity of my area, but at the moment they face uncertainty. We cannot afford to lose our place as a world leader in aviation. The Airbus plant at Broughton is a centre of excellence in wing-making and the workforce are among the most highly skilled in the sector. Those jobs deserve to be supported.

Turning to Vauxhall in Ellesmere Port, we were all very pleased to see production start again last month, although due to reduced demand in the car market and social distancing measures in the plant, not everyone has gone back in. As it seems clear that social distancing rules will be here for some time, getting back to full capacity may be some time off, so why is the support not being provided to recognise that? The automotive sector is not going to come out of this as quickly as other sectors. We need that support soon or we risk losing the very jobs that we have fought so long and so hard to keep.

We must not forget the 3 million or so excluded people who have not received any assistance at all. Some may be able to carry on, but as local lockdown restrictions continue to increase and the Government seem incapable of stopping a rise in infections, it is likely that there will be further economic damage to come—perhaps not as widespread as earlier this year, but to those caught up in it, totally ruinous. Those involved in the wedding industry and social clubs, for example, whose main business is dealing with large functions, cannot expect to be operating fully for a considerable time. We need a Government prepared to listen and prepared to act to develop a more nuanced and sector-specific package.

I hope that we will not keep hearing the same story from Conservative Members saying that we cannot pay people to sit at home forever, because if they actually listened to what we are saying, they would know that that is not what we are asking for. We want the businesses and sectors that were successful and were keeping people in employment before the pandemic struck to be recognised for what they are—an essential part of the UK economy that, going forward, we will need more than ever. We cannot afford to throw them under a bus now because of problems outside their control, because many of these jobs, particularly the well-paid, secure jobs in sectors like manufacturing, will not come back. We need a commitment from Government that they will provide long-term support to safeguard the future of businesses and to support jobs. Otherwise all the effort that has been put into job retention so far will have been for nothing.

The most recent figures we have suggest that there are 14,500 people furloughed in Ellesmere Port and Neston alone. Let that figure sink in—it is an awful lot of people. Hopefully many of them are returning to work, or will be shortly, but even if three quarters of them do so, unemployment will still double in my constituency. It has already doubled once this year as a result of the national lockdown, and we cannot afford for it to double again. Do this Government really want to preside over a 1980s-style jobs crisis? I really do not think they do.

2.31 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): In March, the Chancellor promised to do whatever it takes to get us through this crisis, but six months on, we now have one of the deepest recessions in the OECD. We have already seen the fastest rise in unemployment since the financial crisis, with almost 700,000 more people unemployed—and that is before the furlough scheme is wound down. This is set to happen in just 44 days' time, which means that we are weeks away from an unemployment crisis cliff edge the likes of which this

country has not seen in generations. The Bank of England predicts that more than 1 million jobs will go by Christmas, while others predict that ending furlough as planned will lead to 4.5 million people being unemployed—a level higher than even during the great depression of the 1930s. That includes an estimated nearly 6,500 jobs that are at risk in Coventry South. This would be an utter disaster. These are not just statistics; these are people's lives. Every job lost is another family pushed closer to or deeper into poverty. It is another child going hungry at night. It is another sleepless night of worry about rent or mortgage payments and how the bills will be paid.

But this cliff edge is not inevitable. A deepening jobs crisis can be prevented—it just takes political will. Look at France, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, Australia and elsewhere—their Governments have stepped in and extended wage support schemes. If they can do it, so can we. This is demanded by those from trade unions like mine, Unite, which last week launched the “SOS for jobs!” campaign, to the head of the CBI, who has said that it is wrong to pull away support at the end of October. I urge the Government: listen to trade unions and listen to businesses; do not pursue a reckless one-size-fits-all winding down of the furlough scheme, but instead step in and extend targeted support to protect jobs, workers and livelihoods, and bring in urgent measures to support everyone who fell through the cracks of the support scheme from the very beginning.

But the Government should not just leave it there. We do not just need to save jobs: we need to create new, good, unionised jobs. I urge the Government to invest in our industries and in our communities and bring forward a green new deal. This could create more than 1 million green new jobs, with programmes ranging from retrofitting homes to make them greener and bills cheaper, to building up green industries in areas like Coventry that have skilled workers and proud manufacturing industries.

These are urgent demands. We are at the edge of a jobs cliff edge. Workers in Coventry South need the Government to act to avoid an unemployment tsunami. I urge the Government: protect jobs now and invest in our green future before it is too late.

2.34 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on achieving this debate. It must surely be evident to the Government from the number and variety of occasions when this subject is raised by Members in this place that there is a general feeling across the House and in the country that we need to continue the support that the job retention scheme has offered.

I will not subject right hon. and hon. Members to a repeat of my contribution to last week's debate, other than to say that we are in a crisis in this country that poses the greatest threat to our health, our economy and the wellbeing of individual households across the UK of any in our lifetimes. It is only because of the strength of the job retention scheme so far that we have been able to protect about 10 million jobs. Seven million people are currently supported by the furlough scheme, and to withdraw it at the end of October seems rash and too soon.

A Government Member said a little while ago that the scheme got us through the worst of the crisis and there is no longer any need for it. Surely we all saw the

news today that the north-east of England has gone back into lockdown, posing an immediate threat to jobs, retail and wholesale in that part of the country. If we were in any doubt, surely that is evidence that we need to continue to support all industrial sectors through the crisis.

As I mentioned earlier, it is estimated that continuing the scheme until June 2021 would cost the country about £10 billion. That might seem like a large amount of money, but it will be dwarfed into insignificance by the long-term cost to our economy, our wellbeing and each sector if we pull the rug from underneath them at the moment. There should, instead, be a bridge to transition us from where we are now to whatever our economy will look like afterwards. This is an opportunity to support families, to invest in a transition to green jobs and to ensure that this country has a future that is economically stable.

Millions of people in this country who are currently on the furlough scheme look to us for support and reassurance about their future, and to hear that they will not face the financial hardship that many of them fear. It is incumbent on us to ensure that we do not let them down by removing that support too soon.

2.37 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The coronavirus job retention scheme is a pragmatic approach to supporting workers, protecting jobs and bolstering the economy for a rapid recovery after lockdown. It has been a relief for many of my constituents to be placed on furlough rather than being made redundant, but many of those same constituents face fear and anxiety about the Chancellor's cliff edge next month. It is critical that the Government act with urgency to extend the furlough, focusing on sectors of the economy that have been particularly hard hit by coronavirus and for which operation as normal is not yet possible.

Unemployment causes economic hardship, but it also has a devastating effect on health and wellbeing. It increases depression and anxiety, cardiovascular disease and mortality. That is why the scheme matters so much. Mass unemployment is not a price that communities up and down the country can afford to pay for the pandemic. We need a flexible approach to furlough that is targeted at sectors of the economy that provide good jobs, but that have been particularly hard hit by coronavirus and cannot return to business as usual.

In my constituency, we benefit enormously from cultural industries and the performing arts—both national institutions in central London and local theatres such as South London theatre and Brixton House, which is due to open a brand new building this year, and grassroots music venues. They make culture accessible and provide vital experience and employment, particularly for our young people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. The cultural sector helps us to process the events going on around us, which is more important than ever in this time of turmoil. The sector needs sustained support if we are not to lose the precious things it adds to our communities and our society.

ExcludedUK estimates that more than 2 million self-employed people have been left without meaningful support during the coronavirus pandemic. I have been contacted by countless constituents who have fallen through the gaps. The scheme is simply too inflexible

[Helen Hayes]

and does not account for diverse forms of self-employment; I wish to highlight, in particular, the newly self-employed, people taking parental leave or sick leave in the past three years, and those with a combination of PAYE and earnings from self-employment.

The coronavirus pandemic has brought enough heartbreak and tragedy to our communities, and I urge the Chancellor to act now, to show flexibility and creativity, and to avoid adding the tragedy of mass unemployment to the burden our communities have to bear.

2.40 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this important debate. Last week's Opposition day debate on the furlough scheme demonstrated that there is huge demand in all parts of the House for raising constituents' cases, so we have a welcome further opportunity to do that today. Since March, we have all been receiving a huge amount of correspondence from constituents whose livelihoods have been affected by the pandemic. I wish to take a moment to pay tribute to my casework team, who were newly hired just as the pandemic hit and have done a fantastic job in getting up to speed and directing so many constituents to the different, varied and sometimes complex support schemes run by local authorities, the Scottish Government and the UK Government.

Across the whole of Fife nearly 30% of all employees were furloughed. That is a huge number and I give credit to the Treasury for its implementation of the scheme. It is an example of how pooling and sharing resources has allowed the prevention of huge job losses. We have already heard today that all this is put in jeopardy if the scheme ends next month unilaterally, and I re-echo the calls that have been made. I cannot stress enough how vital the scheme is to so many businesses in my constituency. But for all the good the furlough has done, the painful reality for a not insignificant minority of people is that they have missed out on the scheme, for reasons that are, in essence, arbitrary. I welcome the recognition of that in the motion.

For some, that reason is just a date. One of my constituents had not been in work, he started a new job on 29 February and the cut-off date meant he was ineligible for the scheme. He was let go from his job and there was no recent employer to rehire him. Another constituent was placed in a similar situation. She was switching employment just as covid-19 hit, and her new employer could not open the business because of the lockdown and so simply could not take her on. The rules of the job retention scheme were adjusted so that old employers could rehire those people caught in limbo, but that was a workaround, not a solution that is in any way meaningful. She was eligible for furlough but was not furloughed because her old employer refused to rehire her so that she could be furloughed, although that would have come at no cost to them. So she has missed out and instead has had to apply for jobseeker's allowance.

Even for those who were furloughed the scheme has not always been perfect. One constituent, a childcare agency worker on a zero-hours contract, contacted me

because the way furlough is calculated has meant that her regular full-time hours are not considered, and she has experienced an incredibly severe drop in earnings. That has meant an incredibly tough few months trying to survive on very little.

Those are three cases, but there are many more. For thousands of people in my constituency, this has been a difficult year. A lot of people who never thought they would be relying on our welfare system are now doing so because they did not meet arbitrary eligibility criteria and slipped through the gaps. It will now be clear to so many people that what is deemed as our "safety net" does not work. As we look to rebuild, I hope we will reflect on our welfare system and on whether it provides the right support for those who need it. I am increasingly convinced that a more substantial, universal safety net has to be the way forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): To sit down at 2.45 pm, I call Jim Shannon.

2.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Minister and the Government for all that they have done through the furlough scheme and the help for businesses, because without that many, many businesses would have failed. I wish to make four quick points. First, the prospect of an estimated 4 million unemployed is, in itself, a reason to pull out all the stops to see employees able to get back on their feet and start back in their paid roles. It is important that provision is made and consideration is given to how that might happen.

My local high street has survived and seems to be getting out the other side of this, but we have tourism in our area—it is a core economic policy for the Ards and North Down Borough Council—so we need to ensure that that is still there. I ask the Minister seriously to consider the four-day working week as a possibility, looking at the costs and benefits at this time. I implore the Government to look proactively for solutions, such as a four-day week, rather than simply close the scheme.

I would also like to quickly mention the airline and aerospace industry. Furlough is the only way that some of my constituents can pay their bills, and to go from a pilot's wages to universal credit is just not on. If those people are back in their job in a few months' time, they will be paying high taxes and national insurance. My final point is about the many businesses slowly bringing staff off furlough. I believe it is important in the short term to ensure that staff are retained on furlough, so that they have those jobs in the long term.

2.45 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I believe I have eight minutes to speak, and I will do my best to keep to it. These are important debates, and I have some sympathy with your view, Mr Deputy Speaker, about seeing whether we can merge them.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for leading the debate with a fantastic and robust speech. The key point she made was about the costs versus the savings of the job retention

scheme, with the social cost of ending it too early being that millions of jobs will be affected, including in the aviation sector.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) made the important point that we are in deep and dangerous waters, and we could extend the furlough scheme for eight months, rather than end it on an arbitrary date. I certainly support his view that tax offices should be kept open. He made the case well for Cumbernauld, and I have opposed HMRC office closures across the United Kingdom. Perhaps the Treasury could take a leaf out of the Department for Work and Pensions' book. Two years ago, half the jobcentres in Glasgow were closed, and the Department for Work and Pensions is now having to reopen them as a result of the demand that it believes will be placed on them. It is also having to look at opening jobcentres in other areas where it closed them two years ago.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran referred to the bewildering vote in Holyrood last night, but I have to say, it was not as bewildering as the statements we heard from a number of Conservative colleagues that the job retention scheme was somehow a key feature of Conservative economic theory. That was not the case in March, when such a scheme had not yet been put in place by the UK, and when Opposition parties were raising examples of schemes put in place by other countries to support workers. It was that pressure, I would suggest, from all Opposition parties and Opposition Members asking the Government to look at international examples and put in place a scheme to protect workers that was the reason for the job retention scheme.

The hon. Members for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) made an important point about local lockdowns. If, for reasons of public health, there must be a local lockdown in an area of the United Kingdom and the job retention scheme no longer exists, what support will be made available? Are we really suggesting that people and businesses should make a choice whether to follow the public health guidance or to challenge and ignore it because they are not getting support? That is a dangerous path to go down and a reason why we should consider extending the scheme. No one should have to make that choice. There were optimistic forecasts in March that this would be a three or four-month event, and then things would suddenly get back to normal, but that is not the case, and I think the optimistic forecasts about what happens next will also not take place.

I echo the remarks of the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), who rightly said that people will have to make choices, and some of those choices are unacceptable if the job retention scheme is not extended. I also echo the remarks of the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain). The pressure on the constituency office teams of every Member since March has been considerable. Whether you have been a Member for decades or came in the door in December, we can all agree that this is the busiest that any constituency office team has been. Part of the reason is having to address inquiries from constituents about the nuts and bolts of the job retention scheme. For example, some people who were new starts in March were missing out, and we had to pressure the Government to make those sorts of changes.

As has been said, extending the furlough scheme by eight months would save 61,000 jobs. In August, in Scotland, 34.4% of staff in the accommodation and food services were still on furlough; in the arts, entertainment and recreation sector, it was 57.5%. These are key sectors of the economy and are viable jobs going forward. Sectors such as the arts, entertainment and recreation, for example, are key parts of the economy that take on young workers and people not interested in working in a conventional workplace—say, an office or factory—and are key to going forward and a key part of the rebuild and of putting young people into work.

We can no longer have vague promises of creative solutions. As several Members have said, according to some estimates, unemployment could be greater than in the great depression of the 1930s. According to some assumptions, there could be 4.5 million people unemployed—even higher than the unemployment in the 1930s. We are seeing an explosion of redundancies, while the Government are saying they will do whatever it takes, but the point has been well made: it has not stopped Centrica, British Airways and other employers who wish to fire and rehire. I hope the Government will look very sympathetically at the private Member's Bill put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), because that practice really needs to end.

We are in a serious situation now, given the number of employers who have announced job losses: Rolls-Royce, 9,000; Jaguar Land Rover, 1,100; John Lewis, 1,300; Boots, 4,000; Marks and Spencer, 950; Alexander Dennis, a bus company in Falkirk, 650; Costa, 1,650. These will all have serious economic impacts, and we need to do everything we can to ensure that those jobs are saved. I hope the Government do accept the demands of the Treasury Select Committee that they look carefully at extending the job retention scheme. I hope they will do that.

In closing, not one Member has said that the job retention scheme should go on forever, but extending it by eight months is a sensible proposition, and as others have said, we need to look at what other countries are doing and match that.

2.53 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and the Backbench Business Committee on securing this debate.

We have heard some excellent contributions from across the House, and it has been reassuring to hear so much consensus, not just on the Labour Benches, but from SNP Members and the Liberal Democrats. We even heard a short but sweet contribution from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and not forgetting of course the contribution from Plaid Cymru too.

Alongside those excellent contributions was a rather depressing sense of déjà vu, because just last week the shadow Chancellor warned that our country was in the grip of a jobs crisis, and she warned that the crisis would intensify if the Government failed to change course. This week, those warnings came to pass, with the latest unemployment figures. Between March and August, 695,000 workers disappeared from the payroll and the claimant count more than doubled and now stands at 2.7 million. The number of vacancies in

[*Wes Streeting*]

August was almost half that we saw at the same time last year. We have warned for months that a one-size-fits-all approach risks fuelling unemployment, ruining lives and risking the economic recovery that we need following this crisis; but, instead of listening, the Chancellor seems determined to roll back one of the Government's most effective responses to this crisis, the job retention scheme.

A total of 9.6 million jobs have been furloughed through the job retention scheme, including 17,500 in my constituency. It peaked at 8.9 million on 8 May, and most recent estimates showed 13% of all jobs still furloughed in the two weeks up to 9 August. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe), in so many sectors the picture is far bleaker: 51% of those in arts, entertainment and recreation furloughed; 27% of those in accommodation and food services furloughed; and 19% of those in transport and storage furloughed.

That is not surprising. We have said consistently that there are many businesses and some sectors that are inevitably hit harder and for longer, through no fault of their own. Indeed, at this very moment more communities across the country are facing local lockdown. More businesses are facing closure or severe disruption through no fault of their own.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) reminded us, the Chancellor said at the outset of the crisis that he would do "whatever it takes", but there are communities across this country—millions of people, in fact—who have had no support at all, who do not think the Chancellor is doing whatever it takes. In fact, a Chancellor who we were happy to support when he announced the job retention scheme is looking increasingly stubborn and inflexible, determined to roll back the furlough scheme by asking employers already to contribute more to the costs and rolling it up altogether in just six weeks' time.

The IPPR has warned that 2 million jobs could be lost as a result of that single decision. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) spoke of so powerfully, the economic crisis we are experiencing is likely to worsen if the Government continue on this course, entrenching inequality in our country that was already intolerable before this crisis even began.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) pointed out, possibly quite reasonably, that it is unusual to see a policy from a Conservative Chancellor receiving so much support and acclamation from the Opposition Benches, but there is a good reason for that. As we have already heard from other hon. Members, the job retention scheme did not fall out of the sky and it certainly was not the brainchild of the Chancellor alone. The reason it was so successful was that the Chancellor listened to calls from the Opposition for wage support and even got business representatives and the trade unions around the table to design the scheme.

There is a model there for the Chancellor to follow: one that is listening, one that is inclusive and one that recognises that if we are serious about tackling economic inequality and injustice and about getting Britain working again, we need the voice of the workers at the table. Sadly, the Chancellor has stopped listening to the voice

of labour—the official voice of labour represented here on the Opposition Benches, and the official voice of labour that we heard this week at the TUC congress.

If the Chancellor will not listen to the voice of labour, if he has stopped caring about the interests of labour and workers across the country, perhaps he will listen to business voices—the CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses, the British Chamber of Commerce, and businesses up and down the country—calling on him to show some understanding of the long-tail impact of this public health crisis and the impact it is having on their businesses and their ability to keep good people in good jobs, in viable businesses that just need that bit more time.

Perhaps the Chancellor will listen to the economists and the think tanks urging him to show a more flexible approach to furlough and to take, as we have called for, a sector-by-sector approach to ending the furlough scheme. If he will not listen to them, perhaps he will listen to his own MPs. An increasing number of Conservative MPs have said publicly what many more are saying privately in the Tea Room: that it is a mistake to wind up the furlough scheme and a mistake to take this one-size-fits-all approach.

Indeed, that call was reflected in the cross-party but Conservative-led Treasury Committee of this House.

We heard from the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) that the Government are looking at taking a more creative and innovative approach. We have heard again today, as we have heard so often from Government Members, that it would be a mistake to continue with a blanket extension of the furlough scheme. No one has ever called for a blanket extension of the furlough scheme. The fact that so many fewer people are currently furloughed tells us that a blanket extension is not necessary. However, we know that many people in many sectors continue to be disproportionately affected and it is right that the Government should reflect that in a more flexible approach to the job retention scheme.

We shall doubtless hear again in the next debate the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) made so powerfully. Let us not forget the 3 million people in this country who have not benefited from the Chancellor's one-size-fits-all approach: the excluded. Other countries show us that a different way and a different choice are possible. There have been extended schemes in the Republic of Ireland, France and Germany. In a powerful speech, my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) mentioned that the twin towns of Münster in Germany and Dijon in France have extended schemes. Our Government's approach just does not cut the mustard.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) among others pointed out, we are still waiting for the aviation deal that was promised in March. While on that point, I must reply to the claim by Scottish National party Members that the Scottish Labour party opposes calling on the UK Government to extend the furlough scheme. Last night, the SNP attempted to rewrite a Scottish Labour motion setting out the action needed by the Scottish Government to bail out the aviation sector and provide the support it needs. I cannot say I am surprised because it is a pattern that we often see. SNP Members are happy to come here and rightly challenge the UK Government to use

their powers and resources to support jobs, workers and industries across the country, but the SNP Government are not prepared to use their own powers and resources. They are good at passing the buck, but terrible at taking responsibility for their decisions.

The hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) made some powerful points about the need to get women into work. She talked about the support that should be on offer for women, particularly childcare, retraining and providing new opportunities for people who find themselves out of work. That support is not yet in place and I hope that the Government hear her call.

We are told that we should let people lose their jobs now and be released from furlough because they will find other jobs. Those who make that claim are apparently ignorant of the fact that there are no other jobs yet for people to go to and that putting people out of work now means that they are staring at the grim reality of Britain's social insecurity system.

I urge the Government to consider the costs of not acting, of allowing unemployment to rise further, of the personal tragedies and human misery that means for families across the country, and of the further, avoidable damage it will inflict on our regional economies and our economy as a whole. Maybe then those on the Treasury Bench will go back to the Department of Health and Social Care and say that until the test, track and trace system is working properly, the economic and public health damage will be self-inflicted by the Government, and Britain will pay a heavy price, not just now but in the longer term. That will be on the Government.

3.3 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):

I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on introducing the motion and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate. I thank other hon. Members for their contributions to an energetic, well-attended, engaged and interesting debate. As the hon. Lady will know—as we are all aware—we in this House continue to face an enormous challenge.

As has been widely recognised across the Chamber, since March, the Government have acted with great determination to protect people's livelihoods. Indeed, I think it is recognised that our response has been one of the most comprehensive and generous anywhere in the world. The Office for Budget Responsibility and the Bank of England agree that the Government's actions in the face of the pandemic have helped to safeguard millions of jobs and businesses.

The job retention scheme—the furlough scheme, as it has been described—has been central to that response. I will talk a little about that and then come on to some of the very interesting points made by colleagues from across the House. As the House will be aware, the furlough scheme was designed and implemented at extraordinary speed, and launched on 20 April, just a month after its announcement. Its purpose has been to help those who would otherwise have been made unemployed and to support businesses as quickly as we could. I do not think that anyone has questioned its success, as I have mentioned. According to the latest figures available, the CJRS has helped 1.2 million employers across the UK to furlough 9.6 million jobs, at a value of some £35.4 billion.

The hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) will not often hear me say this, but how right he was to describe this as one of the Government's most effective schemes. It is a hotly contested area, and there are many schemes that he could have chosen, but I think I heard him say—I wait to be corrected—that this was one of the most effective. He is absolutely right about that: it was, and it is. Detailed figures show that, up to 30 June, the CJRS had supported nearly 800,000 jobs furloughed in Scotland, more than 400,000 in Wales and almost 250,000 in Northern Ireland. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran was right to say that it would be churlish not to recognise the CJRS as a laudable scheme. It has had an enormous impact on every single constituency represented in this Chamber.

Opposition Members have pointed to other countries that they would like the furlough scheme to emulate. Of course, they are welcome to do that. They might, for example, want us to contribute at the same wage rate as in Spain, but in fact our furlough scheme does more than that. They might want us to support the same range of businesses as the furlough scheme in New Zealand does, but in fact we are supporting a much wider range of businesses. They might want our scheme to run for as long as that originally proposed in Denmark, but in fact our scheme runs for twice as long. In a majority of sectors in France, which has been mentioned on several occasions, businesses have had to make an employer contribution of 40%, which is significantly higher than in the UK. Why should we imitate that scheme? Why should we have a 40% contribution rate? I think that would be wrong.

At its conclusion in October, the furlough scheme will have been open for eight months from start to finish. Of course, it is understandable in that context that Opposition Members should be calling for an extension, but the Government's view is that it is in nobody's interests for the scheme to continue forever—I am not suggesting that that has been widely promoted as a policy option by Opposition Members—and, if it does not, it has to be brought to an end at some point. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) mentioned that it was important to do that on the basis of analysis. Let me reassure him that no one does more analysis than the Treasury does. We look at these issues every which way. We draw on an extremely wide spread of data sources across a number of different areas of behaviour, in both the consumer sector and the wider productive economy. Our view, which has been expressed separately and independently by Andy Haldane, who has been mentioned in this debate, is that it would be irresponsible to trap people in jobs that can exist only because of Government subsidy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) was absolutely right to point to the importance of energising the possibilities for new work, new opportunities and new scope in the labour market, particularly for women. However, the onus must be on us to provide fresh work opportunities for those who need them across the UK, and the Government have been doing just that through the Chancellor's plan for jobs.

As the House will know, we are thoroughly committed to the responsible management of the public finances, in part because no one can say how long this pandemic will last for. As has been recognised by none other than

[*Jesse Norman*]

the OECD, the work of the last 10 years has given us relatively strong public finances, which we have achieved by bringing borrowing and public debt under control. That is what we are needing to draw on in tackling the challenges posed by covid-19. With Government debt now exceeding the size of UK economy for the first time in more than 50 years, we must continue to balance the needs of the present moment with the need to maintain the country on a sustainable financial footing.

Stuart C. McDonald: The Minister will have heard a couple of folk refer to analysis that shows that by extending the scheme for eight months, debt as a percentage of GDP will fall rather than rise because of the positive impact that it would have on growth and total GDP.

Jesse Norman: I have not seen the National Institute of Economic and Social Research analysis that the hon. Gentleman talks about, which is somewhat embarrassing, since I am a governor of the national institute—I shall ask it to forward that to me. I am pleased to say that it is independent of its governors and rightly so. I will certainly look at that.

The point I would make is that although the scheme as such is winding down, Government support is very much not. It continues across a very wide range of packages and includes, as colleagues rightly mentioned, the bonus. I think that that is much underestimated by colleagues—it is a very important element. That guarantees a one-off payment of £1,000 to employers for each furloughed employee they bring back to do meaningful work and earn an average of £520 a month between November and January, and who continues to be employed by the same employer as at 31 January 2021.

Wes Streeting: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I have very little time—if the hon. Member does not mind, I will proceed. That bonus is an important aspect because it provides a marginal benefit to a very large group of relatively low-paid employees. Of course, we have also launched the kickstart scheme.

Let me pick up a couple of points that have been raised. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said that it is very important for Scotland to have powers of its own in this context. I echo again—I am becoming like a broken record—the hon. Member for Ilford North who said that the Scottish Government are good at passing the buck and bad at taking responsibility. The Scottish Government House has tax-raising powers devolved through the Silk commission. Let it use those. At the moment, the vast majority of money spent in Scotland and in Wales is spent by and raised through local government—regional government—but raised through UK Government, and that is crucial.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) rightly pointed out that the Chancellor has included many flexibilities in the design of the furlough scheme, and it is important to recognise that it has evolved over time. It has not been a fixed thing. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) rightly pointed out that the

unemployment drop had been much less in the UK than elsewhere and that there had been a rapid fall in furloughing. He pointed to the tapering out that that implied and he is right about that.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) was right to raise the point about the need for green jobs. The Government absolutely share that view, and that is one of the things that successive policies have focused on. I have no doubt that it will be an important part of the consideration in the net-zero review and all the other measures that are presently in place.

Quickly, on the issue of fraud—if I may for a second before winding up, Mr Deputy Speaker—it is much misunderstood; the planning assumptions that were outlined in the evidence from the CEO of HMRC are just planning assumptions, and we wait to see what the final numbers will be after enforcement. He has said in terms that he does not rule out penalties and potentially criminal procedures to bring that back under control—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am sorry, Minister—

Jesse Norman: And with that, let me sit down.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

3.13 pm

Patricia Gibson: I will not detain the House any longer, Mr Deputy Speaker. I know that there is another important debate on the horizon. I just thank everyone who has participated, and I am deeply disappointed that the Minister has not listened to the calls and continues to tell us how lucky we are with the support that we already have. That is cold comfort to those who are worried about their homes, their jobs and their future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and calls on the Government to examine, improve and extend that scheme's operation and application to ensure that people who started work after the furlough scheme started are included and that this support continues until the UK's economy is more robust, so that the goal of retaining as many jobs as possible is secured.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Like last week, I will not suspend the House; I will just pause while the Dispatch Boxes are sanitised and the main players take their positions, please, as others leave the Chamber. Remember “hands, face and space” and please leave socially distanced.

To let those who are taking part in the next debate know, the wind-ups will begin at 4.30 pm. Those participating in the wind-ups will have half an hour between them; it will be eight minutes, 10 minutes and 10 minutes, and then, if time allows, Caroline Lucas, who will open the debate, will have two minutes at the very end. This debate, like the last, is well over-subscribed, and we are much later going into the debate because of previous activities, so, following Caroline Lucas's opening speech, there will be a four-minute limit. That is likely to be reduced later by Madam Deputy Speaker.

Support for Self-employed and Freelance Workers

[*Relevant documents: Second Report of the Treasury Committee, "Economic impact of coronavirus: Gaps in support", HC 454; and the Government responses, HC 662 and HC 749; Eighth Report of the Treasury Committee, "Economic impact of coronavirus: the challenges of recovery", HC 271; e-petition 303345, "Pay self employed workers a wage due to lack of earnings caused by covid-19"; and e-petition 310471, "Provide covid-19 income support for the newly self-employed, without HMRC records".*]

3.15 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for the self-employed and freelance workers during the covid-19 outbreak.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this important debate, which affects so many of our constituents. The job retention and self-employment income support schemes have provided a lifeline for many, and they have undoubtedly provided a degree of security for those who were eligible. But there's the rub: far too many people have been ruled ineligible.

Today's debate takes place just as the six-month period that the self-employment scheme was intended to cover draws to a close. I intend to make the case that the scheme should be continued where it is needed and, crucially, that it should be extended and backdated for all those people who have been unfairly left without support over the last six months through absolutely no fault of their own, and who have endured intense hardship as a result.

Many cannot pay their bills. They are losing their homes, they are drowning in debt and they need our support. Today's debate is a sorely needed opportunity to set out how the self-employment scheme has fallen short. It has fallen short by failing to recognise the reality of what self-employment looks like in Britain today—by failing to understand that self-employment is significant across the breadth and depth of our economy. The self-employed are beauticians and barristers; charity and construction workers; dentists and decorators; many in marketing, events, arts and hospitality, and many more. This is a chance for us to explain loudly and clearly why self-employed people need justice and why they need support as we go forward.

As it stands, as I am sure all hon. Members know—although, frankly, I am less sure that Treasury Ministers know—the Government scheme penalises a wide range of people. They include those who combine self-employment with pay-as-you-earn work, or PAYE freelancers. They include new start-ups and the recently self-employed. They include women who have taken time out for maternity leave and childcare. They include anyone earning over £50,000. They include those earning less than 50% of their income from self-employment. They include limited company directors who take their income in the form of dividends.

There have been endless requests for the Treasury to meet MPs and those affected by the scheme's failings to discuss those gaps. Frankly, the exchange between the Chancellor and the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) during Treasury oral questions earlier this week underscored how urgently such a meeting is

needed. I am not sure whether the Chancellor just does not understand his own scheme or whether he was deliberately being economical with the truth, but when he asserted that the only group of people excluded from the self-employment scheme is those earning more than £50,000, and that their average median salary is apparently £200,000, I did not know whether to laugh or cry. He is completely and utterly wrong. He does not understand his own policy, and we urge him again to meet us so that we can set out the problem.

At this point, I would like to pay tribute to the brilliant campaigns, including ExcludedUK, ForgottenPAYE, ForgottenLtd and many others, and individuals such as Amanda Evans and Ellie Phillips who have helped the self-employed find such a powerful and united voice. I also thank the various hon. Members from right across the House who joined me, campaigners and the money saving expert Martin Lewis at the end of July to symbolically deliver petitions to the Treasury. They were signed by more than 348,000 people and demanded that the gaps in the scheme be urgently closed.

Those campaigns and many individuals have sent copious correspondence to the Chancellor, detailing the various groups of people who are not eligible for income support. His refusal to honestly engage with those suffering as a result of his policies is frankly shameful. The Treasury has met all requests for dialogue with either deafening silence or meaningless stock responses. I am sorry, but that is not good enough.

It is not good enough for my Brighton constituent who was working full time with the BBC as a PAYE freelancer, so he is ineligible for either furlough or self-employment support and, having come relatively recently from Ireland especially to take on the role at the BBC, he is not eligible for universal credit either. He says that how he has been treated during this crisis has financially ruined him. It is not good enough for Deniz Turan, a sole trader who has gone, in her own words, from being a successful businesswoman to being homeless and feeling suicidal every day in the blink of an eye, simply because she was a start-up who took her income in dividend payments. And it is not good enough for Mark, another small limited company director, who says that the strain of getting no income support on his marriage, his household, his mental health, his physical health and his finances is literally unbearable.

The self-employed have been failed by the Chancellor and the Prime Minister, and it is not just me making that argument. As hon. Members will know, an all-party parliamentary group has recently been formed. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for setting up the APPG, which represents those who have not been protected by the various Government packages. It is I think one of the fastest growing APPGs in parliamentary history. It currently has around 260 MPs from all sides of the House, including 79 from the Government Benches, while 15 Conservative MPs added their names to the application for this debate to take place.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): One of the forgotten sectors is music teachers who teach our young people. Many of them—including some in my constituency, as well as throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—do not have any income whatever. They are one of the forgotten groups as well.

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I absolutely agree. The people we are talking about are in every sector of our economy and our society, and they are hurting.

Back in June, the Treasury Committee published a unanimous report called “Gaps in support” as part of the inquiry into the economic impact of coronavirus. It found that hundreds of thousands of self-employed people are suffering hardship because of features like the disqualification of anyone who started a business in the last year. The Select Committee made some clear practical recommendations for change. I agree with the Chair of the Committee, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), that urgently enacting those recommendations and helping those who have fallen through the gaps is the only way for the Government to, as he puts it, fairly and

“completely fulfil its promise to do whatever it takes”.

Sadly, the Government’s response to the “Gaps in support” report was predictable: they made excuses and cited obstacles, when what we need is action. So let me say just a little more about some of those who are falling through the gaps. I mentioned small limited companies whose directors take all or part of their income in dividends. I want to stress that that is common practice; there is nothing suspicious about doing that—it is what people do when they are starting up small businesses, and they plough that money back into those businesses in the early days.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): How is Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs meant to know where the dividend income comes from, because when people fill in their tax return, they do not have to say the source of it? It could be dividend income from massive stock market investments, and why should they get subsidised for that?

Caroline Lucas: A whole range of practical proposals has been set out by the Treasury Committee, ExcludedUK and many others documenting the other paperwork that could be presented, including records from tax returns and so forth, that can make sure that this scheme is not open to fraud. If the political will is there, a way can be found using a range of different documentation to demonstrate that the money that people are applying for is absolutely legitimate. We can look at bank statements, for instance. It is not beyond the wit of people to make sure that people in our constituencies are not literally having to go to food banks, as an hon. Member mentioned the other day, in order to be able to put food on the table.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): When I raised this very issue with the Treasury Minister, I highlighted the fact that the records are held in Companies House and all HMRC has to do is marry up the records. The reason he gave was that they did not have enough staff at HMRC. Is that not just a complete disgrace?

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point. She is of course absolutely right, and it would be a simple measure to do this if the political will were there.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Would these things not be able to be thrashed out one to one in the meeting that still has not taken place that the hon. Lady mentioned?

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Lady is exactly right. Just a first step will be for the Government to acknowledge that there is a problem. Instead of sticking their fingers in their ears and going, “La, la, la”, they need to accept there is a problem here, and I am sure if we all got around the table we could find a way through this.

The vast majority of those small limited companies do not have commercial premises either, so they do not qualify for business grants. Nor do they see taking on large debts in such an uncertain business landscape as a realistic option. Furlough has been a Catch-22 for company directors: unpredictable cash flow means their salaries are low, so the scheme does not cover living expenses, yet if they furlough they are not allowed to work on saving the businesses that are in question.

The scheme has also routinely excluded carers and parent. As part of its inquiry into the impact of covid-19 on maternity and parental leave, the Petitions Committee heard evidence from the brilliant campaigning group, Pregnant Then Screwed. It was told that, because the self-employed scheme fails to properly accommodate women who incur a loss of earnings when taking time off for maternity leave, the gender pay gap among the self-employed, which is already at 43%, will increase, as will the likelihood of women’s businesses failing due to a lack of financial support.

Anthony Browne: The hon. Member is absolutely right that people furloughed generally are not allowed to work. But there is an exemption that the Government brought in for company directors who are furloughed—they are allowed to carry on with their company director duties, including saving their business.

Caroline Lucas: If they do not have any money, they cannot save their business, can they? That seems an odd intervention to make.

The Petitions Committee urged the Government to amend the scheme to take into account periods of maternity and paternal leave to ensure fairness and equality, yet, once again, Ministers have deliberately looked the other way. That phrase “whatever it takes” apparently does not stretch to ending discrimination against self-employed women. Nor do they care very much about freelancers, especially those on short-term PAYE contracts, as is now common practice because of HMRC requirements. They are caught between a rock and a hard place: denied access to the job retention scheme and the chance to be furloughed, yet often not earning enough from self-employment to qualify for the self-employed scheme.

In some sectors of our economy, freelance working is especially common. In my own Brighton constituency, for example, a number of people work in the arts. Three in four jobs in the arts across the country are freelance. They are the people who make the plays, the musicals and live experiences that are a part of the fabric of British life. We do not always see what they do, but they are invaluable, yet one in three of the skills base in theatre, for example, have missed out on any Government support since March, with disabled people, people of colour and early career workers disproportionately affected. Young people are also over-represented compared with other sectors of the economy. Therefore, rather than recovery, we see a sector that is facing total collapse.

Failure adequately to support the cultural, creative and events industries has put at risk 16,000 jobs across Brighton and Hove and £1.5 billion in turnover. My inbox, like, I am sure, the inboxes of many other hon. Members, is full of emails from constituents forced to abandon long-standing careers in the arts because there is no income support for them as freelancers.

Many working in media and journalism are similarly struggling, as the National Union of Journalists has evidenced, with its members routinely treated as employees for tax purposes, yet not eligible for furlough and not afforded the same protections and rights as staff when it comes to employment law.

Another group of people hard hit is those who choose to combine self-employment with PAYE income. I have a number of constituents in that situation, often as a result of being midway through making the transition to running their own company and being wholly self-employed.

None of this is inevitable. All of it is the result of a conscious choice by the Government to abandon anywhere between 3 million and 6 million self-employed people and freelancers. As the current self-employed scheme winds down, now is the time to change tack and do the right thing by these people. The details of a more inclusive scheme have been set out by the campaign groups and by the Treasury Committee. The ForgottenLtd group published a rescue package. Backed by the Federation of Small Businesses and other business groups, it sent it to the Treasury over a month ago, and it is still waiting for a response.

I appreciate how much other people need and want to speak, so let me quickly, in my last few minutes, outline three things that can be done. First, we can retrospectively expand the self-employed scheme. Bring those people who have been excluded from it into its ambit and make it fair by retrospectively starting it from 1 March to give it parity with the furlough scheme.

Secondly, as well as looking back, we need to look forward, so the Government should immediately extend the duration to the many sectors where the self-employed are a significant part of the workforce and which will not be back to anything like normal for some time to come. Thirdly, the Government should be looking at ways of keeping pace with the changing shape of the economy, balancing public health and economic priorities with the likelihood of more local lockdowns, for example. Part of the answer to that is a basic income scheme. The self-employed and job retention schemes do not work in tandem with the welfare system and therefore do not approach anything like a proper safety net. Many people have not been able to claim universal credit. Some have received no support whatever and the consequences are devastating, so much so that ExcludedUK has been working with the Samaritans on creating a dedicated helpline called Mind the Gap for those experiencing mental health problems. There is a simple and effective way to start to put things right and a universal basic income delivered via a welfare system that lifts everybody up would be a key cornerstone of that.

In conclusion, on Tuesday the Chancellor said he had “not hesitated to act in creative and effective ways to support jobs and employment,”—[*Official Report*, 15 September 2020; Vol. 680, c. 160]—

and promised he would continue to do so. The self-employed and freelancers rightly want that creativity to apply to them as well. The Treasury has demonstrated time and

again that it does not understand self-employment, so at the very least those of us standing up for the excluded are asking this again today: please will the Minister go back to the Treasury team and ask them to meet us so that at the very least they can understand what is at stake here? The stakes could not be higher: people’s businesses are being destroyed and their lives are being destroyed. That is not right and that is why so many Members want to speak in this debate.

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

3.30 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): What a powerful start to this debate we have just heard from the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), laying out with passion the case that has, to some extent, not been heard by those on the Treasury Bench throughout this crisis.

I want, in part, to echo a number of the points the hon. Lady made and take hon. Members back to the start of the crisis when all of us as Members of Parliament were met with a series of increasing issues from our constituents. They were worried about not being able to get groceries from their local grocery store. They had loved ones who were overseas. They were worried about their jobs. People could not get loans to keep their businesses supported.

Time and again, those issues were sorted out by the Government to a greater or lesser extent and answers were found. At the end of all that, however, as many hon. Members will know, there was one group that remained excluded from a number of levels of support or where their ability to access that support was not sufficient—the millions of people in this country who are self-employed.

I want to go through some of those issues passionately, if I can, but also with facts. I am sure the Minister will respond with facts, and quite rightly so. She will, I am sure, mention the fact that the Government did find the right arteries, if I can call them that, to get the support to people, particularly those in the job retention scheme and others. That was a tremendous success. The ease with which people were able to access the support when they qualified was also a tremendous success.

The overall record for the Government in terms of economic programmes and international comparisons was also a great success. However, this debate is not about those successes; it is about the omissions from those programmes. A fact it would be helpful for the Minister to provide is to reconcile the difference between the Government’s assertion that 95% of the self-employed are covered and the other assertion that there are 3 million excluded. That would be a helpful reconciliation to have.

It is important for those on the Treasury Bench to understand the issues for the self-employed that have made that speed to get a response so difficult: the fact that their income is lumpy and unpredictable and the fact that they have a variety of employment structures, often taken up over the years at the request of those on the Treasury Bench, make it difficult for schemes to come into place.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Will my hon. Friend allow me to assert the fact that some people who are self-employed have been able to get back to work, but many involved in large industries such as culture, entertainment, film and music have not been able to because those events are not taking place?

Richard Fuller: My hon. Friend is precisely right. That is one of the three issues the Government really need to focus on as they consider their response to this debate. If we take wedding planners, theatre, live events or conferences, we see that the Government are asking those sectors to remain closed but what is their level of support? Literally hundreds of my constituents in those sectors still cannot earn an income anything like they would have earned in normal times.

I urge the Government also to consider the newly self-employed. We had issues with people who changed jobs from February to March, when the scheme came in. The Government did find some change there, but that was where someone's change was measured in a matter for weeks. The self-employed can be measured for a matter of months and they still cannot get included because their tax returns are measured on an annual, not monthly, basis. What will the Government do, for example, for a pet care business in Biggleswade in my constituency that suffered precisely because of that?

The criteria for the self-employed were more complex than for those in any other of the schemes that businesses or individuals could apply for. It got to a point, which I will return to in my final comments, where something in what the Government were trying to do for the self-employed was beyond the issue of providing support. I had a musician from Upper Caldecote and a performer from Sandy who were not able to access the scheme because they felt they fell on one side of the criteria and not on the other. If it was good enough for the Government to think of complex criteria for the individual to claim, why could the Government not sort out the problems for people by cross-referencing their dividends so that they could say that they were genuinely self-employed?

It is important that the Government get to grips with the issue of those who feel that they have been excluded, because the self-employed provide so much for our economy. They are the innovators. They are the people who will undercut competitor prices to deliver a better product. They want to over-deliver, because for self-employed people, it is not just about business; it is about themselves. It is how they behave and how they interact with others that is so important. The UK gets so much from the self-employed. We get a quarter of a trillion pounds of contribution to the British economy. We get higher growth. We get a world-beating labour market in terms of its efficiency. We become a front-foot nation. That is why the Government need to act.

3.35 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on securing this debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for putting it forward. It is a shame that we have to cram six months of misery into an hour and a half, but we will do our best.

Many of those excluded from Government support over the past six months work in the creative industries—in TV, theatre and the arts, but also in events and exhibitions. Sometimes I feel I have got all 3 million of the excluded in my constituency, which is very arts and ents heavy. With 70 years of the BBC, we have grown a massive media industry, including commercial broadcasters. We have three highly regarded theatres in the Lyric, the Bush and the Riverside. We have major national music venues, such as the Hammersmith Eventim Apollo, the

Shepherd's Bush Empire and the Olympia exhibition centre. Such venues have had a double-whammy, because in many cases they and their industries do not get any help and are not being allowed to open—it is likely, the way things are going, that that will be further delayed—and many of them rely on exactly the excluded groups we are talking about today.

Of course this is not just about those groups. I have been involved recently with everything from the wedding industry to the Bar. Anything that brings barristers and wedding planners together must be quite extraordinary. We go to them at different times of our lives when we may be happy or sad, but there is an interesting point there, which is what all these organisations have in common. Often they are entrepreneurial. Often they are risk-taking. Often people who are at the beginning of their career are investing and have limited incomes. Often, also, they are following professional advice from accountants and the Treasury that has got them into the situation they are in. They are not wilfully ending up in this situation; they are there because they have entered into it in good faith.

I have to declare that I was a self-employed barrister for a number of years, and the figures from the Bar Council say that not only have three quarters of chambers lost 50% of their work, but the majority say they will not be able to last more than six to 12 months. Some people may not cry many tears over that, but the fact is that these people—I hope that many of them are successful and go on to great careers—cannot make do on the income that they have, and they are being done down in that way.

I have so many letters from constituents, and often they are from couples who both work in those industries. I think that most of us know the common problems. They could be people who are just above the £50,000 earnings threshold. They could be people who recently became self-employed having set up their businesses. They could be people who have moved between jobs. They could be people whose incomes come from a range of different sources. Whatever it is, they fall through the gaps in the Government's scheme, and they cannot get any help at all in many cases.

The Chancellor, of all people, pooh-poohs them and says, "These are wealthy people," and talks about dividends, but I have a letter from a constituent who gets £10,000 basic and then relies on dividends to top up their income. I could go on for a very long time—I am sure all Members could—in relation to these matters, but I will end on this: whereas we have got our act together with the Excluded UK all-party parliamentary group and through ExcludedUK, the Government are all over the place. We often have to deal with four different Departments to get an answer. We are taking two or three months to get Departments to answer. Please will the Treasury Minister sort that out, make the change retrospective and help people who are genuinely in need?

3.39 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): Businesses up and down our country face pressures they never expected, challenges they never predicted and hardships they never sought. Rightly, the Government stepped up and came to their aid in their hour of need—grants, the furlough scheme, bounce back loans, and much more.

The Government have provided to businesses in all four nations one of the most generous and supportive packages of economic measures anywhere in the world.

That said, my constituency, a coastal community, with an economy at its core dependent on tourism, the arts, music, creative sectors and hospitality, has been disproportionately hit by coronavirus. Hastings and Rye is a beautiful constituency that has seen a revival in recent years of its music scene, artistic events, creative kinship and gastronomic offerings. We only have to compare Hastings old town 15 years ago with today to see the massive winds of change that have blown through our streets.

Those who have helped to revive the parts of this beautiful constituency, however, are now themselves in need of support, for they are the freelancers who are the backbone of many of these sectors and have thus far gone without much Government support. From musicians to artists, writers to journalists, actors and performers, they put the soul and beat into the streets of Hastings, and it is only right that we support them now in their hour of need, because once coronavirus is over and we are out in the streets celebrating once more, we will want our musicians, actors and artists there to entertain, inspire and lift us up after this dark episode in human history.

This is not just about the performer; it is about the fabric of connections that bind the whole industry together. These performers work in partnership with each other and with theatres, commercial organisations, charitable trusts, schools and local groups, so by supporting our freelance or self-employed performers, we help the whole industry to stay afloat and we build community resilience.

This is not just about individual finances; it is about experience and skills being lost and young people not being encouraged to choose the creative industries as a career. Being self-employed in any industry provides the freedom and flexibility to go where the work is, but during the pandemic, work dried up overnight for many people, and freelancers continue to struggle as protective measures against coronavirus continue to affect many industries.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Like my hon. Friend, I represent a coastal community, and many of the people she has mentioned I recognise. May I add my voice to the calls to the Government? They have done a tremendous job during the pandemic to support businesses, but those whom she describes have been badly hit, particularly those who have been prevented from carrying out their work because of Government regulation. Surely, they deserve additional support.

Sally-Ann Hart: I agree with my hon. Friend. Numerous freelancers did not have a financial buffer and, unlike employees, were not entitled to be furloughed. We must not forget the small business owners who pay themselves mostly in dividends and earn under the threshold. It is often a more flexible way of payment that can keep money in their businesses to keep them going—many have used dividend payments to legally mitigate their tax payments—but there has to be some encouragement for entrepreneurs taking risks and setting up businesses and employing people.

Our SMEs provide the backbone of our great nation. The Government rightly took the bold and necessary decisions to provide an exceptional package of financial

support to businesses up and down our land, but now the Government must go further and consider the support given to our freelancers and self-employed as we turbocharge our economy out of the pandemic. For we as a community will look for our creative freelancers once all this is over to lift our spirits once more and inspire us into happier, healthy and more prosperous days.

3.43 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): I thank those Members who have been championing the self-employed for the past six months. In Northern Ireland, about 15% of people are self-employed, which is higher than average, and of course the scheme has been welcome, vital and suitable for many people, including those back already to something approaching a normal working life. For me, however, as for other Members, the hole in the scheme became very clear from my inbox—from the newly self-employed without last year's tax return, to the limited director who pays herself with dividends as and when she can; from the PAYE freelancer, the part-time freelance, to those just over the threshold or who took time off for sickness or maternity, having tried to build a career that could balance their home and work life, and now feel abandoned.

In short, the scheme did not reflect the modern economy and modern work practices, nor the ways in which so many had been living. These are individuals who had taken a leap of faith with their skills or had been manoeuvred into their working arrangements by the casualisation of the economy in their sector. We are talking about the tradesman, the contractor, the small and growing business—the red blood cell members of our economy, driven, willing and creative: attributes we will need so much as we rebuild after the pandemic. Some have already gone under because they could not wait for business as normal to return, and very many more are edging closer to a similar fate. In my constituency, since the start of the pandemic, 2,300 more people are claiming universal credit. It would take every minute of the time we have today to talk about how unfit for purpose and unfair is that system that so many more people will be thrown into in coming months.

I want to use my limited time to focus on the creative sector in Northern Ireland, which is 5% of our economy and growing fast. It is not only fundamental to our tourism product but fundamental, of course, to who we are. At home, now and in darker times, the arts was the shared space—the organic place—where people of all backgrounds and different views worked and enjoyed themselves together in a way that a Government in Northern Ireland could not create in their wildest dreams. It was, as Liam Neeson said, our north star and our compass. He said that at the Lyric theatre, which is the heart of my constituency and the heart of the arts and culture.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is very passionate in what she is saying, and I totally agree with her. One of the drama clubs and theatres that has done exceptionally well is Bangor drama club, which has closed after 90 years. Many of my constituents participated in that for the camaraderie, the coming together, the friendships and the wonderful productions. Does she agree that the Minister here and the Minister in Northern Ireland must ensure that historic venues such as this can be opened once more as the community hubs that they are and can be again?

Claire Hanna: Of course. The hon. Member will know that community arts also feed into our professional workforce, attracting and creating so many jobs. The economic value is clear: the arts give us £7 for every £1 spent. We have world-leading expertise—genuinely world-leading expertise—in all areas of the arts in Northern Ireland. But because it is a sector that requires collaboration, it is almost necessarily casualised, and very few people are working in static economies.

I think we are all dying to get back to the theatre, back to a book launch, back to a gallery or back to a gig, but if we do not take action, the sector will not be there. In fact, if we do not take action the things that, in many cases, got us through the past six months—the books we read and the TV we enjoyed—will not be produced in the same volume again. That requires taking action: the type of action that the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) outlined so comprehensively, and indeed, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, action within Northern Ireland. I am calling on the Executive to release and to thoroughly target the £33 million that was our proportion of the arts intervention in July within Northern Ireland. If we are not spending as much as the Conservatives on the arts, we have a bit of a problem. Indeed, we need a wider economic strategy that addresses all those who have been excluded and left out within the economy.

The whole economy is struggling, of course, but the arts, in particular, has so little chance of recovery. It simply cannot open in the same way again. If universal credit is all that people are going to be able to access—if they are lucky, after a fight—how are they going to stay afloat? How are they even going to get back on their feet, let alone manage to retrain or retool for a future economy? This is going to have a long-term impact that is not just economic and not just about our cultural value, but will affect equality in the workplace, skills, growth and innovation. It is not too late to act. The scheme can be extended in scope and duration. It can be applied retrospectively. The support that other advanced economies have provided can be given. No one is saying that this can or should last forever, but nor does anyone believe that this crisis is over. Leaving people with nothing and at the financial cliff edge turns off the light at the end of the tunnel.

3.49 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to support freelancers and self-employed people in my constituency who have fallen through the cracks of what I recognise has otherwise been an extremely generous financial package provided by the Treasury for so many people. As I have gone about my constituency over the past few months, so many people have thanked me—people in business and employees—for the support that they have received from the Chancellor. However, I want to use this opportunity to highlight three cases in my constituency.

The first is that of Andy Warren, a co-director of the long-established Congleton company Printing Group (UK) Ltd. He refers to the fact that dividend-receiving company owner-managers are effectively discriminated against from receiving support. He says:

“HMRC is happy to accept our word on our income tax returns (that are self-assessed), on our corporation tax returns (that are self-assessed), on the furlough claims we make for our

staff, and on our entitlement to a bounce-back loan. We even have to self-declare that we have to repay child benefit. None of these are verified by a third-party, we are taken at our word. So why is it not acceptable regarding our dividends?”

Secondly, I would like to turn to the concerns expressed by another constituent, Dave Butcher, who is a director of Thorn Distribution Ltd, a warehousing and distribution company with 15 staff. Neither he nor his co-director have received anything by way of benefit from any national scheme or council support package for themselves or their company. They have not even received any furlough money, due to a technicality on the payroll submission date, but being the honourable employers that they are, they have paid out some £100,000 of their own money to their staff, effectively furloughing their staff out of their own funds. I wrote to the Treasury about this on 13 May and received a generic reply letter on 8 September. I am asking the Treasury to look again at their case, which their accountant says is one of the worst they have seen in a system with no flexibility and no appeal.

Finally, I would like to talk about my constituent Lauren Scott, a self-employed musician. We have heard a lot about musicians in the debate, and I would like to tell the House about Lauren’s circumstances. Lauren is a highly professional harpist, and her husband Andy is a composer and teacher. Over the past 10 years of my being a Member of Parliament, no individuals have done more in my constituency to promote the arts, and particularly the engagement of young people in music, than Andy and Lauren Scott. I have heard Lauren perform many times as a harpist, and I have heard one of Andy’s pieces premiered at the Southbank Centre.

Jim Shannon: I commend the hon. Lady for what she has said. It is so important to foster talent, and if we do not provide the support now, that future talent could be lost forever.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Member is absolutely right—it is about not just these people’s talent, but the next generation that they are nurturing.

Lauren says:

“I am a self-employed freelance musician of 25+ years. I have only ever been a professional musician. During that time I have always paid my taxes and never considered myself to be a burden on the state. I am highly regarded within my field and very often my work is booked into my diary up to 1-2 years in advance. All my concert work has been cancelled...Performing was 80% of my work/income and private teaching was 20%. The only work I now have is my teaching.

At the start of lock-down I applied for 18 jobs with local supermarkets for roles ranging from shelf stacking to driving delivery vans. I did not succeed with any of those applications. It appears that 25 years of playing guest principal harp with all the professional orchestras playing at the likes of the BBC Proms, recording live broadcasts and performing at all the major concert venues across the country was not the right kind of experience Aldi and Tesco were after.

I will not be able to ‘get back to work’ when the current SEISS ends in October. By now my diary should be full of bookings for 2021, but promoters are not booking and I have nothing booked in for next year...

Please could you ask for there to be consideration to extend the SEISS for self-employed musicians and the Arts Sector. Having high quality live events happening in major venues... is precisely what is going to attract people to visit those city centres.”

3.54 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Gary Thomson is a taxi driver in Edinburgh—one of many in the city. He has been driving for years, and until last year he worked for a private company and paid his taxes and national insurance every month. A year ago, Gary realised his lifetime ambition of setting up and started working for himself. He invested his savings and went into the unknown. It was working up until the virus struck, when demand for taxis pretty much disappeared overnight.

When Gary tried to apply for support, he was told he had not been self-employed for long enough and was excluded, even though he had been paying his taxes continuously over the qualifying period. That is unfair.

Sarah Lachhab is a tour guide in Edinburgh—one of thousands of workers in that industry in the hospitality sector. She has been running her own business for more than three years, but up until the beginning of 2019 she did not make enough from it to pay the rent, so she had some other bar jobs in the hospitality sector. When Sarah applied for support, she was told that because most of her earnings had not come from self-employment over the past three years, she too would be excluded from the self-employment income support scheme. Of course, because by then she was doing okay as a self-employed worker, she had given up the other payroll jobs. That meant she was excluded from the coronavirus job retention scheme as well. She fell between the two stools, and that is unfair.

Georgina Allison is an architect in Edinburgh. She has been self-employed for a while, but three years ago she took time off to look after a newborn child. Because her earnings were very little in that year, it brought the average of the three years for which the calculation was made much lower than it would have been otherwise. I have asked HMRC to disregard maternity periods and childcare in making the calculation, but it has refused to do so. That is not only unfair; it is blatant discrimination against female self-employed workers in this country.

All of those things need to be fixed, and it is possible to fix them. For six long months, dozens of MPs—or perhaps hundreds of MPs—on behalf of tens of thousands of constituents, have been arguing with HMRC and the Treasury to try to get something done for the people they represent. I think we have all been stunned at the degree of intransigence we have met.

We are constantly invited to applaud the schemes that have been set up. There is talk about how many people they have helped and how much money has been spent on them. I acknowledge that—I will sign anything you want to say how great it is—but that is not an excuse or a rationale for refusing to fix problems that are manifestly there in the system. In fact, the very scale of the schemes and the amount that has been spent on them make it bewildering that for a very small proportion more, the Treasury would not plug all the gaps that are clearly there. When we come to remember these schemes, I fear that they will be remembered not for their largesse and generosity, but for the parsimony and unfairness that has led to many millions of people being treated unfairly in this country.

It is not good enough for the Treasury to refuse to answer questions, to refuse to take meetings, to sit there and pretend that it does not understand what is happening.

There is no reason for that, so I appeal to the Minister and her colleagues: please open your minds, open your ears and meet with us so that we can discuss the things that need to happen to put these schemes right.

3.58 pm

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): For the sake of transparency, I refer hon. Members to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. At the point when I was elected to this House, I was still self-employed and, with a bit of cross-over to complete a couple of projects, I remained so before I completely ceased trading much earlier this year.

As someone who was self-employed for 15 years, I come to this debate understanding what self-employed people go through and the risks they take, often putting their own homes on the line in order to build a business. Most importantly, I speak in this debate because there are some 12,000 people registered as self-employed in my constituency of Buckingham.

The self-employed and those who take the risk to start their own business will always have my absolute respect and admiration. They are the wealth creators, not just for themselves but for the supply chains and services they use to go about their trade or profession. They are the vital disrupters who propel competition and innovate. Those who take this worthy entrepreneurial path do so, as I have mentioned, at serious personal risk: their own homes are on the line. It is because of that very risk that when crisis or disaster strikes, such as we have seen with coronavirus, they are left the most vulnerable if their trade cannot continue through no fault of their own.

I want to put on record my absolute thanks and gratitude to the Government for making available a support package that has supported 4,300 self-employed people in my constituency, receiving grants worth a total of £14.5 million. It must be acknowledged that this Government's covid support scheme for the self-employed has been among the most generous in the world. However, like so many other hon. and right hon. Members, I have heard far too many stories of those who have fallen through the gaps.

Each and every freelancer, contractor, self-employed businessman or woman who has come to my surgeries or written to me has a different story to tell, and that is important because it speaks to the diversity and vibrancy of entrepreneurialism and how it works and thrives. Not everybody fits into the sort of box that I fear HMRC officials would deeply love them to neatly sit in. Our challenge is how we make up for those losses if we are to come together as a country and bounce back.

I have argued in the past and written to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and my other hon. and right hon. Friends in the Treasury calling for a support package. However, if such a retrospective package cannot be delivered, I urge my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary and the whole Treasury team, as they look to the upcoming Budget, to look at ways in which we can stimulate the self-employed sector and ensure that we are recognising them in the tax system, including the risks they take and the costs they incur. For example, the value of every invoice is not necessarily profit—there is cost in there that needs to be taken into account—and dividends are a legal and legitimate way in which people have paid themselves, on the advice of their accountants, for many decades.

[Greg Smith]

Let us find a way to support all our self-employed, freelancers and owner directors of limited companies, and give them the stimulus to grow our economy.

4.2 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) made an excellent speech, and I hope the Minister listens to him in a way that I have not managed to make the Treasury listen to me so far.

I have had constituents from all walks of life reach out to me over the last few months—carpenters, architects, taxi drivers, musicians, accountants—and all with one thing in common, which is that they have been very badly let down by this Government. People who have been self-employed for less than a year, limited company directors, freelancers, the self-employed earning over £50,000 have all had their income slashed and are expected to get by on universal credit.

We cannot stress enough that this was totally unexpected. If someone is self-employed or a freelancer, they expect the ups and downs that accompany that state as they take risks, but nobody expected covid to happen. This was a one-off event, and in such circumstances people look to the Government to step in and provide a safety net.

Like the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), I have heard from self-employed new mothers who have been financially penalised for raising a child because maternity leave is included in the self-employment calculations as a period when they have not made a profit. I have heard from a director of a limited company whose income supports her, her partner and their four-year-old daughter, but her partner was on maternity leave as lockdown struck with a baby due in four weeks, and they were not getting any support at all.

Another constituent sent me this, which is worth reading in full because it sums up the impact that people are experiencing:

“I went self-employed 9 months ago and haven’t so far submitted a tax return. My work is drying up and I just don’t know how long I will be able to keep my head above water, I’m so worried that I’ve been having panic attacks. My brother is in an even worse situation. He’s a director of a small limited company and pays himself via dividends, with his average earnings a fraction over the £50k cliff-edge threshold. He’s a heating engineer who can only do breakdowns. His partner can’t work as she’s a hairdresser and they have a young family. My brother’s income has been slashed to virtually nothing and they have next to no income to pay their bills. They are in such a lot of trouble. If I knew if I could keep working I could help him out. My parents are trying to help but they can’t if this goes on for very long.”

That was in early April.

Five months down the line and despite repeated pleas to the Treasury, there is still no support for people like them. The Chancellor bragged that his March Budget was pro small business, but small limited companies have received neither business nor personal support. Some 20 directors of small limited companies reached out to me and I have tried to lobby on their behalf but, as everyone who has spoken today has said, the Government simply would not listen.

Since lockdown, I have sent 16 letters to the Chancellor about flaws and gaps in the Government’s personal financial support schemes. If we take into account the

business in my constituency on whose behalf I emailed to see if they could get loans or business grants, I sent 35 emails to the Treasury. The vast majority of those received a cut-and-paste response from a civil servant in the Treasury’s correspondence unit—not even a Minister—that was essentially a printout of the Government’s frequently asked questions.

As colleagues on both sides of the Chamber have mentioned, people in the creative sector have possibly been dealt the worst hand of all. Many of them, especially musicians, still cannot legally go back to work. I hope the Minister listens to us all today on both sides of the House, does the sensible thing and extends the furlough scheme, as we heard in the previous debate, for those who cannot return to work. However, the Chancellor also needs to listen to what MPs are saying today, finally acknowledge the plight of the excluded and do the right thing by them too.

4.6 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for securing this debate on an important topic. It is a topic that has featured frequently in my inbox and consistently at surgeries. I am sad that I follow my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith), because he has taken so many of the issues that I wanted to talk about in my speech. He, though, was very eloquent and said them in a far better way than I could do.

Early on in my career, I was engaged under a freelance contract, and before coming to this place I worked in a sector that used freelancers and self-employed talent, so I have a deep understanding of the issues that affect those who are self-employed. If someone works for themselves, their *raison d’être* to get up and go in the morning is to go out and find business—to work. When they cannot work because the Government have told them to stay at home and has locked them down, it is counter to everything they do. I represent Warrington South, an area in the north-west of England that has a particularly high level of self-employed people. More than 20% of the constituency work for themselves. It is an issue that has come to the forefront there.

As other hon. Members have done, I pay tribute to the Government for the support they have given to the 2.7 million people in this country who are self-employed, costing £7.7 billion. Self-employed people have been able to claim grants worth 80% of their average monthly trading profits, up to £2,500. It is without doubt one of the most generous schemes in the world.

I remember clearly, in late March, when we first went into lockdown, that the furlough scheme had just been announced and I took a call in my office from a gentleman called Stephen, a self-employed carpet fitter. He was incredibly concerned about his self-employed status and what it would mean for him. I remember being able to phone him back a few days later and give him the news that the Chancellor was launching a scheme to help people like him, and I remember the words he used: “Thank you, Chancellor.”

Sadly, I took a call on the same day from a couple who worked in the entertainment sector, Jo and John Martin. Jo books talent for cruise ships and John is a performer. They, too, were incredibly worried and the call I made back to them, thinking it would be positive, ended up not getting quite the same response, because the way

they had constructed their self-employed operation meant that they were not eligible for anything. Today, they still do not understand. They have paid every single tax that was due, on time, all the time, but have had nothing. That is the bit that confuses and frustrates many people.

I want us to look forward; I want to see a focus in the forthcoming Budget in November on ensuring that we do everything we possibly can to encourage businesses to start up and operate. We are providing significant cash incentives to businesses to take on people and paying them £1,000 to train them up. I hope we can look carefully at what we are doing for people who want to go out on their own and set up their own businesses. I want us to make sure we have mentor schemes in place. When someone launches their own business, stepping out on their own, without the ability to wrap a monthly salary around themselves, it is a difficult time. As a Government, we need to ensure that we are ready to support those people and give them every level of assistance to get the business up and running. We need people who work on freelance and self-employed contracts to be firing on all cylinders, ready to go, and I look forward to economic support targeted in a creative way in the autumn statement.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I can see that several people are hoping to speak. We are running out of time, so I am afraid that I am going to take the time limit down to three minutes. I am sorry that that gives a little shock to the hon. Member for Stirling, but I know he can deal with it very well.

4.10 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): You are very kind, Madam Deputy Speaker. I assure you that I have had more shocking things to deal with this week than that.

I warmly pay tribute to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for securing this debate and praise to the rafters the ExcludedUK and #ForgottenLtd campaigns, which have done so much to bring this issue to the forefront. I also praise colleagues for the constructive, bipartisan way in which we have held this debate, and in that spirit I reach out to those on the Treasury Bench and to Treasury Ministers. I do feel for them, as this has been an unprecedented crisis, needing unprecedented solutions, on an unprecedented timescale. So we are not here just to criticise; we do have solutions to the problems.

The Scottish Parliament cannot borrow at the moment. I would like it to, but at the moment the UK Government does this on our behalf, so it is our job to make sure that the money is well spent and that the support is extended and better targeted. Business is still in crisis. We need to acknowledge the seasonality of many businesses, particularly in Stirling and in Scotland, and we need to look after the self-employed better. But what hurts—I would like some response on this—is that the Chancellor said that no one will be left behind. I promise and assure those on the Treasury Bench and colleagues that in Stirling, Scotland and the UK lots of people have been. They feel aggrieved and hurt, and that needs to be acknowledged. I have supported the schemes as far as they have gone, but we are talking about people who are not Wetherspoons, British Airways or Costa Coffee. We are talking about pram shops, electricians, taxi drivers,

mortgage brokers music shops, gym equipment makers—the real entrepreneurs, who are the lifeblood of the Scottish economy.

We have a number of concrete requests to make—I have tried to boil this down. First, the Government should acknowledge that there are gaps in support and that some people have been left out and left behind. I ask the Government to meet us—to meet colleagues from across the House, and meet ExcludedUK and #ForgottenLtd. I ask them to continue the self-employed scheme beyond October and retrospectively expand it to cover seasonal workers, freelancers and the recently self-employed, and to look into the specific gender pay aspects of the support schemes, which have let down so many women in particular.

We are not out of the woods yet—far from it.. I have just heard of one case of covid being confirmed at the University of Stirling, and we must ensure that we keep people safe throughout the times to come. If the Treasury will not act on the reasonable suggestions made by Members from across the House today, we will. Let me give a final statistic: 71% of Scots want the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament to have full financial powers to protect our businesses and to deal with the crisis. If the UK Government prove that they will not act, they build the case for the transfer of powers to Scotland, because we have a fully functioning, law-abiding Parliament and Government who will.

4.13 pm

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on securing this debate on a very important issue. If the Conservative party is anything, it is the party of entrepreneurs, strivers and people who get out of bed in the morning to create wealth, which is one of the reasons I am a Conservative. I have also been freelance—self-employed—the past couple of years, and I know how precarious it is and how one may not know how much money is coming from one month to the other. When the coronavirus crisis struck, my heart went cold when I heard accounts from some of my constituents about the sudden 100% loss of income overnight.

As we have heard, a huge amount of support has been provided, through a range of different schemes. That has totalled some £280 billion, with quite a lot of it focused on self-employed people. The Treasury Committee, on which I serve, produced a report on those who are excluded—it was quoted earlier—for which we talked to a range of different groups. Many people have been in very difficult circumstances, and I do not wish to minimise that, but I will say—because we have heard so many Members speak from one side of the argument—that a lot of them did get some form of support. They might not have got the self-employment income support, but often they got other forms of support, such as VAT deferral or other tax deferral, or they did not have to pay business rates, or they received grants. There is also the backstop of universal credit. I totally accept that universal credit is not much money and that it is very difficult to live on, but everyone should have access to it.

The one big difference between the self-employed and those on the furlough scheme, which we debated earlier, is that the self-employed could continue to work. I know from conversations that I have had with constituents

[Anthony Browne]

that many of them who are self-employed continued to work, particularly those in the online and digital sector, although I absolutely accept that if they do not have any work, clearly they cannot continue to work.

The other thing about all of this is that the more we think about the detail, the more complicated it gets. We heard the discussion about dividends, for example. Actually, there are so many different circumstances in which people get dividends from different forms of work, with company directors getting dividends from investment funds and so on. It means that we cannot have an automated system. The whole point about the SEIS scheme and the furlough scheme was that it could be done rapidly and at scale because it used data that already existed and was accessible by Government. We could not do that in this case without the equivalent of some sort of self-assessment scheme, with really detailed investigations into each individual's circumstances, which would have taken six months or so to set up. The Government's objective, quite rightly, was to get support to as many people as possible as quickly as possible, and they did that well.

Another aspect of paying oneself by dividends, which obviously people do for cash-flow reasons, is that they do not pay national insurance contributions, so they are paying less. It is very complicated, and the more we look into it, the more difficult it is. I join my right hon. and hon. Friends in urging the Government to ensure that we have a Budget for freelancers and entrepreneurs, and to make sure that they are looked after.

4.16 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) for securing the debate, and the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to it.

I wish quickly to pick up on a comment that the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) has just made. He suggested that, "As the Government have been saying all along, it is just too difficult." The fact is that the Government have not even met the Excluded UK all-party parliamentary group or Forgotten Ltd, even though we could help them resolve this. It is difficult, but we can help. The hon. Gentleman said that we must not forget that the self-employed can work. Let us not forget that awful week when the whole of the creative sector, restaurants, theatres and cinemas were ordered to close, sports were cancelled, schools were shut and millions were told to work from home if they could, but millions could not.

Although we are very grateful for the Chancellor's furlough scheme, there were some quite frustrating days while we were waiting to hear whether the self-employed would get any support. It might have been a mistake on my part, but I put out a single tweet on 13 March asking for people who were self-employed or who worked freelance to contact me with their stories. My inbox almost exploded, with nearly 4,000 contributions, because people's lives had been thrown into total chaos and anxiety. I heard about work that had been booked in for more than a year being wiped out. I heard from couples, often in the same sector, who lost a whole year's-worth of work, with childcare costs and mortgages to pay. It had a seismic impact on people's lives and futures. There is still no mention of support for freelancers.

Finally we got the self-employed income support scheme, which I am enormously grateful for. But we cannot get away from the fact that there are still 3 million people excluded from that support.

One of the most recent emails I received was from a lady who is a freelance musician. Because of the crisis, she is now going to a food bank, and she is very grateful for that food bank. Unfortunately, she is not going to be the only one. The Trussell Trust has announced a spike in food bank usage and said that worse is to come, with a possible 61% increase in need compared with last winter, and with half the food parcels given out to first-time users. We are facing a tsunami of deprivation this winter.

I would like to add my support for Pregnant Then Screwed, and my good friend Olga Fitzroy, for all the campaigning they have been doing for maternity and paternity rights. In my remaining 23 seconds, I cannot fail to mention the creative industries, in which I was a self-employed freelancer for more than three decades. We are used to feast and famine, but this is unacceptable, particularly when the Government do not seem to be listening. Please may I urge the Government to extend the furlough scheme for those sectors that are the last to return and to meet with us and ExcludedUK?

4.19 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Back in March, at the beginning of lockdown, when announcing some financial support, the Chancellor said that he understood people's concerns about losing their jobs and paying their rent or mortgage and their food bills, and he added:

"You will not face this alone".

Since that time it has been clear that a significant section of our community has been abandoned—left to face their financial difficulties without any help from the Government and very much alone. The people I am talking about are the excluded 3 million, made up of freelancers, the self-employed, new starters and many others who, through the misfortune of the way that they were employed, were excluded by the Government from any financial assistance at all.

I have had numerous cases of constituents that illustrate the injustice of this denial of support by the Government. Take the example of my constituent Debbie Hassan. Debbie is a single mother of three and a self-employed picture editor for newspapers and other publications who works shifts. Her income went from £150 a day to zero as a result of lockdown. As she was ineligible for furlough or the self-employed income support scheme, the only support she could access was universal credit, at £94 a week. Or take the case of Anna, who, after being made redundant some years ago, set up her own media consultancy company from her loft. In an email to me, Anna said: "I have been five months without any income or meaningful support. As a sole director, PAYE, of my own company, there was no help. I was forced to furlough on less than half my mortgage and council tax, let alone all other bills, such as utilities and food. I am single, so there was no back-up for me."

Let us take the case of another constituent, S, who said: "I am self-employed. I work mainly as a British Sign Language deaf-blind communicator guide. I usually find I am turning away work. When lockdown happened, most of my clients started to shield, so my income

stopped immediately. I met the 50:50 rule for the self-employed income support scheme for my work, but I get some of my dividends from my husband's limited company, which made me ineligible." Her husband's limited company was in set construction and its work also stopped immediately when lockdown was announced.

I have many other examples, including freelancer musicians who have received nothing while their contemporaries in orchestras and thus on contracts were furloughed on 80% of their pay. The Chancellor said he will do "whatever it takes" to get us through the coronavirus pandemic. He has totally ignored the 3 million excluded, who have fallen through the gaps and been left to sink or swim. All that is being asked for is that the disparity in support for the excluded is remedied and that they be given the financial support that they deserve and need to survive. If the Chancellor truly wants a quick economic recovery after this crisis is over, he needs to start listening and do whatever it takes to support the excluded, and to do it now.

4.22 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Following the powerful debate on the coronavirus job retention scheme that has just taken place, this debate is on an equally unfair injustice. I am glad to speak in today's debate on behalf of the hundreds of freelancers and self-employed workers in my constituency who have contacted me because they fall outside the various covid support schemes. They include high and low earners, working across many sectors, including those that have been devastated, such as the arts and culture, and aviation. They include those working in TV and media. They are minicab drivers and supply teachers. They work in events, IT and other transport sectors. They include those who have set up a company and employ others, contractors, those who work part time and those in the gig economy.

These people generate economic growth. Except for the very low earners, they pay taxes. They train others. They enrich our cultural life. Yet despite the explosion of self-employed and freelance workers in the UK to around 3 million, too many Government policies, tax arrangements and HMRC processes still see the world through the lens of PAYE and permanent workers. The covid recovery scheme is no different from all the others. I think that is why too many freelancers and self-employed taxpayers have fallen through the gap, and fallen for the cultural block of the Treasury and HMRC.

Despite many of us writing letters and submitting petitions, the Treasury is not listening. A number of solutions have been proposed by those affected and we have heard examples of them today. For those in limited companies—those in the TV and creative sector in my constituency have been particularly hard hit—it has been suggested that the Government could use dividend certificates as a form of proof. For those on maternity leave, SEISS calculations could calculate the time spent on maternity and shared parental leave and exclude that. For those who are self-employed, HMRC could use evidence such as the UTR—unique taxpayer reference—to calculate a rough income. For those who earn less than 50% of their income from self-employed work, a taper beyond £50,000 would be appropriate.

Like others, I have not had anything more than a generic response from the Government on this. I acknowledge that many self-employed people have been

helped, and the Minister will no doubt reel off the list of how many millions of pounds of taxpayers' money has been spent, and on how many thousands of people, but what the House and our constituents want to hear is what those in other nations across the world are providing: honesty, acknowledgement that they are listening and, where appropriate, adaptation. Finally, I want to address the issue of universal credit. With rents over £2,000 in my constituency, too many people are excluded from any benefits.

4.26 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I join others in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on securing the debate this afternoon and on drawing attention not only to the pivotal role of self-employed people across the UK but to the need for further Government support for them in this time of crisis. This is particularly the case in Wales, where self-employed rates in rural areas such as Ceredigion are far above the UK and Welsh averages. In the previous debate, my right hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) rightly noted the need for sector-specific extensions to the furlough scheme, and I would argue that a similar targeted approach is urgently required to support self-employed and freelance workers, especially those working in the creative, tourism and hospitality sectors, and also in the events sector, which in Ceredigion has been particularly hit this summer, with the cancellation of dozens of local agricultural shows, carnivals, weddings and eisteddfodau.

In the brief amount of time I have available to me this afternoon, I want to echo others in urging the Government to look again at helping the individuals and businesses who have been unable to access any support thus far. I welcome the UK Government's self-employed income support scheme, but, as has already been noted, almost 3 million self-employed workers were excluded from it, many of whom live in Ceredigion and work in a range of sectors and different circumstances. Composers and architects, newly employed workers and small business owners have all been excluded from support after falling foul of the scheme's criteria, perhaps by submitting PAYE details a few weeks after the cut-off date or because they have earned too much in previous years.

Another hurdle that needs to be addressed, which has punished far too many, is the requirement to prove that at least 50% of an individual's income comes from self-employment. That criterion especially disadvantages freelancers in the arts and creative sector, who draw their income from a range of sources. Just as devastating was the exclusion from both the coronavirus job retention scheme and the self-employed income support scheme of newly self-employed workers and those limited company directors who are paid through PAYE on an annual basis.

I am talking here about individuals and businesses who have seen their income completely disappear in recent months and who have little prospect of any work for months to come, and I therefore urge the Government to take action to address these issues, to extend the support to prevent a jobs crisis over the winter, and to look again at the rules so as to help those who have thus far been excluded through no fault of their own to get some support.

4.28 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Time is of the essence, so I am going to cut to the chase and give a couple of examples from constituents who have been in touch with me because they are ineligible for support because of the timing of when they became self-employed. One email I received was from Steve, a self-employed wedding videographer from Cambuslang, and it sums up the position many newly unemployed constituents have faced with the scheme. He told me:

“I took great comfort in Rishi Sunak’s words that ‘no one will face this alone’. However, because I only became self-employed in December, and despite the huge effect the crisis has had on my business—effectively putting me back to square one—I was unable to receive any SEIS because I hadn’t been self-employed for long enough.”

Lesley runs a photography business and lives in Rutherglen. She found herself ineligible for support under the scheme because, as a small limited company director, she took her income in the form of dividends. She told me:

“As my husband and I are both full-time directors, we are missing out on over £27,000 of support that we would’ve received had we been considered self-employed and treated equally. That money would’ve been retained in our company to pay for overheads and staff, rather than taken by us personally. It’s criminal that honest taxpayers are paying into a system which is excluding them in a time of crisis. It has gone beyond the issue of dividends, these companies need the same support as the self-employed.”

Lesley’s words not only demonstrate the devastating impact that ineligibility for SEIS will have on businesses; they highlight the mistake of bringing the scheme to an end prematurely. Self-employed people working in industries that are still in recovery from the pandemic, such as theatre, live events and productions, want the scheme to be extended for as long as is needed to protect their livelihoods.

This Government must start listening and act quickly to extend both the availability of grants under SEIS and the eligibility criteria for receiving those grants. Like other Members in the Chamber, I am a member of the APPG focused on the gaps in support. I call on the Minister to listen and to arrange a meeting so that we can discuss ways out of this and give options to the people who have been left behind.

4.31 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), as other Members have, on securing this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for enabling it.

The hon. Member was absolutely spot on: the self-employment income support scheme must be extended in time, it must be extended in scope, and it must be made retrospective. We have heard throughout the debate how upwards of 3 million people across the UK, including several hundred thousand people in Scotland, have found themselves excluded from the support that the Government have offered, and I add my own commendation to ForgottenUK, ExcludedUK and the Excluded UK APPG for the work they have done in highlighting those instances.

The excluded range far and wide in their scope. They include the self-employed seasonal workers who fall outside the scheme. They include freelancers, and directors

of small businesses remunerated by dividends. They include, in many cases, the newly self-employed—and of course let us not forget those who, because of the hard cut-off date of 19 March, missed out entirely on any support through the job retention scheme.

The hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) made a point about the exclusion of the newly self-employed. It is possible to support those in that situation. The Scottish Government did precisely that, using their own resources to fill the gaps. That additional response included £100 million to help the newly self-employed and £10 million to help support those in the events sector who were not able to access any other kinds of support.

Time prevents me from going much further on that, but the Scottish Government certainly flexed their budgets as best they could to spend beyond the allocations that came through the Treasury and Barnett. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) said eloquently, the Scottish Government lack the financial powers to extend support much beyond that, but it is not good enough to say, as the Minister did in response to the previous debate, “You’ve got tax powers; off you go and use them,” when the Chancellor prefers, quite rightly, to expand borrowing rather than increase income taxes to achieve that outcome.

The real harm here is the damage of exclusion—not just the immediate hardship, devastating as that is for those affected, but the effect it will have in hampering the economic recovery. I represent a constituency in the north-east of Scotland that has one of the highest start-up rates for businesses in the UK, let alone Scotland. It is no exaggeration to say that those small businesses—those enterprises; those risk takers—are absolutely the backbone of our economy. They include the start-ups, the spin-outs, the home enterprises, the lifestyle businesses, those who are working from home supporting the oil and gas and engineering sectors, the creative businesses, those who organise events, those involved in tourism, the musicians—in short, the creators, the innovators, the entrepreneurs: folk who roll up their sleeves, get their faces dirty and in many cases, as the hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith) said, put their homes on the line to do what they do. Those are the people who will drive the recovery. Hammering their finances and their ability to do all that they do best will not just impoverish them; in the long run, it will impoverish us all.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) said that providing support for the self-employed was complicated and that the Treasury had responded with alacrity. That much is true, but let me repeat the plea for the universal basic income. Surely it would have been better just to give everyone something than to try to cut red tape sideways or do as the Chancellor is often wont to do and obsess about the wrong details, leaving so many people excluded from support.

Many hon. Members have given eloquent personal testaments from their constituents to describe the gaps. We have heard about how pernicious the gender gaps in particular are. I acknowledge that the job retention scheme and the self-employed support scheme were fine as far as they went. I have welcomed and supported them; we have been bipartisan about that. The trouble is, although they are fine as far as they go, we know that they do not go nearly far enough. My plea to those on

the Treasury Bench is: acknowledge the gaps and the hurt they have caused the people who have been excluded; please agree to meet those who have been affected; and commit to doing, to quote the Chancellor, “whatever it takes” to help put that right now and for the future.

4.36 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I begin by congratulating a stellar cast of cross-party MPs, led by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), on securing this important, well-attended and over-subscribed debate, which the Backbench Business Committee granted in its wisdom.

As we have heard so powerfully, the Chancellor plans to cut off support for every self-employed worker in the country from October, no matter whether they are back at work or back under local lockdown. It is almost as if he thinks that the economic crisis that we are living through is somehow unrelated to the Government’s catastrophic failure on test, track and trace.

As we have heard throughout the debate, the people we are discussing—the self-employed and freelancers across the country—are the backbone of Britain’s economy. They are entrepreneurs, innovators, creators, risk takers and entertainers. They are not looking for a permanent handout, just the support they need to weather the crisis, get back on their feet and help build Britain’s recovery. Let us be honest: they have been an afterthought since the crisis began. Few of us will forget the despair they felt when the Chancellor promised to do “whatever it takes”, yet they found themselves out in the cold when the job retention scheme was first announced.

Without an outcry from the Opposition, we would never have had a self-employment income support scheme and more than 2.7 million people would have missed out on any support at all. Sadly, we do not have to imagine what that would have meant for those people because, if the anguish people felt when they were left out of the job retention scheme package was not bad enough, it was dwarfed by the total despair that 3 million people felt when the Chancellor announced the self-employment income support scheme and excluded them.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Many of those excluded from the schemes are in the creative industries, which contribute £111.7 billion to the UK economy. That affects not only them as individuals, but our future recovery.

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She is second to none in championing that issue on behalf of the people of Luton.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Although many groups are affected, I want to highlight those people on repeated short-term contracts. They do not fit into any category, but they have tax records. Surely, with a bit of imagination, people with a long-standing tax record could be helped.

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are practical ways through this. We do not pretend that it is not difficult, but the problems are not insurmountable if the Government would only show flexibility and willingness to listen. Millions of people’s hopes were crushed and their lives thrown into chaos and anxiety when they saw the ship was sailing and had left them behind.

I do not need to list the exclusions, but can we drop this idea once and for all that these are all super-wealthy people living it up on savings or shares? One of my constituents affected is a face painter and balloon artist. She has a simple job, which is to bring joy to children, and it is a job she loves doing, but it is a job she could not do when, like every other business, she went into lockdown and her business closed. Now, as she is trying to get her business back up and running, she finds the rule of six has once again crushed the party business. She is not super rich, she cannot do her job through no fault of her own and she has not had a penny of support since April.

We have heard other powerful examples, including from my hon. Friends the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous). There are so many examples we could give, but we have so little time and those people have even less time. “You will not face this alone”, the Chancellor said. Unfortunately, that was true in only one respect: they found each other. Through ExcludedUK, ForgottenLtd and other campaign groups, they have found a support network and managed to win a hearing in the huge cross-party support they have built in this House. So why is the Chancellor not listening? Why is he being so stubborn and inflexible? Why, even now, do Ministers refuse the basic request, which is just to meet and talk with people who are willing to come forward with ideas and practical solutions? The consequences of the Government’s failure to act are clear. Before the crisis began, around 15% of the workforce were self-employed. That figure has fallen sharply during this crisis. We heard powerful personal testimony on this from the hon. Members for Buckingham (Greg Smith) and for Warrington South (Andy Carter)—people who know what it means to take the plunge, take the risk and start a business.

We have heard powerful contributions on the arts and creative industries, not least from my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), who knows how to build an audience. We have heard other brilliant speeches, too, from my hon. Friends the Members for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and for Belfast South (Claire Hanna), from Conservative Members, such as the hon. Members for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), and from right across the Back Benches, from SNP and Plaid Cymru Members.

People might think that theatre is frivolous and all about singing and dancing and having a good time, but there is an important economic issue here. There is a reason central London is empty: the theatres are closed. The live music sector contributed £4.5 billion to the UK economy in 2019. We also see in the figures that some of the sharpest falls have been in construction, professional, scientific and technical services, and administration and support services. The Resolution Foundation has highlighted the sharp fall in these people’s earnings.

Labour has repeatedly called on the Government to listen to the concerns of the excluded. The shadow Chancellor has written to the Chancellor four times in recent months to highlight problems and suggest solutions, and we are always willing to meet, if only the Government were not so stubborn and unwilling to listen. The Federation of Small Businesses—experts in this area—has repeatedly called for a rescue plan for those left out of Government support. It is right to argue that those whose businesses

[*Wes Streeting*]

are often suffering through no fault of their own should not be left out of support. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) underlined, the Government do not understand Britain's self-employed. As a result, they have not valued them and because of that they have not provided them with the support they desperately need.

Before I was elected to this House, I spent just a year as a freelancer. It was one of the most terrifying professional experiences of my life—not knowing if I would get the next job, or if the invoice would be paid on time; worrying about things such as my cash flow, bills, my incomes, my outgoings. It is a stressful experience. I can speak for the self-employed and the excluded in my constituency—we have heard so many others speak for their constituents too—but none of us can truly understand what these people have been through this year, seeing other people receive support and themselves left behind.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Does the hon. Member agree that many freelancers, particularly in the creative industries, where it is really precarious and people live contract to contract, make ends meet with casual work, but that has totally dried up in the hospitality sector, in ushering and in box office work, for example? So they have absolutely nothing, and they are desperate and running out of savings.

Wes Streeting: That is absolutely true. One of the things I find most worrying about the trends we have seen is that—as if the inequality that has gripped this country was not bad enough entering the crisis—there have been two very different experiences of the pandemic. If people are in a job with stable employment and have had money coming in every month, they may well be one of the households who has contributed to a record rise in savings. They may well feel that their outgoings have gone down and that they can start planning for home improvements or a decent family holiday. However, if people have lost their job, or were self-employed or freelance and their business activity went completely down to zero, this has been an absolutely terrible experience. I do not think that any of us, unless we have been in that position, can really understand what those people are going through.

In conclusion, I say to the Minister, whose task in responding to the debate I do not envy—with the notable and honourable exception of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne), I think she has found herself pretty alone in this debate—that the cross-party calls for the Government to listen, even to meet, are overwhelming. The privilege of being able to govern comes with the responsibility of taking action, of seeing people through difficult times. We know that the Government have a difficult job. We would not have wished this pandemic on anyone, but so many of us on both sides of the House simply do not understand the Chancellor's intransigence, stubbornness and unwillingness to listen on this issue. So please, I beg the Minister, on behalf of millions of people across this country who have felt unheard or excluded: it is time to act.

4.46 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Kemi Badenoch): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on securing the debate and acknowledge

the many and varied contributions of right hon. and hon. Members across the House. The Government understand the crucial role that the self-employed, including members of partnerships and freelancers, play in this country's economy. They are part of the lifeblood of British enterprise and they, too, have suffered during the months of the pandemic. We have not forgotten them, but we recognise that we have not been able to help everyone in the country exactly as they would have liked. However, what the Government have done has been unprecedented.

Since the launch of the self-employment income support scheme earlier this year, designed and implemented at speed, claims totalling £7.6 billion have been paid out to support more than 2.5 million people. That represented a first grant and we did not stop there. As of 17 August, individuals have been able to claim for a second and final self-employment scheme grant. This further grant is open to anyone who meets the eligibility criteria and whose business was adversely affected by covid-19 on or after 14 July 2020. Importantly, applicants do not need to have claimed the first grant and they can receive the support while continuing to work.

The eligibility criteria have been raised by many Members. The criteria for the scheme are fair and rightly aimed at delivering support to those who need it most. Self-employed individuals, including members of partnerships, are eligible if they submitted their tax return for the tax year 2018-19, continue to trade and have been adversely affected by covid-19. To qualify, their self-employed trading profits must be no more than £50,000 and at least equal to their non-trading income. Many Members have said that this is not enough, so I would like to pick up on those points.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) said that there is a discrepancy between the 3 million who are not served and the 95% that the Treasury is talking about. We are talking about people for whom at least half their income comes from being self-employed. Ninety-five per cent. of those people are covered—that is about 3.4 million people who were mainly self-employed in 2018-19 who should be eligible for this scheme. The statistics show that the scheme has helped individuals across the UK in all sorts of different sectors. The extension of the scheme also means that eligible individuals whose businesses are adversely affected, from or after 14 July, can claim a second and final grant until 19 October. That is a taxable grant worth 70% of their average monthly trading profits paid out in a single instalment. Like the first grant, the second grant will be based on three months' worth of trading profits and capped at a maximum of £6,570. We are listening. Many different requests are coming through and we are trying to get a package that works, but that is balanced towards businesses, the consumers and the taxpayer.

Very many Members, including the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) and others, have raised the case for those working in the arts. We do recognise that. The Government know the challenge facing creative organisations and practitioners as a result of the pandemic and the disruptive impact of the necessary measures on cultural and creative activity. We have announced a £1.57 billion cultural recovery fund to protect the cultural sectors through the covid-19 pandemic, and that money will also go to help those

self-employed individuals who may not have been able to access schemes. None the less, as the economy opens, we believe that the situation will improve.

The self-employed, including freelancers, benefit not only from Government support specifically designed for their needs, but from schemes that we have created that will cover them, but that are not specifically targeted at them. They benefit, like so many others, from schemes such as bounce back loans, tax deferrals, rental support, increased levels of universal credit, mortgage holidays and other business support grants. The Government have spent £160 billion in support on interventions—as much as we have spent on the NHS and schools. That is alongside many other Government measures that will help support people and kickstart the economic recovery. The plan for jobs, for instance, will make up to £30 billion available to assist in creating, supporting and protecting jobs. I am pleased that hon. Members from across the House have acknowledged that the UK has one of the most generous self-employed support schemes in the world. However, today's debate is about the concerns and not about the successes.

Several Members, including the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), are particularly interested in the eligibility of individuals who receive income from dividends issued by their own limited company. Although the Government understand that some business owners choose to pay themselves in the form of dividends, it has not been possible to include them in this scheme. The Government have worked closely with stakeholders and carefully considered the case for providing a new system for those who pay themselves through dividends, but it would be so much more complex than other existing income support schemes. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) was very perceptive in raising the operational difficulties that it would entail. That is because, under current reporting mechanisms, it is just not possible for HMRC to distinguish between dividends derived from an individual's own company and dividends derived from other sources. Unlike existing support schemes that use information that HMRC already holds, such a scheme would require individuals to make a claim and submit information that HMRC may not efficiently or consistently verify. Such verification would be essential to ensure that payments were made to eligible companies for eligible activity.

Many Members have talked about comparing notes with Companies House. I do not think that people really understand just how difficult that would be. It is not simply a matter of looking at Companies House. It would require so many manual compliance checks: those people who need money would have to send information to HMRC, which would then need to be cross-checked. That would be extremely arduous and due regard would have to be given to the opportunity cost for that resource—where compliance activity would have to be reduced elsewhere. In other words, the many checks that Members are asking for would make it even harder for us to help those people who are most at need. It is important that the House—

Rachael Maskell: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kemi Badenoch: I am afraid that I do not have enough time. I am sorry I am not taking interventions.

It is important that the House understands that we have not taken a deliberate stance against support for company owner managers who pay themselves through dividends. This is about understanding and identifying what is operationally feasible, managing technical complexities and fraud risks and ensuring that other forms of Government support are delivered in a timely way.

Owing to the Government's reasonable concern to protect against fraud and error, it has also not been possible to include in the scheme those who are newly self-employed, which I know many Members have raised. That is because the most reliable and up-to-date record of self-employed income is from the 2018-19 tax records. Individuals can submit tax returns for 2019-20, but again there would be significant risks to the public if the Government relied on those returns for the scheme. That would create an opportunity for fraudulent activity through the returns—where no trading activity has taken place, where trading profits have been inflated to increase the size of the grant, and where trading profits have been reduced to below the £50,000 threshold in order to become eligible. The Government cannot expose the taxpayer to those risks, and the extension of the scheme would not mean that those concerns have been reduced.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), among others, raised the issue of parental leave. The treatment of self-employed parents is part of the scheme. As the Minister for Equalities, it is a subject close to my heart, made even closer by the fact that I recently returned from maternity leave. That is why I want to address the issue directly. Claiming maternity allowance or taking parental leave does not mean that trading has ceased and will not therefore affect a person's eligibility for the self-employment scheme, as long as the individual intends to return to trading after parental leave.

In addition, we have listened to feedback from stakeholders and made changes to the scheme to benefit self-employed parents. Those parents who were previously ineligible for the scheme because they had not submitted a tax return for 2018-19, or because their trading profits in 2018-19 were less than other trading income because they were taking time off work to care for their newborn or adopted child, can now claim through the self-employment income support scheme. Those parents who have become eligible can now make a claim for the first grant, the second grant or both depending on when their business may have been adversely affected by covid-19. Again, we have made those changes. Many Members of Parliament have written to us with requests about that.

We are aware of concerns raised on how the grant is calculated, particularly for those who have taken parental leave. As the Chancellor indicated, delivering a scheme for the self-employed is a very difficult operational challenge, particularly in the time available. We are trying to get the money to people as quickly as possible. There is no way for HMRC to know from income tax self-assessment returns why an individual's profits may have dropped in earlier years. However, to help those with volatile income in 2018-19, eligibility can be determined by profits in 2018-19 or by an average between 2016-17 and 2018-19. This scheme has been designed to deliver support as quickly as possible to millions of self-employed individuals by using information that HMRC already has. It is an enormous delivery challenge and we need to ensure that the changes do not risk delivery of the scheme.

[Kemi Badenoch]

The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and others expressed concerns about the impact a second wave might have on the future income of their constituents and talked about extensions. The scheme will remain open for applications for the second and final grant until 19 October 2020. Unfortunately, it is the case that some businesses will be affected by covid-19 far longer than others, and the Government will seek to support those businesses appropriately. As I mentioned earlier, many other schemes can provide support to specific businesses.

Let me end by saying that we are living in unprecedented times. The Government needed to deliver support at incredible speed, prioritising those schemes that could help as many as possible, as quickly as possible. Once the scheme launched, we have remained flexible. We have worked with stakeholders to consider carefully the case for making changes. We listened and, where possible, acted to bring individuals into eligibility.

The Chancellor has acknowledged that the Government have not been able to support everyone in the exact way that they would want, and we have been clear from the beginning that delivering the scheme for the self-employed is very difficult in the time available. They are a very diverse and wide mix of people, with a diverse mix of turnover and profits and monthly and annual variations even in normal times. In many cases, they have substantial alternative forms of income, too. Despite the challenges, the scheme has delivered what it set out to do successfully, providing at speed much-needed income support.

I will endeavour to make sure that ExcludedUK and ForgottenPAYE, which so many Members praised, receive a ministerial response to their letters, and I am happy to write to those Members who have other areas that they feel have not been addressed today. I thank so many Members for contributing to this debate, and I hope colleagues will support the Government as we now turn our thoughts, energies and resources to looking forward and planning for the recovery.

4.58 pm

Caroline Lucas: I thank all Members who have contributed to this debate and many others who I know wanted to do so, but could not because there was not time. All of us—even the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne)—want to see some changes to the scheme. There is no shame in saying that errors have been made and in trying to rectify them. That is all we are asking the Minister to do, yet I notice that she is still refusing to meet us. That is simply not acceptable.

The Minister says that the Government understand the crucial role that the self-employed play in our economy. No, they do not, otherwise she would not be suggesting that the self-employed just take more loans or they just have universal credit. She said that the Government have not forgotten them. The impression that has been left with people all around the country is that the Government have forgotten them. She says that the Government have not helped them as they would have liked. The Government have not helped this particular group of people at all.

I beg the Minister again. It is not enough to say that she will get a response—a much-delayed response—in writing to these excluded groups. They want a meeting. Why is that so much to ask? What happened to all the rhetoric about levelling up and the warm words about the Government putting their arms around everybody? Why are these people being excluded? Why are our innovators, our entrepreneurs and our risk takers being punished? This is not a party political issue. I am happy to commend the Government for the support they have put in place for the people who have been able to access it, but I want the Minister to acknowledge that some people have not been able to access it and to act now. I ask her again to meet with us.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered support for the self-employed and freelance workers during the covid-19 outbreak.

Axial Spondyloarthritis

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

5 pm

Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to hold this Adjournment debate. I have been a Member of this House for nine months. One of the great privileges of being a Member of Parliament is the opportunity to sit in this Chamber. The more astute observers might have noticed that I occasionally sit slightly awkwardly on these Benches. I admit that, sometimes, I slouch. One of my waggish Twitter correspondents recently juxtaposed a photograph of me and a photograph of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House reclining on the Treasury Bench, with the caption,

“great to see Gedling MP getting comfy in parliament and following in the footsteps of his fellow parliamentarian”.

I admire the Leader of the House very much—there is much to admire about him—but on this, alas, I do not seek to emulate him. Rather, my awkward posture arises from the condition I have: ankylosing spondylitis.

Ankylosing spondylitis is one of three sub-types of a type of inflammatory arthritis called axial spondyloarthritis. Axial spondyloarthritis is a chronic inflammation of the spine and joints. It is a painful and progressive long-term condition for which there is no cure. It is unlike conditions such as osteoarthritis, which is often associated with older people and the wear and tear that comes with ageing.

Axial spondyloarthritis, often abbreviated to axial SpA or AS, tends to present in the late teens or early 20s, with the average onset being just 24. In my own case, I first presented with symptoms at 16. As well as the stiffness and pain that one might expect from an arthritic condition, axial SpA is also associated with a range of complications and comorbidities, including uveitis and psoriasis. But it is perhaps the less visible complications of AS that can be the most debilitating. Many suffer from severe fatigue, as well as flare-ups and stiffness.

The condition presents itself in a period when most people are at a crucial stage of their lives, looking to build careers, start families and forge social relationships. I well remember my early 20s, when I was starting out in my first job after university, before I was prescribed the treatments that I am on now. When I got home after doing an eight-hour day in the office—something that most people would take in their stride—I crashed out on the bed, completely exhausted from a normal day at work.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. My husband also suffers from ankylosing spondylitis. Like the hon. Member, he started getting symptoms when he was about 20, and it took him about 10 years to get diagnosed. He was exhausted and struggling to work, and there were days when I had to help him put his socks on because he could not bend over. Does the hon. Member agree that the shocking delays in getting a diagnosis have a massive impact on quality of life, as do the difficulties that people have in accessing the right treatment? We need to improve awareness, particularly of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines on the treatments available.

Tom Randall: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. What I and her husband have experienced is sadly not a rare phenomenon.

The name axial spondyloarthritis will be unknown to many, if not most, people, but it is not uncommon. It affects about one in 200 of the adult population in the UK, or just under a quarter of a million people.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing forward this debate. I spoke to him this morning to seek his permission to intervene. He is aware of the massive eight-and-a-half-year delay in diagnosing this awful illness. I read an article in my newspaper back home in May about a young mum in Northern Ireland and her battle. We must all be determined to secure extra funding so that early diagnosis can happen, for adequate research into this life-changing debilitating disease, and for more support groups. In Northern Ireland, we have only two—one in Belfast and one in Londonderry—for a population of 1.8 million spread across the whole Province.

Tom Randall: In last night's Adjournment debate, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) said that she felt like a proper MP after the hon. Gentleman intervened on her in an Adjournment debate, and I echo those sentiments. He is completely right about the delay, which I will come on to in a moment, and about the role that support groups can play in showing that people are not alone in having the condition and in providing moral and practical support. I hope that now awareness has been raised, there will be more than two groups in Northern Ireland in due course.

As I was saying, there are a quarter of a million people with AS, which makes it more prevalent than multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's combined. Hon. Members may say, “Well, so what?” AS is incurable and it can be managed through medication, physiotherapy or exercise, but what makes it worthy of particular concern and debate is, as outlined earlier, the delay to diagnosis.

The symptoms of AS can be difficult to diagnose. I was passed between neurologists, geneticists and other specialists as various conditions were ruled out, before a rheumatologist finally diagnosed AS when I was about 20. I was very lucky that I had to wait only a couple of years before getting my diagnosis, but on average, there is a delay of eight and a half years between the onset of AS symptoms and diagnosis in the UK.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend's bravery in refusing to allow the condition to prevent him from gaining a place in this House and in attempting to draw more attention to the condition. How does the UK compare internationally in terms of the delay that various hon. Members have discussed between the onset of symptoms and diagnosis?

Tom Randall: I think in comparable countries such as Germany, France and Italy it is four, five or six years. Certainly, I think the delay to diagnosis in the UK is one of the longest in Europe, and that is something that needs to be remedied. Obviously, during that delay of eight and a half years, the condition can deteriorate considerably. One does not need to be an expert to understand the clinical, economic and human burden of delayed diagnosis.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on this timely debate. I have the honour to have the National Axial Spondyloarthritis Society based in my constituency, which is why I have some knowledge of the matter and am involved in the all-party parliamentary group on axial spondyloarthritis. I am sure that he will join me in praising its work and the extraordinary expertise that it brings. The danger is that if people do not have that association or contact, as many medical practitioners do not, it is difficult to diagnose, and therefore, heartbreakingly, young people suffer in pain and do not get a diagnosis when they should. Will he praise the NASS's work and agree that the NHS needs to communicate about it much more widely?

Tom Randall: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's work. He was an active member of the APPG long before I was in this place. On the issues that he identifies, on which I will go into more detail in a moment, he is absolutely right.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate. Before coming to this House, I was a physiotherapist. I ran an AS group for swimming and exercise and really know the benefits of that. The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy was in touch with me just this week to say that, because of covid, it is experiencing a real shortage of physios for the future and that 2,339 more physios are needed. Does he agree that we need to look back at the NHS work plan to ensure we have the right practitioners in place to support people like him?

Tom Randall: Physiotherapy can play a key role in managing the symptoms of AS, and we should all support the work that physiotherapists do with patients.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate on this important issue, and I pay tribute to his bravery in overcoming his condition and ensuring it did not prevent him coming to this House.

I have a family member, a friend and a constituent who suffer from AS, and I know well the problems with delayed diagnosis. My constituent Frances Reid started having symptoms 10 years ago. She went from doctor to doctor but did not get diagnosed. She was diagnosed only one year ago, and she now has pains across her entire body and needs joint replacements. She is in so much pain that she wakes up eight to 10 times a night. In contrast, a friend from Canada was diagnosed really early. With treatment and exercise, he leads a full life. What lessons can we learn from countries that have quicker diagnosis and what would my hon. Friend like to see here?

Tom Randall: My hon. Friend neatly explains the consequences of delayed diagnosis. A recent systematic review of the available literature found that, overall, patients with a delayed diagnosis of AS had worse clinical outcomes, including higher disease activity, worse physical function and more structural damage compared with patients who had an earlier diagnosis. Those with a delayed diagnosis also had higher healthcare costs and a greater likelihood of work disability, as well as a worse quality of life, including a greater likelihood of depression. Those are the consequences of not giving a prompt diagnosis.

We spoke earlier about the National Axial Spondyloarthritis Society, or NASS, which has identified four factors that contribute to delay: a lack of awareness among the public that AS might be the cause of their chronic pain; GPs failing to recognise the features of AS; referral to non-rheumatologists who might not promptly recognise AS; and failure by rheumatology and radiology teams to optimally request or interpret investigations. AS cannot be cured, but reducing the eight-and-a-half-year average delay in diagnosis will lead to better outcomes for those living with the condition.

The all-party group for axial spondyloarthritis, of which I am a vice-chair, suggests three steps that would help to reduce the delay in diagnosis. The first is the adoption of a local inflammatory back pain pathway to support swift referral from primary care directly to rheumatology. Low levels of referral to rheumatology from primary care represent one of the key barriers to achieving an early diagnosis of AS, and a national audit by the APPG found that 79% of clinical commissioning groups do not have a specified inflammatory back pain pathway in place, despite NICE guidelines recommending that.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): My hon. Friend makes reference to the NICE guidelines and the quality standard on spondyloarthritis not being implemented by 79% of clinical commissioning groups. Does he agree that that simply relates to primary carers referring directly to rheumatology departments, which is not a cost issue but one of professional education?

Tom Randall: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that neatly leads me on to the APPG's second proposal. I appreciate that the NHS is rather busy at the moment with public health messaging of one kind or another, but awareness of AS remains low and support for an awareness campaign would help to significantly raise the visibility of the condition not only among the public, but for example among GPs.

Thirdly, the APPG suggests encouraging the routine adoption of minimum service specifications across the NHS to help to reassure patients, particularly in the context of covid-19 and the difficulties many patients face in accessing key services during the recent lockdown. I would welcome any opportunity to meet Ministers separately to discuss those proposals in detail, if that were possible.

I will leave the last word to Zoë Clark, who addressed the APPG's last physical meeting in January. She told attendees how, after getting AS symptoms aged 20, incorrect diagnoses and the impact of her condition left her socially isolated and unable to live independently, at a time when she was trying to complete a demanding four-year master's degree in osteopathy. She said that living with undiagnosed AS was a frightening time and she ended up having to largely sacrifice her social life, due to the difficulties of balancing her degree with the pain and fatigue she regularly experienced.

No one should have to wait eight and a half years to find out what is wrong with them. I hope that we can begin to put that right.

5.15 pm

The Minister for Care (Helen Whately): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall) on securing this debate and on bringing the House's attention to the need for earlier diagnosis of axial

spondyloarthritis. May I say how important it is that he has brought his personal experience to the debate? The House should appreciate the courage he has shown to speak up about his own condition—something that cannot be easy, but that is an example. I feel strongly that all of us bring our own experiences to our work. That is one of the reasons it is important to have a diverse House of Commons. He has brought his own extremely painful experience to bear. I am confident that simply by doing so, he will make a difference for many others who suffer from this painful condition or who may do so in the future.

My hon. Friend rightly highlighted how critical it is for those with axial spondyloarthritis to get the right diagnosis and get it quickly, and to have their symptoms taken seriously by all healthcare professionals. It is clearly incredibly important to ensure that people can access the right sort of care at the right time, as it can prevent the potentially devastating impact of the condition on quality of life. I very much appreciate from his account and from others I have read how the condition affects people and their loved ones. We must do all we can to reduce the impact on people's physical and mental health, and I want to do so.

As my hon. Friend said, axial spondyloarthritis, which may also be referred to as axial SpA or AS, is a form of inflammatory arthritis that most commonly affects the spine. It is a painful long-term condition that currently has no cure. As well as affecting the joints in the spine, it can affect the chest, the pelvis and other joints, ligaments and tendons. Unfortunately, AS is often misdiagnosed as mechanical lower back pain or diagnosed late, leading to delays in access to effective treatments. It is estimated that approximately 220,000 people, or one in 200 of the adult population in the UK, have the condition.

As my hon. Friend said, the average age of onset is relatively young at 24, with patients having to wait on average eight and a half years before diagnosis at an average age of 32. That is clearly far too long to be waiting for a diagnosis, because left untreated the condition can lead to irreversible spinal fusion, causing severe disability. That makes a rapid referral to specialist care for those with any signs or symptoms crucial to treatment and to preventing those kinds of outcomes.

I recognise that AS can have a devastating effect on the quality of life of people who sadly go undiagnosed or misdiagnosed for far too long. This must get better. It is clear to me that early diagnosis and treatment are the key to preventing the development of other serious conditions further down the line and to improving the quality of life of those who suffer from this condition.

We recognise that one major reason for the delays in diagnosing axial SpA is a lack of awareness of the condition among healthcare professionals and the general public. That can take many forms: a lack of awareness of different types of arthritis; a lack of knowledge about the differences between inflammatory and mechanical back pain; or misunderstanding that AS affects similar numbers of men and women. Educational interventions to improve the level of awareness should lead to improvements in earlier diagnosis, and a range of materials are being produced to this effect. For example, an online training module on AS for GPs has been produced by the Royal College of General Practitioners.

In June this year, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence published its managing spondyloarthritis in adults pathway, which has been well received by patient groups and charities. This set out recommendations for healthcare professionals in diagnosing and managing axial SpA in adults. It describes how to improve the quality of care being provided or commissioned in this area, both through guidance and via an associated quality standard. I completely agree that we would expect providers and commissioners to be following the guidance and recommendations in this area so that we can improve the overall rate of earlier diagnosis. It is not only important that we have this guidance but that it will be within the pathway that the APPG and my hon. Friend have argued should be put into place in practice.

Munira Wilson: While I welcome the guidance and the pathway, what does the Minister suggest can be done to tackle the clinical conservatism that we quite often find among specialists even once the diagnosis is made? In my husband's case, the rheumatologists said to him, "You are far too young for us to move you on to the more advanced treatments", so he was living with huge amounts of pain on just very mild painkillers and steroids. It was only because we happen to live in London that we got him re-referred to a world-leading specialist in the field who then put him on anti-TNFs. He is now able to be the primary carer of our two very young, active children, which he could not do otherwise. Not everybody has that luxury, especially if they live in a rural area.

Helen Whately: The hon. Member makes a really important point, again drawing from her own personal and family experience, about the importance of awareness of what is the best treatment for this condition. If she would like me to do so, I am happy to take away her specific point and look into how we can address the need for improvement in the treatment, as well as her general point about needing a better pathway. I am also happy to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling, as he requested, to talk further about how we can make more progress on the right treatment for this condition, and awareness of it.

Coming back to the overall points about what we can do to improve the treatment, the NHS long-term plan set out our plans to improve healthcare for people with long-term conditions, including axial SpA. That includes making sure that everybody should have direct access to a musculoskeletal first-contact practitioner, expanding the number of physiotherapists working in primary care networks, and improving diagnosis by enabling people to access these services without first needing a GP referral—in fact, going directly to speak to somebody with particular expertise in the area of musculoskeletal conditions. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) intervened to make a point about the demands on physiotherapists. I have asked to be kept updated on progress on delivering the expansion of the number of physiotherapists in primary care networks and, more broadly, on the implementation of the NHS long-term plan. We do indeed need to make sure that we have sufficient physiotherapists to be able to deliver on that. I anticipate that that should have a positive impact on the problem of delayed diagnosis for a range of conditions, and particularly for this specific condition.

[Helen Whately]

While better education and awareness of AS should improve the situation, there is clearly more that we can and must do to understand the condition. The National Institute for Health Research is funding a wide range of studies on musculoskeletal conditions, including AS specifically. That research covers both earlier diagnosis and treatment options for the condition, so that we continue to build our understanding of good practice and improve both the treatment and the outcomes for those who have the condition.

In conclusion, I want to pick up on my hon. Friend's point about the importance of awareness and the call for an awareness campaign by the APPG, and I should of course commend the National Axial Spondyloarthritis Society for its work in this area. My hon. Friend mentioned that there is clearly a huge amount of public health messaging going out at the moment, but I hope the time will come when we can gain more airtime for this particular condition. However, the fact that we are having this conversation in the Chamber is in itself a step towards raising awareness of the condition, and so,

too, is all the work that is going on; that is important as well, because along with having the policy and the pathway, we must make sure it is put into practice.

I congratulate my hon. Friend again on bringing this subject to the attention of the House and on the work he is doing and the effect that this will have. I truly want to support him and to do our best for all who suffer from this condition and may suffer from it in future, to ensure that we achieve much earlier diagnosis and treatment and better outcomes for those with the condition.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I commend the hon. Member for Gedling (Tom Randall) on his courage in bringing such a personal and difficult matter before the House. Many people will not appreciate that that is a difficult thing to do, and I am sure that he will have made a difference to many by what he has done today. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am pleased that those in the Chamber are in agreement.

Question put and agreed to.

5.26 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 17 September 2020

DEFENCE

Legal Protections for Armed Forces Personnel and Veterans

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):

Today, I am announcing the publication of the Ministry of Defence (MOD) analysis and response to the 2019 public consultation on “Legal Protections for Armed Forces Personnel and Veterans serving in operations outside the United Kingdom”. A copy has been placed in the Library of the House and will be published on gov.uk.

There were over 4,200 responses to the consultation, with approximately 3,750 of respondents identifying as being a current serving member of the armed forces, or a veteran, or a relative of either. We also received approximately 20 responses from legal firms, interest groups and NGOs.

The analysis and response includes statistical data and identifies the key themes drawn from the textual comments provided by respondents. A MOD response has been provided for each question set to explain how we have reflected on these key themes, and also against the more general points made by respondents (points not directly linked to the questions and measures in the consultation). While the responses to the consultation proposals were overwhelmingly supportive, in order to ensure a balanced analysis, we have also referenced where respondents either did not support or expressed concerns about the proposed measures.

The analysis of the responses helped to guide our thinking and to shape the legal protections measures that we introduced on 18 March 2020 in the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill, to deliver our manifesto commitment to legislate to prevent vexatious claims being brought against the armed forces. I look forward to discussing this vitally important issue with the House on Second Reading of the Bill.

The attachment can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2020-09-17/HCWS456/>.

[HCWS456]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Manchester Arena Inquiry Terms of Reference: Amendment

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): On 22 October 2019 I announced an independent public inquiry to investigate the deaths of the victims of the 2017 Manchester Arena terror attack, and the terms of reference for that inquiry.

I have now received a request from the inquiry’s chair, Sir John Saunders, to make a small addition to the terms of reference. The additional text was not explicitly included in the original terms of reference due to the risk of prejudicing a future trial. That trial has now

completed and therefore I have agreed that it is in the public interest that the terms of reference should more fully reflect the scope of the inquiry’s investigations.

Therefore the following text will be added to section 1 (ii): “whether Prevent referrals should have been made in respect of Salman Abedi and/or any of his family members”.

The updated terms of reference can be found on the inquiry’s website at www.manchesterarenainquiry.org.uk.

I would like to thank Sir John Saunders for his continued work, and I pay tribute to the strength and courage of all those who will be sharing their experiences to ensure the inquiry can deliver its vital work.

[HCWS455]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Rough Sleeping

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick):

On 18 July, as part of the Government’s “Everyone In” initiative, we launched the next steps accommodation programme to support local authorities and their partners to prevent the nearly 15,000 people accommodated during the pandemic from returning to the streets. There are two parts to this funding: £105 million to pay for short-term and immediate accommodation and support; and £161 million to deliver 3,300 units of longer-term move-on accommodation this year—part of the £433 million total.

Today I have announced the allocations for the short-term aspect of this funding. 274 councils across England will be receiving £91.5 million to provide short-term and immediate accommodation and support to help vulnerable people to move on into sustainable accommodation. This funding will enable councils and providers to support individuals into the private rented sector, facilitate reconnections with friends and family, or maintain or extend emergency accommodation where necessary on a short-term basis, including where additional provision is required over the winter. Additionally, this funding will allow local areas to provide support for those with complex needs. We will continue to work with local authorities to allocate the remaining £13.5 million funding to enable them to tackle new or emerging challenges.

For the longer-term aspect of the fund, we are progressing our assessment of bids. This includes conducting due diligence regarding proposals and undertaking further negotiations where required to make proposals viable. Details on successful bids will be announced in due course. This allocation is part of a broader £433 million funding package which will provide 6,000 homes for rough sleepers over the course of the Parliament, the largest ever investment in accommodation of this kind.

Taken together, this funding will provide immediate reassurance to those housed as part of our “Everyone In” campaign and give longer-term assurance of more move-on accommodation—ensuring as few people as possible return to the streets.

Today’s announcement is on top of the £112 million rough sleeping initiative funding provided to councils earlier this year. We have also provided £3.7 billion to help councils to manage the impacts of covid-19, including supporting homeless people and a further £3.2 million in emergency funding for local authorities to support

vulnerable rough sleepers as part of a total package of almost £28 billion of support to councils, communities and businesses since March. An additional £23 million will be provided so that vulnerable individuals experiencing rough sleeping, including those currently in emergency accommodation as a response to covid-19, can access the specialist help they need for substance dependency issues. This funding, together with our pledge to enforce the Homelessness Reduction Act fully, demonstrates our commitment to making the most of this opportunity to transform the lives of some of the most vulnerable in society, and to ending rough sleeping for good.

[HCWS457]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Disability Benefits Operational Update

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): I would like to update the House on the Department's plans to implement the Supreme Court judgment in the case of Secretary of State for Work and Pensions v. MM, known as MM¹, into the personal independence payment (PIP) assessment process.

The Supreme Court judgment concerned the definition of "social support", when engaging with other people face to face, in activity 9 of the PIP regulations, and how far in advance that support can be provided.

I set out to the House on 23 July 2019 that we would carefully consider the full judgment before updating the House on our implementation plans. We have worked hard to implement the judgment quickly, but given the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on our staff resources and services, this has taken longer than we would have liked. We have also consulted Mind, the mental health charity, which intervened in the Supreme Court case.

We have now made the necessary changes to the way PIP activity 9 is assessed and these are reflected in revisions to the PIP assessment guidance (PIPAG) published today on gov.uk at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/>

[publications/personal-independence-payment-assessment-guide-for-assessment-providers/pip-assessment-guide-part-2-the-assessment-criteria](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/personal-independence-payment-assessment-guide-for-assessment-providers/pip-assessment-guide-part-2-the-assessment-criteria).

Despite the challenges, all DWP staff and healthcare professionals working for our assessment providers have been trained to apply the judgment. DWP will be applying the changes to all decisions from today. A FAQ will be deposited in the Library of the House.

On 23 July 2019, I also confirmed that the Department would be undertaking an administrative exercise to check whether claimants are entitled to more PIP as a result of the judgment. This is a complicated exercise and we are still planning our approach. This will be a substantial undertaking and will take some time.

I also want to update the House on the administration of severe disability premium transitional payments (SDP).

On 22 July 2019, we laid legislation to provide additional financial support for former SDP recipients who had moved to universal credit on account of a change of circumstances. As at 17 January 2020, we had already paid over 15,000 people, totalling more than £51.5 million.

The Universal Credit (Managed Migration Pilot and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2019 provide for the conversion of these transitional payments into transitional elements. This means that payments will be made through the UC system rather than manually, and all transitional protection will be subject to the same rules.

I will be signing a determination setting the conversion day to 8 October 2020 and will place a copy in the Library. This is when the UC system will have capacity to convert SDP transitional payments to transitional elements.

¹Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Appellant) v MM (Respondent)(Scotland) 18 July 2019 <https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/docs/uksc-2017-0215-judgment.pdf>.

[HCWS454]

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