

Thursday
1 October 2020

Volume 681
No. 112



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 1 October 2020

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

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

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

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Future UK-EU Relationship

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): What recent progress he has made on negotiations on the UK's future relationship with the EU. [906869]

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): What recent progress has been made on negotiations on the UK's future relationship with the EU in relation to financial services. [906871]

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the progress of the UK's negotiations with the EU. [906890]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): This week the ninth round of negotiations with the European Union is taking place. Since the last round of negotiations, as set out in the terms of reference, UK negotiators have continued informal discussions with the Commission in both Brussels and London. Differences, of course, still remain, but we are committed to working hard to reach agreement within the timeframe that the Prime Minister has set out. On financial services, we are still seeking to provide a predictable, transparent and business-friendly environment for firms that undertake cross-border business.

Tom Hunt: Stopping illegal crossings of the English channel must be a top priority, but my understanding is that, while we are still in the transition period, our ability to tackle this issue at sea in a robust way is significantly curtailed. Will my right hon. Friend reassure my constituents that a plan is in place to deal with this issue swiftly as soon as the transition period is over?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend raises a very important question that is of concern to constituents across the United Kingdom. We are actively looking at the steps we can take after we leave the transition period to ensure that we can both maintain our commitment to providing a safe haven for those genuinely fleeing

persecution and safeguard our borders. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has appointed Dan O'Mahoney to lead the United Kingdom's response in tackling illegal attempts to reach the United Kingdom.

Harriett Baldwin: Financial services are this country's biggest export sector. The Treasury Committee heard evidence from the Bank of England last month that equivalence could be a real problem, as it could be withdrawn quickly. Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster update the House on how negotiations on financial services regulations are going?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that question, as a former Treasury Minister and a very effective advocate for one of the most successful parts of our economy. The granting of equivalence is an autonomous process within the European Union, but we are confident that the high standards of financial services regulation in this country command confidence not only in the EU but elsewhere. It is also the case that it is in the interests of EU citizens and companies that they have access to the broad and deep capital markets in London and across the United Kingdom.

Justin Madders: Vauxhall Motors in my constituency exports the majority of its vehicles to the EU, but at the moment it does not know where it stands on rules of origin, and it does not look like that will be a priority in the next round of negotiations. Is it not time that the Government actually supported the UK automotive sector and made that a big priority in the next round of negotiations?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that question. If I may gently correct him, we do put the interests of the automotive sector front and centre. When it comes to rules of origin, diagonal cumulation or seeking a tariff-free and quota-free deal, that is at the heart of our negotiating approach, and the interests of his constituents are at the heart of the approach that Lord Frost is taking.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Yesterday, the Committee on the Future Relationship with the European Union was told by representatives of the UK chemicals industry that the cost to the sector of registering all chemicals under the new UK REACH system after 1 January will be about £1 billion because of the Government's negotiating decisions. Can the right hon. Gentleman explain why, in the midst of an economic crisis, the Government have chosen to impose such enormous costs and red tape, to no benefit whatsoever, on one of our most important and successful industries?

Michael Gove: The right hon. Gentleman is right that the chemicals sector is one of the many economic success stories of the United Kingdom. It is an inevitable consequence of leaving the European Union single market and customs union and freeing ourselves from the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the European Union that we have to have our own regulatory systems in place. They will enable us to be competitive and to take advantage of increased autonomy and independence in the future. One of the great prizes of leaving the European Union is that, when it comes to life sciences and other areas, we will be freed from the often anti-science and anti-innovation approach that the EU has had hitherto.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Government have said repeatedly, and I have heard the Minister say it many times, that they want a Canada-style deal. The Minister will know that Canada's deal with the EU—the comprehensive economic and trade agreement—contains many commitments on a level playing field, with both parties signing up to an entire chapter on workers' rights and two chapters on environmental standards. Could he try a straight answer to this question: will the Government be prepared to sign up to similar commitments in their deal with the EU?

Michael Gove: Absolutely—we are totally committed to ensuring that there can be reassurance on workers' rights and environmental protection. In a previous life, I was the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and as a result of our endeavours in the Environment Bill, the creation of the Office for Environmental Protection will mean that the UK is a world leader in upholding environmental standards. We will be upholding them to a higher level than the European Union does. What we cannot accept, however, is the European Union seeking to tie the United Kingdom to its laws and its jurisdiction. We are an independent country. The people voted in a referendum and a general election for us to reclaim our sovereignty. It is a pity that the Labour party thinks that the British people, when they have the freedom to choose, will choose lower standards. That is a lack of faith in this country and a lack of faith in democracy.

Policy on International Law: Strength of the Union

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the implications for the strength of the Union of recent differences in UK and Scottish Government policy on international law. [906870]

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the implications for the strength of the Union of recent differences in UK and Scottish Government policy on international law. [906875]

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the implications for the strength of the Union of recent differences in UK and Scottish Government policy on international law. [906893]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): Our Union is strong.

Tommy Sheppard: Given that the Cabinet Office refused to answer my written questions within the agreed timescales, will the Minister confirm whether his Department undertakes opinion polling and research into public attitudes to the Union? If that is the case, will he commit to putting that information in the public domain, since it is paid for by the taxpayer?

Michael Gove: First, I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for any delay in answering his written questions. I will take that up with the team in the Cabinet Office.

Of course, Government do undertake research, and that research reinforces to us the vital importance of serving every part of the United Kingdom effectively. The research that we undertake, for example, reveals

that, across the United Kingdom, people believe it is vital that Governments work together to deal with the current covid pandemic, and it is important that the good co-operation that we have recently enjoyed with the Scottish Government continues.

David Linden: It seems to be the approach of a slippery fish from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. How much money—UK taxpayers' money—is he spending on this private polling? Given that all public polling shows that there is an increase in support for Scottish independence, is it not correct that support for the Union is pretty weak at the moment and it is only a matter of time before Scotland becomes an independent country?

Michael Gove: Talking of fish, slippery or otherwise, one of the benefits of leaving the European Union is that we will be taking back control of our territorial waters. As the Scottish Government have pointed out, and as I know the hon. Gentleman is aware, there will be hundreds of thousands of new jobs and millions of pounds of new investment in the north-east of Scotland as a result of leaving the European Union. We do not need any opinion polling to tell us that that is a Brexit boost for the north-east. These are facts, and facts are chieftains that winna ding. Therefore, that is a ding-dong for the Union.

Anne McLaughlin [V]: This House has approved a Bill that allows the democratically elected Scottish Government to be overruled by the right hon. Gentleman's Government—happy to ignore laws they have not made, happy to break treaties and hungry to take power from everywhere they can. Alongside this appalling level of respect for the law and for Scotland, can I at least highlight one silver lining and thank him for the contribution he is making towards Scotland's independence?

Michael Gove: It is always flattering to receive compliments from colleagues across the House and across parties, and I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the gracious compliment that she pays me, but it is one that I am afraid I must gently turn down, because the Scottish Parliament will be receiving additional powers—a power surge—as a result of our departure from the European Union. That proves that devolution works. I think, and I think the majority of people in this House think, that devolution provides the people of Scotland with the best of both worlds—a strong Scottish Parliament and a strong UK Parliament. The Scottish National party, I am afraid, would force people to choose between being Scottish and being British, and I do not think that people should be forced to make that choice. They should, as Andrew Wilson, the author of the Scottish Government's growth commission report, recently pointed out, take pride in being both Scottish and British.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): If the right hon. Gentleman's Union is so strong, as he contends, can he tell me why he thinks Scottish independence is at a record high of 55% and has been at a sustained majority all year?

Michael Gove: The evidence of my eyes is that support for our United Kingdom across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in England, is strong. People recognise that it is the broad shoulders of the UK Treasury that have been responsible for helping to ensure

that we can borrow money cheaply and invest in the people of Scotland's welfare. In the conversations that I have had with Scottish Government Ministers, they always express their thanks and gratitude for the support the Treasury is giving. Whether it is the furlough scheme, eat out to help out or the support we have been giving to investment in hydrogen technology in Glasgow and in Aberdeen, the United Kingdom Government work with both the Scottish Government at Holyrood and Scottish local government to strengthen our United Kingdom. This has been a partnership for good for hundreds of years, and I know it will endure for many more.

Pete Wishart: The right hon. Gentleman will not produce his own opinion polls and he will not believe actual opinion polls, so maybe I will give him a few suggestions as to why support for Scottish independence is so high. He can see if he agrees with me in this. How about this? The power grab; the attacks on our democracy in Parliament; the contempt this place shows for our beautiful country; the constantly saying no to a majority of our people in Scotland; taking our nation out of the EU against our national collective will; the Prime Minister; him. Do any of them sound familiar to him at all?

Michael Gove: What an impressive list. What a pity that so many of the items in it sadly do not stand up to scrutiny. There is no power grab; there is a power surge as the Scottish Parliament receives additional powers as we leave the European Union. I think the hon. Gentleman used the phrase "contempt". Actually, one of the things that the beautiful country of Scotland has achieved throughout our time in the United Kingdom is improved productivity, improved competitiveness, improved employment and a stronger health service. Sadly, over the last 10 years, some things have blighted progress in Scotland: a declining level of educational attainment as Scotland has gone down international league tables; a failure to procure the basic ferries that will mean that Scotland's islands are connected to its mainland; and a failure to invest in the sick kids' hospital in Edinburgh and elsewhere. All of those are failures of the Scottish Government. It is a sad state of affairs when the United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Government, who have so often committed to working together, are faced with a situation where the Scottish Government have comprehensively failed in these areas, but we stand ready to help the people of Scotland do even better in the future.

Mr Speaker: Let us hope we can change the tune.

End of Transition Period: Ports

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to prepare ports for trade with the EU after the end of the transition period. [906872]

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): We have created a £200 million port infrastructure fund to provide financing support directly to ports. Furthermore, in July, to help the whole of the border industry prepare, we published a border-operating model for the border. An update will be published shortly, providing further details on policies and processes for the end of the transition period.

Neil Parish: Can the Minister assure me that, when it comes to imports, we can actually get our ports ready and get imports through? When it comes to exports, this is much more difficult. Of course, our French cousins have form on this. They have stopped British lamb and British beef in the past, when we have been part of the European Union. What reassurances can we have that we will be able to get exports out, so that our great farming, food and all businesses can export into Europe through France successfully?

Penny Mordaunt: We think it is sensible to agree reciprocal arrangements to allow road transport operators to move to, from and through the UK and the EU. We hope to secure those arrangements; we do not want unnecessary burdens to be placed on hauliers or other road transport operators. It is in everyone's interests that we do that.

Cross-Government Communications: Covid-19

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of cross-Government communications during the covid-19 outbreak. [906873]

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of cross-Government communications during the covid-19 outbreak. [906874]

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of cross-Government communications during the covid-19 outbreak. [906882]

The Paymaster General (Penny Mordaunt): We evaluate the effectiveness of Government communications. We constantly monitor and gain insights on public awareness and compliance from regular evaluations. This question affords me the opportunity to pay tribute to the Central Office of Information for its work not just on covid-19, but in preparation for the end of the transition period.

Grahame Morris: I thank the Minister for that answer. The Cabinet Secretary said that consistency commands confidence. We all heard the Prime Minister last week on TV telling us to work from home again where possible to slow down the second wave of coronavirus. However, according to the Public and Commercial Services Union, civil servants, who have managed stoically, even heroically, during the crisis to keep the machinery of state running while mainly working from home, have now been instructed to return to their offices in order for the Departments to hit arbitrary and outdated Cabinet Office targets. The Government are saying one thing to the country and something entirely different to their workforce. Can the Minister correct this anomaly?

Penny Mordaunt: I would be very interested to hear whether the hon. Gentleman has examples of that. As far as I am aware, there are certain areas of government that do require people to come into work. For example, some of the things that the Cabinet Office deals with have to be done in a secure environment, but we are following the same rules and guidelines that the rest of the UK workforce are. If he has specific examples that he wants me to look at, please send them to me.

Chris Elmore: Genuine concern has been expressed by the First Minister of Wales about the lack of engagement from the Prime Minister in terms of cross-Government discussions. May I raise a specific point with the Paymaster General? In England, people in restricted areas are able to travel into Wales to go on holiday. In Wales, people in a restricted area, such as in my constituency, are not allowed to travel to go on holiday. This has been asked of the Health Secretary and the Prime Minister this week. Could the Paymaster General, or indeed the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, urge the Prime Minister to say to people living in England, “If you are in a restricted area, please don’t go on holiday, please don’t travel into Wales, please don’t spread the virus”?

Penny Mordaunt: I will certainly take that up on the hon. Gentleman’s behalf. One of the benefits of the four nations working together is that we try to have as much consistency as possible and anticipate the impact of one set of rules on others, particularly communities living near the borders. I will follow that up for him and be in touch.

Fleur Anderson: Government communications this week have been quite shambolic. My constituents have been writing to me to ask for more clear messaging. The Cabinet Office has spent more than £50 million on untendered contracts for media and consultancies, yet Ministers have found it hard to explain local measures this week. It has been reported that mask wearing in shops is going down instead of up, in contradiction to communications, and more people have been told to get the flu jab yet cannot get one. How are members of the public expected to understand and keep up with the changes if Ministers cannot?

Penny Mordaunt: I fully recognise that the rules have got more complex—were Matt Lucas recreating the “Baked Potato Song” now, he would have to write an opera. They are more complex because we have regional and local lockdowns, as opposed to a blanket lockdown, and I think that is what the nation wants: we want to keep our economy going and to give people as much freedom as we possibly can, while fighting this virus. By and large, although the public are fed up, they are following the rules and they are working together, with collective responsibility, to beat this virus. All Members of this House can help to deliver the messages by putting them on their Twitter feeds and by communicating them. Only by working together are we going to defeat this virus.

Regional Economic Opportunity

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): What progress the Government has made on ensuring regional equality of economic opportunity. [906876]

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): What progress the Government has made on ensuring regional equality of economic opportunity. [906879]

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to promote regional economic growth to support recovery from the covid-19 outbreak. [906884]

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to promote economic growth to support recovery from the covid-19 outbreak. [906889]

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): What steps he is taking to promote regional economic growth to support recovery from the covid-19 outbreak. [906898]

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): What progress the Government has made on ensuring regional equality of economic opportunity. [906899]

Mr Speaker: I welcome Minister Lopez on her first outing at the Dispatch Box.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez): Thank you, Mr Speaker. This Chamber has changed in many ways since I went on maternity leave, but I am glad to say that the atmosphere has markedly improved for the better thanks to your warmth and good humour.

The Government are committed to levelling up opportunity in every corner of the United Kingdom, including as we respond to the economic impacts of covid-19. This work has many strands, from the winter economy plan to protect jobs and businesses to the lifetime skills guarantee and the investment we are making in major regional infrastructure. In the Cabinet Office, we are playing our part through our Places for Growth strategy, locating more high-quality civil service jobs beyond the capital so that the Government are better connected to all the communities we are here to serve.

Paul Bristow: I welcome my hon. Friend to her place on the Government Front Bench.

The Government plan to bring decision making “close to people”. Peterborough is a city just 50 minutes from London. It is on the east coast main line and has a bustling hospitality and retail sector and a hard-working and skilful population, and a university is coming. Can my hon. Friend think of a better place for a civil servant to work than Peterborough? Will she consider the city in the latest round of civil service moves?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his passionate pitch for his city. We completely agree with him that Peterborough, with its fantastic transport links, entrepreneurial people and broader economic offering, would be a great place for a new Government hub. That is why we are locating one at Fletton Quays, where I hope to visit next week to demonstrate our commitment to locating more civil service roles in the regions and nations of the UK.

Antony Higginbotham: Constituencies such as mine have for too long been left behind, with London taking the lion’s share of infrastructure and small and medium-sized enterprise finance. That means that good, viable businesses in Burnley are left to grow at a slower speed than if they were elsewhere in the country. Does my hon. Friend agree that development banks, which are such excellent mobilisers of capital, could prove a solution to that problem?

Julia Lopez: My hon. Friend has been a fantastic champion of Burnley’s small businesses since his election. The Government are determined to reduce imbalances

in access to finance for smaller firms. Some 83,000 SMEs outside London have already benefited from programmes run by the British Business Bank, which is the UK's Government-owned economic development bank. Infrastructure is also central to our economic plan, providing opportunities for SMEs throughout the supply chain. We will publish a national infrastructure strategy, including our ambitions on levelling up across the whole UK, later in the autumn.

Mark Logan: Pubs and restaurants in Bolton have been harder hit than those in nearly any other of the UK's 650 constituencies, largely due to an unfairly enforced economic lockdown. Will my hon. Friend assure me that the Government are doing everything they can to support businesses in Bolton? I urge the Government to align our restrictions with those in the rest of the region.

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. It is an incredibly challenging time for constituents in Bolton North East and in many other areas of the country, and I know they will appreciate his advocacy. Local lockdown decisions are determined following advice from national medical experts, local leaders and directors of public health, in accordance with data provided by the Joint Biosecurity Centre. We consider case rates, trends in the data and causes, but also local geography, before making judgments about whether restrictions are needed. We of course keep all these measures under constant review.

I share my hon. Friend's concern for the hospitality sector, and I have spoken to the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), about the taskforce he is setting up as Business Minister to work through some of the issues for the night-time economy in particular.

Joy Morrissey: In Beaconsfield, many of my constituents work in aviation or other sectors directly affected by covid-19. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that anyone who finds themselves unemployed due to businesses having to adapt or close because of covid-19 can find the education and qualifications they need for the future?

Julia Lopez: The new Member for Beaconsfield is another very refreshing change in this Parliament, and I thank her for her question. She might wish to point her constituents to the Chancellor's plan for jobs, which is designed to help unemployed people find work through training to develop their skills. That support includes incentive payments for employers to hire new apprentices and funding to triple the uptake of traineeships. The Prime Minister also set out his commitment this week to lifelong learning. As part of that, adults who do not have a full level 3 qualification will be able to take level 3 qualifications in high-value subjects for free from next April.

Paul Howell: I also welcome the Minister to her place. Economic growth in the regions will be maximised by the public and private sectors working in partnership. Currently, there are 92,000 civil servants in London, 56,000 in the north-west and only half of that in the north-east—and two thirds of those are in Newcastle, leaving negligible numbers in Durham and the Tees Valley. Does she agree that any relocation of Government

Departments to the regions can be a critical lever and that it is important that they do not all now just move to another metropolitan centre? It is imperative that Departments such as the Department for Transport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government consider locating to areas such as Sedgefield, which sits on the intersection of the Tees valley and County Durham and has all the rural challenges, but also has excellent connections to London.

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He also makes a passionate pitch for his constituency. The Government are committed to levelling up across the UK, ensuring that this Administration are much less London-centric. The Places for Growth programme is working with Departments on their relocation plans ahead of the spending review and continuously exploring opportunities to build clusters of civil servants across the whole UK. I welcome my hon. Friend highlighting what Sedgefield has to offer, and I am sure the north-east will benefit from the relocation of civil service roles.

Matt Vickers: There is an amazing world of opportunities, talents and skills outside London, and nowhere more so than in Teesside. We are on the up. Our airport is reborn. We are leading the green technology revolution. We have the brightest and best entrepreneurs, manufacturers and exporters. We are fighting for a freeport and gagging for growth. Could my hon. Friend confirm not if but when civil service jobs from Whitehall will make their way to Teesside?

Julia Lopez: Another very passionate case—perhaps a bit too passionate. It is incredible to see how firmly Teesside has been put on the map over the past few years because of its Mayor and hon. Friends in this place, and it is great to see my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) join their number. The Government are committed to relocating 22,000 civil service roles out of central London within the next decade, with the majority going to other regions and nations of the UK. We will continue to engage with the Mayor and others to ensure that the north-east benefits from our ambitions.

Government Contracts: Covid-19

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of (a) supplier performance and (b) value for money achieved under Government contracts issued in response to the covid-19 outbreak. [906877]

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of (a) supplier performance and (b) value for money achieved under Government contracts issued in response to the covid-19 outbreak. [906878]

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of (a) supplier performance and (b) value for money achieved under Government contracts established in response to the covid-19 outbreak. [906888]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Julia Lopez): The private sector has played a vital role in the Government's response to the covid-19 outbreak, such as delivering over 15,000 ventilators in under four months to support the NHS and changing production facilities

so that by December we expect that UK manufacturers will be meeting 70% of the demand for personal protective equipment, compared with just 1% before the pandemic. Being able to procure at speed has been critical in providing that response. However, we have been clear that all contracts, including those designed to help tackle coronavirus, must continue to offer quality public services and achieve value for money for taxpayers.

Debbie Abrahams: The Minister's response says more about the Government's failure to implement the recommendations of Operation Cygnus than it does about their ability to implement an effective response to the pandemic. The Government have bypassed the NHS, outsourcing billions of pounds-worth of contracts in back-room deals with their mates that then failed to deliver—failed to deliver PPE that fits on time, failed to deliver the testing capacity that is needed and failed to deliver a national tracing programme that contacts everyone affected. The Government's actions are not just incompetent; their failure to comply with transparency obligations is potentially unlawful. Therefore, will they stop wasting more taxpayers' money defending the indefensible and provide my lawyers with the information on these contracts that my co-complainants and I have requested?

Julia Lopez: The DHSC has procured over 32 billion items from UK-based manufacturers and international partners—an incredibly difficult task at an incredibly difficult time. We received over 24,000 offers of help from 15,000 individual suppliers, and all were prioritised according to volume, price, clinical acceptability and lead time, meaning the time from an offer being accepted by the DHSC to a supplier delivering the items. Of course I am happy to look into any offer of help from a business that was found wanting, but I refer the hon. Member to the view outlined by the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who praised the Department's response to procurement.

Ruth Cadbury: Track and trace services, when led by experienced public health teams, have been more effective, and at lower cost, than the outsourced system in NHS England. In Wales, the contact rate for track and trace is over 90%, whereas in England, it hovers at a little over 70%. When will the Government recognise the importance of value for money and redirect their multimillion-pound procurement towards long-established local health networks?

Julia Lopez: It has been an extremely challenging time, as I have said, and the private sector has been a valuable partner in everything we have done. The contracts awarded have been extremely valuable in ensuring that we can deliver capacity at pace. If the hon. Lady has any concerns, I am happy to look into them.

Ian Byrne [V]: The Minister will be aware that the Competition and Markets Authority is now investigating the proposed merger of two outsourcing giants in the facilities management industry: Mitie and Interserve. Given that both companies hold Government contracts worth over £2 billion, what steps is she taking to review the implications of the merger, considering the clear risk to public funds, as well as to the terms and conditions and future employment of over 80,000 workers?

Julia Lopez: I am afraid that the Competition and Markets Authority is not within my remit, but I am happy to look into any concerns, because contracts and procurement performance are within my remit, and I want to ensure that we receive value for money for the taxpayer in everything we do.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I understand that the Government's contract with Sitel for test and trace is renewed on an eight-week basis, with a two-week notice period. The next deadline for renewal is this Sunday, 4 October. Will the Minister publish all the renewal dates for Sitel and Serco's contracts, and will she explain what justification the Government could possibly have for continuing with the failed privatised, centralised model of test and trace, by contrast to the effectiveness of local councils and public health teams, who are denied the full funding that they require?

Julia Lopez: As I have said, without the private sector, we would have struggled to deliver the testing capacity that we now have. Serco and Sitel are approved suppliers on the Crown Commercial Service's contact centre framework, and they gain their places through fair and open competition via *Official Journal of the European Union* procurement. Value for money and capability were part of the assessment criteria. But if there are other suppliers that would bid well for the contracts, we are happy to look into that.

Helen Hayes: Government spending on consultants has risen sharply in recent years, up by around £1 billion since 2016, with contracts worth at least £56 million awarded without competitive tender during the covid crisis. Does the Minister agree with her colleague Lord Agnew that the Government are reliant on consultants who are providing poor value for money because of their vastly inflated cost when carrying out services that could be conducted more efficiently in-house? If so, can she tell the House when the review into current controls and spending limits will begin, and when it will report?

Julia Lopez: Consultants play an important role in what the Government try to achieve on particular projects, but the hon. Lady is right: we have concerns about the cost of those consultants and whether we are too reliant on them, and we are actively reviewing that. I am working with my colleague Minister Agnew on these matters.

Transition Period: Visas

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with his counterparts in the EU on visa arrangements for British workers at the end of the transition period. [906880]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): We want to see visa-free arrangements for tourists and short-term business visitors as part of our future relationship with the European Union. Temporary entry for business purposes, or mode 4, sets out terms under which a business person can move between trading partners. On short-term business specifically, we are only seeking to lock in on a reciprocal basis arrangements that the UK already offers to third-country nationals.

Sir George Howarth [V]: I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for that answer. He will be aware, because I wrote to him about it, that some European Union countries, such as Portugal, require people to be on a professional register before they can be issued with a visa to work in that country on a short-term contract. Can he give me some assurance that that problem will be resolved before the end of the transition period?

Michael Gove: The right hon. Gentleman raises a very important question. He is an assiduous advocate for workers and for his constituents. We are working in these negotiations to ensure that, whether in Portugal or elsewhere, those who have skills have the opportunity to work in the European Union to the benefit of both. I am really grateful to him for being so vigilant on their behalf.

Strengthening the Union

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to strengthen the Union. [906881]

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): The Government have an unwavering commitment to our Union, as demonstrated by the £190 billion of measures that the Chancellor has already introduced to protect jobs throughout the UK. We are strengthening our Union even further by taking steps to ensure the free flow of trade and ensuring that powers return from the EU directly to the devolved Administrations. In addition, we are committed to concluding the review of intergovernmental relations, to ensure that our structures are improved and adaptable for our Union, both now and in future.

Sally-Ann Hart: The rich tapestry of our precious Union is woven together by the threads of our individual cultures, languages, traditions and values, creating the most successful political, social and economic Union in the world. So what steps is my hon. Friend taking to reach out to the devolved nations to show how much we value them as part of our great United Kingdom, on a cross-party basis?

Chloe Smith: My hon. Friend makes the point extremely well. We have confronted the recent pandemic as one United Kingdom and have achieved more together than we could have done as individual nations. That unity has been reaffirmed through the joint statements of 25 September. As I said, we have taken significant steps to protect the economy, providing billions of pounds to protect lives and livelihoods in all parts of the UK. As I mentioned in my earlier answer, the way in which we are taking our intergovernmental relations forward will show how committed we are to those relationships and to making sure that they are positive today and tomorrow.

Local Elections: Registration and Participation

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure high levels of (a) electoral registration and (b) participation in the May 2021 local elections. [906883]

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): We will be working safely with the Electoral Commission to support its voter registration and public information campaigns ahead of the next elections next May, as we do for every election. Together, we will be able to ensure that people can participate in the polls safely and confidently and in a way of their choice, whether by post or proxy or in person.

Nick Smith: It is a great pity that this spring's elections were postponed because of covid. To reduce uncertainty about the management of our democracy next May, how seriously are the Government considering all-postal voting, which could be a good way to boost safe participation in the coming elections?

Chloe Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He and I both know that he is an experienced hand at election matters. I welcome his scrutiny of this question because it is important. We want the elections in May next year to go ahead, because it is extremely important that we are able to continue with our normal way of life as a country, rather than seeing any further postponement of important elections.

I do not take the view that all-postal elections would be a wise move, however, for the following reason. It is principally that we have already seen around the world that elections can be run in person safely during this pandemic. We are confident that that can be the case here as well, and I am doing all the work necessary with the electoral community to make sure that is so. Indeed, I published evidence of that only recently, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman has already seen.

Furthermore, it is an important part of our elections that people can actually choose the way in which they vote—as I have already said, by post, by proxy or in person. We think that it is important to maintain that and that there is not a good enough reason to do otherwise.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): This week, we have seen thousands of Czechs who are quarantined at home participating in regional and Senate elections by voting at drive-in polling stations. From the Minister's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), it is clear that this Government have run out of ideas about how to make sure that the May 2021 elections are both covid-secure and innovative to ensure that voter participation is high at these elections. Is it the case that this Government have really just run out of steam?

Chloe Smith: No, it is the hon. Lady with those reused arguments.

Miners' Strike 1984-85

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on the establishment of a commission on the policing of the 1984-85 miners' strike. [906885]

The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution (Chloe Smith): I am aware that this question was also put to the Home Office earlier this week. I can confirm that there are no plans to establish an independent inquiry into the policing of the miners' strike in 1984-85 in England and Wales.

Ian Lavery [V]: More than 11,000 UK miners were arrested during the bitter dispute of 1984-85, and I declare an interest as I was among that number. There were 6,000 put on trial and 7,000 injured, while many were blacklisted—never ever to work again—and others died with an unjust criminal record. There was an independent review in Scotland, where miners convicted in the Scottish coalfield are set to be pardoned. Justice is being served. Can the Minister say if the miners in the UK can expect a pardon from the Government, and does the Minister acknowledge that a full inquiry into the policing of the miners' strike is the only means of justice for those miners who were the backbone of this nation?

Chloe Smith: I admire the passion and experience with which the hon. Member speaks. I will say straight off that the report produced for the Scottish Government is a matter for them. I understand that it has reported, but that is not for me to comment on.

The core point is this: since the strike of 1984-85, there have been very significant changes in the oversight of policing at every level. I am not sure that it would be worth the efforts of an inquiry to be able to make sensible comments on that, given the quantity of change, and that the focus should instead be on continuing to ensure that the policing system is the best that it can be. I can also add that all the 33 files the Home Office had held relating to that strike have now been transferred to the National Archives and that these are available for the public to review.

Public Service Changes

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): With reference to the speech he made at the Ditchley annual lecture on 27 June 2020, what progress he has made on implementing changes to the public service. [906886]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): Since the Ditchley lecture, I have been working closely with our colleagues in the civil service to ensure that the Government can deliver our ambitious agenda for this country. Like all institutions, the civil service and, indeed, Ministers must constantly seek to improve how they deliver, and our plans for reform for both civil servants and Ministers will be set out in due course.

Richard Fuller: There is a vital democratic connection between the manifesto commitments that we stand on at elections and the formulation of policies to enact those commitments. In what ways is my right hon. Friend looking to make better use of data and to have better interpretation of data in that vital task?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. One of the things that we need to do is to transform the way in which we use data in the public sector in order to best deliver for all voters. It is crucial to democracy that Government fulfil their manifesto commitments. We are currently advertising for a new Government chief digital officer to help to lead that transformation. If my hon. Friend were not in his current role, then he would be an ideal person to fulfil that very important job.

Covid-19: Discussions with Devolved Administrations

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What recent discussions the Government have had with the devolved Administrations on tackling the covid-19 outbreak. [906887]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): We and the devolved Administrations recently published a joint statement showing our commitment to work together to protect the health of our citizens, to protect our communities, and to enhance our economic recovery. Ministers from all the devolved Administrations attended Cobra on 22 September following bilateral discussions with the Prime Minister the day before. Of course I have regular meetings with the First Ministers of all the Administrations.

Sir Desmond Swayne: If the effort against covid is a war, then the first principles are the selection and maintenance of the aim. In March, the aim was to flatten the curve and protect the NHS. Has it changed?

Michael Gove: No. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, as a distinguished Territorial Army officer as well as a very successful former Defence Minister. Yes, our aim is to flatten the curve, to protect the NHS and to save lives.

Topical Questions

[906929] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Michael Gove): On Monday, the Paymaster General and I were in Brussels for the latest meeting of the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee, which I co-chaired with my EU counterpart, Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič. We made progress on a number of areas, and specialised committees will meet in the coming weeks to conclude further work.

Vicky Foxcroft [V]: The Government have confirmed that they are adopting a public health approach to tackling youth violence. This involves a cross-departmental, multi-agency approach, and a long-term strategy over a minimum of 10 years. Can the Minister therefore offer any explanation as to why the serious violence taskforce has not met for over a year?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this question. She has been a consistent voice in this House, and beyond it, for new, imaginative and effective ways of dealing with the scourge of youth and gang violence. Her attention and focus on this issue has helped to improve the work of Government and others. Some of the issues that she mentions are subsumed within the work of the broader criminal justice taskforce that the Prime Minister has set up. I will ask the Home Office to make sure that there is an opportunity for her to be briefed on its work, and if there is more that can and should be done, then we will benefit from her involvement.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): We are told that the two sticking points in the Brexit negotiations are state aid and fisheries, but we have now learned from a leaked letter—not from Ministers—that cars made in Britain are likely to face tariffs from 1 January next year, deal or no deal. Detailed negotiations on automotives or on crucial rules of origin requirements are not on the agenda for the crunch talks taking place this week, and there are no further rounds of negotiations planned. So can the Minister tell the House at what point precisely do the British Government give up on the British car industry?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady, not least during the time when she was Chairman of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, was a strong champion for manufacturing, and indeed this Government are strongly committed to manufacturing, not least in the automotive sector. Of course we are fighting for the best possible deal on rules of origin and diagonal cumulation, and we are seeking a no-tariff and no-quota deal with the European Union. That has always been our consistent aim.

Rachel Reeves: The complacency is staggering. It is the responsibility of the British Government to stand up for British industry. The letter from the Government's chief negotiator says that they “obviously cannot insist on” tariff-free trade. But our Government should be insisting on the very best deal for car manufacturing and for British industry. There are 150,000 jobs that depend on car manufacturing. I can tell this House that a Labour Government would do that. Will the Minister get out of first gear and prioritise and protect the jewels in the crown of British manufacturing? Will he agree to urgently meet representatives of the automotive sector and the trade unions Unite and GMB to ensure that we do not do away with this vital industry and the vital jobs that depend on it?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady knows how to wound with her reference to getting out of first gear. I suspect that she knows, as many Members know, that it took me seven attempts to pass my driving test and therefore I am not an expert—

Rachel Reeves: Did you check your eyesight?

Michael Gove: I took my final successful test in Aldershot, not County Durham, but still.

On the hon. Lady's serious and substantive point, she is right and I will happily meet representatives of the manufacturing sector, including representatives of the trade unions. It is our aim to secure tariff-free access. Officials from the Cabinet Office talked to Ford Motor Company only earlier this week to make sure that we could support them through the end of the transition period. The hon. Lady is right to emphasise the importance of the sector, not least as we move from internal combustion engine manufacture and towards electric and other zero carbon vehicles.

[906930] **Rob Roberts** (Delyn) (Con): We have heard from the First Minister of Wales in the past few months that he has had no engagement or meetings with the Prime Minister about covid. He is clearly trying to make out that there has been no contact with the UK Government. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that there has been significant discussion between the UK

and Welsh Governments? What discussions has he had recently with the devolved Administrations about the upcoming end to the transition period?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. As I said earlier, there was a Cobra meeting just last week at which the First Minister of Wales was an important and constructive participant, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister talked to the First Minister prior to that. I enjoy my regular conversations with the First Ministers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. I think I have probably spoken to the First Minister of Wales more often in the past couple of months than I have to my own mum and dad, and that is a reflection of the high regard in which I hold the First Minister of Wales, not of any lack of regard for my parents in Aberdeen.

[906931] **Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): Last week the right hon. Gentleman told the House that the two IT systems that will be crucial to enabling goods to move across the border from 1 January—namely the goods vehicle movement service and smart freight—“are in operation.” Later that day, the chief executive of the Road Haulage Association wrote that these were “absolutely not in operation.” I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman would like to clarify what he meant.

Michael Gove: Yes of course. I have found that the Road Haulage Association, valuable organisation though it may be, has not always necessarily been the most constructive partner at every stage in the conversations that we needed to have. Nevertheless, I think it is the case that we are having conversations with it and others to ensure that these and the other IT systems that we need for the end of the transition period are in place.

[906941] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to ensure that businesses in Basildon and Thurrock are ready for the end of the transition period, regardless of the outcome?

Michael Gove: The Government's campaign to ensure that businesses are ready for the opportunities and to meet and master the challenges that come at the end of the transition period has seen an uptick in the preparedness of UK business, but there is much more that needs to be done. We published our reasonable worst—case scenario last week to demonstrate the consequences if we do not all work together to ensure that we are ready for 1 January.

[906942] **Joy Morrissey** (Beaconsfield) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend outline what steps are being taken to deliver the much-needed Whitehall reforms that he outlined in the Ditchley speech earlier this year to ensure that the Government can deliver effectively for all corners and communities of the UK? May I welcome his call for the civil service to return to Whitehall?

Michael Gove: We are undertaking a number of strands of work. One is making sure that we can more effectively disperse key decision makers across the UK—to Teesside and other parts of the UK—and my colleague Lord Agnew is leading work to ensure that new senior civil service posts are located outside central London. Work requires to be undertaken to make us more transparent and

effective in how we deliver for all parts of the UK. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), we are doing more to use data and digital tools to make transparent the work of Government.

[906944] **Paul Howell** (Sedgefield) (Con): As was discussed in the Blue Collar Conservatives session in Sedgefield, opportunities for UK growth post-covid and Brexit are aligned by doing everything that we can to support Made in Britain. Will my right hon. Friend support that agenda and encourage HS2 in particular to do so rather than placing orders for steel and bridges overseas? We have great companies in Sedgefield such as Ebac, Cleveland Bridge, Hitachi and indeed Roman showers, of which David Osborne, one of the joint chairs of Made in Britain, is the managing director. I invite my right hon. Friend to come with me to visit Roman and others to see for himself the passion behind a Made in Britain agenda?

Michael Gove: Hon. Members for Sedgefield have always been powerful advocates for the north-east, but none more so than my hon. Friend the current Member. He is absolutely right that Teesside, with Sedgefield in particular and County Durham as well, is at the beating heart of the economic future of this country. We need to invest in the next generation of manufacturing excellence; it is the young men and women of his constituency who will be at the cutting edge of that revolution, and they have no better advocate for manufacturing, for growth and for smarter government than him.

Mr Speaker: I come now to the hon. Member for Bedford, whose birthday it is. Happy birthday, Mohammad Yasin.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has said that over his dead body would he accept United States food standards, so will he take the opportunity to protect our farmers and keep our food clean and safe in a post-Brexit future by enshrining our standards in law when the Agriculture Bill returns to this place?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question and I wish him a happy birthday. I also take the opportunity, while at the Dispatch Box, to wish my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) a happy birthday. It is her birthday as well today, and I hope that she has an enjoyable day and a relaxing weekend. On the broader question of food standards, it is already the case that in law we uphold very high animal welfare, environmental protection and food safety standards, and there will be no compromise on those.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Like many small and medium-sized enterprises, Hydro Cleansing in Carshalton and Wallington provides very specialist services that are not available on the open market, yet it still has trouble getting access to public sector contracts. What more can my right hon. Friend do to ensure that SMEs such as Hydro Cleansing can get access to those contracts?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of our economy, and in Carshalton and Wallington there are a number of SMEs, effectively represented by him, who deserve a squarer go when it comes to getting access to Government contracts. We need to simplify the process of procurement, and outside the European Union we can do precisely that.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): Given that today we have heard a number of very positive comments from Ministers about the effectiveness and the quality—sorry, I am trying not to laugh here—of the delivery of test and trace by the private sector, is the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster aware of the recent survey that showed that 74% of the public want those services delivered by local public health teams, which have proven to be far more effective in stopping the spread of the virus?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady makes an important point. The important thing to say is that, when it comes to the delivery of all public services, what is right is what works. We need to ensure that we have an effective mix of public sector and private sector delivery. It is the case that we would not have been able to increase testing capacity to the current levels that we have without the involvement of the private sector, and it is central Government, local government and the private sector working effectively together that ensures that we can both test, and track and trace, in the way that is best guaranteed to keep our respective constituents safe. So we look at the evidence, but we also ensure that we do everything we can to have the innovation of the private sector and the compassion of the public sector working hand in hand.

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend not agree that it is in the interests of both Unions—the EU and the UK—for the EU to return to the negotiating table, end its games of brinkmanship and sign the deal?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One reason that David Frost is in Brussels today is to seek to ensure that we can get the best possible deal. Progress has been made in a huge number of areas, but, as the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) pointed out earlier, there are still one or two sticking points—on state aid, the level playing field and fisheries. With good will on both sides, we can achieve resolution. I certainly know that the Government are determined to do that, but of course we have clear red lines that we will not cross. It is vital that we maintain our faith with the British electorate, and ensure that on 1 January we leave the European Union, single market and customs union, and take back control.

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

10.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Covid-19 Update and Hospitality Curfew

10.33 am

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the work to tackle coronavirus.

The virus continues to spread. Yesterday, there were 7,108 new cases. However, there are also early signs that the actions that we have collectively taken over the past month are starting to have a positive impact. Today's Real-time Assessment of Community Transmission study from Imperial College suggests that although the R number remains above 1, there are early signs that it may be falling. We must not let up, but people everywhere can take some small hope that our efforts together may be beginning to work; I put it no stronger than that. Cases are still rising. However, as the chief medical officer set out yesterday, the second peak is highly localised, and in some parts of the country the virus is spreading fast. Our strategy is to suppress the virus, protecting the economy, education and the NHS, until a vaccine can make us safe.

Earlier this week, we brought in further measures in the north-east. However, cases continue to rise fast in parts of Teesside and the north-west of England. In Liverpool, the number of cases is 268 per 100,000 population, so together we need to act. Working with council leaders and mayors, I am today extending the measures that have been in place in the north-east since the start of this week to the Liverpool city region, Warrington, Hartlepool and Middlesbrough. We will provide £7 million of funding to local authorities in these areas to support them with their vital work.

The rules across the Liverpool city region, Warrington, Hartlepool and Middlesbrough will be as follows. We recommend against all social mixing between people in different households. We will bring in regulations, as we have in the north-east, to prevent in law social mixing between people in different households in all settings except outdoor public spaces such as parks and outdoor hospitality. We also recommend that people should not attend professional or amateur sporting events as spectators in the areas that are affected. We recommend that people visit care homes only in exceptional circumstances, and there will be guidance against all but essential travel. Essential travel of course includes going to work or school. I understand how much of an imposition this is, and I want rules like these to stay in place for as short a time as possible. I am sure we all do. The study published today shows us hope that together we can crack this, and the more people follow the rules and reduce their social contact, the quicker we can get Liverpool and the north-east back on their feet.

We are aligning the measures in Bolton with the rest of Greater Manchester, and I would like to pay tribute to David Greenhalgh, the leader of Bolton Council, for his constructive support, and to the Bolton MPs for all they have done in support of Bolton. There are no changes to measures in West Yorkshire, West Midlands, Leicester, Lancashire or the rest of Greater Manchester. It is critical that the whole country acts together now to control the spread of this virus, so please, for your loved ones, for your community and for your country, follow the rules and do your bit to keep this virus under control.

By its nature, this virus spreads through social contact, so it has had a terrible impact on the hospitality sector, which in good times exists to encourage the very social contact that we all enjoy. We have had to take difficult but necessary decisions to suppress the virus. The only alternative to suppressing the virus is to let it rip, and I will not do that. I know that many of the individual rules are challenging, but they are necessary and there are those early signs that they are working. In the measures we have introduced, including the 10 pm restriction, we are seeking to strike a balance, allowing people to continue to socialise safely where that is possible while reducing the social contact that the virus thrives on. Elsewhere in the world, they have introduced an evening restriction and then seen their case numbers fall. We know that later at night, people are less likely to follow social distancing.

Of course we keep all our measures under review, and we will closely monitor the impact of this policy, as with all the others, while continuing our unprecedented support for hospitality businesses by cutting VAT, supporting the pay of staff, offering rates relief for businesses and giving billions of pounds of tax deferrals and loans. Our hospitality industry provides so much colour and life in this country, and we will do whatever we can to support it while acting fast to keep the virus under control. I know that these measures are hard, and that they are yet another sacrifice after a year of so many sacrifices already, but there are some signs that what we are doing together to respond to these awful circumstances is starting to work, so do not let up. Let us all of us keep doing our bit, and one day over this virus we will prevail.

10.39 am

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary State for giving me advance sight of his statement. The Imperial study today is indeed encouraging, but, as the chief medical officer said yesterday, we have a long winter ahead. We know that sustained contact, especially in crowded, poorly ventilated spaces, is a driver of infection, and pubs and bars are an obvious risk. I heard what he said about the 10 pm rule, but my concerns relate to everybody leaving the pub at the same time. What action will he take so that we do not see a repeat this weekend of people piling out into city centres, packing out public transport and sometimes piling into supermarkets to buy more drink?

We completely understand the need for local restrictions, including in Merseyside, as the Secretary of State has just announced. It was probably too late for colleagues from Merseyside to get on the call list this morning, but they would be keen to press him further on the financial support for Merseyside. The region is hugely reliant on hospitality and leisure, and we know that these restrictions exact a heavy social and economic toll. Areas need financial support, otherwise existing inequalities, which themselves have a health impact and allow the virus to thrive, will be exacerbated.

People need clarity as well. Areas such as Leicester, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire and Bradford have had restrictions imposed on them for months now. Millions of people in local lockdown areas across the north and midlands just need some reassurance that an end is in sight. Many want to know when they will be able to visit their loved ones and whether they will be able to visit their families over the coming school half-term, for example. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether

[Jonathan Ashworth]

he has now ruled out the so-called circuit break taking place across the October half-term, as was mooted in the newspapers last week?

Some of the biggest increases in infection appear to be taking place in areas where restrictions are in place, so why are the interventions not working? Why are the moles not getting whacked? Yesterday, the Prime Minister suggested that the success of Luton in leaving restrictions was because of people pulling together. I have no doubt that people are pulling together across Bolton, Bury, Rossendale, and so on, but what additional help will they receive to drive the virus down?

I believe that Ministers lost precious ground in fighting the virus by not having an effective test, trace and isolate regime in place by the end of the summer. Testing and tracing is key to controlling the virus. Increasing evidence now shows the importance of backward contact tracing in controlling outbreaks. Is backward contact tracing routinely happening in areas of restriction, and will the Secretary of State publish data on backward contacts reached? We also support the Health Committee's calls today for routine testing of all NHS staff. Will he finally set a date for introducing it?

Problems remain with testing generally. I have just heard of a case in the Rhondda where people have booked appointments and turned up at a testing centre, but Serco has pulled the testing centre out and is saying that it needs the Secretary of State to intervene in that area if it is to be reopened. Will he do that?

On 8 September, the Secretary of State told the Health Committee that the problems with testing would be resolved "in the coming weeks." That was more than three weeks ago, yet it still takes 30 to 31 hours to turn around in-person tests, 75 hours for home test kits, and 88 hours—more than three and a half days—for test results in the satellite test centres, which are predominantly used by care homes, so he has not resolved the problems. When will he?

Today we have learned that Deloitte, which is contracted by the Government to help to run test and trace, is now trying to sell contact tracing services to local councils. The Government's own contractor, one of the very firms responsible for the failing system in the first place, now sees a business opportunity in selling information and services to local authorities. Authorities should be getting that anyway, and this is in the middle of the biggest public health crisis for 100 years. Is this not an utter scandal? How can it be allowed? Does it not once again show that directors of public health should be in charge of contact tracing?

Finally, this week GPs warned of significant problems with flu vaccine supplies. Boots and LloydsPharmacy have stopped offering flu jab appointments due to issues with supplies. Can the Secretary of State confirm that we have enough flu vaccines available for all who will need one this winter?

Matt Hancock: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support for the measures that we have had to take and for the £7 million of extra financial support for the councils affected—not just Merseyside, and Halton and Warrington, but Hartlepool and Middlesbrough—which is on the same basis as the support for the seven north-east councils announced at the end of last week.

It is true that some parts of the country have come through a local lockdown. In fact, we have lifted many of the measures that were in place in Leicester, for instance. We were not able to lift all the measures, and the case rate there then went back up again, although it has now appeared to have stabilised. Luton is another example where there was a significant local outbreak that was brought under control.

The hon. Gentleman asked about increased testing. Increased testing is, of course, going into Merseyside, and we can do that because we have record capacity, which has increased yet again this week. He also asked about backward contact tracing; absolutely we have backward contact tracing in these areas. And that is one of the reasons we know that, sadly, the highest likelihood of picking up coronavirus outside our own households comes from social settings. Public Health England will be publishing further information today on backward contact tracing to understand how this virus spreads.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the speed of test results. I am glad to say that the turnaround time for test results in care homes is speeding up. He asked about Deloitte and its contact tracing capabilities. Deloitte has done an incredible job in helping us put together the contact tracing and backward contact tracing that we have, and of course it should offer its services to local councils too. He says that local councils should have more impetus and more involvement in contact tracing, but when a company with great experience in contact tracing comes forward to offer its services, he criticises it. He cannot have it both ways. Of course, these services cost money and they have to be delivered, and I pay tribute to Deloitte, which is doing a brilliant job.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about flu jabs. It is absolutely true, as he says, that there is a record roll-out of flu jabs. There are enough for everybody in a priority group who needs them. I stress that this is a roll-out: nobody needs to have a flu jab before the start of December, but people can have it in September or October and it will then cover them for the winter, so we are rolling this out and more appointments will become available in good time. We have 30 million jabs in total, more than we have ever had before and almost double what we typically have had in the past, and those are available. I am really glad to say that record numbers of people are coming forward to get flu jabs, and I welcome that, but, as the Royal College of General Practitioners has said, people will need to have patience. For those in the target group—the over-65s and those with clinical conditions—flu jabs are available, and it will take us the coming weeks in order to ensure that people who need those flu jabs can get them.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Bradford has been in a local lockdown for weeks and weeks, and the number of cases is going up, not down. Is the Secretary of State aware of the damage the arbitrary 10 pm curfew is doing to pubs, restaurants, bowling alleys and casinos? Is he aware of the jobs that are being lost, all just to see people congregating on the streets instead and shop staff getting more abuse? When will the Secretary of State start acting like a Conservative with a belief in individual responsibility and abandon this arbitrary nanny-state socialist approach, which is serving no purpose at all, apart from to further collapse the economy and erode our freedoms?

Matt Hancock: I am going to pay tribute to my hon. Friend, and for the following reason. There are some people who rail against some of the measures that we have to put in place, and of course I understand the impact they have, but there are reasons for each one of them—and collectively they are vital for the strategy that we are pursuing of suppressing the virus and protecting the economy, education and the NHS until a vaccine arrives. My hon. Friend does not agree with that strategy, and that is a perfectly honourable position; it is just something I profoundly disagree with him on. Indeed, last night he was one of the handful of colleagues who voted against the renewal of the Coronavirus Act 2020. It is perfectly reasonable to make the argument that we should just let the virus rip; I just think that the hundreds of thousands of deaths that would follow is not a price that anyone should pay.

I believe in individual responsibility and the promotion of freedom, subject to not harming others. One of the pernicious things about this virus is that people can harm others, sometimes inadvertently, by giving them a disease that leads to their death, because this virus passes from one to another asymptotically. So while I understand the impact of these things, especially coming from a small business background—I get it—unfortunately we do have to take action to suppress the virus, because the alternative of letting it rip is not a policy that I would ever want to pursue.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP) [V]: It is vital that we find a balance between taking action to suppress the virus and protecting people's jobs and their livelihoods. How confident is the Secretary of State that the existing rules for pubs and restaurants on hygiene, face coverings, table service, maximum numbers in groups and the distances between them are being complied with? What happens next if they are not? Does he agree that avoiding mixed messaging is particularly important, and if so, what message does it send that Parliament's bars are exempt from the curfew? Will he commit to continued co-operation with the devolved Governments under the four-nation plan?

Matt Hancock: I have not been to the bar recently, but I do not think that Parliament's bars are exempt from these measures. I think it is wrong to say so, and I would be grateful if you could confirm that, Mr Speaker, because it is a matter for the House, not the Government.

Other than that, the hon. Gentleman makes a perfectly valid point. Of course we keep these measures under review. We want to have the least damaging economic impact, consistent with keeping the virus under control and suppressing it. That is the same strategy of all four Governments—the three devolved Governments and the UK Government. We keep these things under review, but we think that they are necessary to keep people safe.

Mr Speaker: I will confirm the situation. If the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) had been in the House or spoken to his colleagues, he would have realised that the decision was taken last week. Unfortunately, the newspapers were mischief-making. Those bars were not open after 10 o'clock. Let us get that clear, and I think we ought not to believe sometimes what newspapers say.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): The Government have already made over £190 billion of support available to protect lives and livelihoods. Last week I spoke to Tom and Lindsey, the landlords of the Clumber Inn in Ordsall, to discuss the impact that these lockdown measures are having on the hospitality industry, which I know my right hon. Friend understands. Can he confirm that Ministers will continue to work closely with the sector, to look at what further support can be provided?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. I think, if I have spotted it correctly, that my hon. Friend is wearing the parliamentary beer association tie, so he obviously knows that of which he speaks. He is right, and he makes a very important and serious point. Of course we will keep working with the hospitality industry and do everything we can to support it through these times. It is so difficult, but because of the way that the virus spreads, these measures are necessary. We have not gone for a full-blown lockdown as we did in March because we know far more about the virus owing to the test and trace system, the massive amount of testing we are doing and the contact tracing. That means we can be more targeted, and my heart goes out to everybody in the hospitality industry, who are doing so much.

Mr Speaker: I call Daisy Cooper, who has two minutes because her urgent question was converted into a statement.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): The original urgent question was about the 10 pm pubs curfew, and after this statement it is clear that the Government are simply not listening. They seem to be covering their eyes and ears and singing “La, la, la, la.” The Secretary of State says that this is under review, but the evidence is clear: the 10 pm pubs curfew has been a hammer blow to hospitality, and turfing crowds of people out of covid-secure venues on to the streets is putting lives and livelihoods at risk.

Since reopening in July, businesses on every single one of our high streets have put blood, sweat and tears into making their venues covid-secure, but they are trading at a reduced capacity. Since the pubs curfew was introduced, some of them have seen a further 50% reduction. The Prime Minister announced the blanket 10 pm closing time last Tuesday. Within hours, the industry warned that it would lead to chaos on the streets, and it did. The shocking truth is that this Government have, by their own admission, made no assessment of the cost of this measure to the industry, and SAGE has confirmed that it was never even consulted on whether a 10 pm curfew would be effective. Now, experts are telling us that it is making the risk of covid transmission worse.

Public Health England's weekly surveillance reports are clear: outbreaks of the virus in hospitality venues are responsible for less than 3% of all cases, and they have not contributed to any of the increase, yet the Government are making thousands upon thousands of hospitality jobs unviable, undermining public health and killing our high streets. The Government like to talk about balance and the tough choices that they have to make between public health and the economy, but the shocking truth is that the pubs curfew is bad for both, and the longer the Government defend it, the more damage it will do.

[Daisy Cooper]

People are scared. Care homes are becoming prison-like, students are being locked up and businesses are saying that without a further package of support they will be closed by Christmas. I asked for some evidence behind this measure; the Secretary of State has provided none. That is why the curfew must be scrapped today.

Matt Hancock: I just want to correct the hon. Lady on the point that she made about outbreaks. The updated statistics will be published today by Public Health England. The measures that have led us to understanding that the virus spreads most outside of households, when other households meet together, including in hospitality venues, comes from the very backward contact tracing that the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) asked about. The outbreaks data is about where there is an outbreak with significant numbers within one institution—for instance, within a care home or a school, and that is then raised as an issue with Public Health England—not where individuals go. I am afraid the hon. Lady is using a different set of statistics, which do not make the case that she puts forward. We all understand the concern about the impact of this virus on so many parts of our economy. Our task is to try to limit the impact on lives as well as on livelihoods, and that is at the root of our strategy.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): My city has been following the rules. Thanks to the people of Peterborough and excellent council leadership, we came off the watchlist last week. I know that the data can change, and I also know that my right hon. Friend appreciates the issues around the 10 pm curfew, but will he keep the policy under review so that those who are doing the right thing, like the people of Peterborough, can get back to something like normality?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is an incredible voice for Peterborough. We discussed the local lockdown having its effect in Leicester, and the Prime Minister mentioned Luton yesterday; the work of the people of Peterborough is another example that we could cite—[*Interruption.*] My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) shouts from a sedentary position, “What about Bradford?” The truth is that we took Shipley out of the measures because the numbers came right down, but unfortunately they then rose again, so in a way he makes my point for me.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: The Secretary of State knows that I can get passionate and even angry with some of my questions to him, but not today. He will know that as a West Yorkshire MP I will support anything—any measure—that stops this virus spreading at this perilous time when tens of thousands of students are moving around our county and our country. I will support any measure that is effective. The old social scientist in me suggests that the Secretary of State was right when he said that all these measures should be closely monitored. There is no doubt that experts, whether it is Professor John Edmunds or others, worry that the 10 o'clock curfew has quite serious unintended consequences. Will the Secretary of State give me his word that he will keep it under review, because there seem to be some problems with it?

Matt Hancock: It is constantly under review. We have shown that we are willing to change the measures to follow what works. This is an unprecedented crisis. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support for the measures across West Yorkshire. It has been a pleasure to work with him and to hear his voice in this Chamber on what is needed. My message to his constituents in Huddersfield and those across West Yorkshire is that these measures are necessary—we would not have them in place unless they were—and the more that people can abide by them, the quicker we will be able to lift them. I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman on supporting people in Huddersfield and those throughout the country to keep this situation under control.

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I recognise, of course, the value of simplicity on issues such as the curfew for the hospitality industry, but will my right hon. Friend accept that we should allow economic activity where it does not cut across public health objectives? Will he therefore apply an imaginative approach to doing that—for example, looking at how we might be able to allow hotel guests to stay in hotel bars where they are resident in the hotel later than 10 o'clock, recognising that some hotels depend substantially on that income?

Matt Hancock: I am always happy to look at, as my right hon. and learned Friend calls them, imaginative ideas like that. He will know that there is a tension between the clarity of the rules and bringing additional nuances into the rules. He will have seen how, as a society, we have struggled with that balance all the way through this, because we are in novel circumstances. I am happy to talk to him about his proposal.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The imposition of a 10 pm curfew on the hospitality industry was entirely avoidable, but became an inevitability because of the Government's shambolic handling of their privatised test and trace system. Last month, I highlighted to the Health Secretary that locals in Slough were being forced to drive hundreds of miles, including catching a ferry to the Isle of Wight, just to access a test, but he retorted:

“On the contrary, the fact is that we are working hard with the local authority in Slough”.—[*Official Report*, 17 September 2020; Vol. 680, c. 520.]

Well, Mr Speaker, the council has informed me that it has not heard a dickie bird from either the Health Secretary or his team, so perhaps he can advise us this time when the test centre in Slough will go back to being a drive-through and walk-in test centre, so that locals can actually access a test when they desperately need one.

Matt Hancock: We have got this record testing capacity and I am incredibly grateful for all the people who work to deliver it. I will not have this divisive language; I just won't have it.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con) [V]: Restricting hospitality hours and venue capacity, although not ideal, can present us with a good opportunity to explore and support our local businesses such as Griffiths Brothers, the excellent gin distillery in the village of Penn in my constituency, which operates a shop where people can sample its high-quality gin made from the best of the best, and in fact take it home to enjoy at leisure, without a curfew. What can the Government

do to encourage people to visit these local distilleries and breweries, which are a vital part of the hospitality industry and many of which have had a lean time during the pandemic?

Matt Hancock: I will do everything I can, both policy-wise and personally, to support our great distilleries, including in my right hon. Friend's part of the world. One of the wonderful things of the last few years has been the massive expansion in the number of local distilleries and breweries, and I am glad she supports her local gin distillery, no doubt both in her official capacity and perhaps with a tippie at home.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Through you, Mr Speaker, may I say to the Secretary of State that I voted against him last night not because I want the virus to rip through the country? Quite the reverse, I want him to get decisions right, and I do not think he is getting them right at present. The 10 o'clock curfew is bad for jobs and bad for the economy, and it is not controlling the spread of the virus. There is no scientific justification that he has been able to give for it. I believe he would make better and more correct decisions if he consulted Parliament, and the House of Commons in particular, particularly on local lockdowns. Today, Merseyside is being locked down and the Merseyside MPs cannot talk about that. Will he agree, before taking further measures, to bring every new restriction back to this House?

Matt Hancock: Of course the restrictions will come back to this House in the normal way. As the hon. Gentleman well knows, yesterday we made the further commitment that, wherever possible, all nationally significant measures will be brought forward for a vote before being implemented. I was very pleased that, as a result of that, there was an overwhelming majority of support for renewal of the Coronavirus Act yesterday.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I support the 10 pm restriction as an alternative to hospitality businesses having to close entirely, but it may well hurt certain parts of the sector more than others—for example, wet-led pubs that do not serve food, such as the Wheatsheaf in Faringdon. Will the Secretary of State and his colleagues confirm that they will look closely at whether certain parts of the sector are being hit hard, to see whether they need more support?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course we will, and I take my hon. Friend's point about wet-led pubs. He is right that the 10 pm curfew is far better than the closure of hospitality—not that we want to do that, but we do need to take measures to suppress the virus. He is wise in his description of why we have had to take these decisions, because we cannot will the ends of suppressing the virus without also willing the means, and some of those means are difficult.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab) [V]: Over six months into the pandemic, people in my constituency still see no sign of the world-beating test and trace system that they were promised. Does the Secretary of State feel any personal responsibility for the utter chaos that is putting lives and livelihoods at risk in my constituency and across the country?

Matt Hancock: I feel personal responsibility for the record number of tests that are being done in this country. I feel personal responsibility for the fact that the vast majority of people in Hull and across the country can get a test within six miles of where they live, and the majority of them get the results the next day. I feel personal responsibility for the biggest contact tracing programme that this country has ever seen, with the support of the armed forces, the NHS, brilliant civil servants and the private sector working together. It is that sort of coming together that we need to get through this virus.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for another update on covid-19. I am wearing pink today, because October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, so will he take this opportunity to remind everybody how important it is to check for symptoms and to see their GP if they have any, and to tell the NHS how important it is that the screening programme gets back under way, because 1,000 women will die of this disease this month alone?

Matt Hancock: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. People must continue to check, and if they think they are at risk of cancer or if they find a lump, they should please come forward, because the NHS is open—help us to help you. The more we can suppress coronavirus and keep it out of our hospitals, the easier it will be to treat more people for cancer and ensure that screening stays open. Efforts to stop the virus spreading directly save lives from cancer, and we need to get that message out as well.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): A national curfew in the New Forest is rather unfair, given our very low infection rate. Restaurateurs and landlords have invested a great deal in covid-secure measures and reduced capacity, and the loss of the extra hour reduces throughput, particularly for those that want a second sitting for dinner to come through, because it makes it very uneconomic. Will the Secretary of State consider the possibility of devolving the power to impose curfew locally, even to particular establishments, which would provide landlords with a powerful incentive to ensure that their patrons behave sensibly and properly?

Matt Hancock: I welcome my right hon. Friend's constructive suggestion. As we constantly have these policies under review, it is that sort of working together that will help us to improve the response. Of course I understand the impact on the New Forest—some of the finest pubs in the country, outside of West Suffolk, are in the New Forest. We should keep this under review, because the whole point is to suppress the virus while having the minimum negative impact on the economy, and it is that second part that we are mostly discussing today.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Many of the hospitality businesses in my constituency have been deeply upset by the imposition of the 10 pm curfew. OverDraught, a bar in my constituency, told *Levenshulme News* that it feels that this is a knee-jerk reaction by the Government to counteract their own poor handling of the virus and that they are punishing a sector that has reacted seriously, flexibly, and efficiently over the past six months. What does the Minister say to businesses such as OverDraught that feel let down by this Government's decision making?

Matt Hancock: What I say is that we do what is necessary because it saves lives and we understand the impact that it has. The message that I would send to everybody in Bradford is that, the more that they follow the rules that are in place, the faster we will be able to get through this.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): It does seem strange to think that concentrating trade in a smaller number of hours and making everyone leave a pub or restaurant at the same time, rather than spacing them out over the course of the evening, should suppress rather than spread the virus. Will the Secretary summarise the scientific advice that he has had on this point?

Matt Hancock: The scientific advice is that the people who are closer together are more likely to spread the virus and that, later at night, social distancing becomes harder. We have all seen the pictures of people leaving pubs at 10 o'clock, but otherwise they would be inside the establishments, and we all know that outside is safer, or they would be leaving later. Of course we keep this under review and of course we are constantly looking at how we can improve these policies, but I think that we have to look at both sides of the evidence to try to get this right.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): People will only believe that the 10 pm curfew is the least bad option if they understand the basis on which the decision was taken. The figures for the number of infections linked to hospitality range from the 3% that Public Health England has put for outbreaks, up to nearly a quarter that the deputy chief medical officer has suggested. Will my right hon. Friend make sure that the evidence as to how many transmissions are linked to pubs and hospitality based on test and trace data is available, so that people can reach their own conclusions?

Matt Hancock: Yes, and the updated evidence that we are publishing today shows that the just under a quarter figure is correct. It is the highest single identified area. The figures on outbreaks, which were also mentioned by the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), are measuring something completely different and are not a measure of how many cases are caught there. The 25% figure is, of course, for those who catch it outside the household. The single biggest place we can catch coronavirus is from somebody else inside your own household, but that is, in a sense, inevitable and very, very difficult to prevent.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: The tighter restrictions here in the north-east are already having a severe impact on many businesses that have been left without appropriate financial support. Although it is imperative that we prevent the further spread of coronavirus, it is also important that we protect businesses, workers, livelihoods and jobs. The arbitrary 10 pm curfew has increased the financial pressure on many local hospitality businesses and appears to have had the effect of inadvertently encouraging unregulated gatherings after the blanket 10 pm closing. Would it not be safer for those who are allowed to sit in safe, regulated premises and adhere to social distancing after 10 pm, rather than to be on the streets or on public transport with significant numbers of other revellers, who may have reduced inhibitions or levels of self-control? Would it also not be better if

businesses that are responsibly operating at much-reduced capacity and adhering to the regulations were provided with urgent financial support, as requested by local authority leaders in my area, to ensure that it is at least as viable for them to remain open for business as to close completely—possibly for good?

Matt Hancock: We have put extra financial support into the north-east, and I thank people across the north-east for what they are doing to stick by the renewed and increased restrictions that we had to put in place earlier this week. The point the hon. Gentleman makes about people's reduced inhibitions later at night is the critical one, and as I just mentioned to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee, it is almost certainly true—I think this is one of the few things we know about this virus with great certainty—that transmission is much lower outside than inside, and that also helps with protecting people against this virus.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): My constituency thrives on hospitality, and many jobs are dependent on it. It is also low-incidence when it comes to the virus and high-compliance when it comes to the safety measures around being covid secure. My right hon. Friend said in his opening remarks that the second peak is highly localised. In that light, how quickly can we look to move to a more localised, regional approach to the 10 pm curfew?

Matt Hancock: We are taking a more localised approach to tackling this second peak than we did to the first, for two reasons. The first is that the evidence is that it is much more localised in terms of where the virus is concentrated. The second is that we know far more about where the virus is concentrated, but that extra information also tells us that the number of transmissions is much higher in hospitality than in many other settings—for instance, workplaces. That is why we have made the decision that we have, but the core of my hon. Friend's point, which is that it is safer in places such as Eastbourne because there are fewer transmissions, is reasonable, and we keep all of this under review.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab) [V]: Last week, I spoke to a lady whose husband has dementia. He was in a care home, and she was unable to visit him. He deteriorated rapidly, until he was deemed a risk to himself and others, and he was eventually sectioned, at which point she was allowed to visit him. Of course I completely understand the difficult balance the Minister must make between protecting our health and the health of others, but could he please look specifically at what guidance can be given on rights to visit loved ones who have dementia?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady makes an incredibly heart-rending and important point. The balance in terms of the rules around visiting those in care homes is one of the most difficult to strike. On this, I rely heavily on the clinical evidence of Jenny Harries, the deputy chief medical officer, who works with the four nations to try to make sure we get this balance right. It is very difficult, and the guidance we have put out includes the permissive ability to allow directors of public health to

take decisions that are appropriate in local circumstances. However, this issue is a very difficult consequence of the virus.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I have spoken to landlords and landladies around my constituency, and they have all been incredibly grateful for the unprecedented support that the Government have provided to them, but they have been equally clear that that has just about kept their heads above water, especially at a time when there was warmer weather. I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to keep this issue under review, but what reassurances can he give landlords and landladies that, as we head towards Christmas and the nights get colder, there is a timescale on this and they can have hope that they will still be trading at Christmas and not, sadly, closing down for Christmas?

Matt Hancock: The truth is that the more we all avoid close social contact, the harder the virus will find it to spread and the easier it will be to lift measures. It is as straightforward as that. From that logic, obviously, come many difficult consequences, including the ones my hon. Friend spoke to. However, I am happy to keep talking to him to make sure that we get this balance right in his area and across the country.

Miss Sarah Dines (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his updates, which are always very useful. May I ask him to think for a minute about places with low infection rates, including the Derbyshire Dales? We have some fantastic wedding venues such as Shottle Hall and Eyam Hall, and some great historic pubs that have been around for hundreds of years, such as the Rutland Arms, the Peacock at Rowsley, the Devonshire Arms at Baslow and the Old Dog at Thorpe. Will my right hon. Friend consider opening early locally where people can prove good compliance and where there are very low infection rates, because we have to allow the economy to get up and running again?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to support her local pubs and in what she said about keeping the economy going while we deal with this problem. She is also right that there are large swathes of the country with very low infection rates, including Derbyshire. Our approach is to take the minimum national action necessary to ensure that the rates stay low in Derbyshire and other areas with low rates, while also taking more action in places where the virus is rife. That is an approach that we will be strengthening over the weeks to come.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con) [V]: Although I am sure there is some logic behind the recent 10 pm curfew, other changes put in place, including table service, have led to small hospitality businesses such as the Treaty of Commerce pub on Lincoln High Street in my constituency having to increase staffing overheads, which they can currently ill afford. Will my right hon. Friend acknowledge that the latest changes to the guidance are not entirely suitable for all businesses? I have heard what he has said this morning, but will he commit to reviewing the regulations regularly and at the earliest opportunity to ensure that we protect jobs, the wider economy and the important freedoms of businesses and individuals while also remaining covid-secure?

Matt Hancock: A hundred per cent; my hon. Friend speaks with great wisdom.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I have been known to enjoy pubs and hospitality myself, but the reality is that if this sector—in particular, nightclubs and the entertainment industry—is to survive, it is going to need much greater Government support. Does the Health Secretary accept that, and is he having those discussions with the Chancellor? Does he also accept that if Scotland wants to go its own way with a different level of curfew, the Scottish Parliament needs to have, at the very minimum, borrowing powers so that it can make changes for public health benefits and provide the necessary support for these businesses?

Matt Hancock: As the hon. Member knows, although public health measures are devolved, it is only because we are one United Kingdom that we are able to have the strength of support that is in place right across Scotland. He and his party would do well to recognise that and to welcome the support that the UK has been able to provide in Scotland during these very difficult times.

Dehenna Davison (Bishop Auckland) (Con): When my right hon. Friend visited Bishop Auckland during the election campaign, we spent our lunch break in a pub called the Merry Monk. Since then I have been in regular contact with the landlord, Christian Burns, who, alongside a lot of other pub landlords, has written to the Prime Minister expressing concerns about some of the lockdown measures that have been introduced. I recognise and welcome the unprecedented support that the Government have put in place—over £190 billion is not small fry—but will my right hon. Friend please confirm to Christian and other landlords that Ministers will continue to work with the hospitality industry, particularly pubs? We need to save our pubs, because they are a lifeline for our local communities.

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. I really enjoyed my trip to the Merry Monk with my hon. Friend. We left before 10 pm, even though at that time we could have stayed longer. Of course we will keep working with the hospitality industry. I wish all the pubs in Bishop Auckland all the very best. We will support them as much as we can.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): We are in a never-ending cycle of repeated lockdowns that are deferring the problem because they are not matched by robust testing and clear messaging. It is clear from the Health Secretary's responses this morning that the 10 pm curfew is yet another example of the Prime Minister plucking ideas out of the air to be seen to be doing something. It has already caused significant damage to the hospitality industry, and, as predicted, is doing nothing to stop the spread of the virus. When will this Government start to understand that a balance needs to be struck to protect those most at risk without complete societal shutdown?

Matt Hancock: I would urge the hon. Lady to support her constituents and the public health measures that are necessary to get this virus under control in order to protect this country, to protect her constituents and to save lives.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Pubs, such as the New Cross in Ashfield, run by Jay and Mathew, are losing revenue due to the 10 pm curfew. They fully understand the rules that need to be in place to keep us safe, so can my right hon. Friend please explain to the staff and regulars at the New Cross how science has guided the decision to close pubs at 10 pm?

Matt Hancock: I want to say to all the staff and all the regulars at the New Cross that we would not have this in place unless we thought it was needed. The science is about how, late at night, people end up closer together and therefore spread the virus more, and this will not stay in place one minute longer than it needs to.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: If the Government decide to restrict trade or close down trade for pubs or particular businesses for good public health reasons, surely it is for all of us, through the Government, to pay that cost—through borrowing, at historically low interest rates, paid back over time through our progressive tax system—not for individual pubs and businesses to pay it, possibly with bankruptcy, as at places such as Brains brewery in south Wales. Will the Secretary of State therefore have a word with the Chancellor to ask that he provides adequate financial support for both sustainable businesses and good public health?

Matt Hancock: Of course, this measure is for England, and it is up to the devolved Welsh Administration to decide public health measures in Wales, but the principle that we as taxpayers, as a whole country, should shoulder as much of the economic burden as possible is what underpins the absolutely unprecedented £190 billion of extra support that this Government have put into the economy to get us through these very difficult times.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): This week, Burnley recorded the highest covid-19 rate in England, and that has understandably caused concern to residents who are worried not just about the virus, but about the impact on the local economy. Could the Secretary of State reassure them and me that, when we look at further interventions that might be needed, we will keep them as targeted as possible so we can fight the virus where it is really spreading?

Matt Hancock: Absolutely. There is a lot of virus spreading in Burnley, and we need to all come together to tackle that spread. I know that my hon. Friend has been fighting as hard as possible for the people of Burnley. He has been making this argument to me in private, as well as in public, that we need to make sure that the measures are as targeted as possible and have as low a negative impact as possible, but we do need to get the virus under control in Burnley and across the country. I pay tribute to him for the work that he is doing in supporting and representing his constituents.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): The Minister will know that the hospitality sector emerged on its knees from the general lockdown, and I am sure he understands that those in the sector were barely getting to their feet when the 10 o'clock curfew came in. He has given hon. and right hon. Members a lot of assurance today that he will keep this under review. As part of that review, can he assure the licensed trade, particularly those relying on wet sales, that he will take a view on staggered exit

times and a more intelligence-led curfew, appreciating that the curfew has value to add? Can he also take a look at the role of off-sales in promoting community transmission not in the hospitality sector?

Matt Hancock: Of course, we look at all these things. This is of course a measure in England, and it is because the UK Government have put in £190 billion across the whole UK that we have been able to give the support that we have, but we keep that under review, too.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): No constituency in the country has such a high concentration of first-rate pubs as Ipswich, and currently in Ipswich we have very low levels of covid-19. Last weekend, I spoke to the landlord of the Belstead Arms in Chantry, who had to watch as many of his loyal customers, who would have been spending hundreds of pounds in his pub supporting the pub to recover from the previous lockdown, went to the off-licence across the street to buy beer from there. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that at the closest possible time he will review measures and ensure that pubs in Ipswich can stay open later?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I know the Belstead Arms in Chantry well from campaigning pitstops, and it is true that Suffolk has the finest pubs in the country. My hon. Friend is making his case for Ipswich very strongly. Of course we keep these things under review, and will lift these measures as soon as we can.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab) [V]: I have spoken to many business owners and residents across Newport West in the past few days, and there is increasing concern that the UK Government's left hand does not know what the right hand is doing. The border between Wales and England is extremely porous and any differences in local lockdown rules and restrictions are confusing for those living along it. So can the Secretary of State outline exactly how, and how often, he is meeting Members of the devolved Administrations to ensure that all parts of the UK are involved and engaged as we chart our way through this crisis?

Matt Hancock: Constantly, is the answer. I was brought up on the Welsh border, in Cheshire. I know exactly how porous the border is. Of course, public health is devolved and I would be surprised if the hon. Lady was arguing against the devolution of health powers. In fact, I have received a text from my Welsh opposite number during this session, so we have a constant conversation and dialogue to try to minimise exactly the sorts of issues that she talks about.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Public health must be our first priority, but restrictions on pubs, bars and restaurants need to be accompanied by new economic support for workers and businesses; otherwise, people will be pushed into unemployment and destitution, and businesses will be forced into bankruptcy. So, on behalf of hospitality workers and businesses in Coventry South, I urge the Secretary of State to speak with his Cabinet colleagues and bring forward new measures that will support livelihoods and businesses and actually save jobs.

Matt Hancock: Yes, the £190 billion of extra funding has been there to support jobs, and of course we keep that, as with all these things, under review.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I refer colleagues to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I understand and support the measures taken to reduce deaths from this terrible disease, and thank Ministers for all they have done to stem the tide of the virus. Please could my right hon. Friend consider allowing pubs, cafés, restaurants and casinos to extend their closing time when customers are still in the process of eating a hot meal? That would allow time for a second sitting of those venues without disturbing the safety elements of table service and social distancing. It would also mean a staggered time of exit from those venues, allowing better social distancing in the local community.

Matt Hancock: Of course, as we keep this under review, we will consider all the options. The clarity of the rule that was brought in was one of the reasons that it commends itself, but I would be happy to talk to my hon. Friend about the future.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): We all agree that suppressing the virus is essential in saving lives, and as a scientific socialist, I think we should apply basic public health principles. It seems absolutely clear to me that it is problematic that we have a 10 o'clock curfew, when large numbers of people are all coming out into the street at the same time. Night-time entertainment businesses such as comedy and live music venues, which are based in covid-secure premises such as pubs and clubs, are seriously impacted, and like—

Mr Speaker: Order. Come on, Secretary of State. We have got to get a grip.

Matt Hancock: I love comedy, I love live music and I wish that we did not have to do this, but I have answered the point about outside being safer than inside. It is one of the many regrets of the very serious problem that we have.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I represent a central London constituency where many businesses are hurting hard, especially with the 10 pm lockdown. I also have many residents who are only going out for the first time at 8.30 or 9, so do not fit into the idea of going to the pub at 6 o'clock. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that he will review these measures at the earliest opportunity?

Matt Hancock: We will keep these measures always under review.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab) [V]: I accept what the Secretary of State has said about the science, but he must realise that there were many publicans who were really struggling to get by before this, and the new things that have been put in have just made their businesses untenable. Does he accept that getting support for the measures that he has put in place has to come with a financial package that supports our publicans to remain open after covid?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I have addressed that point. We have put £190 billion in, and we keep all that under review.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Love it or hate it, the gambling industry delivers thousands of jobs, and taxes, to this country. Casinos in particular create 60% of their business after 10 o'clock, and it is illegal for someone to gamble if they are drunk. May I therefore ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to consider whether casinos can continue to do business after 10 o'clock in England, as they can in Scotland?

Matt Hancock: I would be happy to talk to my hon. Friend about that.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Newcastle's night-time economy is globally renowned but, yesterday, in a typically cowardly attack, the Prime Minister basically said that we should not complain about the impact of these measures on that sector because local leaders had asked for them. Will the Secretary of State confirm that in their letter of 29 September local leaders specifically said that the measures must be accompanied by targeted support, and will he say what targeted support pubs and restaurants, and the 10,000 jobs in my constituency that depend on them, can expect?

Matt Hancock: Yes, the leaders of the seven Newcastle councils—Newcastle, Gateshead and the wider north-east councils—did ask for the measures that were put in place. We put in £10 million of funding. The most important message that we can get across to people across the north-east, where the case rate continues to rise, is that the more people follow the restrictions, the quicker we can ease them.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): Recognising the need to control the virus with the 10 pm curfew, can my right hon. Friend outline what additional guidance and support has been offered to our hard-working police officers, such as those in Durham constabulary who serve my constituency, to help them to protect the public after 10 pm?

Matt Hancock: This is, of course, a matter for the Home Secretary, but there has been additional guidance to the police. I pay tribute to the police, who have done so much work to enforce those rules and who continue to step that up.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): May I ask the Secretary of State to what extent he thinks Dominic Cummings's clear disregard of the rules during lockdown has undermined people's compliance with the current guidance, placing excess pressure on police as well as on staff in the hospitality sector? Does he agree that many of those on the frontline in the fight against covid are now paying a heavy price for Cummings's actions?

Matt Hancock: I do not recognise the link at all.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Restrictions curbing when we can go to the pub are against the DNA of our country, but we are in exceptional times, and I recognise that that includes taking measures

[Andrew Jones]

that people do not like and that Ministers do not like having to introduce. Will my right hon. Friend commit to keeping the restrictions under the closest possible review and in place for the shortest time necessary to protect lives?

Matt Hancock: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, who speaks from the heart.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has heard from across the House great concerns about the 10 pm curfew. Given the statements yesterday from yourself, Mr Speaker, and from my right hon. Friend about more parliamentary scrutiny, does he agree that, if the 10 pm curfew had not yet been brought in, it is exactly the sort of measure that should be brought to Parliament first, scrutinised, debated, amended if necessary, and voted upon? Does he agree that that is the sort of thing we can expect in future?

Matt Hancock: I do agree, and I am glad to agree with my hon. Friend. As I announced yesterday, we have brought in a new process, an innovation on parliamentary procedure, to ensure that there are votes on nationally significant measures in the future.

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

11.39 am

Sitting suspended.

Business of the House

11.44 am

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Leader of the House to answer business questions, I want to say a few words about Mark Hutton, who retired from the House of Commons Service yesterday. Mark joined the House on this day 35 years ago and, since then, many hon. Members across the House will have benefited from his wise advice and his authoritative approach to many issues—procedural, practical and political.

As Principal Clerk of the Committee Office, Mark pioneered a digital-first approach to publication that led to the process of business change which underpinned that. In recent years, as Clerk of the Journals, he has provided me and my predecessor with authoritative advice on matters of privilege. His most lasting monument will be the 24th and 25th editions of “Erskine May”, for which he successfully was deputy editor and co-editor. The House is grateful to Mark for all his service and for enabling “Erskine May” to be available to all Members and to the public online.

11.45 am

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

MONDAY 5 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Bill.

TUESDAY 6 OCTOBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Prisoners (Disclosure of Information about Victims) Bill, followed by consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Private International Law (Implementation of Agreements) Bill [*Lords*], followed by motion to approve the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) (England) (Amendment) (No.4) Regulations 2020.

WEDNESDAY 7 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the Pension Schemes Bill [*Lords*], followed by motion to approve regulations related to public health following the Secretary of State’s earlier announcement.

THURSDAY 8 OCTOBER—Debate on a motion on planning reform and house building targets, followed by general debate on the spending of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on support measures for the DCMS sectors during and after the covid-19 pandemic. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 9 OCTOBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 12 October will include:

MONDAY 12 OCTOBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Agriculture Bill.

TUESDAY 13 OCTOBER—Remaining stages of the Fisheries Bill [*Lords*], followed by general debate on covid-19.

WEDNESDAY 14 OCTOBER—Opposition day (12th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 15 OCTOBER—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Bill.

FRIDAY 16 OCTOBER—Private Members' Bills.

Right hon. and hon. Members will also wish to be aware that, subject to the progress of business, the House will rise at the conclusion of business on Friday 23 October and return on Monday 2 November.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business and for announcing the Opposition day and the recess. I also thank him and his office for forwarding all my requests to Ministers. We just need to find a way round the use of “in due course” and “shortly”. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) has received a “soon” on her 10-minute rule Bill on access to benefits for terminally ill people.

We did not get a very helpful response from the Foreign Office Minister, and I would say, in relation to Nazanin, Anousheh and Luke Symons, that we well remember how Jill Morrell kept the names of John McCarthy, Brian Keenan and Terry Waite front and centre so that people would not forget them, and that is what we must do now. These are innocent people who have done no wrong.

Mr Speaker, I know that the whole House—maybe apart from the Government—agrees with your statement and supports it.

Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said that he was announcing a new convention, but I am not quite sure what that means. He said that

“for significant national measures...we will consult Parliament”,

but I thought the Government had to consult Parliament anyway on anything that is supposed to come into effect. He also said that

“wherever possible, we will hold votes”.—[*Official Report*, 30 September 2020; Vol. 681, c. 388.]

But there is no guarantee of a vote. The Leader of the House will know that the regulations on self-isolation, including the £10,000 fine, came into effect seven hours after publication, but the media were briefed eight days before, so there was plenty of time for a debate.

This so-called new convention only deals with national measures, not local measures, which is what right hon. and hon. Members want to know about, because they want to know what is going on in their constituencies. Last week, the Leader of the House said that there is regular scrutiny and debate, but that is not true, is it? Without the hybrid proceedings, many of our colleagues are excluded from taking part in debates on legislation, so the Government cannot have it both ways.

Let us look at the statutory instruments. Some of them are made through the negative resolution procedure, which means they are signed into law and are debated only if they are prayed against. Mostly, they are administrative and technical, but extending pre-trial custody from 56 days to 238 days deserved a debate, and in any event, the Government decide whether there

is time for a debate. What about affirmative SIs? They are laid before the House only after they are signed into law.

Can the Leader of the House say why the majority of the regulations have been made under the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984, which is meant for emergencies, and not the coronavirus legislation, with its safeguards? Will he guarantee that we will have a debate or even a short statement on any new regulations that are proposed? We want it in the House, not in No. 10 from behind a lectern.

May we have a statement on 16 October, a sitting Friday? The European Council will meet on 15 October. The Prime Minister needs to give a statement to the House on the next phase of the negotiations.

That lack of transparency is everywhere. In the Government's White Paper on planning, they are removing the requirement to place planning application advertisements in local newspapers. That is already happening in my constituency, where Walsall Council has decided, without any consultation, that it will not do an environmental impact assessment for one of the most important projects there, the route for a sprint bus. It is totally discredited; there will be more traffic; and no one wants it apart from the current Mayor.

Mr Speaker, you mentioned someone who is really good at transparency, and that is Mark Hutton. I, too, agree with your statement and want to pay tribute to Mark Hutton. He has been in this House for 35 years. As you say, one of his greatest legacies is “Erskine May” online, and he was the co-editor, with Sir David Natzler, the 25th edition. In fact, his nickname was “Erskine” Hutton. He always saw the potential of digital, and his advice was quite strategic across the House, both on procedure and how it related to the legal side and on how the House works. Apparently, when he was at university, he liked directing plays, so obviously he came to work here, because he likes the drama. He has left a great legacy.

The Leader of the House and I were on the Governance of the House Committee, which was very controversial at the time, but Mark managed to get us through that. Also, we agreed the report digitally, and it went through in record time. Mark has not only left online “Erskine May”; he has patiently taught the next generation of Clerks. Mark, we will miss you. Thank you for your work. The House is very grateful, and we hope to see you when you get back—and when we all get back, maybe at a do in Speaker's House. [*Interruption.*] We hope you do, Mr Speaker; we are looking forward to your dos.

It is Black History Month. Tomorrow is the anniversary of the birth of Gandhi, and it was lovely to see a photo of Dr Martin Luther King in his dining room with picture of Gandhi. Both of them worked for justice in a non-violent way. Today is also the mid-autumn festival for the Chinese community.

Finally, on behalf of the whole House, I want to send our very best wishes to my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who is jumping out of a plane on Sunday, weather permitting, for six year-old Florence, who has a life-limiting disease and a rare genetic condition. He is not on the call list today, but we hope will see him next week at business questions, hopefully without a plaster cast.

Mr Rees-Mogg: We all wish the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and, of course, Florence well. It is a brave thing to do.

I used to live in Hong Kong, and the mid-autumn festival was a public holiday, so I am sorry that I cannot tell the House that we will have a public holiday similarly.

The right hon. Lady began by mentioning the dual nationals and the need to keep their names at the forefront of the national debate, which she has been doing fantastically every week, so that Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anousheh Ashouri and Luke Symons are remembered. The Government are made aware of this every week: the right hon. Lady mentions it to me, and I mention it to the Foreign Office. It is known. We are trying our best, but, as was found with hostages before, it is very difficult to get obdurate states and obdurate organisations to move.

On parliamentary scrutiny of the coronavirus—the issue that the right hon. Lady focused on—I note that Labour Members did not actually take part in large numbers. I think a very small number of them voted yesterday. It is a bit worrying if, when we actually have a vote, the official Opposition sit on their hands, so they call for something and then they are absent without leave. They do not formally need leave, of course, under the procedures of the House; it a long time since attendance was demanded. The right hon. Lady asks but the Whips Office does not necessarily want.

On the debates that we are bringing forward and have brought forward, we have had 40 oral statements in relation to covid in this House, in addition to the urgent questions that Mr Speaker has facilitated. This week, we had a full day's debate. The whole of Monday after questions was devoted to a covid-19 debate, and of course we had the renewal of the orders yesterday. Next week, we will have a vote. We had a vote yesterday, but Labour Members did not take part. [*Interruption.*] The right hon. Lady is heckling—it is unlike her to heckle—saying, “Vote, vote.” Well, they did not vote. It is not my fault they did not vote. I cannot make Labour Members vote. I have no influence over the Labour Whips Office to get them to turn up and do their job. If they want to sit at home idling away the happy hours not voting—not going through the Division Lobbies—what can I do? I can appeal to your good offices, Mr Speaker. I can ask the Doorkeepers to encourage them. We have set things out in a covid-safe way. But Labour Members decide not to turn up when we give them a vote, which they keep on asking for.

Valerie Vaz: We did turn up. Did you listen to the debate?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Not to vote, they didn't. There will be opportunities to vote on Tuesday and Wednesday next week, and there will be a debate on Tuesday 13 October—which happens to be the anniversary of the birth of Lady Thatcher, so a day of legend and song. On that happy day, we will have a debate on covid-19.

I want to pay tribute, as the right hon. Lady did, to Mark Hutton. Thirty-five years' service in this House is a pretty good innings. He has been an absolutely authoritative source of advice on procedure and parliamentary privilege. Parliamentary privilege is one of the most interesting topics of discussion: it is such an important part of how we do our work. He has obviously

been a distinguished Clerk of the Journals. He has been very ready to give advice to Members on knotty procedural problems. He has been involved with three editions, two as deputy editor and then as co-editor, of “Erskine May”. I must confess that his career is practically what I might like to have had, so in paying this tribute to him, I am a little bit envious of his distinction, his learning and his capability. I served—I think the right hon. Lady may have done as well—on the Committee chaired by Jack Straw looking into the governance of the House. That Committee was handled by the two of them with such effectiveness and subtlety that it came up with a very good answer. I would like to record my gratitude to him, not just personally but also on behalf of Her Majesty's Government.

The right hon Lady mentioned that this is Black History Month. I am a great encourager of all history. As the Prime Minister said yesterday, for countless generations, people of African and Caribbean descent have been shaping our nation's story, making a huge difference to our national and cultural life and helping to make Britain a better place to be. The more we learn from our history, the better.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Leader of the House will know how important it is to patients to be able to receive their treatment as close to home as possible, so will he join me in welcoming the new haematology and oncology unit at the Hospital of St Cross in Rugby, which will provide chemotherapy locally for Rugby residents? The soft furnishings and equipment there have been provided by the Friends of St Cross. May we have a debate about the great support that is provided by local health charities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The work done by the St Cross hospital is fantastic. It is so important that people with very serious illnesses should receive the best possible treatment and should receive it locally. The work he is doing in supporting local charities is first class, and the St Cross hospital has the particular respect of this House.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): First, may I, on behalf of the third party, associate myself with the remarks made by you, Mr Speaker, the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House regarding Mark Hutton? He has been a friend of this party over the years, so much so in fact that our Chief Whip takes rather more pride than might be expected in a Scottish nationalist in having his signed copy of “Erskine May” in his office.

I want to begin by talking about our procedures and paraphrasing Kipling by saying “If you can keep your head while all around you are losing theirs, you probably don't understand the seriousness of the situation.” I think that is what is happening in this Chamber, where we are maintaining this façade of normalcy while we know that there is a crisis gripping the country. I do wonder if we are devoting enough urgency to looking at how we can revise and improve participation by remote means in our discussions, given that large parts of the country are now again in lockdown and that these measures may intensify in the weeks and months to come. In that regard, I am particularly disappointed to see that next week Westminster Hall will resume its sittings in a business-as-normal-type way. Surely if there

was ever an opportunity to try to test creatively the opportunities presented to us by technology and to have virtual conferencing, it would have been in the setting of Westminster Hall. As it is, these debates will take place with the vast majority of Members of Parliament unable to participate in them, and it is a great wasted opportunity.

I also want to talk about the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill, which is trundling its way through Parliament. It is now clear—it is no longer a matter of speculation—that the devolved Administrations of the United Kingdom will not give consent to this ridiculous legislation, and I want to know if we can find the time to debate in this Chamber the consequences for the devolution settlement of that being the case and of the United Kingdom Government choosing to ignore the wishes of the devolved Administrations and steamroller the legislation through anyway.

For my final point, on the job support scheme, I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. It was welcome that the Chancellor came to the House to discuss this last week, but there are still enormous gaps. When can we find the time to debate what we can do to assist those companies in this country that are viable, safe and good businesses but that are closed, by order, to meet the public health imperative? Are we simply to say that all those businesses and all those jobs are unviable and they are to be discarded, or are we going to step in after 31 October and offer them some assistance?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman has continued to ask for us to change our procedures and to do things more remotely; it is worth noting that yesterday the remote voting system in the other place fell down and therefore it will have to redo the votes on the business it was supposed to be doing. I think we have to press on with our important business in serving the country, ensuring that we have the debates that are asked for. From the point of view of Government business managers, we have the demand, on the one hand, for debates and votes, quite rightly, and on the other, that we should not be here. People cannot have it both ways. The technology did not provide satisfactory scrutiny and has fallen over in voting in the other place. When we had a problem in our Division Lobbies, we had a fall-back solution and we could carry on with the business. Losing a day's votes on Report stage of a Bill makes proceeding with Government business exceptionally difficult.

As regards Westminster Hall, the hon. Gentleman says that most Members will not be able to attend, but most Members do not attend Westminster Hall anyway; very few debates are full in Westminster Hall, and although there will be formal limits, considering the numbers who are at most Westminster Hall debates, those formal limits will not be unduly stretched. The resources of our broadcasting teams are being used in other ways, and there are limited resources. Again, people wanted Westminster Hall back, and we have got Westminster Hall back, and that presents an opportunity to hold the Government to account; I think this is a good thing and the right thing to be doing.

The United Kingdom Internal Market Bill is a fantastic Bill. It is one of the best pieces of legislation passed by the House in recent times. It also devolves 70 powers to the devolved Administrations. SNP Members are modelling

themselves on *Oliver Twist*—they are always asking for more. They cannot have more on this occasion. They have a great deal of devolution coming through that Bill, and the Bill will ensure that we have a functioning internal market. The hon. Gentleman effectively asked for further debates on the Bill. It is worth noting that two of the days in Committee were not completely used, so Members are on stronger ground complaining when the time provided by Government has been used up.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support for the job support scheme. I remind the House that £190 billion of taxpayers' money has gone to support the economy so far. That is a very substantial amount. As the Chancellor has said, not everything can be protected, but an enormous amount has been protected.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): In Cornwall, our town and parish councils are struggling financially in the wake of covid-19 due to their revenues being highly dependent on car parking, and leisure centres are on their knees due to the lack of financial support from Cornwall Council. After months of us asking for it, Cornwall Council has only this week given leisure centres financial support. That is despite Cornwall Council being allocated £39 million of un-ringfenced money to spend on local issues such as these. Will the Leader of the House consider holding a general debate on how local authorities have used this un-ringfenced money during the covid pandemic, and does he agree that public finances should always be open, transparent and accountable?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right that the spending of taxpayers' money should always be open and accountable, and I am glad that he is making it accountable by asking his question. The Government rightly have given taxpayers' money un-ringfenced to local councils, but local councils have a responsibility to their communities to spend it wisely, and MPs have a right to hold them to account for how it is spent and bring it to the House when they feel it is not spent well; I am sure my hon. Friend will continue to do that.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: I thank Mr Speaker, his team, House authorities and staff for their combined efforts to support the reopening of Westminster Hall. We have some debates already lined up for Westminster Hall: on Thursday 8 October, a debate on obesity and the effect of covid-19 on those living with obesity, and a second debate on mental health support for frontline staff; on Tuesday 13 October, a debate on the introduction of a universal basic income; and on Thursday 15 October, a debate on a disability-inclusive response to covid-19, and a second debate on massacres in Sudan and the United Kingdom's support for Sudan's democratic transition.

We do not have Backbench Business time in the Chamber on 15 October; the Government have taken that day. If we get time in the Chamber on 22 October, we have a long-overdue application for a debate on errors and underpayments in the Equitable Life scandal and an important application for a debate to celebrate Black History Month, which would be very timely and welcome across the House. We do not yet have a slot for a debate on Baby Loss Awareness Week, so should Government business look like it will run short at any time, that debate could perhaps be held then.

[*Ian Mearns*]

We might need to put the record straight on something. In answer to a question from myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care earlier mentioned additional financial support of £10 million for LA7 north-east councils. The leader of my local authority in Gateshead is totally unaware of any additional financial support for businesses given to local authorities in north-east England. That is what we were asking for—additional financial support for businesses.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think the last point needs to be followed up privately with the Secretary of State and the hon. Gentleman's local council, but I am sure that if the Secretary of State said that funds are available, they are. I am delighted that the Backbench Business Committee is using the time available in Westminster Hall so effectively. I note the hon. Gentleman's requests for further time. We are catching up, but the availability of Westminster Hall means that the Committee will be able to start getting through its backlog of requests.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Research from the Children's Commissioner shows that spending by clinical commissioning groups on speech and language therapies ranges from £17.61 per child in the NHS north region all the way down to £10.20 per child in the NHS midlands and east region. When may we have a debate on those regional disparities and on support for children with speech and language difficulties, particularly during the coronavirus pandemic?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this crucial matter. The Government recognise that speech, language and communication skills are important for child wellbeing, and as a father of six I know how important this issue is for children as they grow and develop. The Government will continue to prioritise the improving of early speech and language outcomes across education, health and social care, to narrow inequalities. The NHS long-term plan recognises the importance of speech and language therapists. It proposes that "local areas will design and implement models of care that are age appropriate, closer to home and bring together physical and mental health services."

Unfortunately, the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), has disappeared, but I hope he is watching the Parliament channel and therefore will have noted my hon. Friend's request for a Backbench Business debate.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): This week, I received urgent concerns from a major meat-processing company in my constituency about its ability to export to EU countries post the Brexit transition phase. It is particularly concerned about the ability to process animal health export certificates, agreement from the EU on animal origin identification, and the export of frozen and fresh groupage products. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to make an urgent statement addressing these areas of concern?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is obviously important that we are able to export our food around the world. It is good news that UK beef has at last gone back into the United

States, with a shipment going from Northern Ireland to the United States. Markets are reopening, but the negotiations with the European Union are continuing and we will see what the results are. In terms of a debate, I am sure the hon. Gentleman will know how to get an Adjournment debate, which is a suitable way to raise a constituency matter on the Floor of the House.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): My right hon. Friend may know that I am a keen supporter of electric vehicles and believe that this emerging industry could help to level up areas such as Don Valley. May we have a statement on what the Government are doing to help to incentivise electric-vehicle production in this country?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. Electric vehicles are going to be tremendously important and are a central tenet of the Government's economic agenda in supporting innovative industries in our manufacturing heartlands. The Secretaries of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and for Transport are aware of that, and the Government want to see the UK become a world leader in the manufacture and use of electric vehicles. Some £1.5 billion has been committed jointly by taxpayers and industry, through the Advanced Propulsion Centre and the Faraday battery challenge, to research, develop and commercialise local carbon or automated innovations. Funding is, therefore, available, and I hope that levelling up in my hon. Friend's constituency will benefit from it.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: Yesterday I received an email from the TSB informing me that three branches in my constituency—at Anniesland, Drumchapel and Partick—are to close. One of those branches is in an area where digital exclusion is extremely high. This issue will affect many Members from all parties and the scandal must be addressed, so may we have a debate in Government time on the importance of maintaining these vital lifelines?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue, which many Members from all parties have raised in the past. People's access to vital services is of great importance and has been debated in the House previously. The hon. Lady is also right to raise her specific constituency issues and put pressure on the service providers to continue to provide the services that their customers and local residents need.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con) [V]: May we have a debate on the use of sky lanterns? Is the Leader of the House aware that they pose a fire risk to farmers' crops and are a danger to animals if ingested? As they are, in effect, hazardous airborne litter that invariably lands on someone else's property, why do we not ban them?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very well aware of the concern my right hon. Friend raises, because it has been raised with me by my own constituents, and I am aware of farmers' concerns about sky lanterns. However, I am always reluctant to jump to the immediate conclusion that things should be banned. There may be a way of enjoying sky lanterns without endangering crops and livestock. The knee-jerk reaction to ban is something politicians should always be a little bit careful of.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Has the Leader of the House seen early-day motion 884, in my name and the names of others?

[That this House recognises the constructive approach taken by GMB Union and Unison in negotiations around their members' pay and conditions with British Gas and its parent company Centrica; condemns the tactics employed by that company in commencing those negotiations with threats to dismiss and re-engage its UK workforce on lesser terms; commends British Gas workers who while furloughed during the covid-19 outbreak voluntarily delivered thousands of food parcels with the Trussell Trust; and calls on the company to do the right thing, withdraw the Section 188 notice of potential redundancies and negotiate in good faith with workers' unions.]

It is about Centrica's outrageous threat to sack its entire workforce unless they agree to new and far worse terms and conditions and pay. We have not seen this practice universally, but across one or two sectors of the economy, and it seems to be growing and proliferating. If ever there was a strategically important industry, it is Centrica. If, through the short-sightedness of the management, Centrica finds itself without a workforce, we will be in serious trouble. Can we have a statement from the Business Secretary?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Again, the hon. Gentleman is so right to raise this matter. We are all, individually, champions for our constituents, and it is our job to seek redress of grievance when they are treated badly, whether that is by the state or by private companies, and to ensure that companies behave in a way that understands their societal obligations, as well as their shareholder obligations. I congratulate him on bringing the issue to the Floor of the House. It is a problem that the Government are aware of and I would encourage him to keep on asking for debates so that the issue can be examined more carefully.

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): Carshalton and Wallington is home to some of the best schools in the country. However, there is a worrying lack of secondary school places due to the incompetent Lib Dem council's handling of school place provision, trying at once to block a new school at Rosehill on what has been described as an ideal site while trying to force a school on a tiny and inappropriate site at Sheen Way. Can we have a debate in this place on school place provision to ensure that every child has a good or outstanding local school place to go to?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have a nasty feeling that when my hon. Friend says "incompetent Lib Dem-run council", he is guilty of a tautology. I have not yet come across a competently run Lib Dem council. Supporting local authorities to create sufficient school places is one of the Government's absolute priorities. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry, I hope I have not upset the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). We share a local authority and I do not want to be too mean about it.

I sympathise with my hon. Friend. I am sure many Conservative MPs share his pain in dealing with Lib Dem-run local authorities and their flawed approach to planning in education. We provide funding for all the places that are needed based on local authorities' own data on pupil forecasts. This is why we have announced nearly £750 million to provide places needed for 2022.

The Government's pupil places planning advisers will work alongside councils to provide support for any local authority that fails to provide sufficient school places. We announced that Sutton local authority will receive £16.2 million to provide new school places for 2022, taking its total funding between 2011 and 2022 to £141.8 million.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): By video link, my former university lecturer, Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: It might surprise the Leader of the House to learn that I miss him dreadfully. As an active parliamentarian, I miss so much the ability to ask him questions on a Thursday, but, as I have the chance this morning, can I ask him for an early debate on the future of new buildings in Parliament and the holocaust memorial and learning centre? Can we have an environmental impact assessment of all the contracts? Can we start using the River Thames so that it goes back to being the conduit that it was—the heart of our transportation system? Can we have a debate on that?

Secondly, I am a pretty new boy on the Select Committee on the Future Relationship with the European Union. These are hazardous and tumultuous times for my constituents and those of the Leader of the House, and it seems strange that this all-party Committee, which does such good work, will be wound up at the very time we will need the scrutiny of this House as we move into uncharted territory. Is there anything we can do to prolong the life of the Committee?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We miss the hon. Gentleman too and look forward to seeing him back here in due course. I was pleased to note that he asked a question to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care earlier, so he remains an enormously active Member of Parliament, although I recognise his general point that it is harder to get in during Question Time than it was before.

With regard to building works in the Palace, I am delighted to be able to say that that is a matter for the House of Commons Commission. The spokesman for the Commission answers questions periodically, and I am sure the matter will come up next time. We all look forward to seeing the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) back here in due course.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that a review of the parliamentary art collection should be an opportunity to celebrate Parliament's rich and central role in our nation's history and heritage, rather than a political exercise to edit, rewrite and impose woke contemporary interpretations of history on a place of such national importance?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We should take such pride in the history that is displayed through the art in this House. It might be a slightly Whiggish view of history, but if we go to Committee Room 10, we see Alfred the Great defeating the Danes, starting our great island story. If we walk from here to the House of Lords, we see on the walls the whole process of the civil war, with King Charles I raising his standard at Nottingham, and we see the birds that flew—we see the history of our nation. It is something that we should be proud of, for we are a great nation; a successful nation; one of the greatest nations the world has ever seen; and we have done so much good, not just at home but abroad, and we should be

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proud of that. We should recognise that how our forefathers have recorded our history is not something we should dispose of. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has said:

“Statues and other historical objects were created by generations with different perspectives and understandings of right and wrong... they play an important role in teaching us about our past... Rather than erasing these objects, we should seek to contextualise...them in a way that enables the public to learn about them in their entirety... Our aim should be to use them to educate people about all aspects of Britain’s complex past, both good”—

in my view, primarily good—and occasionally bad. The word “occasionally” is an edit of my own.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab) [V]: Two weeks ago, I asked the Leader of the House to help ensure that the Prime Minister read the Youth Violence Commission’s report, and whether we could have a debate on it. He said that he would not be so bold as to tell the Prime Minister what to read, but I think he is a bold fella, and I just wonder whether he has had any success.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I can assure the hon. Lady that my office has brought her important report to the attention of the Prime Minister’s office, but it is not really for me to dictate the Prime Minister’s reading material.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I want to begin by paying tribute to PC Ratana, who was killed last week while serving his community. More than 1,600 police officers have paid this terrible price while serving their country. I come from a policing family and I know what it is like to hear about the death of a police officer on the news and wonder for a moment whether it is a family member. We cannot bring PC Ratana back, or others such as PC Andrew Harper, but we can ensure that in future families such as theirs get justice. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate so that we can support the campaign, led by PC Harper’s widow, Lissie, and others, to introduce whole-life sentences for people who kill police officers and other emergency service workers?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I know that that issue is close to my hon. Friend’s heart, as he is a volunteer special constable. I take this opportunity to thank and commend him for his public service in that regard, and for the courage that is required to be a serving police officer. It was with great sadness that we heard of the death of Sergeant Matt Ratana, and the Prime Minister recognised that, and Mr Speaker organised a minute’s silence for him. May his soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, rest in peace. The Government are committed to improving and strengthening sentencing for violent criminals. The justice system exists to keep the public safe. The Government recently published the sentencing White Paper, which outlines our approach to sentencing, including the introduction of tougher sentences for murderers and a review of the use of whole-life orders. But those who serve us, who are brave in carrying out their duty, deserve protection.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Yesterday, in my capacity as co-chair of the beauty, aesthetics and wellbeing APPG, I virtually met some truly inspirational women who were being supported by an incredible

charity, Changing Faces. These women, like one in five people in the UK, have a scar, birthmark or skin condition that makes them visibly different. As a result of this, they experience discrimination and exclusion in their everyday lives. Changing Faces and Avon Cosmetics have launched the Pledge to be Seen campaign. Will the Leader of the House join me in championing that campaign, and encourage businesses and Government services to recognise that being different should be embraced and reflected in all advertising and campaign material?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady always brings the most cross-party campaigns to the Floor of the House, and I am genuinely grateful to her for that. It shows how politicians can work together. I also notice that most of the campaigns that she brings to the Floor of the House are successful, and that is a tribute to her doggedness and determination. In light of that, many Members across the House will be sympathetic to the Changing Faces campaign to support children and adults with facial differences who may have suffered from isolation, stigma and discrimination in their lives. It is important as a fundamental principle that we value everyone as an individual and what is inside, not what is necessarily outside.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con) [V]: I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Since 1988 Armenia has illegally occupied Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. That led to a war that took place between 1988 and 1994, when a ceasefire was agreed, backed up with a United Nations Resolution in 1993. On 27 September, Armenia mobilised forces and attacked Azerbaijan, and I understand that they are regularly launching rockets from Armenia into Azerbaijan to provoke Azerbaijan to react. All this has the potential for dragging both Turkey and Russia into a much more extended war. May we have a statement from the Foreign Secretary early next week on what actions the UK Government will take at the United Nations Security Council to broker a ceasefire and prevent Armenia from creating a potentially very serious war?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Her Majesty’s Government are deeply concerned about the situation on the ground, including the continuing violence and reports of high numbers of civilian casualties. We call on Armenia and Azerbaijan to return to dialogue, as the only lasting settlement to this conflict is a peacefully negotiated one without preconditions.

My hon. Friend asks what the Government have been doing, and I can tell him that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has issued a joint statement with the Canadian Foreign Minister calling for an immediate ceasefire and a return to the negotiating table under the auspices of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe Minsk group. On Monday my hon. Friend the Minister for European neighbourhood and the Americas spoke to Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Bayramov and urged a return to dialogue on the OSCE Minsk group to ensure a peaceful and sustainable settlement.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): A recent report by the Electoral Reform Society “Democracy in the Dark” demonstrated the unregulated wild west of online political campaigning; millions were spent on secretive

dark ads before the 2019 general election. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that there is a pressing need for meaningful regulation of online campaigning, and may we have a debate in Government time to consider these much-needed reforms?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman raises a very valid point: anything that we send out on paper is heavily regulated, and things that are done online are almost unregulated—not entirely, but broadly. There is a discrepancy between those two, and I know that the Government are considering this matter. A debate via the Backbench Business Committee would be a good starting place to get the ball rolling on this discussion.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): One of the many awful aspects of the coronavirus crisis has been the doubling of assaults on shop workers. These people are heroes who went into work every day while we were all locked down at home, and ensured that we had food and provisions; yet, the thanks that many get is to be abused and assaulted by customers. As somebody who worked for Asda for 12 years before entering the House, I feel very strongly that the despicable people who assault shop workers should face much tougher sentences from the courts. Can we have a debate to see whether the majority of the House agrees with that sentiment and so that we can show our deep gratitude for all shop workers?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend, as he so often does, puts his finger on the right issue. Shop workers have been fantastic, phenomenal and brave, because they all stayed at work at a point when we knew much less about the disease than we do now and thought that it might have been much more risky even than it has turned out to be; they were a real frontline emergency service. Without them, the crisis would have been infinitely worse, so I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the tribute he has paid to them. I can reassure him that there are already offences that cover assaults against any worker, including those in the retail sector, such as common assault, actual bodily harm and grievous bodily harm. In July, the Government published the findings of a call for evidence on violence and abuse towards shop workers, and we will continue to work with the British Retail Consortium and other partners to stop these crimes. I pay tribute to the British Retail Consortium for the work that it has been doing to highlight this important issue, and encourage my hon. Friend and the BRC to continue raising it.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Over 15,000 people have died in our care homes—many because of the Government’s shameful policy of discharging patients with coronavirus from hospital into care homes. Both the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary confirmed to me from the Dispatch Box that they took full responsibility for those deaths, and the policy then changed. But my local trust recently issued new guidance stating that covid-positive patients are again to be discharged back into our care homes. Will the Leader of the House ask the Secretary of State to come to the House and explain this dangerous policy?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government take this issue with the utmost seriousness and have been doing a great deal to help care homes, including issuing more than

100,000 tests a day to care homes across the country, overhauling the delivery of personal protective equipment to care homes and setting up a £1.1 billion infection control fund. The issue that the hon. Lady raises is one of great seriousness. I assure her that it will be taken up on her behalf with the Secretary of State for Health immediately after this statement.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con) [V]: I know that my right hon. Friend, because he is a sensible fellow, did not visit Minehead funfair a few days ago. The idea that Minehead Town Council could actually have a funfair at this time is daft, stupid and dangerous. As my right hon. Friend is aware, infection rates in Somerset are going up, but Somerset County Council’s public health department has not acted to stop it; in fact, it has not done anything. I am afraid to say that the county council is far too busy fighting to form a half-baked unitary authority without the backing of the people of Somerset. I am afraid that promoting this ridiculous idea and using £1 million of public money to do so may cost us lives, and, as has already been mentioned, King Alfred would not tolerate it. Could we have a debate on some of the more stupid things that councils are doing during this appalling situation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend refers to half-baked proposals and then King Alfred, so I cannot help but remember that King Alfred, as a baker, was not invariably successful.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Do you remember?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do indeed. I was not there at the time, but I was paying close attention to events.

I have always thought that our great county is thought of by the people living within it as one, not as various little dissected bits, and I do have concerns with public bodies spending large amounts of taxpayers’ money campaigning for their own preferred interests. It is indeed an issue that we should take seriously and be concerned about. As regards closing funfairs, I will consult my children and see what they think.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab) [V]: This year, because of covid, the only “DIY SOS” Big Build, which was completed for Children in Need, was in Gower. Last week, I visited this unique, one-of-a-kind facility, which has been provided for Surfability UK. It gives people of all ages with disabilities the opportunity to take to the waves of Caswell bay. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the two men behind it—both called Ben—who took up this concept and continue to bring joy to the lives of so many? Will he also acknowledge the generosity of trades and businesses across Swansea and south Wales? Moreover, will he urge the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to highlight to the new director-general of the BBC the immeasurable impact “DIY SOS” has on our communities across the UK?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is so right to bring this issue to the attention of the House. Yes, I would like to thank Ben and Ben for what they are doing, which sounds wonderful and inspirational, and I would like to know more about it. I also thank the people and businesses of Swansea and south Wales for funding it, and “DIY

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SOS” for what it does, which sounds truly inspirational in helping people, and I would love to know more about it if the hon. Lady is willing to send me further information.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): The Leader of the House will know that I am forever banging on about rural issues, and today is no exception. Residents in BUILT Wells in Llandrindod Wells find it almost impossible to access NHS dentistry. This has been going on for a long time, since well before covid. I have raised the issue with the Welsh Government, but they simply acknowledge the difficulty of services in rural areas, and nothing seems to change. However, this is a fundamental, basic service, and I should not have to campaign on this issue. Will the Leader of the House grant time for a debate about what we can do for constituents who are denied access to basic healthcare by the Welsh Labour Government?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend says she bangs on, but this is clearly not true. She stands up for her constituents and seeks redress of grievance in the right and historic way that Members of Parliament do, and she is a noble champion for her constituency. She is right to campaign for better dentistry provision in her constituency. It is a devolved matter, and the Welsh authorities are responsible—they are, of course, socialist-run Welsh authorities—but I am afraid there is a problem with the provision of health services by the devolved Welsh authorities, which do not manage to run their affairs as well as they should. The good news is that there is going to be an election in May. Next May, people can vote Conservative, and then they will have better, cleaner, fresher teeth—and if they use Aquafresh, their teeth will be cleaner still.

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Given my right hon. Friend’s great affinity with history and the natural environment, does he agree that a quarry on Briggens Estate in rural Hertford and Stortford would be a huge blight on the area and local people? I am keen to ensure that Hertfordshire County Council engages with me and local residents on the putative minerals plan, so will the Leader of the House assist me in securing a debate on this important local issue?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, and I understand that it has been rumbling on for quite a few years in Hertfordshire. It is for local authorities to develop their mineral and waste plans and then to consider subsequent applications. At all stages, the local authority is required to give consideration to the environmental effects of activities on residents. Any minerals and waste plan will be supported by a strategic environmental assessment, which will have regard to site allocations and activities, and any planning application should be supported by an environmental impact assessment. However, I suggest to my hon. Friend that she apply for an Adjournment debate, because this is exactly the sort of issue that is well highlighted in Adjournment debates.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, may I add our gratitude and thanks to Mark Hutton?

Last night, a group of activists carried out a night-time video projection on this building, detailing the human rights abuses by the Chinese Communist party against Hong Kongers, Uyghurs and Tibetans. Pema Yoko from Tibetan Community UK said:

“Under Xi’s rule, Beijing has tightened its grip on restrictions on communication in Tibet in an effort to cut Tibet off from the rest of the world”.

This coalition of people fighting the severe human rights abuses by the Chinese Communist party is calling on our Government to take much more co-ordinated action. Will the Government make time to debate the systematic human rights abuses by the CCP against minorities in China, and consider the private Member’s Bill laid by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on reciprocal access to Tibet?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady raises something that it is absolutely right to raise in this House. The activity in Xinjiang against the Uyghurs is an egregious breach of human rights and the sort of thing that a civilised country would not be involved in. Communists do not always observe human rights. The spiritual leadership offered to the people of Tibet by the Dalai Lama is recognised across the world, and we will continue to play a leading role internationally, working with partners, to hold China to account for gross human rights violations. With regard to Hong Kong, we have offered a route to citizenship for British nationals overseas because of China’s failure to honour the joint declaration.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): The pandemic has highlighted how essential access to high-speed broadband is. I ask my right hon. Friend for a debate in Government time to discuss the importance of rural broadband roll-out, so that constituencies such as mine can become better connected.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I assure my hon. Friend that the Government are offering huge support for rural broadband, including £5 billion of taxpayers’ money committed to fund gigabyte-capable broadband in the UK’s hardest-to-reach areas, on top of £1.9 billion spent on the Building Digital UK superfast programme to ensure that more than 96% of premises have access to superfast broadband. She is absolutely right that reliable broadband is a necessity for households and businesses; representing a rural constituency myself, I know what a difference it makes to the opportunities for businesses.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We are now going to the place where I was educated by the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman)—Swansea West.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be familiar with hospitality venues across Swansea, including Wind Street. Across the UK, such venues are having their trade restricted for public health reasons. When will we have a debate on how, given that that is in the public interest, the public purse should pay the costs, rather than individual business owners? Will the Leader of the House ensure that such a debate includes all right hon. and hon. Members, in accordance with my Remote Participation in House of Commons Proceedings Bill, by allowing them to participate and speak remotely? That Bill, of course, was presented on my behalf by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent

North (Barry Gardiner), because the Leader of the House would not allow me to speak. When will he lift restrictions and allow us to debate the important issue of ensuring that businesses do not have to pay the cost of public health restrictions?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The House has made the decision, quite rightly, that debates require personal participation. Debates do not run properly when people are remote and interventions are not possible. The support given to Wales by taxpayers is a total of £4 billion, protecting 400,000 jobs under the furlough scheme and 110,000 jobs under the self-employed scheme. What has been done for Wales is very significant, and if the hon. Gentleman wants to come to the House to sing the praises of the Government for what they have managed to do, we will lay out the red carpet for him.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Does the Leader of the House agree that, were the Prime Minister minded to answer the letter sent to him on 21 September by Professor Gupta and other eminent scientists, questioning the selection and maintenance of the aim regarding the Government's policy in respect of covid-19, he should do so by making a written statement to the House?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend refers to the intimate details of the Prime Minister's correspondence, but what I can assure him of is that, before the latest series of lockdowns, which is to say after 21 September and therefore subsequent to the letter, the Prime Minister had meetings with Professor Gupta, Professor Heneghan and others. He listened closely to their views and policy has been developed on the information that he received from a range of scientists and experts.

As the Prime Minister has said, the most important thing is that everyone now follows the guidance that we have set out, so that we can stop the spread of the virus. All measures are kept under constant review, and changes will be announced in the usual way. This has often been by oral statement rather than by written statement, which, by and large, I think the House prefers on matters of this importance. I hope my right hon Friend will welcome the Government's recent commitment to offering the House greater opportunity to scrutinise coronavirus measures before they are implemented and, as always, we remain very grateful for his full support.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): May we have a debate on the importance of keeping highly skilled engineering jobs in the UK? Konecranes in my constituency has this week decided to cease manufacturing with the loss of many jobs despite the fact that it appears to be in line for contracts linked with the UK defence industry, which will, as I understand it, be instead considering manufacturing in Czechoslovakia. What more can be done to ensure that companies, particularly those bidding for local contracts, encourage, support and protect local jobs rather than outsourcing them?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady raises a matter that is of great importance to the Government and to the country, which is that, if we are to earn our living over the coming decades, we need high-skilled jobs. That is why it has been right for the Government to give huge

support to businesses through the coronavirus crisis, essentially to maintain the structures of the economy, so that when demand returns the businesses are still there and the demand can be met. Although, as the Chancellor has said, not every job can be protected, £190 billion of taxpayers' money has been very significant.

I think the hon. Lady is right to ask for further discussion on this. In this instance, referring to her specific constituency issue, an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate will be suitable now that Westminster Hall is back up and running, and will provide direct answers from Ministers in this crucial area.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): I would like to associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) earlier. Yesterday, a review and audit of art across Parliament by the Works of Art Committee was announced. At the height of the global coronavirus pandemic, Durham County Council launched a similar review, spending days of officers' time on a pointless exercise looking at works of art across County Durham. We all want to see the very best of Britain showcased in this Parliament and see the context of historical pieces. However, does the Leader of the House agree that, at this time of the global coronavirus pandemic, Parliament can do better than following a panicked Labour-led Durham County Council in bending the knee to woke political agenda?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We should take, as I have said before, pride in:

"This royal throne of Kings, this sceptred island,

This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,

This other Eden, demi-paradise,

This fortress built by Nature for herself

Against infection and the hand of war,

This happy breed of men, this little world,

This precious stone set in the silver sea,

Which serves it in the office of a wall,

Or as a moat defensive to a house,

Against the envy of less happier lands,

This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England."

Had William Shakespeare lived in a later day, he would have said, "this United Kingdom", because that is what we should take pride in, and, no, we should most certainly not be overwhelmed by wokeism. Members may wonder why I read that quotation today. Well, it is National Poetry Day, so I thought it only appropriate that we have a proper quotation and that we stand up for our great nation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I hope this is going out on Sky Arts. Wonderful, isn't it?

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab) [V]: The furlough scheme was obviously welcome, but, as the GMB has pointed out, those on lower pay who return to work after being furloughed and then fall ill may find that they are not entitled to statutory sick pay as it is based on actual earnings. Can the Leader of the House ask Ministers to address this?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government have taken steps to help people on low incomes who have to self-isolate because of the coronavirus with a special payment of

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£500. Therefore, steps are being taken to try to help people on lower incomes when affected by illnesses relating to the coronavirus.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con) [V]: I welcome the news that the overwhelming majority of customs declarations for freight leaving the UK will be completed online post 1 January 2021. Plans for a new inland customs clearance centre have been outlined for my constituency, which will be based at a former coach interchange near the motorway. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that money from the £450 million port infrastructure fund will be made available to provide the necessary road improvements and to introduce weight limits and restrictions to protect the surrounding villages in Warrington South from visiting HGVs?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I congratulate my hon. Friend on standing up for his constituency in the way that he has. There is a £470 million fund for infrastructure, as part of the wider package of £705 million for the GB-EU border. My right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary has committed to spending £15 million of taxpayers' money on road and rail infrastructure to ensure that goods and freight flow to and from our ports as quickly as possible. I cannot promise that that money is going to Warrington, but my hon. Friend's point has been noted and I will pass it on to the Secretary of State.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I seek assurances from the Leader of the House, as the representative of Parliament in Cabinet, that he will raise my significant concerns about our lack of opportunity as constituency MPs to raise our serious concerns about the job loss tsunami that we are about to face. The Chancellor's announcement last week will not save my constituency from mass job losses. We have solutions, but we need the Government to engage to save those jobs. Will the Leader of the House raise this matter in Cabinet to ensure that Ministers meet us to discuss the pending crisis? In addition, may we have a specific debate about the job losses that are about to hit our nation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will always try to facilitate meetings for hon. Members, if they need them, with particular Ministers. As for a debate, there is an Opposition day debate coming up, and this may well be a subject that the Opposition think it worth debating, because it is clearly very important. I would add that the kickstart scheme will help to get people back into work, and particularly to get young people into work. The Department for Work and Pensions is also taking on many, many more work coaches to help people, but it is widely accepted that this is a difficult period, and the hon. Lady is right to focus our minds on it.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Our town centres have been particularly impacted by coronavirus. In Stoke-on-Trent, we have not been a beneficiary of the town deals funding, so will my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time about what more can be done to help our high streets?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises a key point. The Government are committed to supporting and reviving Britain's high streets, many of which are in real

need of regeneration. As I understand it, officials from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government are meeting Stoke-on-Trent council leaders to discuss the town's progress in applying for towns fund investment. The Government welcome proposals from local authorities for towns fund investment, which will be assessed on the quality of their business case. There is another round of money forthcoming, and I am sure my hon. Friend will encourage the local authority to apply. This is a fund of £3.6 billion in England. Many Members across the House will see their constituencies benefit from this use of taxpayers' money, as I am in North East Somerset, in Keynsham and Midsomer Norton.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Last night Gateshead Council supported the WeMakeEvents initiative to pave the way for the return of live events by lighting Gateshead International Stadium in red. Events companies in my constituency such as MandyLights, Sound Inc studios and Atlas Band Touring are facing huge difficulties while their respective industries are on hold. May we have a debate in Government time on how we can ensure the safe return of the events industry as soon as possible?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Obviously the events industry is particularly badly hit because of the difficulties in managing large gatherings. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport set out a significant package of support for live events and cultural events, which is the basis of what is available to the companies affected. As for a debate, this might also be the subject of an Adjournment debate relating to the specific concerns in the hon. Lady's constituency.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): As well as being National Poetry Day, today is Lincolnshire Day, and the county was of course the birthplace of the former poet laureate, Alfred, Lord Tennyson. At long last, the top-tier authorities in Lincolnshire are agreed on a devolution deal—we now need the Government's go-ahead—which will finally expunge the past links with county Humberside. Lincolnshire could be united again. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement from the appropriate Minister to give us the go-ahead and let us get on with devolution to Lincolnshire?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My only worry about creating this great Lincolnshire state is that my hon. Friend may then declare UDI for Lincolnshire and become its king—a role he would carry out with enormous distinction. It is the policy of the Government to devolve, to centralise and to give more power to local communities. Building on the programme of mayoral combined authority models, conversations on further devolution are continuing. Lincolnshire is unquestionably a great county, and I think that bringing counties back together is always welcomed by the people who live within them.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I have a constituent whose life has been ruined following a mesh implant. She is constant pain and it has cost her her marriage. She can only work part-time and in a more junior role, so that causes her financial hardship. Despite using a walking stick she still suffers falls. She cannot venture out for leisure activities on her own as

her life revolves around toilet stops. Yet she was refused the mobility element of the personal independence payment. Can we have a statement from the Leader of the House outlining how the DWP can award my constituent the mobility element she deserves without her having to suffer another assessment?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is, dare I say it, a model of an active Member of Parliament as a champion for his constituents. We have all had occasional cases when things have gone wrong with assessments. One of the ways to put them right is by direct application to Ministers, which I have found has ensured, in all the cases that I have raised where there have been mistakes, that they have been put right. If he sends me more details of the specific case, I will undertake to take it up with the Secretary of State and try to get him a full answer. I thank him for going into bat for his constituent in such a proper way.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): Last month, it came to light that a neighbouring council, Brighton and Hove, had, without any consultation with Eastbourne Borough Council, quietly moved over 130 homeless people into Eastbourne hotels. Those who it had moved along the coast in this way could not possibly be cared for at arm's length by Brighton and Hove, nor could they be properly cared for in Eastbourne, unprepared and unaware as we were. Could we debate the framework that sits behind the way in which local councils operate together to consider whether aspects that are currently considered good practice might need to be raised to the level of a duty to make sure that a sorry situation such as this does not repeat itself?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is an example, is it not, of what goes wrong when the hard left are in charge? [*Interruption.*] I would not accuse the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) of being from the hard left—not today, at any rate. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this matter. The homelessness legislation guidance sets out that in the first instance local authorities should try to place homeless households within their own area, and when this is not possible they should place them as near as possible to the original local authority area. We are clear that local authorities should, as far as possible, avoid placing households outside their borough. We are aware that, on occasion, in some areas where there is a limited supply of suitable accommodation, it is necessary to place households in temporary accommodation outside the local area, but this should be a last resort. If a local authority places a household in accommodation in another local authority area, it is required to notify that local authority of any placement. My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue and to put pressure on the relevant local council to do better.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Leader of the House for his statement and all those who have participated today. In order that we can have a safe exit and the safe arrival of Members for the next statement, I am suspending the sitting for three minutes.

12.59 pm

Sitting suspended.

Lifetime Skills Guarantee and Post-16 Education

1.1 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement regarding the lifetime skills guarantee and post-16 education. Ever since I was appointed Education Secretary, I have been determined to raise the status of further, technical and vocational education. In a speech in July, I set out that, for decades, this sector has been overlooked and underserved, playing second fiddle to higher education. All too often, it has not given the young people and adults of this country the skills that businesses are crying out for, or enabled them to pursue the careers they dreamed of.

What we are determined to do, and what we must do, is give people the opportunity to retrain and upskill, so that if one door closes, they will have the key to open others. This Government stand for empowering everyone in this country, wherever they live. We stand for the forgotten 50% who do not go to university. We stand for those who find that their jobs no longer exist because technology has redefined industries overnight. We stand for young and old alike. Talent exists everywhere in this country. We have to ensure that we give it every opportunity to flourish, wherever people come from.

Two days ago, the Prime Minister outlined plans to bring closer alignment between further and higher education, to end the outdated distinction that one is better than the other and to offer world-class education after the age of 16 that is fit for the 21st century. We want every student who has the ability and the desire to go to university to do so, but we also want all young people to be given a real choice in what route they take.

We will introduce a lifetime skills guarantee that will help people to retrain and upskill. This will be the backbone of our covid recovery and will enable us to come back stronger and build back better. The measures will embed greater flexibility in the technical and vocational system to support not just young people but adults who need to retrain and upskill at any point in their working lives.

This is not merely a response to the pandemic. It is a continuation of our whole-hearted commitment to level up every inch of the country. Our reformed apprenticeships programme already provides a vital route for employers to meet their skills needs and for apprentices to learn and earn through high-quality training programmes and on-the-job experience. We are going to expand apprenticeships, making it easier for people to get a high-quality apprenticeship, and connect them to local employers who know what jobs their industry or community will need in the future.

We know that some employers will be nervous of taking on apprentices in the current climate. We are therefore making sure that we address some of the barriers that employers, especially small and medium-sized businesses, face in taking on apprentices—for example, by making it easier for larger employers to transfer their unused levy funds to smaller employers. Where apprentices have been made redundant as a result of the pandemic, we will ensure that more of them have the opportunity to continue their training. We have just begun the roll-out of T-levels, our new high-quality technical and

vocational qualifications, and we have just welcomed the first intake of students, who are taking them in digital, education and childcare, and construction. One T-level is the equivalent of three A-levels, and these qualifications will open up further routes of study or employment for those who take them.

For those who have not achieved the equivalent of A-levels by the age of 18, the chances of proceeding to higher levels of qualifications are, as Philip Augar's report put it, "virtually non-existent". The lifetime skills guarantee will therefore fund technical courses equivalent to A-levels for adults, all of which teach skills that are in high demand in our economy. These will give anyone who left school without an A-level or its equivalent the qualifications they need to upskill or to change jobs, and give them a much better chance of finding work, achieving their dreams and doing what they want in life. We have already announced plans to sharpen the job focus and the quality of higher technical education. The process of getting employers to review and approve the best digital higher technical qualifications began last month. We want to invest in, and increase take-up of, these courses as they are developed to meet the skills needs of the economy.

Another key element of the lifetime skills guarantee is to open up funding and alternatives to degrees for students. We are going to transform the funding system so that people can get a loan just as easily for a higher technical course as they can for a university degree, and we will ensure that further education colleges have access to funding on the same terms as universities do. Everyone will be able to call on a flexible lifelong loan entitlement for four years of post-18 education, so any adult who wants or needs to retrain with high-level technical courses can do so, instead of being trapped in unemployment.

Our flexible lifelong learning allowance is going to enable people to study high-quality courses across further and higher education at a level and time that best suits their life. This will make it easier for people of all ages to do courses locally and to study and train part time to acquire the skills that can transform their lives. This new arrangement will provide finance for shorter-term studies, rather than people having to study in one, three or four-year blocks. People will be able to break up their study into segments, transfer credits between colleges and universities, and take on more part-time study. We will consult on this matter next year and bring forward legislation as necessary later in this Parliament.

We also want to transform our left-behind towns and regions, but we are not doing this just by investing more money in universities. We are going to do it by investing in local colleges. In the spring Budget, we announced an additional £1.5 billion to upgrade the further education college estate. The largest capital investment in the sector in a generation, it will enable colleges everywhere in England to have buildings and facilities that can deliver world-class tuition.

We are setting up 20 employer-led institutes of technology with capital funding for state-of-the-art equipment and facilities. They will be specialist institutions that are a unique collaboration between employers, colleges and universities. They will give businesses the skilled workforce that they need to drive growth and productivity and get more people into rewarding jobs. We have already committed £170 million to establishing the first 12 institutes and are making a further £120 million available for

another eight in areas of the country currently without access to one. The competition for the next wave will open shortly.

We are going to inject £111 million in the largest ever expansion of traineeships, as well as an extra £32 million for recruiting extra careers advisers and £17 million for work academies in England. We are also providing £101 million to support school and college leavers to take high-value level 2 and level 3 courses.

Even before covid, the country faced a challenge in terms of providing the skills that the country needed. We are desperate for more skills in digital, and more electricians and technicians, right across the board, from healthcare to construction. Our productivity continues to lag behind that of our neighbours and competitors—Germany, France and the United States all produce more than 25% more per hour than we do. If we were to match German productivity, it would enable us to recoup billions of pounds that we need to recover from the economic effects of covid. Put another way, our productivity levels are only 4% higher than they were in 2008.

To bounce back from the pandemic, we will need a lot more people with the vital skills to drive productivity in our economy. Technology is one area with an ever-growing need for skills. This week, the Prime Minister announced that £8 million would support boot camps for digital skills in the west midlands, Liverpool, Lancashire, Leeds, the south-west, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Manchester. The boot camps will be led by local employers, and from next year we hope to extend the delivery model to other areas and other sectors.

Greater productivity will drive our economy as we seek to build back better after covid. Businesses will be able to hire more, people will earn more and the quality of life will be much greater for more of our citizens. We will publish a White Paper later this year to take a holistic look at post-16 education and training. It will set out how we will continue to rebalance higher and further education, making sure that people understand the benefits of a greater technical education that offers them flexible ways to get the skills needed to progress and for our economy to prosper.

This is not a subject that just Conservative Members feel passionately about; it is something all Members feel incredibly passionately about. It is something that I think we all recognise is an area that has maybe been neglected a little bit too much in the past, and I hope that there is a sense of will across both sides to work together to make changes and to make improvements for the life chances of all.

I believe this dynamic programme of measures is not just about weathering the covid storm; these reforms will lay down a marker for the age. They will bring an end to the post-16 career lottery and decades of indifference to further education, and they will set up each and every member of society with the means to get a satisfying and well-paid job. I commend this statement to the House.

1.15 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and particularly for ensuring that I had early advance sight of it.

As the right hon. Gentleman said, on the Labour side of the House, we, too, passionately believe in the value of further and adult education for individuals, for their communities and for our shared prosperity. I do think

that many of the announcements the Secretary of State has made are a step in the right direction. Indeed, I have no doubt that he does believe we need more investment in further education, so I can only imagine that he was appalled to discover which party has been in office for the past 10 years and which party has spent those years slashing funding for further education, cutting maintenance support for learners and building barriers to further study. Will the Secretary of State now admit to the House that it was a mistake to cut billions of pounds from further and adult education and that the advanced learner loan system, which has deterred so many adult learners from studying, has had a devastating impact on their life chances?

I turn to the specific proposals outlined by the Secretary of State and, first, the lifetime skills guarantee. I am glad that he has acknowledged, as Labour has long argued, that more people need access to further education and retraining, particularly given the challenges our economy now faces, but many learners who could benefit from these new funded courses will not be eligible. For those training beyond level 3, he appears to be offering only a flexible loan system, but his own Department's research shows that the introduction of loans caused participation in adult education to plummet. Why is he repeating this failed approach? What about those who do not hold level 2 qualifications? What funding will be available for them to study for level 2, so they can then progress to level 3 and further? I am sure the right hon. Gentleman would agree that he cannot credibly say that he wants equality between further and higher education if only one route brings maintenance support, so will the learners who study for these new funded courses be eligible for that support?

Next, I turn to funding. Additional investment in further and adult education is obviously welcome, which is why we on the Labour Benches have spent years advocating it, while year after year the Conservative party cut it. The funding that the Secretary of State has announced today will not even reverse the damage, let alone mean increased investment. Funding is supposed to be available for every adult who is not qualified to A-level or equivalent. There are 9 million of those people in the country. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that every single adult not qualified to level 3 who wants to access this support will be able to do so? His £2.5 billion amounts to less than £280 for each of these learners. Does he really think that is sufficient for an adult learner to get the necessary skills and qualifications? He has stated that a full level 3 qualification would be made available for adults aged over 23 for courses that are shown to be valued by employers. How are the Government determining that? Will he commit to a date to publish these details? I think that he said that T-levels will be included. Will he confirm that?

What conversations has the right hon. Gentleman had with the devolved authorities and Metro mayors about these proposals? Will metropolitan combined authorities that have their adult education budget devolved be able to set the eligibility criteria for this spending, and is the £8 million for the boot camps genuinely new money? He talks about increasing apprenticeship opportunities, but since the Government introduced the apprenticeship levy, numbers have been consistently down, especially at lower levels. Can he provide more detail on the support available for small and medium-sized enterprises and non-levy payers?

[Kate Green]

Finally, I want to emphasise the scale and urgency of what is needed. The Government rightly found billions of pounds for the job retention scheme, but when it comes to retraining, their ambitions do not stretch further than last year's manifesto, as though the global pandemic has had no impact on the need for workers to get new skills and new jobs. Labour called for the Government to integrate training into the job support scheme to allow workers on reduced hours to improve their skills. Why have the Government failed to do that?

The Office for Budget Responsibility's central projection is for unemployment to reach 12% before the end of the year. That is when the need for skills and retraining will be most acute, so why is this package available only from April next year? Will courses starting under the new guarantee begin in April or follow the usual academic calendar? Why has the procurement of the contract for the 30,000 traineeships announced in July not yet even begun?

Labour has spent years calling for investment in the skills of working people and those seeking work. They are, and always have been, the greatest asset in our economy. It is only by making the most of all their potential that we can truly recover from the effects of this terrible pandemic and achieve a lasting and shared prosperity. We now face a crisis of unemployment that could be the worst in my lifetime. It is vital that the Government support those at risk of losing their jobs and that they support them in finding new careers and opportunities. The Government must get this right, and they have one chance to do so. I implore Ministers to listen to our concerns. The task is urgent, and it is essential.

Gavin Williamson: We have a proud record on the Government side of the House: what we saw in the last year for those who are studying, the 16 to 19 budget, and the rate that was made available to 16 to 19 education was one of the largest increases in this year. We made available £1.5 billion of capital funding to transform the estate of our further education colleges. We launched the national skills fund, announced in our manifesto. We recognise the value of that.

When Labour was in power, what did it do? It talked about one thing—"Universities, universities, universities". That was the answer to the problems of a nation. Government Members recognise the need to make sure that young people have true opportunities. It is about not just the 50% of youngsters who go to university, but the other 50% of youngsters and making sure that they have the opportunities and qualifications that they deserve. They should have an entitlement and the opportunity to take those up.

We have launched the skills toolkit, which has had a transformational impact on so many people who have taken furlough. The hon. Lady talks about numbers over time in terms of apprenticeships. On the Government side of the House, we talk about quality. We recognise that it is important to drive up the quality of apprenticeships, as against simply numbers. When we talk to employers, they say that they want to see quality driven up in terms of apprenticeships and that is what we are doing.

We will have the roll-out of T-levels. Labour is always ambiguous on whether or not it supports T-levels. It supported them at the launch, but then it seemed to

change its policy. With a new shadow Education Secretary, it has probably changed its mind again. As we roll these out, we would very much like to see them as part of this.

In terms of the eligibility, this is a national guarantee. It will be determined nationally—that is where the decision will be taken. It will not be devolved to the mayoral authorities, but we will continue to work with employers, organisations and the mayoral authorities to make sure that we get the right skills mix so that the qualifications that are on offer ensure that young people and people of all ages have the opportunity to progress into work.

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): I welcome the lifetime skills guarantee, which, if done properly, could be a game changer in the life chances for a huge number of people across the country. May I urge the Secretary of State to ensure that his policies announced today are targeted in a way that makes sure that we have the skills needed in vital areas such as construction, engineering, quarrying, telecommunications and broadband roll-out, so that we can get on and deliver the infrastructure investment that is so badly needed in places such as High Peak?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is right: this investment must be properly targeted to ensure that the money that we are spending and the time that is invested by people as they take this training and opportunity leads them into employment and to work. That is why we have to take a targeted approach. That is why we have to take a different approach in terms of further education, an approach we have not always taken, looking at the skills needs in a local area and making sure that we are matching that and delivering those skills for employers and for the young people who are doing the training, to ensure that leads them into work.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) [V]: I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. On the face of it, this move towards skills education is positive, and I certainly welcome the recognition that further education in England finally seems to be receiving, and I am delighted that, once again, he is following Scotland's lead when he talks of closer alignment between further and higher education, because I have said many times in this place that Scotland does not draw a distinction between FE and HE and that we concentrate on positive destinations, and with good reason. We have the highest percentage of positive destinations for young people in the UK.

Many times, however, I have been lectured by Government Members about university numbers. They cannot have it both ways. If further education in England has been playing second fiddle to higher education, it is because the Secretary of State's Government have treated it as such. As Scotland has invested in the entire tertiary education landscape, FE in England has suffered a decade of neglect. So can the Secretary of State confirm whether this lifetime loan entitlement means that FE students in England will now be saddled with the same massive debts as their HE counterparts, and since his Government seem to be open to new ideas, when will he be readdressing the issue of their outrageous tuition fees?

I welcome the long-overdue investment in FE infrastructure in England, but will the Secretary of State acknowledge that if he were to match Scotland's facilities funding, the figure he would be announcing today would be not £1.5 billion, but £8 billion?

Finally, the Scottish Government have committed to a lifelong learning strategy and are investing £25 million to support adults retraining. However, similar courses will not be available in England until April 2021. Those whose jobs have been affected by covid cannot wait seven months, so will the Secretary of State work with colleagues to ensure this funding is brought forward and people can start training immediately?

Gavin Williamson: Of course we always look right across the United Kingdom, as one United Kingdom, to see how we can learn best and work well together, and I am sure that the hon. Lady is as much an advocate of that as I am—or maybe not quite as much—and she will no doubt be delighted to hear that over £1.5 billion has been spent in terms of capital in the FE estate, and that has approximately £300 million of Barnett consequential for the devolved nations. So that is even more good news that we are delivering for Scotland as a result of having a Conservative Government for the United Kingdom—extra investment into FE in Scotland, and I hope the hon. Lady ensures that that is delivered into Scottish further education colleges.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I particularly welcome the reform progress my right hon. Friend outlined on higher-level technicals, as well as on T-levels and apprenticeship reform. I welcome, too, the lifetime schools guarantee, and will he say a word about how that fits with the national retraining scheme? Can he confirm that work coaches and the National Careers Service will be fully engaged in making sure that they do not just signpost but actively encourage people who could benefit from this great upskilling opportunity to do so?

Gavin Williamson: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance not just of encouraging but really taking people through that journey. There has sometimes been a slight prejudice in our education system to steer people away from those really great-quality higher technical qualifications, which are a great way for young people—and people of all ages—to transform their careers. May I take this opportunity to thank my right hon. Friend for so much of the work that has already been done on higher technical qualifications? I would love to lay claim to having started it all myself, but I was very much driven by his work as Secretary of State for Education, which recognised the need to broaden out the range of opportunities for young people; this revolution that we are driving through in the sector is built on the work that he did at the Department for Education.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab) [V]: I am very worried because unemployment in east Hull is already at 10%—and it is rising. We cannot possibly wait for vital opportunities to retrain and reskill. Having left school with few qualifications myself before returning to education, I know the value of the last Labour Government's lifelong learning agenda. If the Secretary of State really understands the urgency of the situation,

why is he waiting seven months, until April next year, for any of that new money to come through? It is too little, too late.

Gavin Williamson: It is always nice to see the generosity of the hon. Gentleman regarding the important programme that we have announced. If he had been paying attention to the Chancellor before the summer, he would have heard the announcement of a whole set of programmes, including the kickstart initiative, giving people the opportunity to be in the workplace and get jobs, and ensuring that they are not left behind as result of the pandemic. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will welcome, as so many Conservative Members have, the opportunities that we are driving forward. We always want to do more, which is why we have made this announcement today.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The lifetime skills guarantee is extremely welcome, as it should help to boost the covid recovery. In order that those adults who will take up the guarantee can realise their full potential, can my right hon. Friend confirm that the new gold standard of T-levels will be available to them?

Gavin Williamson: I can absolutely guarantee that. I had the great opportunity to see many youngsters in colleges taking on T-levels. These qualifications have been incredibly warmly welcomed. The real difference compared with so many past attempts at reform of qualifications in this sector is that this has very much been based on the needs of employers. T-levels have been developed to ensure that they actually take young people into work, further education or apprenticeships.¹

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab) [V]: Lewisham and Southwark Colleges, which serve my constituency, do fantastic work, but have faced severe cuts over the last 10 years. Staff have had a significant real-terms pay cut and funding per pupil has reduced by over a third. They are already stretched to the bone. If further education is to help lead our recovery from the pandemic, it needs not just restoration of funds but substantial new investment. Will the Secretary of State give the sector the real-terms funding to match the ambition?

Gavin Williamson: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady noticed, but we have been announcing substantial extra funding into the FE sector. Part of this announcement is ensuring that we are not just talking about it, but doing it and delivering on it.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): Further education colleges can play a vital role in transforming lives and communities. Will my right hon. Friend set out what the Government will do to ensure that world-class education and training is available to all students, no matter where they come from or which college they go to?

Gavin Williamson: Absolutely so. That is what the Prime Minister was doing when he was down at Exeter College the other Tuesday—making sure that people understand that there is a whole range of different options at different stages of their lives. It is brilliant that so many youngsters in my hon. Friend's constituency of Stockton South benefit from going to great universities, not just locally but nationally, but many youngsters will not make that choice, and this is about recognising that

1. [Official Report, 22 October 2020, Vol. 682, c. 2MC.]

[Gavin Williamson]

and ensuring that they have really exciting options ahead of them in terms of high-quality technical qualifications. That is what we are delivering on; that is what we are working towards. It is a problem that this nation has had for many, many generations. This Government—this party—will address that and put it right.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I welcome much of what the Secretary of State has said today. We do not have a proud record, in any party, on the more practical side of education in our country—in schools or colleges. It is a neglected area, by comparison with Germany, France and many other countries, so we must do better. I welcome the fact that we are to have a really serious look at post-16 education. I remind him, though, that a lot of training in our country is delivered by independent training providers, such as in engineering and textiles—in my constituency we have the Textile Centre of Excellence. We have some really good trainers in this country and we will need the industry trainers to be with us, but we need well paid, highly motivated staff in our FE colleges, such as Kirklees College in my constituency. Does the Secretary of State agree that pay and conditions for staff in the training sector must be improved?

Gavin Williamson: I know that the hon. Gentleman has long been an advocate of high-quality technical training. We see in his constituency the important role that those who provide such training play in the vibrancy and success of business, enabling it to continue to provide employment. He is right to highlight the importance, not just of colleges, but of independent learning providers and the many businesses that work hand-in-glove with industry. We want to work with them to ensure the highest-quality delivery. A key element of high-quality delivery is to have high-quality individuals with experience and expertise, and pay is of course an important part of that.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): This morning I spoke with Anna Morrison, founder of Amazing Apprenticeships, based in Hitchin, which does fantastic work in schools and colleges, and especially with employers, to support and strengthen social mobility. What more will the Government do to ensure that we can provide more opportunities to disadvantaged and vulnerable people who are taking advantage of the lifetime skills guarantee?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is right to pay tribute to the work that is done in his constituency by Amazing Apprenticeships and many other organisations and colleges that are going out there, working with employers and providing opportunities not just for young people but for people of all ages. That is why, in Philip Augar's report, he made the powerful point that if people do not get a level 3 qualification—an A-level equivalent qualification—they are hampered throughout the rest of their life; it really holds them back. That is why this announcement is so important: it gives those people who maybe missed out on that opportunity in those early stages of their life, the opportunity to create the chance to succeed, to progress, whether that is through apprenticeships, or through university, or through

extra college qualifications—but, most importantly, to get jobs and employment. This will be transformative, not just for them, but for their families and their community. That is why the announcement is so important—it will change the lives of so many.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) [V]: I welcome many of the measures that the Secretary of State announced, but they cannot be implemented in isolation from the wider skills and employment support system in places such as Greater Manchester. We need to deliver flexible, responsive support to drive recovery in the months and years ahead. Does he recognise the real risk of the new measures duplicating and competing with existing adult skills policy and failing to act as a springboard into the devolved employment support offer? Will he continue to work closely with the combined authority to ensure that we get the joined-up approach we want to see in Greater Manchester?

Gavin Williamson: Of course, we will always work with all devolved authorities. The hint is in the title—this is a national guarantee, which means that we must have parity in every part of the country. We must ensure that, whether it is in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, my constituency or any other part of England, there is a set national standard, because it is a national guarantee.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con) [V]: I very much welcome what the Secretary of State has announced. What measures is he putting in place to support final year GCSE and A-level students who are still having their studies disrupted by the pandemic? When will he make an announcement about his plans for the exams next year?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will give the Secretary of State some latitude, but that question really was not on the statement.

Gavin Williamson: It was a tad opportunistic, it has to be said, but my hon. Friend is always an opportunist. Many of our further education colleges up and down the land are doing brilliant work, with the covid catch-up funding and support we are offering, in supporting students as they approach their qualifications next year and ensuring that they do incredibly well. We will make further announcements about qualifications in due course.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that this one will be a question about the statement—I call Richard Graham.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I welcome this smorgasbord of new skills pathways. I look forward to more detail on how flexible loans, segments, transfer credits and so on will work in practice and to confirmation that work coaches will be trained on how to guide universal credit claimants on making the best decisions. The Secretary of State will know that one of the key asks of our Gloucestershire jobs, skills and apprenticeships lift-off—which the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), kindly came to launch—was to enable large employers to use an uncapped percentage of their apprenticeship levy for their contractors and suppliers. Does he agree that that would mean a real lift-off in terms of SME apprenticeship recruitment? When might we expect to hear more about this vital reform?

Gavin Williamson: We are looking at how to increase flexibility. I would be happy to organise a meeting between my hon. Friend and the Minister for skills, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester, to discuss his thoughts about how to unlock more employment in Gloucester.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I welcome the ambition of the Government's plan for skills, but we need to see a bit more detail. The Secretary of State will be familiar with the recommendations of the Independent Commission on Lifelong Learning, convened by former Liberal Democrat leader Vince Cable. That commission called for the apprenticeship levy to be expanded into a skills and training levy, for a quarter of those funds to be channelled into a social mobility fund, for new national colleges to become centres of expertise, and for a skills wallet that would give everybody £10,000 to spend on education and training throughout their lives. There is a plan that exists and is ready to go. Will he meet me and members of the independent commission to discuss those very precise ideas?

Gavin Williamson: It is good to see that the former Member for Twickenham is keeping busy in his retirement. I am sure that my hon. Friend the skills Minister would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady and other colleagues to discuss that. As I said, I think there is a strong will on both sides of the House to make real change in this area, and with that collective will and determination, we can make a positive impact on the lives of so many people.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I am one of the people the Secretary of State has been targeting with the measures announced today. I left school without qualifications, applied later in life to go to university and was rejected three times. I even went back to secondary school for a year when I was 25 to get the qualifications to get into university, and then was rejected again. I had to beat down the door to get the education that I needed, but once I got into the University of Sussex, I found an educational institution that for the first time ever saw potential in me that I did not see in myself.

I understand the impact that these measures will have for some people, but I must say that they do not show the kind of ambition that we need, the kind of ambition that will match the scale of the opportunity that we face. We should be awash as a country; every community should be burgeoning with educational opportunities right now, and we are not going to do that on the back of these announcements.

Will the Secretary of State say what contact he has had with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that every aspect of Government is extending educational opportunity to every part of our communities? What conversations is he having with other Departments, such as the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, to ensure that we are proactively putting educational opportunities into every community up and down our country? Right now, these measures are fine, but it does not match the scale of opportunity that our country needs and faces.

Gavin Williamson: I would like to reassure the hon. Gentleman on how closely we have been working, not just with the Department for Work and Pensions, but with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial

Strategy, to ensure that the actions we take match up with the needs of the whole economy and the whole country. We will continue to take that approach.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that by offering free, fully funded courses to adults without A-level or equivalent qualifications, this Conservative Government are promoting social mobility while helping to provide the skilled workforce we need in our businesses and throughout the country? Educational establishments such as Loughborough College and Loughborough University are integral to our local community. That is why it is fantastic that last week MHCLG awarded £750,000 to the Loughborough towns fund to set up a careers and enterprise hub in the town centre, to attract those who are not traditional participants in learning and development. This week, Loughborough College, with Charnwood Borough Council, Loughborough business improvement district and Loughborough jobcentre, launched the kickstart scheme in the town. Now, that is partnership working and joined-up government.

Gavin Williamson: That is a brilliant example of higher education, further education and local government all working together with a laser-like focus on creating opportunities not only for young people, but for people of all ages. I pay tribute to all those involved, including my hon. Friend, who I know is such a passionate advocate of that and of ensuring that we drive opportunity in every part of the country.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): While I broadly welcome the Secretary of State's announcement, I want to draw his attention to problems with existing post-16 students. My constituent Linus has just completed his first year of a diploma in arboriculture, tree management and forestry at a local college, and he was able to do that because his fees were waived as a result of his receiving less than the limit of £330 per calendar month on universal credit. However, a top-up to his universal credit this year has increased Linus's monthly benefit to £342, taking him above the fee waiver limit. Now he must either pay the full fee or leave his course, because the Government's fee waiver rules have not been updated. Will the Secretary of State help students such as Linus by fixing this anomaly?

Gavin Williamson: If the hon. Gentleman would write with the details on that case, I would be happy to look into it.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con) [V]: I really welcome the lifetime skills guarantee from the Government and firmly believe it will increase access to and flexibility of learning in both further and higher education for learners young and old. As my right hon. Friend knows, Newton Rigg College in my constituency is currently the subject of a strategic review by the Further Education Commissioner. As we look to secure a new organisation to take over the college, does my right hon. Friend agree that, if this review is successful in securing the future of the college, fantastic colleges such as Newton Rigg will play a key role in delivering the Government's lifetime skills agenda, offering training, upskilling and levelling up across Cumbria and the wider United Kingdom?

Gavin Williamson: I thank my hon. Friend for the time he took to talk to me and make representations on some of his concerns about what Newton Rigg College was facing at the time, and I look forward to continuing to work with him on the future of that college. He is right to highlight that not only Newton Rigg, but colleges up and down the land, in all our constituencies, play a vital role in the delivery of these qualifications and opportunities. The college system is something that we must put at the forefront of this nation's recovery from the pandemic.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op) [V]: I very much welcome any improvement in access and flexibility and lower costs for learning. Will the Secretary of State consider the condition of first-year students, who are just leaving childhood and often have never left home before, but are now going into self-isolation in individual rooms, sometimes with collective provision for bathrooms and kitchens, which makes them both isolated and vulnerable? Therefore, their physical and mental health are at risk. Then they have online learning that they could actually do at home. I wonder what consideration he has given, with the Chancellor, to ensuring that they do not end up running into debt for a diminished education. Perhaps they should be going home and the universities should be supported through these difficult periods, so our universities and students can be—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Geraint, I am sorry to interrupt you. Is there any chance you can ask a question about the statement that has just been given, please?

Geraint Davies: I wanted to ask about how those considerations fitted in with the statement. On the one hand, I welcome what has been announced. On the other, I want investment for young people who are in those conditions. Maybe there is a transfer between the two.

Gavin Williamson: That is not an obvious link, but the hon. Gentleman has made some sort of effort, I think, to try to make it. If he had bothered to turn up at the statement on Tuesday, his question might have been quite valid for that, but he would probably also have heard that £256 million had been made available for universities to support pupils in circumstances such as he has outlined.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con) [V]: Can I also welcome the Secretary of State's statement? This year, from 9 to 13 November, the Bucks Skills Show goes online by live-streaming employers into classrooms across the county. They will bring lessons to life by showing how curriculum subjects can be applied in the workplace. Will my right hon. Friend welcome this initiative and the work of Buckinghamshire Business First, as well as the Bucks careers hub, which was named the top performer in the country? Does he agree that their support for young people facing increasing challenges to kickstart their career post-virus shows what can be achieved by a successful partnership between business, the Bucks local enterprise partnership, the council and the Careers and Enterprise Company?

Gavin Williamson: My right hon. Friend lists a lot of people who I want to thank and congratulate, whether at the Bucks LEP or the skills hub that has been

created. This shows that we should not see education in isolation from the rest of the economy or the rest of the community, because all those elements, by working together, provide so much more opportunity. That is a brilliant example of how people can inspire children to make them understand that what they are learning in the classroom has a real relevance to the world of work, giving them the enthusiasm to look at different careers and different opportunities that they might not have considered before.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Colleges such as Langley College in my constituency play a vital role in helping young people to realise their full potential, but they have been underfunded for too long. The Labour party has repeatedly called for the Government to integrate training into the job support scheme to help those on reduced hours to use the rest of the week to improve their skills. If the Secretary of State feels so passionately about retraining, why did the Government fail to do that?

Gavin Williamson: We always look at every idea, but just because the Labour party has come up with an idea has rarely meant that it is a good one. As for the idea that the hon. Gentleman highlights, we look across the board to try to ensure that we put in place the best possible opportunities for young people. That is what a series of policy announcements that we have made is about doing. It is why we will bring forward a further education White Paper later this year and why we will continue to look at every option to ensure that we deliver the best for every individual in this country.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): My dad left school with a whole two O-levels and went to Bolton technical college's night school to get his engineering qualifications while he was earning. That route to social mobility has been closed down gradually over the past 50 years. Will my right hon. Friend confirm for me and the people of South Ribble that the lifetime skills guarantee opens it back up for people—lads and lasses—to do engineering qualifications?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is about opening up opportunities and different routes. We have got too stuck in this ethos that going to university is the only real, proper, feasible route for young people. What we are doing as part of this measure is opening up so many more opportunities for so many young people, and we will be absolutely doing what she wants.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) [V]: The Secretary of State says he is keen to help employees by providing the quality of workforce that they need. I am quite happy to celebrate what is good, but all too many employers are not engaged in training their existing or future workforce in any way. How will he get more employers to engage in that process? Also, how will adults who are looking for an avenue to pursue training or retraining in further or higher education access good-quality, independent and impartial career information, advice and guidance about their options and potential choices? There is a lot of advice available out there, but much of it is mired in vested interests, promoting courses and providers of questionable quality.

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the quality of advice for young people and about ensuring that they have a good understanding of the range of choices open to them. That is why we are investing an extra £32 million in careers advice, making sure that we get the very best. I am sure he very much welcomes that and has been singing the Government's praises in his constituency—as I am sure he does on a regular basis—for doing it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and hon. Members for the fact that many of the questions actually related to the statement.

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

Point of Order

1.57 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I hope the Secretary of State will be able to stay on in the Chamber for this matter. I have notified him, but I apologise: I suspect he has not had a chance to read my message.

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): I had switched my phone off.

Kate Green: Very wise.

In his statement on the return of students to university on Tuesday, the Secretary of State made two claims that I believed were not fully accurate, and later that day I sought a correction to the record. The Secretary of State said on Tuesday that there was £100 million in funding for universities to provide digital access for learners. There is no such fund. That funding is for schools and some further education providers. He also said that the Student Loans Company can provide additional support to students who need it. Again, that does not appear to be accurate. I was grateful that the Secretary of State's office indicated that there would be a correction to the record, but today when I looked in *Hansard*, all that was changed was the date on which he said guidance was published. It seems that he has corrected one mistake, which I must admit I did not know about, but failed to correct two more that he was asked to correct. May I ask for your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker, on how we can have all the Secretary of State's mistakes corrected on the record?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving me advance notice of her intention to raise this matter, and I know that she sent notice to the Secretary of State's office, even though he may not have yet seen that. Although the Chair is not responsible for the accuracy or otherwise of ministerial answers or the completeness of ministerial corrections, she has used this opportunity to raise the matter. The Secretary of State in his place and may wish to respond.

Gavin Williamson: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise for showing the courtesy of making sure that my electronic devices are switched off in the Chamber, which is something I thought the Chair had always wished Members to follow assiduously.

As the House will know, the Government have made available more than £100 million for electronic devices. Those youngsters who are in care and going on to university can access that funding to enable them to have the right type of devices, whether that is a laptop or a router. If a student's family circumstances change while they are at university, they can go to the Student Loans Company to have their maintenance grant re-assessed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for staying for that point of order.

We will now suspend for three minutes. Please be careful as you leave or enter the Chamber.

2 pm

Sitting suspended.

**SOCIAL SECURITY (UP-RATING OF BENEFITS)
BILL (BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE)**

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Bill:

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading, in Committee of the whole House, and on Consideration shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at 4.00 p.m.

(c) Proceedings on Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at 5.00 p.m.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) proceedings on the Bill shall stand postponed while the Question is put, in accordance with Standing Order No. 52(1) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills), on any financial resolution relating to the Bill;

(c) on the conclusion of proceedings on any financial resolution relating to the Bill, proceedings on the Bill shall be resumed and the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(d) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (15)(a) of this Order.

(5) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(6) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(d) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chairman or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(7) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chairman shall instead put a single Question in relation to

those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(8) (a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(9) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (8) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(10) (a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(12) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(13) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

(14) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(15) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under subparagraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(16) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(17) No debate shall be held in accordance with Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) at today's sitting after this Order has been agreed.

(18) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(19) No private business may be considered at today's sitting after this Order has been agreed.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Bill*Second Reading*

2.4 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I beg to move, that the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am pleased to introduce the Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Bill. It makes technical changes for one year only that will ensure that state pensions can still potentially be uprated, despite the likely fall in earnings. This will allow the Government to maintain a manifesto commitment to the pensions triple lock policy, providing peace of mind to pensioners about their financial health. It will also allow for potential increases for the poorest pensioners who are in receipt of pension credit, as well as uprating widows' and widowers' benefit in industrial death benefit.

As I set out with the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), in our letter to all right hon. and hon. Members last week, each year the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my good self, is required by law to conduct a review of certain benefit and pension rates to determine whether they have retained their value in relation to the general level of earnings. If there is a rise, then there is a requirement to uprate the state pension and benefits at least in line with that increase.

In accordance with the usual process, I will undertake that review of social security rates shortly and will report to Parliament on the outcome of the review in November. However, if there has been no increase in the general level of earnings, there are currently no legal powers for the Government to bring forward an uprating order. Since 2011, the Government have used average weekly earnings growth from May to July as the basis for the review. The provisional figure for that period, published by the Office for National Statistics on 15 September 2020, shows a decline in earnings of 1% due to the economic impacts of covid-19. Confirmed figures will be published later this month. Owing to the challenging economic circumstances, average weekly earnings are expected, unfortunately, to show no growth this year. Therefore, this Bill will temporarily amend the Social Security Administration Act 1992 for one year only to grant discretionary powers to increase these rates irrespective of the growth or indeed fall in earnings.

The Bill covers the basic state pension, the new state pension, the standard minimum guarantee in pension credit, and widows' and widowers' benefits in industrial death benefit. Those benefits are linked in primary legislation to earnings. The Bill does not extend to benefits that are linked to prices. I will review those under the existing powers in the 1992 Act.

The Bill largely covers reserved matters for Great Britain. On the one element that is devolved to Scotland, Scottish Ministers laid a legislative consent motion, which was passed by the Scottish Parliament yesterday. Under the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992, the Department for Communities has the power to mirror the uprating order made under the Act that applies in Great Britain. The Northern Ireland Executive can make a corresponding order under their existing power, which mirrors the outcome of the Secretary of State's review without the need for new primary legislation in Northern Ireland.

The Bill must receive Royal Assent by mid-November to allow the review to be completed. If the Bill does not receive Royal Assent ahead of this deadline, the current legislation will apply, and state pensions will almost certainly remain frozen.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way; I know that she has other business this afternoon. As well as uprating, many of us in the House have a concern about the lack of uptake of pension credit. Will she tell us what measures her Department will take to ensure that there is a better uptake of that particular benefit?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We always want to encourage people to take up benefits to which they are entitled. There was an extensive amount of advertising earlier in the year, which was linked into GP surgeries and other public places, in order to encourage that uptake. The changes that the BBC has made in regard to the TV licence has also encouraged some people to take that up. We will continue to try to encourage people to access the benefits to which they are entitled.

If the Bill does not receive Royal Assent ahead of the deadline, the current legislation will apply and it is almost certain that state pensions will remain frozen. The prompt passage of the Bill is essential, which is why I am grateful to the usual channels and the House for expediting this important legislation. In our discussions with the shadow Front-Bench team, we were able to highlight that there has been similar legislation, with a clause in the Welfare Reform Act 2009, to give similar flexibility to the then Secretary of State in consideration of uplifting benefits.

I have set out that this is a technical but important Bill. The Government have worked hard to protect people of all ages during the pandemic by strengthening the welfare safety net, introducing furlough and income protection schemes, as well as supporting those who have lost their jobs to try to help them get back into work. It is right that we also provide protection to our pensioners. Provided the Bill has passed into law by the time I conduct my annual review next month, those pensions and benefits need not remain frozen next year and we will provide our pensioners with important peace of mind.

2.9 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak on Second Reading of the Bill today. I would like to express my thanks to the Secretary of State and to the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for the discussions the three Front Benchers have had in relation to this legislation.

As with so many things during the coronavirus pandemic, we find ourselves in an unusual situation that calls for an unusual course of action. It is an extremely sad and regrettable consequence of the pandemic that we expect that national earnings will be negative this year. That statistic tells its own story about the hardship many families are facing at the moment. However, the added complication this brings, as the Secretary of State explained, is that when earnings are negative, there is no legal power to increase state pensions at all,

[Jonathan Reynolds]

and this also affects the standard minimum guarantee in pension credit and some survivors' benefits in industrial death benefit.

This is due to the drafting of the Social Security Administration Act 1992, and we need to correct that with the legislation before us today. As the Secretary of State said, there is a precedent for this. The previous Labour Government encountered a similar problem following the global financial crisis and brought forward similar legislation. I therefore believe that the correct and constructive course of action today is to ensure the passage of these powers through the House of Commons. It is clearly in the national interest and in the interests of Britain's pensioners to address this problem.

The Bill is extremely limited in length and in scope, applying only to this financial year. However, I believe this is an appropriate opportunity to seek some information regarding the Department's intentions in this area. I was pleased to see in the explanatory notes to the Bill that the Government stated they wanted the Bill passed "to meet its commitment to the Triple Lock."

In the comments the Secretary of State has made, she has reiterated that commitment, which I very much welcome. Labour believes that everyone deserves financial security in retirement, and we believe the cornerstone of that is a decent state pension, properly indexed to ensure it keeps its value for future generations of pensioners. That is why we will hold the Government to account to ensure that they keep their manifesto promises.

One of the things I find so frustrating in the national conversation about pensions is the way that rising longevity is sometimes presented as a public policy problem, rather than something to be celebrated. For many of us in the Chamber today, our grandparents worked very hard lives, yet had very little by way of retirement. My grandfather, for instance, worked 51 years down the same coalmine, yet never owned his own home or was able to travel abroad. So we should celebrate, as a country, that in a relatively short space of time our expectations of retirement have been transformed, and we should thank those who came before us who founded the national health service, raised the school leaving age and improved health and safety in the workplace, because that increased longevity. It is their legacy, and it is an achievement, rather than a problem.

We know and appreciate that the pandemic poses additional problems for the way in which we calculate how we should uprate pensions. The volatility of earnings in the crisis means that we are likely to be faced by the opposite problem when we are discussing this in future years—when it comes to the calculation, for instance, for 2022. Distortion in the earnings statistics as wages bounce back from their 2020 fall due to furlough and unemployment could create a significant one-off jump in earnings in 2021. I would like to know from the Secretary of State how her Department is planning for this eventuality when calculating the triple lock.

One suggestion, as outlined in a recent report by Lane Clark & Peacock, is that the disruption in earnings statistics could be smoothed by applying the principles of the triple lock over two years instead of one. Its conclusion is that, if this is applied, the most likely outcome would be that the triple lock could be delivered over two years by subsequent increases of 2.5% in both

April 2021 and April 2022. I know many people are anxious to know what the Government are planning to do in this scenario. I wonder if the Government could elaborate on what options are being considered, and if there is an intention to continue the triple lock across future years of this Parliament in line with the manifesto commitment from the Government in December last year.

Finally, I would appreciate it if the Minister, when summing up, confirmed the Government's intentions on the timeline for bringing forward proposals for the annual uprating of all social security benefits. At a time of such significant national economic insecurity, there is understandable anxiety about this. That is the point at which we will be able to have a full and involved debate on the Floor of the House on what is being proposed.

I would say, on behalf of myself and my hon. Friends, that when the Government themselves admit that a further 4 million jobs could be lost, any suggestion that benefits for unemployed people could be cut in April would be met with the strongest opposition from these Benches. Today, however, I welcome this Bill to ensure that the Government can fulfil their promise to pensioners. We want to make Britain the best country in the world for people to grow up and a place where retirement is a time of leisure, dignity and fulfilment, however that may come. There is no doubt that this legislation is a requirement of a pension system that can deliver that.

2.14 pm

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con): As I recover from my nosebleed from being so high up the call list today, I should say that I do enjoy these sparsely attended debates, which give us all an opportunity to expound a little.

Covid has obviously had a huge impact on all our lives and arguably led to the elderly in our communities having to make some of the biggest sacrifices. During the worst of the pandemic, they rightly shielded to protect themselves and their families. As restrictions have eased, many have provided vital childcare to their children and grandchildren, allowing younger generations to get back to work. As the Government have already provided extensive financial support to many young people in our communities through schemes such as kickstart, it is right that the elderly are not forgotten during this pandemic and that their support mechanisms are reinforced.

I am glad to support the Bill and pleased to hear the Opposition's keenness to pass it swiftly, as it will provide pensioners with much-needed financial security and stability. It is right that those who have spent much of their life working hard and contributing to the UK economy continue to receive the support they deserve. As other welfare benefits have been strengthened and increased over the past few months, it is only fair that the same principle is applied to state pensions. With nearly a quarter of my constituents in Delyn aged over 65, I know that they will be thankful for the Government's efforts to ensure with this Bill that pensioners are properly supported, especially after the potentially devastating financial impact of covid.

The Bill rightly allows the Secretary of State to uprate the basic state pension, new state pensions and other benefits for the next tax year. Pensioners should not have to make further sacrifices because of the impacts of covid by seeing their state pension remain at

a stagnant level. Instead, we should protect our pensioners and their incomes by ensuring that state pension increases are safeguarded, even if earnings do not increase.

As we have heard from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, without this Bill the existing legislation could prevent any state pension increases next year, just when financial support will be needed most, partly to tackle the economic consequences of covid. I commend the foresight of the Department for Work and Pensions in bringing forward the Bill, as many would have simply assumed, as I did, that the triple lock would persist, without realising that the wording in the 1992 Act may preclude that, leaving many pensioners surprised at not receiving their normal annual increase.

The Bill is another good example of the Government following through on their promises to the people of the United Kingdom. The triple lock on pensions, introduced in 2010, is structurally more generous than its predecessor process. It is important to bear it in mind that the generosity in the benefit is locked in once supplied, as its effects compound over time. For example, the full basic state pension for an individual this year is almost 9% higher than it would have been had it been CPI indexed in the past decade, and almost 8% higher than if it had been earnings linked. It is therefore a policy that has been of real benefit to pensioners over the past 10 years.

Sadly, however, pensioner poverty is a real and pressing problem facing many of our communities across the whole United Kingdom. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's report last year on UK poverty revealed that more than 2 million pensioners are living in poverty or on a low income. That is often due to low benefit take-up. One of the key benefits, mentioned by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) in his intervention, is pension credit, which currently has one of the lowest take-up rates of any income-related benefit, with more than 1 million people missing out. I mentioned that to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House during last week's business questions. Statistics provided by Independent Age's campaign to increase pension credit take-up estimate that more than 1,500 pensioner households in my constituency of Delyn are missing out on a total of £3.2 million.

I pay tribute to the outstanding work of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and, indeed, her whole ministerial team, but I urge Ministers to work with charities such as Independent Age to increase the awareness and take-up of much-needed benefits such as pension credit. Although the Bill will help to address the issue of poverty and ensure that pensioners have greater levels of income, more needs to be done to ensure that no pensioner is left behind and that the needs of our senior citizens are fully considered in the Government's levelling-up agenda. I am sure that my right hon. Friend, along with Treasury Ministers, will in future ensure that there is a serious discussion to be had with regard to intergenerational fairness in the longer term.

I am glad to be a member of the Conservative and Unionist party, which is a party for all and is supporting individuals throughout the United Kingdom regardless of age, whether that be helping young people into new jobs via the kickstart scheme, providing free access to college courses to increase the skills of the workforce, or, through this Bill, bringing peace of mind to pensioners about their financial security.

2.20 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts). I will be picking up on similar themes to those he mentioned.

We welcome this Bill, as it enables the uprating of the state pension and pension credit despite a fall in earnings. We would expect the Government to uprate them accordingly and ensure that everyone can benefit. As the Secretary of State said, the purpose is to ensure that we meet the standard minimum guarantee in pension credit and other benefits. According to the Office for National Statistics, earnings fell by 0.1% in the three months to July 2020 as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. The Government have said that they are committed to ensuring that the Bill will allow them to meet the requirements of the triple lock. We would certainly expect that. The triple lock was a manifesto commitment from the Government, but it was very much supported across the House.

Without this Bill, the existing legislation would mean that the Secretary of State would probably not be able to increase the relevant benefit and pension rates. They would remain frozen, as happened in 2016-17 when the consumer prices index in the 12 months to September 2015 showed a negative growth rate of 0.1%. We therefore certainly welcome the Bill. As the Secretary of State indicated, it also applies to industrial death benefit, which falls within the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament, where there has been an agreement with a legislative consent motion. The Scottish Government are committed to expediting the timetable to match that of the Government here.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies has warned that unemployment shocks to older workers, many of whom have lost their jobs or will do so when the furlough scheme ends, could have severe implications for individuals' retirement savings, and therefore long-term effects on their living standards in retirement. We should be very wary of that going forward, not just in discussing this Bill.

On pension credit, we encourage the Government to look at ways of ensuring that there is uptake of that benefit. There are really alarming statistics from the charity Independent Age about the numbers of pensioners who could be in poverty. We really want to ensure that pensioners are kept out of poverty by increasing uptake. I press the Government, once again, to look at as many imaginative and creative ways as they can to ensure that pension credit is taken up, because the statistics, not just in my constituency but in every constituency across the UK, are pretty alarming. I have tried holding constituency events myself to make sure that the benefit is taken up. The Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), knows that I have raised the issue of uptake of pension credit with him many times.

We start from the principle that just as the national health service was created to protect all in time of need, the social security system should do the same. I encourage the Government to ensure that the £20 uplift to universal credit remains permanent and is extended to all legacy benefits. There are some really dire predictions. The Trussell Trust forecasts that food bank use could surge by a staggering 61% in the coming months, which

[Chris Stephens]

would be equivalent to 846,000 parcels being given out. Behind these statistics are families hit by the pandemic and in desperate need of support.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity—I am sure that the Minister would think it remiss of me not to do so—to suggest that the social security system should be fully devolved to the Scottish Parliament, where we would make sure that the job was done. The Scottish Parliament has now initiated the Scottish child payment, which will be open for applications in November, with the first payments to start in February 2021, providing low-income families with an additional £10 a week initially for each child under the age of six. We will be supporting the Bill on Second Reading, but I look forward to proposing some amendments in Committee.

2.25 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I agree with the case that the Secretary of State has made: that the Bill is needed because in all likelihood there will be no growth in earnings this year. In those circumstances, it is right for the Government to take the action needed, as we are doing this afternoon, to increase the state pension and linked benefits, including the standard minimum guarantee in pension credit.

Like other Members, I want to say a few words about pension credit, because it has proved a very effective tool for reducing pensioner poverty since it was introduced in October 2003. The hon. Members for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Delyn (Rob Roberts) were quite right to ask about the take-up of pension credit. I heard the answer that the Secretary of State gave the hon. Member for Glasgow South West, and I would be interested to know what the outcome of those efforts has been. She made an interesting point about what the BBC has done. Does the Minister have any information on whether those changes have led to increased take-up of pension credit? The most recent figures, for 2017-18, show that only six in 10 of those eligible were claiming it, and only 70% of the total amount of pension credit that could have been claimed was in fact being claimed.

Beyond the measures in the Bill, it would be helpful to hear a little more about what further plans the Government have to tackle pensioner poverty. The Social Metrics Commission, chaired by the noble Baroness Stroud in the other place, estimated in its 2020 report that 1.3 million pension-age adults are living in poverty, and the Government's own figures for pensioners living in relative poverty after housing costs is higher still, at 1.9 million.

The number of pensioners living in poverty had fallen substantially, thanks largely to the introduction of pension credit. However, as others have rightly reminded us, over the past five years or so those numbers have started to go in the wrong direction. That is reflected in the Social Metrics Commission's measurements. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation—the hon. Member for Delyn drew attention to its “UK Poverty 2019-20” report—makes the point that:

“For years, pensioner poverty decreased across the UK, but now those that are single, have non-white ethnicity or have a landlord, are seeing increases.”

The hon. Member for Delyn quoted the troubling rate of pensioner poverty that we are seeing at the moment, with about 2 million UK pensioners living in poverty, with the highest rate of pensioner poverty in London, at 23%. The Bill will ensure that pensioners' incomes rise during a period of no increase in earnings, or possibly even a fall in the value of earnings.

I welcome the fact that the Government are taking these steps, but it is not only pensioners we need to be concerned about, as other Members have mentioned already. What will the Government be doing for people of working age who are facing rising unemployment and loss of income? Is there a risk that, on its own, the Bill will exacerbate existing intergenerational unfairness? We are debating the Second Reading of the Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Bill, but there are some benefits uprating matters that the Bill does not address. The Social Metrics Commission's 2020 report estimated that 8.5 million people of working age are living in families in poverty, and concluded:

“The older you are, the less likely you are to be in poverty. 33% of children aged four and under are in poverty, compared to 23% of those aged between 40 and 44 and 10% of those aged 75 and over.”

The Select Committee, in its first report in this Parliament—on the DWP's response to the coronavirus outbreak—welcomed the £20 a week increase in the rate of universal credit at the start of the pandemic. The Secretary of State has already referred to that increase, which was introduced to last for a year. The Committee recommended:

“now that the initial surge of Universal Credit claims has mostly been handled, the Department should immediately seek to increase the rates of relevant legacy benefits by the equivalent amount. This increase should be backdated to April 2020, as recommended by the independent Social Security Advisory Committee.”

Sadly, that recommendation on a unanimous basis by the Select Committee, and the recommendation by the Social Security Advisory Committee, have not been adopted by the Government. It is quite unusual for the Government to ignore a recommendation, which is largely technical in character, brought forward by the Social Security Advisory Committee. In their response to the Select Committee, the Government simply made the point that those other benefits

“were increased by 1.7% in April 2020 as part of the annual up-rating exercise”.

They went on to say that the Department has “no plans to increase these benefits further at this stage.”

The Secretary of State does have the power to uprate those benefits at her discretion and I very much hope that she will.

I welcome the provisions in the Bill, but pensioners must not be the only people we are concerned about. We need to consider the interests of working-age people as well. After such a long freeze in working-age benefits, there is a very strong case for making the £20 a week increase permanent, as was pointed out by over 50 organisations brought together by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation yesterday. The Select Committee has been reflecting on that in its current inquiry on the five-week wait for universal credit, on which we will be publishing a report in the coming weeks.

Whatever the Government's conclusions on that, I put it to the Secretary of State at the Select Committee yesterday that it would surely be inconceivable for Ministers

to cut everybody's benefit by £20 a week in April before the pandemic was even over. The Secretary of State told me that she is still in "active discussions" with the Treasury over this subject. I suspect that everyone in the Chamber wishes her well in those discussions. We will certainly all be eager to learn the outcome.

Let me reiterate the call made unanimously by the Select Committee that the £20 a week increase should also apply to legacy benefits such as jobseeker's allowance, and employment and support allowance. In our view, it is wrong to have a big discrepancy between the incomes of two people in otherwise identical circumstances based merely on the historical accident of which benefit they happen to be claiming. The rates were the same at the start of the pandemic; they should be the same now.

The main argument at the time for not increasing the legacy benefits was that it would take some time to implement on the rather creaking computer systems through which those benefits are administered. I understand the difficulty, but if work to do that had started in April, the increase could have been implemented around about now. There should certainly be no delay in getting on with implementing it now.

I welcome the measures in the Bill to address the uprating of benefits, but there are some other benefit uprating matters not in the Bill that also require urgent attention.

2.34 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The Secretary of State and other Members have outlined that state pensions rise each year under the triple lock mechanism, which was introduced by the coalition Government and ensures an increase of whichever is the highest of earnings growth, price inflation or 2.5%. As there is expected to be no average growth in earnings between May and July 2019 and May and July 2020, due to the pandemic, the Government have brought forward this welcome Bill to allow a rise to take place. It also allows for an increase in pension credits. However, the Bill does not state a specific rise in the pension; it simply allows the Government to raise it.

The Liberal Democrats welcome provisions in the Bill that mean all retirees—especially the very poorest, who are claiming pension credits—will see a rise in their benefits. The Government have said that they intend to ensure that the triple lock on the state pension is maintained, but as I said, there is no mention of a specific level of increase in the Bill. It is slightly worrying that the Bill gives the Government the power to raise the state pension but fails to say by how much. If the Government were to raise the state pension by less than 2.5%, they would not be maintaining the triple lock as they have pledged to do. I hope the Minister can explain why there is no such provision in the Bill and commit the Government to at least a 2.5% increase, in line with the triple lock.

It is fair to say that concerns may be expressed about the Bill in relation to intergenerational fairness. Things have been very difficult for young people, whether as a result of issues with exams, what they are now experiencing at university or for those looking to enter the job market. Pensions expert Ian Browne has stated:

"There is a danger that guaranteeing a 2.5 per cent boost to the state pension is perceived to be intergenerationally unfair, given it will provide a considerable boost to pensioners' income when

many others are taking a cut in their pay, working less hours or have lost their jobs altogether."

The Liberal Democrats support the triple lock on pensions, and I hope the Government do not intend to abandon it. I acknowledge the concerns but would argue that guaranteeing a strong state pension is becoming increasingly critical. It is clear that many working-age people—especially younger people—are not, and are simply unable to be, saving enough for their retirement, and final salary pension schemes are largely a thing of the past. That means that the state pension will become an increasingly important source of retirement income. We tend to think of pensions as supporting older people, but if we were to abandon the triple lock and give smaller and smaller increases over the next few decades, that would erode the retirement income of those who are only just beginning to enter the workplace. I hope the Minister agrees that maintaining the triple lock is imperative for ensuring that the next generation of retirees enjoy a comfortable income.

Another reason why the triple lock is welcome is the position of many older women. Many women rely more on the state pension than men do for their retirement income, as women have traditionally found it harder to build up a private pension due to taking a career break to raise children or to care for relatives. Raising the state pension is therefore critical for many women who rely on it and pension credit for the bulk of their income.

As the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), said, although it is not addressed in the Bill, there is a risk that the Government will have to scrap the triple lock next year due to an artificial rise in wages. In normal times, the state pension could be expected to increase by about 3% to 4%, and by a minimum of 2.5%, as per the triple lock rules. Given the disruption caused by the pandemic this year, it is highly unlikely that this increase will be far higher, for reasons outlined by other Members. People have lost their jobs in lockdown and been furloughed. As the lockdown lifts, furlough ends, and as the economy recovers, average wage growth will jump significantly. That will show up in the statistics as a massive wage rise, which would mean that the state pension shoots up too. I hope the Minister will give some indication of the Department's plan for this largely predictable situation.

In short, this Bill is largely uncontroversial and to be welcomed, but there are clearly issues ahead. Although it is clearly an expedited Bill that the Government are looking to pass quickly for the next year only, it remains the case that many will not benefit from the uprating being agreed today—for example, overseas pensioners whose pensions have previously been frozen. I note that the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) intends to raise those issues in Committee. The pandemic has had a devastating impact on the elderly and most vulnerable in our society. Providing a degree of financial security is vital, but our approach to pensions must also be considered in respect of future generations and addressing historical inequalities.

2.38 pm

Jonathan Reynolds: With the leave of the House, I will briefly respond to the debate on behalf of the Opposition. It is not often that we have more speakers than clauses in the legislation before us, but I very much

[Jonathan Reynolds]

appreciate Members' contributions. The hon. Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts) was right to highlight the impact of the pandemic on older people. I do not like the intergenerational aspect that is sometimes put on this crisis. It has affected all groups in society in different ways, and in particular, we all feel strongly about the burden in relation to care homes. Indeed, many of us would quite like to see parents and grandparents when the opportunity hopefully arises again.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) made many good points. I agree with him on the take-up of pension credit and the issues around that. Longer term, my preference would be that the new state pension apparatus that was set up in the last Parliament becomes such a satisfactory minimum that pension credit becomes a residual benefit and we do not have the issues that we do around pensioner poverty.

I also very much recognise and agree with the hon. Gentleman's comments on legacy benefits. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), the Chair of the Select Committee, said, the issue was always given as the time it would take to do the uprating. We are now well into the pandemic and beyond the point where that could have come online had the Government chosen to act.

The wider comments from my right hon. Friend were very welcome. He spoke about pension credit, and it is important to say that it was a conscious choice of the Government post-1997 to address the huge issue of pensioner poverty that had built up; that is what the majority of resources at that point went into. There should not be an automatic linkage between retirement and poverty, as was the case at the end of the 1990s. As ever, I very much welcome all the work the Select Committee has done into the impact of the current crisis on the social security system, and the wider points that have been made.

The hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) strongly supported the triple lock, which I agree with. She made a crucial point on intergenerational fairness, and it was one I was going to make at Committee stage, but I will make it now. Often, in the media commentary around this issue, the intergenerational point is made without reference to the fact that we are not just talking about the level of increase for pensioners today, although someone who has just entered retirement will hopefully, in a very good way, now experience that uprating for several years. We are really talking about what the level of the state pension will be by the time today's workers retire. That was very much the modelling behind the changes that were made to the single-tier basic state pension. The increase in the retirement age made the overall package of spending on the state pension a reduction overall in order to make it, in the words of the coalition Government at the time, more sustainable. That is an important point to remember when we are talking about cost and the impact on different generations of the changes we are talking about today.

Overall, however, there is rightly a clear consensus in the Chamber for Second Reading to proceed, and I very much welcome the contributions that have been made.

2.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I would like to begin by thanking everyone who has spoken in the debate, which has been wide ranging and consensual and has covered a number of topics.

Because this is my first appearance back at the Dispatch Box, Madam Deputy Speaker, I just want to raise a personal matter. This is my first appearance since the demise of my twin boys in late June, and I was genuinely struck by the amazing words of commiseration and support that I received across the House from all colleagues. I am deeply grateful, and I know I speak for my wife on that particular point as well.

Moving on, I was struck by the opening point from the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) on the shadow Front Bench, and it is one I think we should all celebrate in this House: rising longevity is a fantastically good thing, and it is a wonderful problem to have. Clearly, there are policy and fiscal issues that follow it, but it is a genuinely good thing that we are addressing.

Even though the House is not well populated today, I am conscious that before me I have a former Pensions Minister from the Department for Work and Pensions—the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), who now chairs the Select Committee. I also think that the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde was a special adviser—

Jonathan Reynolds: Not quite.

Guy Opperman: He was an adviser—let's put it that way—to the previous Labour Government, and he is acutely conscious of the issues that we are dealing with today.

Clearly, there is a delightful sense of a cross-party consensus, but I want to address some of the key points that were raised. People clearly wish to make the case on pensioner poverty, and I will address that. One can trade statistics, but material deprivation for pensioners fell from 10% in 2009-10 to 6% in 2018-19. There are 100,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty before and after housing costs than in 2009-10. Average pensioner incomes have grown significantly in real terms over the past two decades. Average weekly income in 1994-95 was £165 a week after housing costs; that compared with £320 a week in 2018-19. For 2020-21, we are forecast to spend £126 billion a year on pensioners, including £102 billion on state pension. Colleagues will know that that is a record sum spent by any Government in this House in respect of pensioners.

I will attempt to answer some of the particular points that were fairly made on pension credit. It is again the case, and I should put this on record, that pension credit increased significantly under the coalition and then under this Government, from £132.60 to £173.75 for a single person and from £202.40 to £265.20 for a couple. The take-up of pension credit is something that all would like to see increased. I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts) on that; this is the first chance I have had to respond to him in this House, and it is delightful that he is here. He makes the fair point that it is in all our interests that pension credit be increased.

One of my colleagues asked what had been the impact of the BBC decision. There is no totally granular data on that, but I can assist to a degree: the claims for pension credit, which is what we want to see, were dramatically increased as of July 2020 compared with January 2020. There is definitely a massive increase in claims and clearly a filtering through of the acceptance of said claims. I refer hon. Members to the parliamentary question asked by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), PQ 82024. I will ensure that I put a note of the issue on the record in the Library to answer that particular point and expand upon it.

In respect of pension credit, the Secretary of State was right to identify that we had a significant nationwide campaign in the spring of this year, and that the combination of that and the impact of the BBC decision clearly had an impact on greater take-up. The specific causes of the increase in take-up are hard to assess, but there is no doubt that the take-up has been larger.

In respect of the point raised by various hon. Members about working-age benefits, it is right to say that the Government are proud of the fact that they have provided support during the pandemic for those below state pension age, whether through the plan for jobs, with kickstart now open for bids across Great Britain and doing very well, increasing the standard allowance in universal credit and working tax credit by £1,040 this year, benefiting 4 million families, investing approximately £9 billion of extra support to protect people's incomes through the pandemic, removing the seven-day waiting requirement for employment and support allowance claims linked to covid-19, or relaxing the universal credit minimum income floor for self-employed people.

As the Secretary of State said to the right hon. Member for East Ham and the Work and Pensions Committee yesterday, that is a matter that is clearly in her mind and that is to be considered by the Secretary of State. I cannot really add or expand upon the answer that she gave, and it would not be appropriate to comment further, because clearly she has to conduct a review and then return to this House to respond to that review.

Having dealt with the specifics, all colleagues have identified that this is important legislation, without which the state pension would be frozen for a year from April 2021. It makes technical changes to ensure that state pensions can be uprated, providing peace of mind to pensioners regarding their financial health. It is a one-year Bill, so it is not the case that we are considering the matter beyond the first year. Clearly, this arises out of the covid emergency and its impact on earnings, and it would not be appropriate to address the future at this stage. I believe this Bill is a further demonstration of this Government's action in support of pensioners, and provides them with financial peace of mind in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

SOCIAL SECURITY (UP-RATING OF BENEFITS) BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(David T.C. Davies.)

Question agreed to.

Social Security (Up-rating of Benefits) Bill

Proceedings resumed (Order, this day)

Considered in Committee (Order, this day)

[DAME ROSIE WINTERTON in the Chair]

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I ask the Clerk to read the title of the Bill, I should explain that although the Chair of the Committee would normally sit in the Clerk's chair, in these exceptional circumstances, in order to comply with social distancing requirements, I will remain in the Speaker's chair, although I will be carrying out the role not of Deputy Speaker, but of Chairman of the Committee. We should be addressed as Chairs of the Committee, rather than Deputy Speakers.

Clause 1

UP-RATING OF STATE PENSION AND CERTAIN OTHER BENEFITS FOLLOWING REVIEW IN TAX YEAR 2020-21

2.51 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I beg to move amendment 1, page 1, line 10, leave out from "State" to the end of line 15 and insert—

"shall lay before Parliament the draft of an order which increases each of the amounts referred to in subsection (1) above by a percentage no less than—

- (a) the difference between the general level of earnings at the beginning of the period under review and the general level of earnings at the end of that period, or
- (b) the difference between the general level of prices at the beginning of the period under review and the general level of prices at the end of that period, or
- (c) 2.5%,

(none) whichever is the greater."

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to up-rate the benefits to which this Act applies in accordance with the "triple lock" of the higher of increases in prices, increases in earnings or 2.5%.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 2, page 1, line 23, at end insert—

"(2C) No draft order laid before Parliament under section (2A) above may be made in the form of the draft until the Secretary of State has laid before Parliament a report containing an assessment of the impact of its effect on levels of poverty.

(2D) The assessment required by paragraph 2C shall, in particular, consider the impact on levels of poverty in—

- (a) Scotland, and
- (b) Wales."

[The First Deputy Chairman]

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to lay before Parliament an assessment of the impact of the up-rating on levels of poverty, including in Scotland and Wales.

Amendment 3, page 1, line 23, at end insert—

“(2C) No draft order laid before Parliament under section (2A) above may be made in the form of the draft until the Secretary of State has laid before Parliament a report containing an assessment of its impact on persons not ordinarily resident in Great Britain, including the impact of exempting any such persons from entitlement to up-rating increases granted by the order.”

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to lay before Parliament an assessment of the impact on those overseas pensioners whose pensions are frozen in accordance with Government policy.

Amendment 4, in clause 1, page 1, line 23, at end insert—

“(2C) No power may be exercised under this or any other Act so as to exempt persons not ordinarily resident in Great Britain from entitlement to up-rating increases granted by an order made by virtue of section (2A) of this Act.”

This amendment would ensure that this up-rating applied to all overseas pensioners, including those whose pensions have previously been frozen in accordance with Government policy.

Amendment 5, page 1, line 23, at end insert—

“(2C) No draft order laid before Parliament under section (2A) above may be made in the form of the draft until the Secretary of State has laid before Parliament a report containing an assessment of its impact on those affected by the changes in the state pension age made by the Pensions Act 1995 and the Pensions Act 2011; and that assessment shall, in particular, consider the impact on women born between 6 April 1950 and 5 April 1960.”

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to lay before Parliament an assessment of the impact of the up-rating on those whose state pension age was changed by the Pensions Acts 1995 and 2011, including in particular the group known as the “WASPI women”.

Clause stand part.

Clause 2 stand part.

Chris Stephens: It is good to see that social distancing is being applied at all times. It was remiss of me not to welcome the Pensions Minister back to his place. I did send him a private message, and thoughts of him and his wife and family are very much with us all in this House. I do welcome him back.

These are five non-controversial amendments, which I hope— [Interruption.] We seem to have a laugh already from the Minister. I do not know why. He has obviously not read these non-controversial amendments. We have tabled some probing amendments and look forward to his response.

The first amendment is a theme that was picked up on Second Reading by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), which is to ensure that the triple lock is applied in legislation. The Government would have to give an explicit commitment to maintain the triple lock for the year ahead. The amendment seems to speak very much for itself.

Amendment 2 asks for an assessment on poverty, which again was picked up on Second Reading. It is certainly our view that the Government are overseeing some brutal benefit cuts, which have exacerbated poverty, and we require a proper impact assessment of the proposed uprating and the impact that has on poverty levels in each of the devolved nations.

Previous UK Budgets have introduced some fairly punitive cuts to social security—certainly the most punitive in recent memory—and we are starting to see an active reversal of reducing and fighting poverty. The Social Metrics Commission report, which was referred to at an earlier stage, notes that prior to the outbreak 14.4 million people in the UK were already living in poverty, including 33% of children, 22% of all working-age adults and 11% of pension-age adults. The largest employment impacts of covid have been felt by those in the deepest poverty, with many at risk of falling deeper into poverty as a result of job losses, reduced hours or reduced pay. We have tabled amendment 2 to provide for that impact assessment.

Amendments 3 and 4 deal with the issue of frozen pensions. UK pensioners deserve a full uprated state pension, wherever they choose to live. Due to the historical arbitrary bilateral agreements between the UK and other countries around the world, some UK pensioners who live overseas do not have their state pension payments uprated every year. That means that their pension is frozen at the level at which they first received it for the rest of their lives abroad. As of August 2019, that affected over 5,110 UK pensioners, who we believe are being adversely affected by the UK Government’s frozen pension policy. Pensioners who have paid the required national insurance contributions during their working lives in expectation of a decent basic pension and retirement find themselves on incomes that fall in real terms year on year. Pensioners will now face ending their days in poverty because they choose to live in the wrong country, in most cases without any knowledge of the implications of their choice for their pension.

In our view the state pension is a right, not a privilege. UK pensioners who have paid their fair share of national insurance contributions should not have to suffer simply because successive Governments have failed to establish bilateral agreements with certain countries. Therefore, we are asking that amendments 3 and 4 be agreed. I also refer hon. Members to the frozen pensions campaign, of which many hon. Members are members.

Amendment 5 relates to 1950s-born women, an issue that I am sure the Pensions Minister would be disappointed if I did not mention. As a previous Speaker of this House advised in 2015, persistence is not a vice. The amendment would require the Government to publish an assessment of the impact of uprating on those whose state pension age was changed by the Pensions Acts 1995 and 2011, including in particular 1950s-born women, or WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—women, as they are known.

The numbers of ’50s-born women and men claiming working-age benefits has rocketed, and they should have been receiving their state pension. This is a double whammy, with those with occupational defined-contribution pensions to fill the gap being squeezed even further. Those claiming benefits find themselves having lost Government support in many cases, excluded either due to gaps in national insurance contributions, because of low-paid, precarious work, or because of other parts of household income. We are very aware of the history of 1950s-born women and the inequality they have faced throughout many parts of their lives. They now find themselves discriminated against on the basis of so-called equality, while those losing

their jobs or seeking work are being further disadvantaged by an unequal playing field and a shrinking job market.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to our amendments.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for tabling these amendments, which I would describe as probing amendments to have a wider conversation—perhaps “uncontroversial” is too dramatic a description of what we are discussing today.

On amendment 1, to be fair, the Government have given a clear indication in the opening remarks to this debate of their direction of travel and their commitment to the triple lock this year. It is perhaps worth putting on record the figures from the Library, because I see so much commentary on social media and in the press about affordability. As the Minister said earlier, rounded to the nearest billion, this year this country will spend £102 billion on the state pension—not benefits for pensioners, but the state pension. If we had not operated triple lock from 2011, but had just a double lock of prices or earnings, that figure would be around £100 billion. No one would describe a couple of billion pounds as an insignificant amount of money, but in the context of the UK pensions bill it is 1.2% less. If we had no lock and had simply increased the state pension by earnings since 2011, the bill would be £96 billion, which is £5.5 billion less. However, the crucial point is that that is in the context of the worst earnings growth over the last decade that this country has really ever seen—certainly the worst in modern times. Crucially, that would have meant pensioners becoming worse off, because pensions would not have kept up with prices—something that I think no one here would have been happy to see.

I think we all have to acknowledge that the UK state pension is relatively low by international standards. I am not taking a cheap political pop, and it is appropriate to say that the system is obviously much better when we consider it alongside the NHS, because in some pension systems people have to cover their healthcare costs, and we also have top-ups such as pension credit. The overall system is also clearly much better when we factor in private pensions. However, our basic state pension is relatively low compared with other countries. For instance, a typical woman retiring today will still look to the state pension for over half her retirement income. That is a significant point to bear in mind.

As we have heard, when the coalition Government introduced the pensions reforms that came into effect in 2016, the triple lock was a fundamental part of the calculations for the system. The deal was that people would have to retire later and that some people would not be able to create a state pension that was as high as they could previously have done, but that everyone would get a proper index-linked pension at 67, 68 or 69.

3 pm

For the sake of intergenerational fairness, I reiterate the point that the triple lock is not just about what today's pensioners receive but about what the state pension will be by the time today's workers retire. Too often, this is looked at as a binary choice between two groups, but that is not entirely accurate. Critically, this comes down to the Government having made a manifesto commitment to the triple lock last December, and everyone

in the House should hold them to account on that. As was pointed out in the debate on Second Reading, this is the right legislation to pass today to enable the Government to fulfil that promise.

Amendment 2 deals with the uprating's potential impact on pensioner poverty. We have already had some discussion on this on Second Reading. According to Age UK's research in 2019, poverty levels among pensioners are lower than they were 20 years ago, but we still have 2 million pensioners in the UK who live in poverty and, worryingly, the numbers have started to edge up in recent years. Too often, we talk about pensioners as one group of people, but there are important differences among our retired citizens in the UK. People who rent, for instance, are much more likely to be in poverty in retirement. A third of private tenants and 29% of social tenants in retirement are in poverty. There are much more significant levels of poverty among black and minority ethnic pensioners. We also have a situation where older pensioners—those over 80—are much more likely to be in poverty. In future years, we might increasingly talk about different groups of pensioners because of that impact, and it would be welcome to hear from the Minister what the Government's overall plans are. Sometimes we find it hard to get the Government to talk about poverty overall in the UK, and particularly to talk about it in relation to pensioners, so his comments would very welcome at this stage.

Amendments 3 and 4, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West said, relate to UK citizens living overseas who are not in the European economic area, Switzerland or a country that has a reciprocal agreement with the UK. I have considerable sympathy for this point. I think that many people see their pension entitlement as being related to what they have been able to save and put into it, rather than to the country they live in, but I know that this is a difficult issue that many Governments have struggled with. I understand that there are now 500,000 people living in other countries with their pensions frozen, mainly in India, Australia, Canada and parts of the Caribbean. Again, this is something we have not had an update from the Government on for some time. I receive a lot of correspondence from constituents but also from people because of the shadow Secretary of State brief, and some of the stories are very moving. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to probe the Government on this issue, and I would also appreciate the Government being able to provide an update on the situation and tell us what the outlook might be.

Amendment 5 deals with the 1950s women—the so-called WASPI women—and like the hon. Gentleman, I have considerable sympathy and support for that campaign. As ever, it is worth stressing that this is not about a desire to return the retirement age to what it was in the past, but about what is a reasonable amount of time that a person should be given to plan for their retirement. I have no doubt that the acceleration of the timescale in the 2011 Act produced considerable hardship, and I think the Government are wrong to continue to consider this not to be the issue that it is. The latest research shows that there are 15,000 women over the age of 65 currently claiming universal credit. The Government should give more consideration to what immediate action could be taken to support this group.

One of the options that could be explored for those affected women would be to extend pension credit, alongside the possibilities of that in the Pensions Act 1995,

but whichever option the Government choose, this clearly is a pressing problem that is being made worse by the pandemic. To be frank, it does feel at times that the Government just wish this issue would go away. I appreciate that, at the election, there was a significant offer from the Labour party. I have no desire at all to re-fight the 2019 election, but I think that it was right to raise that issue and to highlight the impact on that group of women. Certainly, when we have the next piece of pensions legislation—the Pension Schemes Bill is coming to the Commons next week—we will be pushing the Government to accelerate the plans for the publicly provided pensions dashboard, because, at the heart of this, is the fact that everyone should have clear, transparent information about what their pension entitlement is and how they can successfully plan for their future and organise their own lives and finances.

Again, I pressure the Government to consider what this pandemic means for those 1950s women and whether there is the opportunity to bring forward more support for them. I ask the Government, in responding to this amendment, to consider that. There will be further opportunities in future to recognise the strain on this cohort of women and what further measures could be done for them.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I thank colleagues for their contributions and will respond briefly because I accept that these are probing amendments. I will most definitely not take up the opportunity to re-fight the 2019 election with the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), because, frankly, that is probably somewhere he does not wish to go.

On the probing amendment on the triple lock, this is a matter, as was rightly highlighted by the hon. Gentleman, that the Secretary of State herself was pretty unequivocal about. I also welcome his analysis and appreciation that the state pension should not be viewed in isolation, because, quite clearly, it is one element of the various supported benefits that are available—whether a national health service, free at the point of delivery, or the support that is now going through with automatic enrolment, a cross-party policy developed by the Labour party and the Turner commission. Various Ministers in the Labour Government had brought that policy forward as part of the coalition, and it was then implemented by the Conservative Government. That has clearly had an impact, as has, obviously, the expansion of pension credit, and it should be seen in the round rather than on its own in that particular context.

Clearly, the key policy has been the increase in the basic state pension and the fact that we are now £1,900 larger than we were in 2010. Clearly, this is a matter that all parties in this House are supporting on an ongoing basis. I submit with respect that it is entirely appropriate that the Secretary of State should be allowed to bring forward this legislation, as the House seems to deem fit, and should conduct the up-rating review and then come back to this House, as she is required to do, and debate the matter in this House.

The issue of pensioner poverty leads me into amendment 5 in respect of the women against state pension inequality. It is unquestionably difficult to predict future poverty rates when one is assessing an impact. The Bill is enabling legislation. It does not implement a particular policy. There is also a danger with trying to

accurately predict future poverty rates, when one is looking at an individual policy and an individual part of a Bill. For example, the published predictions of the Resolution Foundation, which were cited by colleagues earlier on, suggested that relative child poverty after housing costs would increase in 2017-18 when they actually fell. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has not published projections of poverty since 2017.

Let me turn now to the other amendments submitted by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). In respect of the assessment in amendment 3, I submit that there is a “be careful what you wish for” approach. The assessment is unnecessary and, in reality, unfeasible. The reality is that the UK state pension is payable worldwide and given that the socioeconomic conditions of each country vary enormously, it is simply unfeasible to produce a meaningful assessment of the up-rating policy’s impact on overseas recipients, and—this is the crucial point—notwithstanding issues regarding feasibility, the timetable for laying a draft order for up-rating does not allow for an assessment to be made. If there were to be an assessment, and the amendment was successful, the reality is that that assessment would not be made in time—by November 2020—with the consequence that the state pension would be frozen. I most definitely suggest, with great respect, that that assessment would be a negative idea for all the pensioners who are seeking an increase, potentially by reason of this legislation.

On amendment 4, this is a long-standing policy pursued by successive post-war Governments, who have taken the view that priority should be given to those living in the United Kingdom in drawing up expenditure plans for pensioner benefits. There are no plans to change that policy. The up-rating of the state pension is intended to provide support for pensioners who live in the UK.

I turn to the perennial issue that the hon. Gentleman seeks to raise—I do not diminish the fact that he wishes to raise it, as did the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde from the Opposition Front Bench—in respect of the changes to the state pension increase, which were, of course, supported for 13 years by the Labour Government when they were in power and, in fact, were enhanced by the 2007 Act. It is not the Government’s intention to amend the 1995 Act, the 2007 Act or the 2011 Act. Clearly, if the Scottish Government wish to act, sections 24, 26 and 28 of the Scotland Act 2016 give powers to the Scottish Government to intervene in Holyrood if they choose to do so. We would certainly resist any changes in this Parliament.

I take the point made by the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde about the 2019 election and the debate on that matter, but since then, there has been the Court of Appeal’s decision in respect of the court case, which unequivocally found for this Government, the coalition Government, the Labour Government and the Conservative Government, dating back to 1995 on all issues on these grounds, including notice. With respect, I believe that the matter should rest there.

The long and the short of it is that I would resist the amendments, and I invite the hon. Member for Glasgow South West, with due respect, not to press them.

Chris Stephens: I would love to say that I am shocked and stunned that the Government have not accepted any of the amendments, but that would perhaps be an

oversell. As the Minister said, they are probing amendments. He will be well aware that we will return to these topics, and I invite Members of the other place perhaps to pick them up when they discuss the Bill. I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

Fly-tipping: Penalties

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

3.14 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting me the opportunity to have this Adjournment debate. I am also grateful to the Minister for coming to the House to respond.

Fly-tipping is an issue that blights too many of our communities. It happens in cities, in towns and in the countryside. Those who are dumping range from selfish individuals to criminal operators, but the effect is the same: the law abiding suffer, and on private land the law abiding are made to pay. Peterborough is a proud city. My constituency also takes in the fens around Eye, Thorney and Newborough, so I see fly-tipping in all its forms, and, quite frankly, I have had enough of it. The people of Paston, Bretton, Werrington, Ravensthorpe and Millfield have also had enough.

At the 2019 election, I put tackling fly-tipping at the very top of my list of priorities. Some argued that this was a local council issue, but I make no apology for demanding action. I know that Peterborough City Council is working hard to tackle the problem, but we all need to do more to help, including the Government. I regularly report fly-tips as I walk around the streets of Peterborough, and on several occasions I have even rolled up my sleeves and cleared up the fly-tips myself.

The village of Newborough regularly has to put up with fly-tips and mess on roads and around the community. The junction of Norwood Lane and Newborough Road is a particularly bad hotspot that many election candidates visited in the run-up to the 2019 Peterborough by-election. Rubbish piles up high and many have stories of travelling for miles to dump rubbish in this spot. It costs Peterborough City Council tens of thousands of pounds to clear up, and even the *Daily Mail* called it the most fly-tipped road in Britain.

This problem does not stop with rural locations. In the city of Peterborough itself, we are sick and tired of people making our neighbourhoods dumping grounds. People have even said to me that seeing fly-tips, especially during the isolation of lockdown, affected their mental health. The council does a good job and often clears up after 24 hours, but people are beginning to think that this is almost a service. We need more CCTV and stricter fines.

I could talk for hours about specific problems in Peterborough, but I want to return to the overall picture and what the Government should be doing about it at a national level. There are three acknowledged drivers of fly-tipping, large and small: cost, because dumping waste means not having to pay for it; facilities, which can sometimes be difficult to access; and attitude, of the lazy and selfish who want to make their waste somebody else's problem. I would add a fourth driver, which is acceptability. When some people regularly see fly-tips, they think it is acceptable. Almost half of recorded fly-tips occur on pavements and roads, and these are often carried out by copycat offenders.

Certain locations become hotspots where fly-tipping becomes the norm. I will refer to private land, which the figures do not properly capture, but I am talking now about the cases recorded by councils. A third of cases

[Paul Bristow]

are classified as equivalent to a small van load, which are often little white vans of illegal operators. Another third of cases would apparently fit in the boot of a car or less. That is the description in the official statistics. I do not know whether our statisticians regard a mattress as fitting a car boot, but mattresses are definitely among the most common items dumped in my city.

When mattresses are dumped and are not removed, other people take the opportunity to add their own rubbish. The mattress is joined by a broken buggy, a dilapidated table, an old fridge, boxes and bags. As the council's contractors will be coming anyway, why not? It beats the hassle and cost of the tip or arranging a proper collection. That is why we should alter our approach and treat fly-tipping like we do antisocial behaviour; I call it zero tolerance. Obviously innovations help, including advertising dates for bulky waste collection, and improving access to other facilities and services. But above all, we need a quick removal blitz from hotspots and proper punishments.

I want to acknowledge that the Government recognise there is a problem. I welcome previous actions, particularly the introduction of fixed penalty notices for small offences, along with the power to seize vehicles. The ability for a householder to be fined if waste can be traced back to them was an important change, and the Environment Agency has also been given more funding.

However, an emphasis on localism and local approaches must not become an excuse. It may be tempting to think that fly-tipping is now down to local authorities to combat, but what they need is the right guidance, the right support and the right tools—and those are still limited. The work to secure tougher penalties is not in place, nor is a zero-tolerance approach being promoted or resourced, so we cannot say it is just down to councils. It is not clear to me that any council has had notable success on this. The reality is that fly-tipping is with us just as much as ever, and it appears to be getting worse.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point, and I congratulate him on securing this very important debate. I am sure he agrees with me and those around the Chamber that one of the pressures on local authorities has been a significant increase during lockdown of people fly-tipping because of their inability to access recycling and other centres. Does he agree, however, that the cost to local authorities such as Warwickshire—£650,000—when budgets are already under huge pressure, is just too much?

Paul Bristow: The hon. Member makes a very important point about the national lockdown and the impact this has had, as well as about the cost associated with clearing up these fly-tips, and I will come on to those specifics. The national lockdown has had very different effects and, unfortunately, life is far from back to normal. My own anecdotal evidence in Peterborough does not lead me to expect any drop in numbers of fly-tips over time; if anything, the reverse is true.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very important point about the attitudinal change during lockdown, as was picked

up by the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) as well. The people of Muggleswick, Weardale and Knitsley in my constituency have seen huge increases during lockdown. Does my hon. Friend fear, as I do, that unless we see a change to the attitudinal change driven by lockdown, we are going to see this problem persist well into the future?

Paul Bristow: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If anything, I think the problem has got worse. A survey that sampled councils in August suggested that over half are experiencing high volumes of fly-tipped waste. The possibility was foreseen in the Government's own pandemic guidance to councils in April, which noted the potential for increased fly-tipping, especially where collections have failed.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend while he is making progress, but in my own constituency, around Totnes and Dartmouth, we have seen a significant increase in fly-tipping. There has also been a problem with access to recycling centres, and in finding a balance in being able to allow such access to prevent people from littering the countryside and ruining our historic areas of outstanding natural beauty.

Paul Bristow: Again, my hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. In Peterborough, my experience is that fly-tipping dropped almost by a quarter when a new super-recycling centre was opened. Huge progress was made, but I fear that a lot of that progress has been lost. There is a clear distinction between clearing fly-tips and enforcement, and I hope the Local Government Association is wrong when it concludes that the unfortunate reality is that enforcement will not be prioritised at this time, and this is likely to have a long-term impact on waste management services.

Sometimes evidence is easy to find. One fly-tip on the site of a local Peterborough business was actually traced back to a Peterborough City Labour councillor not because of rooting through the fly-tip, but because of the enormous "Vote Labour" poster that featured front and centre of it. However, to their credit, the family of the councillor in question cleared up the mess personally when it was pointed out to them that that might be a decent thing to do. It was revealed that they had paid an unlicensed trader to dispose of it. Unfortunately, this is becoming too much of a business for people who would profit from this disreputable way of clearing rubbish.

One positive this year was the Budget, in which the Chancellor announced £2 million to improve the evidence about where fly-tipping happens and the best ways to deter it. I would welcome an update from the Minister on how that work is progressing.

The law makes fly-tipping a criminal offence. The sentencing guidelines were updated several years ago. They allow courts to hand out a maximum fine of £50,000 or a maximum sentence of 12 months. The problem is that this rarely happens. To date, there have only ever been a handful of maximum fines issued to fly-tipping criminals.

Matt Western: I fully agree with all the points that the hon. Gentleman is making. I have taken photographs of fly-tipping at the roadside where there has been a broken number plate from a car tipped with other rubbish and

asked the authorities to follow it up. The trouble is that all the other demands on the police and local authorities mean that they really struggle with that. Even before the pandemic, there was a significant increase in the number of cases of fly-tipping in 2018-19 versus 2017-18, with up to 12,200 cases in Warwickshire alone.

Paul Bristow: I accept what the hon. Gentleman is saying. In fact, a lot of this problem comes down to guidance. Councils should be given much clearer, much stricter guidance from Government in order to tackle these issues. I will mention that at the end of my speech, which I promise Members is coming soon.

Some 95% of sentences issued are fines of less than £1,000, and the most common penalty is £400. We badly need tougher sentences, not just in terms of the maximum punishments but, more importantly, in terms of those typically handed out. Sentences are not currently acting as a deterrent. I know the Government are committed to reviewing the sentencing guidelines. I appreciate that this is not directly in DEFRA's hands, but I hope the Minister can give some reassurance that it is coming, and soon.

Although the council's ability to hand out fixed penalty notices is limited to the less serious offences, it still managed to achieve 76,000. However, only 12,000 were for small-scale fly-tipping. That compares with 37,000 for littering and 26,000 for other offences. It comes back to the ability to catch people and the willingness to enforce. This is where the guidance needs improving. If an aggrieved constituent examines the Government's guidance, "Fly-tipping: council responsibilities", they will find nothing resembling the zero-tolerance approach that we need. I want to see a much tougher approach. I am sure that that view is shared by many hon. Members.

Much of this needs guidance from the centre. The guidance issued for local authorities, "Household waste duty of care: fixed penalty notice guidance", was updated in December 2018. It encourages what it calls a "proportionate" response and says:

"Individuals should not be penalised for minor breaches".

I understand why that is, especially when dealing with vulnerable people, but the tone and language is unhelpful. I would want guidance to reflect the language of zero tolerance, which I believe the people of Peterborough and the rest of the country are crying out for. Fixed penalty notices, as they stand, are inadequate. When the minimum penalty is just £150, many unlicensed traders, individuals and landlords will consider that a penalty worth taking a risk for. The level of fines should be considerably higher. Upping the penalties may require legislation, but I urge Ministers to consider it. In doing so, they would have the overwhelming support of the people of Peterborough and, indeed, Members of this House.

3.28 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) for securing this debate and giving us all a chance to raise this issue on behalf of our constituents.

Nationally, locating, managing and removing waste left by fly-tipping costs the UK economy about £600 million a year. Besides the financial costs, there is the impact it has on neighbourhoods and streets in places like Crewe. Across the Cheshire East area in 2019, there were 3,791

incidents of fly-tipping. That led to the taxpayer bearing the costs of clearing up almost 3,000 incidents. In the first half of 2020, there had already been almost 2,000 further incidents of fly-tipping.

Sadly, more than half of all the incidents across Cheshire East have taken place in Crewe in my constituency. The overwhelming majority of Crewe's residents are proud of their town. They want to play their part in keeping their street clean and decent, and one they can be proud of. Sadly, all it takes is a small number of people to decide that they are going to put themselves and what makes their life easier first, and everyone suffers as a result. The people of Crewe have not taken this problem lying down. The local campaign group Crewe Residents Against Fly-Tipping has more than 1,700 members, and they diligently raise awareness of this problem and repeatedly report fly-tipping to the council.

That brings me to the issue of prosecution, which is just as important as the level of fine and making the most of the maximum fines available. Thanks to the local democracy reporting of the *Crewe Chronicle* and *Chester Live*, we now know that, despite those thousands of instances of fly-tipping, there were only two prosecutions for fly-tipping in Cheshire East last year. That is simply unacceptable. There is little value in having fines or raising the minimum level if prosecutions are not taking place.

I have spoken to residents who feel that they have provided enough evidence to the council when reporting fly-tipping, and again and again nothing gets done. In the long run, that leads to their not bothering to report it anymore, because they do not see the point. I would be grateful if the Minister could outline how we can ensure that local councils take the zero-tolerance approach to this issue that our residents want to see and that is fair to those who are investing their time in ensuring that their local area is one to be proud of.

3.30 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): May I first place on record my sincere thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) for holding this debate? He has homed in on an issue that wreaks havoc in my constituency and, as evidenced by the debate, in constituencies across the nation.

Oh, I must speak frankly, Madam Deputy Speaker: fly-tipping doesn't half get on my wick! I have absolutely no desire to talk around it. If someone fly-tips in their community, they are a criminal, and they must be treated as such. It is the epitome of selfishness, mindlessness and idleness. There is no excuse for dumping waste on other people's doorsteps or in some of our treasured green spaces. In some cases, it is harmful to our natural environment and wildlife. In all cases, it is left to somebody else to clean it up. I know that my local authority does all it can to catch those who dump or drop and run. In the last week, my council has collected 21 mattresses from one estate.

Solving the issue is about making individuals who do not think at all to think twice. We have tough penalties at our disposal, but all too often, they are not applied. The guidance is not clear, and we need to give our councils the guidance and the structure they need to know that they can go and whack these people in the pocket. I must confess that, in the white heat of frustration

[*Matt Vickers*]

about this issue, I have occasionally thought that those who fly-tip should have their dumpings unceremoniously returned to their doorsteps. However, I concede that when they go low, we should go high—and that should be high fines. Let us hit them in the pocket, making use of the £50,000 maximum fine.

Paul Bristow: Does my hon. Friend agree with me and my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe)—who wishes that she could be here for the debate—and our local campaigns that it should not be the job of the council simply to clear up the fly-tipped waste? Councils should give greater priority to going through the waste, investigating whose it is and then taking enforcement action.

Matt Vickers: Definitely. We need to make it clear to councils that that is where the responsibility lies and that, if they go to the trouble of applying big fines, we are on their side and right behind them.

I feel particularly strongly about this issue at present, given the recent efforts of communities to come together, do the right thing, be selfless, do things for their neighbours and make their communities a better spot. People have been out in the countryside enjoying green spaces more, because they have not been going to work, and it is wrong that one or two people should spoil it for the rest of us. I think about the work put in by the Thornaby community litter-picking team, who go out every Sunday morning—quite early, I might add—to do their bit to keep their community a place to be proud of. They are let down by one or two people, and it cannot go on. Twenty-one mattresses on an estate in Thornaby is just not good enough, and we need to do something about it.

A small minority are placing a huge burden on already overstretched local authorities. They cannot get off scot-free. It is not acceptable, and we have to do something about it. I really hope that today's debate pushes the issue up the agenda. We must strive to ensure that all the agencies—local authorities, police, landowners and the Environment Agency—work together, in the knowledge that they are backed by everybody in this place, to bash out those tough penalties, hit fly-tippers in the pocket and find the solution that so many people are calling for today.

3.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) on securing this debate and raising this issue. That there is such a good turnout for a Thursday Adjournment debate demonstrates how fired up people are about this issue. My inbox demonstrates that, too; it is one of the top issues I get letters about as a constituency MP and now as the litter Minister.

I agree with all Members who have contributed to the debate that fly-tipping is unacceptable, and it is worth pointing out at the outset that it is illegal. I want to give assurances that I am committed to tackling what is basically a blight on society in every way, as has been outlined by so many so vociferously in this debate.

Of course, I sympathise with the victims of fly-tipping, plenty of whom contacted me during the lockdown, among them my own father. I grew up on a farm and he

has to go out weekly to tackle incidents of fly-tipping. He recounted one again this very week, when he had to get the low-loader out and drive to a very remote track—I do not know how anybody ever found it—to retrieve another load of stuff that had been dumped there, so I certainly understand the frustrations. We all want to live in a lovely environment, and lockdown has highlighted how much we value our green space and our nature.

The Government remain absolutely committed to preventing fly-tipping, and I hope that what I am going to say will give some reassurance that measures are in place. Lots of measures have been strengthened, but there are lots more measures coming on track that I believe will help. Indeed, many of them have been mentioned by my hon. Friend, and I will touch on those shortly. Equally, however, I have discovered that, as with most things we touch in government, nothing is as straightforward as it initially appears, and it is not just a simple question of raising fines. It is more complicated than that, as I have discovered, and a lot of levers need to be in place if we really are to get to grips with this—and I really hope we do get to grips with it.

The role of central Government is very much to support local action, providing the legal framework of rights, responsibilities and powers, setting the national standards, and, where possible, making sure that the costs of dealing with fly-tipping are passed on to those responsible. I thank my hon. Friend for acknowledging that the Government have already acted. Over the past five years, the Government have given new powers to local authorities to tackle fly-tipping and strengthened those already available to them, and those include enhancing powers to search and seize vehicles of suspected fly-tippers and granting the power to issue fixed penalty notices of up to £400 to those guilty of fly-tipping and, as of January 2019 to those householders whose waste is found fly-tipped.

The levels of fixed penalty notices were set following a call for evidence, and the value of fixed penalty notices for those whose waste is found fly-tipped was confirmed during a consultation in 2018. So a lot of work went into fixing those penalties when they were raised. Fixed penalty notices provide local authorities with an efficient mechanism to hold fly-tippers to account without having to go to court, which can be time-consuming, resource-intensive and expensive.

Should a local authority take someone accused of fly-tipping to court, the sentences available to the court are severe. Upon conviction in a magistrates court, fly-tipping is punishable by a fine of up to £50,000, 12 months' imprisonment or both, and the punishments increase to an unlimited fine, up to five years' imprisonment or both if convicted in a Crown court. Sentences for fly-tipping offences are handed down based on the environmental offences sentences guidance published by the independent Sentencing Council.

The guidance includes, however, a requirement to consider the offender's ability to pay. Sometimes we get the criticism that the courts are not setting high enough sanctions or fully using the penalties and fines within their powers, but there is a requirement when deciding on the severity of the sentence that consideration be given to whether the accused can afford to pay the penalty, and that sometimes leads to slightly lower penalties being imposed.

In 2018-19, 2,397 prosecutions were brought against fly-tipping offenders, which was an increase on the number for 2017-18. Of those brought to court, 2,052 were issued with a fine, which was an increase of 6% compared with 2017-18. The total value of fines issued by magistrates courts also increased to just over £1 million, which was an increase of 29% compared with 2017-18. So the figures are going up and the measures are starting to work. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough will say that is not yet enough, but we are on the right trajectory.

Matt Western: Those figures are really interesting and pleasing to hear, but 3,000, which is the national figure, when compared with 12,200 for the number of cases in Warwickshire, obviously represents a very small percentage indeed. I hear the points being made across the Chamber, but of course we cannot bash local authorities because they have had significant budget cuts and face huge pressures. I would like to see them do more, as I am sure the Minister would too.

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, but there are other measures that I believe will help local authorities, and there are certain reasons why they have been unable to tackle all the incidents he mentions.

We have previously worked with the Sentencing Council to amend sentencing guidance for magistrates, but I acknowledge that the sentences handed down do not always reflect the severity of the crime committed or the costs borne by the victim. It is for this reason that the Government committed in our manifesto to increasing penalties for fly-tipping, and we acknowledged in our waste and resources strategy that there is more to do to strengthen sentences, especially in magistrates courts.

Therefore, working with our partners in the national fly-tipping prevention group, which is chaired by DEFRA, we will continue to work with the Sentencing Council and the Judicial Office to explore ways of ensuring that the penalties handed down for fly-tipping are appropriate and proportionate to the offence committed. My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough raised this issue, and we are working on the sentencing, so this is in train.

The national fly-tipping prevention group has previously published a series of fly-tipping prevention guides, which include a recommendation for private landowners to consider installing appropriate deterrence signage and CCTV cameras, in recognition of the part that such measures can play. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough for his suggestions. It is important to note that increasing the penalties for fly-tipping is not the only approach that can be used to tackle this unacceptable crime. As he alluded to, our waste and resources strategy sets out our commitment to prevent, detect and deter waste crime, including fly-tipping.

The Government have been significantly impacted by coronavirus, but my officials are working hard to deliver on those commitments. Even during the lockdown we continued working on the strategy and on the waste measures. This includes developing a web-based fly-tipping toolkit to help local authorities and others, working in partnership, to tackle fly-tipping. In Hertfordshire, such an approach, using measures suggested by the toolkit, has seen incidents of fly-tipping fall by 10% in the first year. I have been asked whether this is working anywhere, and this shows that some local authorities are being

successful in tackling fly-tipping. Lots of those ideas have been copied. The toolkit is still being worked on but will be available shortly. We think that it will help local authorities, for example by allowing them to follow best practice from other local authorities.

I am aware that in some instances, where a fly-tipper is taken to court, it is felt that the penalty does not always reflect the crime. Therefore, the toolkit also provide advice to local authorities taking fly-tippers to court on how to present a robust case, because often they take them to court but still they do not get the correct fine. So help and advice is out there for the local authorities too, to go armed with the right data and so on, so that the magistrates or the Crown court will give out the correct penalty or fine.

We are aware that a significant proportion of fly-tippers are those who masquerade as legitimate waste carriers before illegally dumping their customers' waste. We are therefore working to reform the waste carrier, broker and dealer regime, and the Environment Bill, which we hope will come to Committee very soon, will contain powers to introduce the mandatory electronic tracking of waste, which will obviously be subject to consultation. That will, among other things, reduce the ability of waste criminals to hide evidence of the systematic mishandling of waste, and deter illegitimate operators from entering the sector. It will help to ensure that waste is dealt with appropriately, reducing instances where waste is not tracked and drops out of the system, which unfortunately does happen. We intend to consult on these proposals in 2021.

The Bill, which we hope will receive Royal Assent in 2021, includes a number of other measures to help tackle waste crime. As well as granting the power to regulate for the creation of a mandatory electronic waste-tracking system, it will simplify the process for enforcement authorities to enter residential or abandoned premises under a warrant without having to wait seven days. The current requirement to wait seven days enables the evidence to be hidden, removed or destroyed, so that change will be genuinely helpful. A new power will also be introduced to search for and seize evidence of waste crime. So there is a lot going on.

The Bill will reduce costs and bureaucracy when the police seize vehicles involved in waste crime on behalf of the Environment Agency. It will do so by removing the current practice whereby that is automatically done on behalf of the relevant waste collection authority unless an Environment Agency officer is present, and it will allow the police to seize a vehicle on behalf of the regulator. It should speed up the process and make it quicker and more proactive.

In addition, the Bill will allow for the level of fixed penalty notices to be amended through secondary legislation, so the calls in this place for higher penalties could become a possibility through secondary legislation. So we are listening to all these comments.

These extensive new powers, which have been widely discussed with stakeholders, will aid us in our fight to ensure that waste criminals, such as illegitimate waste operators reliant on fly-tipping for income, are held accountable for their actions.

I am pleased to update my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough on the Budget, which allocated half a million pounds in 2021 to support innovative approaches

[Rebecca Pow]

to tackling fly-tipping. We are exploring those funding opportunities and priorities right now. We are considering the role that mobile and web-based applications and research projects could play in tackling fly-tipping. As my hon. Friend mentions, our annual fly-tipping statistics currently report fly-tipping incidents recorded by local authorities, but they exclude those incidents on private land. He makes an extremely good point, which has been raised by many other people. We are therefore exploring ways that we could plug that data gap by potentially using mobile digital apps to record information. That could be extremely useful.

Before I wrap up, I want to acknowledge the incredible pressure that local authorities have been under during the coronavirus lockdown. It has been mentioned by many people, but in all honesty, I and DEFRA have been working really hard with the waste industry to get those household waste and recycling centres open—which they have done pretty quickly, considering what had hit

them. They shut down initially, but they are pretty much all up and running now. I pay tribute to the whole sector, which has worked so hard.

As you can tell, Madam Deputy Speaker, I fully sympathise with hon. Members on this issue. I recognise that there are a lot of concerns. The case has been very well made. I hope it is clear that extensive action is under way to cut down on unacceptable waste. There is a lot in the waste and resources strategy and the Environment Bill, and the national fly-tipping prevention group is working on all these measures. I hope that that gives a bit of reassurance that we are trying to crack down on this problem. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough for bringing the issue to us today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you. What an informative debate.

Question put and agreed to.

3.49 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statement

Thursday 1 October 2020

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19 Update

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): As the covid-19 incidence rate continues to rise across the country, a suite of local and national action is required to break the trains of transmission and enable people to maintain a more normal way of life.

The Government will act swiftly and decisively to limit further spread, reduce disruption and contain local outbreaks. The local action committee command structure reviewed the latest evidence during two urgently convened meetings yesterday, in which we worked with local leaders and the scientific community to assess the data and consider whether further evidence was required.

Despite local interventions being put into place in the north-west of England since 5 August, the latest data in the seven day period 19-25 September, shows a continuing increase in incidence rates per 100,000 population and also the percentage of positive test results, especially within the Merseyside region. The impact of this has resulted in increased hospital admissions and ICU occupancy in the Merseyside area.

As a result, from 00:01 on Saturday 3 October we are implementing stricter restrictions in regulations to apply across the Merseyside region, which consists of Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, St Helens and Wirral and for these purposes also Hatton and Warrington. The new restriction will prohibit inter-household mixing in any indoors venue, unless there is an exemption in place. This restriction includes hospitality, leisure, retail and entertainment venues (including bars, pubs and restaurants).

We reviewed the position in the north-east. In addition to the north-east measures we announced last week, from 00:01 on Saturday 3 October we are also implementing further regulations in the form of a regional approach to Hartlepool and Middlesbrough to replicate the restrictions in place since 30 September in Durham County, Gateshead, Newcastle, Northumberland, North Tyneside, South Tyneside and Sunderland. These regulations will prohibit inter-household mixing in any indoors venue, unless there is an exemption in place. This includes hospitality, leisure, retail and entertainment venues (including bars, pubs and restaurants).

We reviewed the level of current interventions in Bolton, and from 00:01 on Saturday 3 October, we will be aligning these with measures in place across the rest of Greater Manchester.

We are also recommending that Sheffield is escalated as an area of enhanced support and that Rotherham, Luton, Wakefield, Barrow-in-Furness, Cheshire East and Cheshire West and Chester are added to the watchlist as areas of concern.

The recommendation is also that Spelthorne and Hertsmere are removed from the watchlist.

We appreciate that this will be difficult news for the people living in these areas, profoundly affecting their daily lives. These decisions are not taken lightly, and such measures will be kept under review and in place no longer than they are necessary.

There are exemptions to these measures so people can still meet with those in their support bubble. There are other limited exemptions such as for work purposes or to provide care or assistance to a vulnerable person. Through the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Protected Areas and Linked Childcare Households) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, people may create an exclusive childcare bubble for the purposes of informal childcare for children under 14, helping to ease pressure on those living under local restrictions so they can get to work.

The guidance on gov.uk covering these areas will also be amended to fully reflect these changes.

[HCWS482]

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